

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2026

## SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

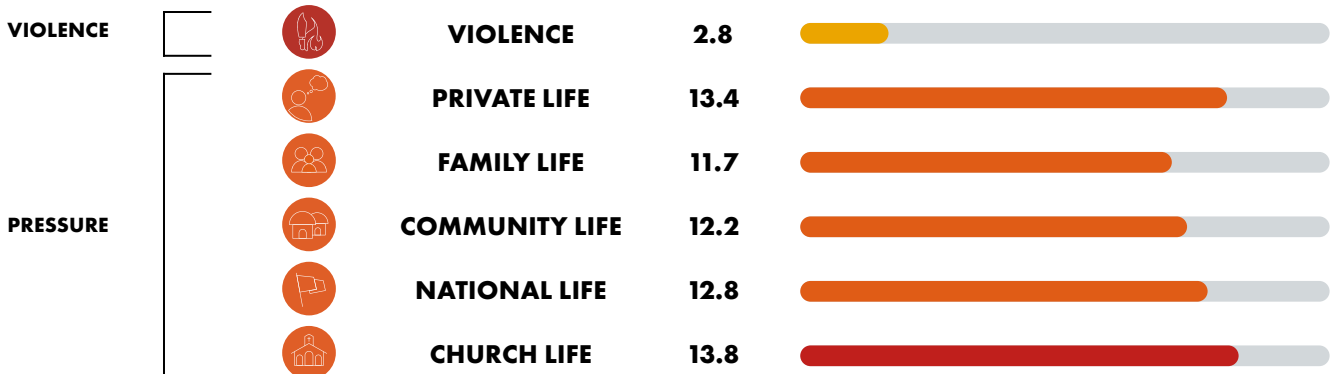
### KAZAKHSTAN

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**45**



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#### LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).

### Key findings

Freedom of religion or belief is restricted by legislation introduced in September 2011. Using the threat of militant Islam as a pretext, the Kazakh government keeps society under tight control, including increased surveillance, raids on meetings and arrests. Russian Orthodox churches experience the fewest problems from the government, as they do not usually attempt to contact the Kazakh population. It is the indigenous Christian converts, from a Muslim background, who experience severe violations from the state, family, and community. Some converts are locked up by their families for long periods, beaten and may eventually be expelled from their communities. Local imams also preach against them.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

President Kasym-Zhomart Tokayev

### POPULATION

20,056,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

3,594,000<sup>1</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Islam

### GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



## Context

Religious context	Number of adherents	% of adherents in country
Christians	3,594,000	17.9
Muslims	15,708,000	78.3
Agnostics/Atheists	666,800	3.3
Others	87,300	0.5
	<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source<sup>2</sup>

A former Soviet republic, Kazakhstan gained independence in 1991 and is the wealthiest country in the region. Since 2010, the government has become more dictatorial, characterized by repressive policies, no real opposition and strict media control. The situation has not improved since President Tokayev took power in 2019 and he was re-elected, as expected, in presidential elections in 2022 and won parliamentary elections in 2023. International observers said the elections lacked “competitiveness” while highlighting the need for reforms in the Central Asian nation ([RFE/RL, 21 November 2022](#)).

Sunni Islam is the main religion and Kazakhs are expected to be Muslims. This makes life challenging for converts to Christianity, especially in rural areas. However, it would be wrong to call Kazakhstan a Muslim country. Most Kazakhs follow the traditions rather than the teachings of Islam, and 70 years of Soviet atheism have left their mark; the government is staunchly secular. According to the US State

Department: “Under the constitution, all persons have the right to follow their religious or other convictions, take part in religious activities, and disseminate their beliefs. These rights, however, are in practice limited to registered religious groups, especially those considered ‘traditional’ to Kazakh society. ‘Traditional’ is not defined by law but typically refers to Hanafi Sunni Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, Greek and Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Judaism” ([IRFR 2023 Kazakhstan](#)).

The [USCIRF 2025 Kazakhstan Chapter](#) classified Kazakhstan as RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF SPECIAL WATCH LIST (SWL). “In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Kazakhstan remained poor. The government continued to penalize the peaceful religious activities of all groups, but it particularly targeted Muslims who deviated from the state’s preferred interpretation of Hanafi Sunni Islam.”

Religious affairs legislation introduced in September 2011 included religious communities needing to reregister, a ban on unregistered religious activity, restricted production and dissemination of religious materials in-country, and a prohibition on religious activities for children, such as summer camps; this particularly affects Protestants. The authorities raid services, punish speech “inciting religious discord” and detain individuals for “illegal missionary activity”. In January 2022, changes made to the Religion Law widened state religious censorship and made holding religious meetings away from state-registered places of worship more difficult ([Forum 18, January 2022](#)).

<sup>1</sup> Gina A. Zurlo, ed., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2025

<sup>2</sup> Other refers to all the rest to make up 100%: Gina A. Zurlo, ed., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2025

## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### DICTATORIAL PARANOIA

Only state-controlled religious institutions are allowed. The authorities raid and arrest members of unregistered religious groups, especially Protestants, who are regarded as a foreign influence aiming to destroy the current political system.

### ISLAMIC OPPRESSION BLENDED WITH CLAN OPPRESSION

Converts to Christianity from a Muslim background experience pressure and sometimes violence from family and community. This can include domestic incarceration or expulsion from home. Kazakh leaders (with the support of the authorities) see conversion as an assault on Kazakh identity. Many converts choose to keep their new faith a secret.



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## How the situation varies by region

Rights violations targeting all Christian communities, carried out by government officials, can occur all over the country. Pressure from family, friends and the community on converts is stronger outside urban areas.

## Who is affected?

### HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

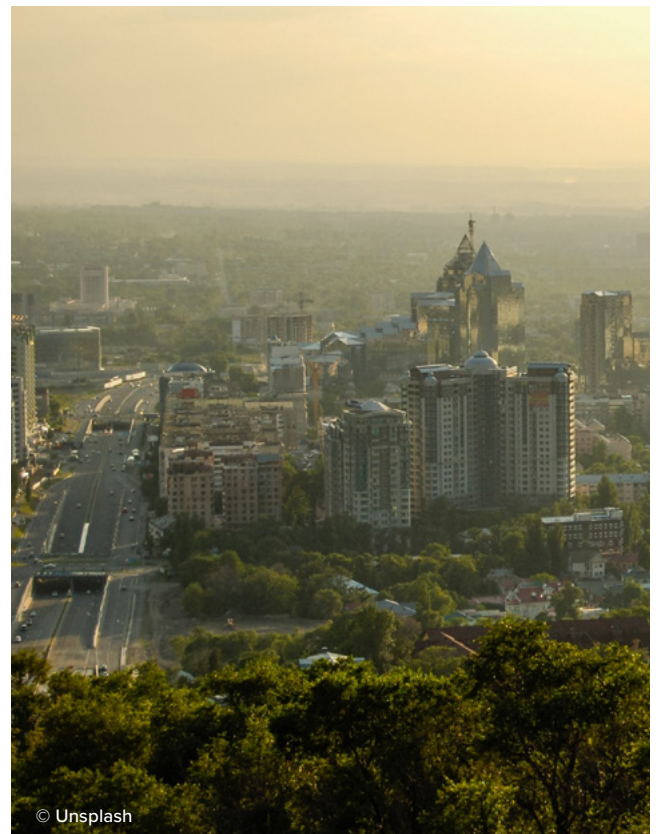
The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has relative freedom since they are not involved in evangelism among Kazakhs and therefore not seen as a threat. Also, the Kazakh government has no interest in provoking Russia by creating difficulties for the ROC.

### CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY

Converts with a Muslim background suffer under restrictions from the state and face severe pressure from family and community.

### NON-TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations are unregistered and experience raids, threats, arrests and fines from the authorities, especially if they are active in evangelism.



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## How are men and women differently affected?

### WOMEN

In Kazakhstan, the daily life of indigenous people is based on traditional Islamic culture, which disadvantages women and requires total submission. There are few effective measures to address gender-based violence, polygamy, child and forced marriages, bride kidnapping, and pervasive domestic violence. Female converts risk greater levels of physical and verbal abuse, harassment, threats and house arrest. Forced marriage to a Muslim is a possibility and occasionally linked to abduction. It is difficult for women to escape these pressures due to high unemployment and limited financial independence.

#### Female typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Denied access to social community/networks
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family (house arrest)
- Violence – physical
- Violence – sexual

### MEN

Pressure on Christian men comes from the State as well as family and community spheres. They risk interrogation, fines, detention and imprisonment. In the WWL 2025 reporting period, police raided church gatherings and fined at least 6 church leaders the equivalent of 1-2 month's wages ([Forum 18, 2024](#)). Obligatory military service for young men is an extra potential risk, being a highly controlled environment in a Muslim-majority state. Converts from a Muslim background experience pressure from their families, typically facing verbal harassment and physical beatings. Job loss is also a risk for converts and church leaders, which affects their dependent families.

#### Male typical pressure points:

- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- Economic harassment via fines
- Imprisonment by government
- Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
- Travel bans/restrictions on movement
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – verbal



## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2026	45	67
2025	38	68
2024	47	65
2023	48	65
2022	47	64

The overall score decreased by one point. This small drop led to a drop of 7 ranks in the list. While average pressure remained at the same level (12.8 points) with an extreme level of pressure in the Church sphere of life, the violence score dropped from 4.3 to 2.8 points. Even so, there were more Christians sentenced and more Christians forced to leave their homes than in WWL 2025.

## Examples of violence in the reporting period

- 13 October 2024:** Kazakh border guards at two separate border crossing points from Russia seized religious literature from Council of Churches Baptists entering the country. Border guards held several Baptist Christians from Eastern Siberia as they tried to cross with Bibles into Kazakhstan. The same day, Kazakh border guards stopped a group of about eight Baptist Christians from Omsk Region and elsewhere in Russia, seizing several hundred Christian books, including New Testaments in Kazakh. A Religious Affairs Department “expert” was called to study the books whilst the Baptists were detained.



WWL Year	Christians raped/sexually abused	Christians harassed	Christians forced to leave their homes	Christians forced to marry
2026	10*	29	29	10*
2025	10*	19	19	10*

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period – for full results see the violence section of the country’s corresponding WWL Persecution Dynamics. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10\*, 100\* or 1000\*) is given which in reality could be significantly higher. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000\*, 100,000\* and 1,000,000\*.



### PRIVATE LIFE

Conversion from Islam to Christianity is seen as a betrayal of family and Kazakh culture. In rural areas, converts can suffer physical violence, so they refrain from talking about their new faith and hide Christian materials that could be used as evidence of conversion. Non-traditional Protestants can easily be accused of evangelizing by the state authorities.

### FAMILY LIFE

Children of Christians are discriminated against on account of their parents' faith, and Muslim children are often encouraged not to mix with them. They may be pressured to attend Islamic classes against their parents' will. Schools periodically organize state-funded public meetings about combating "sects" that spread negative propaganda against religious minorities, including Evangelicals. The adoption of a Kazakh child into a Christian family is not permitted.

### COMMUNITY LIFE

Converts to Christianity from Islam are monitored,

interrogated and threatened by their families and communities. Unregistered churches are monitored and raided by local authorities. Members can be threatened, fined, or detained for illegal religious activities. Once they appear in police records, Christians are required to report regularly.

### NATIONAL LIFE

The Constitution recognizes the state-supported Muslim Board and the Russian Orthodox Church. All other religious communities are required to re-register according to the 2011 law. The process is complicated and limits the possibility for non-traditional organizations to operate on an official basis.

### CHURCH LIFE

Faith-based schools and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are not allowed. Any social work carried out by Christians is seen as a form of outreach and is opposed. Printing and distributing religious literature is restricted.



## International obligations & rights violated

**Kazakhstan has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights under the following international treaties:**

1. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights ([ICCPR](#))
2. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights ([ICESCR](#))
3. Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment ([CAT](#))
4. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women ([CEDAW](#))
5. Convention on the Rights of the Child ([CRC](#))

**Kazakhstan is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:**

- Churches from non-traditional denominations are raided and attendees are arbitrarily arrested (ICCPR Arts. 9; 18 and 21)
- Ownership and consultation of religious literature is severely restricted beyond international permitted limitations (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)
- Christians and their activities are monitored by the authorities and the surrounding community (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Christian female converts run the risk of being abducted and forcibly married to Muslim men (ICCPR Art. 23; CEDAW Art. 16 and ICESCR Art. 10)

## Situation of other religious minorities

Kazakhstan's Constitution defines it as a secular state. Authorities restrict non-traditional religious groups, including Muslims practicing non-Hanafi Islam. [IRFR 2023](#) reports that Jehovah's Witnesses are among those facing greater societal scrutiny and discrimination.





## Open Doors in Kazakhstan

Open Doors provides immediate aid to Central Asian believers when they are imprisoned, excluded from families and communities, and deprived of livelihood and employment because of their faith in Christ. Open Doors also strengthens the persecuted church in Central Asia primarily through:

- Literature distribution
- Prayer support
- Biblical training
- Children/youth training
- Women's ministry
- Presence ministry
- Social and medical ministry
- Vocational training and micro credit
- Socio-economic development projects, such as rehabilitation centers





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## ABOUT THIS DOSSIER

- The content of this Country Dossier is based on detailed analysis carried out by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. This dossier may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2026 Open Doors International.
- All 50 Country Dossiers – along with the latest update of WWL Methodology – can be accessed [here](#).
- The WWL 2026 reporting period was 01 October 2024 - 30 September 2025.

*All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.*