

WORLD WATCH LIST 2026

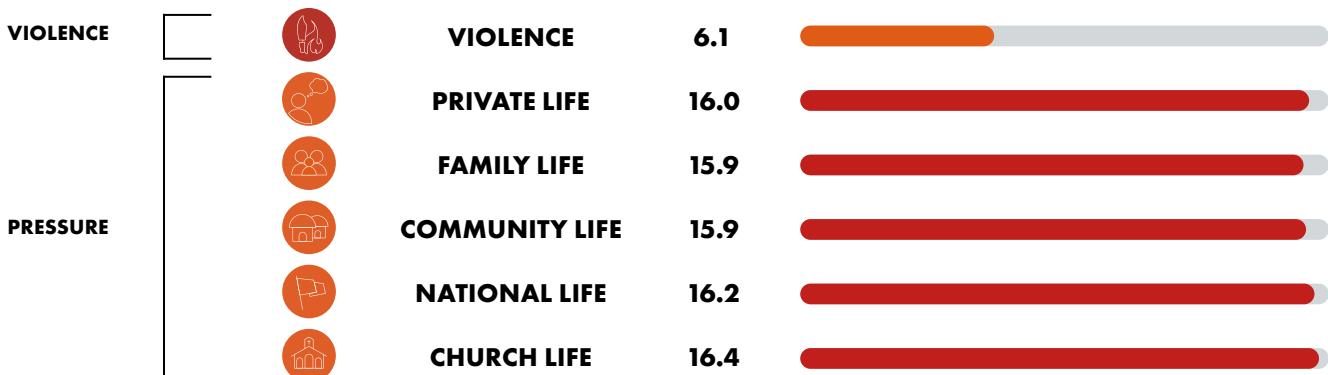
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
9

LIBYA



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

The absence of a single central government to impose law and order in the country has made the situation for Christians precarious and the level of violence against Christians in Libya is categorized as “very high”. Since the arrest of several Libyan Christians in March 2023, different authorities have increased concerted efforts to monitor Christian activities on the internet. Libyan Christian converts from a Muslim background face intense pressure from their family and community to renounce their faith. All of them practice their faith in secret. Foreign Christians, mostly from other parts of Africa, are targeted by various Islamist militant groups and organized criminal groups. These groups traffic and kidnap them and demand ransom, or force them into hard labor. Their Christian faith makes them extra vulnerable to such abuse. Each year, many migrant Christians are believed to die at sea while trying to reach Europe, or from abuse in detention camps.

Quick facts

LEADER

Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh

POPULATION

7,038,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

36,300¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

In transition



Context

Religious context	Number of adherents	% of adherents in country
Christians	36,300	0.5
Muslims	6,969,000	99.0
Buddhists	17,600	0.3
Others	15,200	0.2
Total		100%

Source²

Since the toppling of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, Libya has become divided among different groups and struggles with high levels of lawlessness. The UN-recognized government, backed mainly by Islamist groups and based in the west around Tripoli, is in conflict with a rival government in the east supported by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar and his forces. Both factions have foreign supporters who are competing for power and influence in Libya.

The vast majority of Muslims belong to Sunni Islam. The Amazigh (Berber) ethnic minority includes some Ibadi Muslims. There are significant numbers of Christians among Sub-Saharan African and Egyptian migrants. The number of Libyan Christians from a Muslim background remains very low. They face strong pressure, often violent, from family, community and the government to renounce their faith.

Before Gaddafi fell from power in 2011, many Coptic Christians from Egypt lived and worked in the

country. However, since Gaddafi's overthrow most of them have returned to their home countries, especially following the [beheading of 21 Coptic Christians in February 2015, followed by the murder of 30 Ethiopian Christians in April 2015](#) by Islamic State (IS) militants. Both the 2011 transitional Constitutional Declaration and the 2017 Draft Constitution declare Islam as the country's religion and Sharia law as the main source of legislation. The risk of physical assault, including abductions, torture, unlawful killing and sexual assault and rape, is high for Christians. Christian migrants and refugees in Libya also encounter discrimination from their employers, criminal groups, and fellow inmates in immigration detention centers.

In addition, despite the risks, a steady flow of migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa, many of whom are also Christians, continue to arrive in Libya with the hopes of reaching Europe. Some manage to buy a place on one of the overcrowded boats, but many others get stuck and are compelled to build a life inside Libya, where they become part of a very vulnerable community. According to the [US State Department in its IRFR 2023 Libya report](#), armed groups controlled security and operated some detention centers for migrants and refugees. International human rights organizations reported that Christians in these centers faced a higher risk of physical violence, including sexual assault and rape, compared to other migrants and refugees.

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

² 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

ISLAMIC OPPRESSION

Libya has a deeply Islamic culture and converts from Islam to Christianity face immense pressure from family and community. Following Gaddafi's downfall, various radical Islamist groups gained influence and control in society. At a local level, imams or sheikhs are known to incite hatred against Christians, especially migrants and converts. At the national level [radical Islamic scholars](#) who combine strict Salafi orthodoxy with absolute loyalty to the authorities, exert influence via both satellite television and the internet. Because Sharia is the basis of law throughout the country, Christians face legal and social barriers to practicing their faith openly. Together, these factors have led to a sharp increase in violence against Christians over the last decade.

CLAN OPPRESSION

Libya's society is conservative and tribal. Converting from Islam to Christianity is not only seen as a betrayal of Islam but of family and tribe. Additionally, due to issues of ethnicity and racism, migrants from Sub-Saharan countries are fiercely discriminated against.

ORGANIZED CORRUPTION AND CRIME

Corruption is common, exacerbated by a lack of rule of law and impunity. This source is blended with Islamic oppression since some Islamist militant groups work with or act as organized criminal groups and engage in human trafficking and other criminal activities. These groups have carried out rapes, taken hostages, and engaged in slave trading.

How the situation varies by region

Christians are at risk all over the country but are especially vulnerable in areas where violent Islamist groups are active. This is particularly the case in the region around Sirte, but Islamist groups are also present in cities such as Benghazi in the east and the capital Tripoli in the west.

Who is affected?

COMMUNITIES OF EXPATRIATE CHRISTIANS

Christian migrant workers—mainly from Sub-Saharan Africa, Egypt and the Philippines may gather in a few remaining western churches, but many avoid them due to fear. They face threats such as kidnapping and abuse, with Sub-Saharan Africans being doubly vulnerable to both racial and religious persecution and discrimination.

HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.

CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY

In Libya, indigenous converts to Christianity form a tiny minority and must keep their faith secret. They are forbidden from attending worship in official churches. Interest in Christianity is growing through Arabic Christian media, especially after public arrests of converts made many Libyans aware, for the first time, that Libyan Christians exist in their country.

NON-TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.



How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Libyan women live under strict familial control, with tribal norms and Sharia reinforcing their lower status. Female converts to Christianity face house arrest, domestic violence, sexual assault, forced marriage, or so-called “honor killing.” Social stigma makes it nearly impossible to escape or report abuse. Survivors face police reluctance, judicial bias, and weak laws on sexual violence, while the penal code still reduces sentences for honor crimes. Christian migrant women are especially vulnerable to abduction, trafficking and sexual enslavement, particularly in detention centers or when separated from men.

Female typical pressure points:

- Denied access to social community/network
- Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family/house arrest
- Trafficking
- Violence – physical
- Violence – sexual

MEN

Libyan Christian men face immense pressure to reconvert when their faith is discovered, along with imprisonment, eviction, abuse, and even torture. As family providers, loss of work causes deep psychological distress. These pressures can devastate families, leading to poverty, trauma, and displacement. Forced labor and even slavery are widespread for Sub-Saharan Christian men, who risk abduction for ransom or heavy labor in detention.

Male typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- Forced out of home – expulsion
- Forced to flee town/country
- Imprisonment by government
- Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological



WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2026	9	87
2025	4	91
2024	3	91
2023	5	88
2022	4	91

Although pressure was at extreme levels in all spheres of life, the violence score dropped from 10.6 to 6.1 points. Fewer church gatherings were attacked, as ongoing arrests and detentions have forced Christians to operate with extreme caution. As a result, the overall score dropped by 4.4 points, despite the church being under extreme pressure.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

- A Libyan Christian convert from a Muslim background received a death sentence in September 2022 (MEC, 12 September 2022). He remains imprisoned while his case is still pending in the Supreme Court.
- Several Libyan converts and expatriate Christians were arrested in March 2023 on accusations of proselytizing. Two expatriate Christians were deported from the country and, others remain imprisoned. In the meantime, more Christians have been arrested. Some have been released, but others remain imprisoned.
- Several church buildings and other places of Christian worship, mostly belonging to Sub-Saharan African Christians, were attacked and demolished or damaged.



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WWL Year	Christians imprisoned or punished by the government	Christians physically or mentally abused	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians forced to flee the country
2026	17	100*	2	17
2025	15	100*	13	21

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

Although proselytizing is not outright banned in Libya, actions deemed as ‘instigating division’ or ‘insulting Islam’ are prohibited. As a result, most Christians avoid openly sharing their faith with relatives or their wider community.” Discussing one’s Christian faith with a Muslim could be interpreted as an act of evangelism.

FAMILY LIFE

Libyan Christians from a Muslim background face violent coercion from their families and wider community to renounce their faith, and most are forced to practice Christianity in secret. Marriage can be particularly challenging, since there is often pressure to marry a non-Christian spouse. Many expatriate Christians have left the country, and the main group of Christians currently consists of Sub-Saharan migrants and some Egyptian Copts. Their children, if they go to school, must attend Islamic instruction and are vulnerable to harassment.

COMMUNITY LIFE

Most Libyans are of Arab or Berber heritage. Converts from Islam to Christianity face intense pressure to renounce their faith, not only from their families and communities but also from the government,

if their Christian identity becomes known. Many Christians in Libya are Sub-Saharan expatriates seeking better economic opportunities. They face discrimination due to both their religion and race.

NATIONAL LIFE

Converts can be harmed or killed with impunity when attacks are carried out by family members, which is considered a matter of family honor. Other Christians can be killed with impunity by both radical groups and government officials. Sub-Saharan Christians are especially vulnerable in this regard. Foreign Christians must be careful not to cause provocation by criticizing the government in any way. Even the few registered church buildings are careful not to have religious symbols outside their buildings since the public display of Christian symbols is considered an indirect form of proselytization. It can attract serious punishment from the authorities and even mob violence.

CHURCH LIFE

Depending on the region, migrants can gather in house churches but face serious security risks. Bringing Arabic Christian literature and Bibles into the country remains strictly forbidden. Proselytizing or missionary activity among Muslims is officially prohibited.



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International obligations & rights violated

Libya 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](#))

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

- Christians are targeted and killed by extremist groups on the basis of their faith (ICCPR Art. 6)
- Christians are harassed and targeted for wearing religious symbols (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christian converts are tortured and pressured to recant their conversion from Islam (ICCPR Arts. 7 and 18)
- Christians are arrested and detained on blasphemy charges for sharing Christian material online (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)

Situation of other religious minorities

Ibadi and Sufi Muslims in Libya who do not belong to the Sunni Islamic traditions face violations in the form of violent attacks by Sunni militant groups. They also face general discrimination in society. In addition, atheists and those who openly question Sunni Islamic doctrine are very much at risk.



Open Doors in Libya

In cooperation with local partners and churches, Open Doors is supporting the church in North Africa through the following activities:

- Leadership training and mentoring
- Discipleship training, support theological initiatives, offer persecution preparedness training and distribute Bibles and Christian literature
- Trauma counselling training for women, legal aid to persecuted Christians and practical support
- Livelihood initiatives through micro-loans to start small businesses, vocational training and medical help or offer relief items
- Raise prayer support for believers in Libya



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.