

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2026

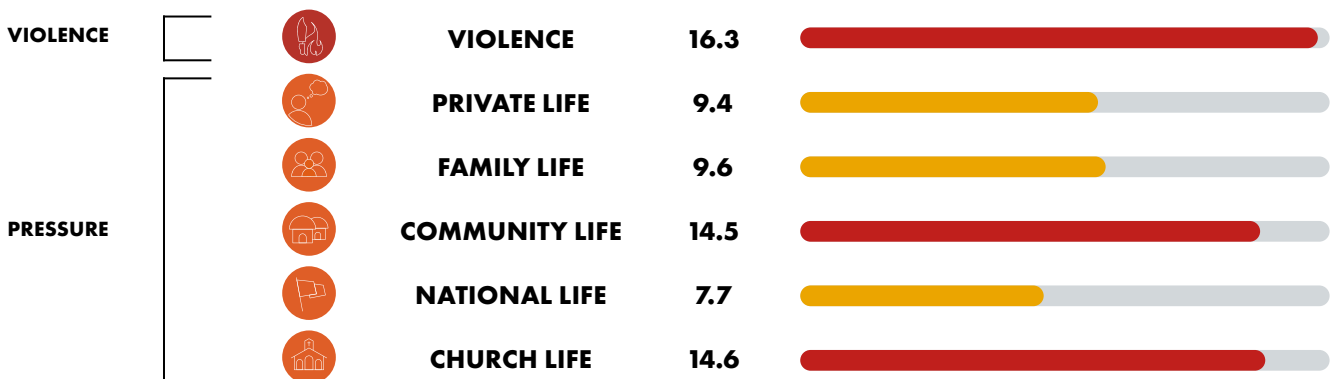
## SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

### NIGER

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**26**



### 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 situation for Christians in Niger has worsened significantly since the July 2023 coup, which destabilized an already fragile state. The weakening of central authority has emboldened Islamist militant groups, allowing them to operate with near impunity across various regions. Jihadist groups, including IS-Sahel (formerly ISGS), Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), Boko Haram, and The Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), have expanded their presence and intensified attacks on Christian communities. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has recommended these groups be redesignated as Entities of Particular Concern. In western Tillabéri and Tahoua, ISIS-Sahel and JNIM impose strict Sharia, targeting Christians and converts. In southeastern Diffa, Boko Haram and ISWAP continue to destroy churches, abduct aid workers, and kill believers. These groups exploit Niger's porous borders with Mali, Burkina Faso, and Nigeria to consolidate power. Christians, especially converts from Islam, are forced to worship in secret, living under the constant threat of violence, abduction, and death, without protection or legal recourse.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

General Abdourahmane Tchiani

### POPULATION

29,316,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

74,900<sup>1</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Islam

### GOVERNMENT

Semi-presidential republic (prior to military coup in July 2023)



## Context

Religious context	Number of adherents	% of adherents in country
Christians	74,900	0.3
Muslims	28,041,000	95.7
Ethnic religionists	1,165,000	3.9
Others	35,000	0.1
	<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source<sup>2</sup>

Since its independence in 1960, Niger has faced ongoing political instability, including four military coups. The decade following the 2011 return to civilian rule brought cautious optimism, marked by limited progress in civil liberties and political openness. However, this progress was abruptly reversed by the July 2023 military coup. The takeover not only dismantled democratic institutions but also isolated Niger regionally and diplomatically. By early 2024, the junta had withdrawn from both the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the G5 Sahel, a regional security bloc, severing essential security partnerships and undermining coordinated responses to violent extremism.

This vacuum has empowered jihadist groups IS-Sahel, JNIM, Boko Haram and ISWAP, which now operate across Niger's western and south-eastern regions. These groups exploit Niger's porous borders and weak governance, embedding themselves in rural communities and sustaining their operations through transnational criminal networks.

Most Nigeriens are Sunni Muslims, but many follow the more moderate Tijaniya and Qadiriya Sufi traditions. Jihadist factions seek to replace this religious landscape with strict Salafist orthodoxy. Their campaign to delegitimize Sufi leaders and enforce ideological conformity has lowered the threshold of religious tolerance, particularly in remote areas, where pressure to conform is both militant and communal.

Historically, Christianity in Niger has existed on the margins, practiced quietly through small Catholic and Protestant communities. That relative peace is deteriorating rapidly. In regions such as Tillabéri, Tahoua and Diffa, churches were burned, Christians executed or abducted and house churches driven underground. Converts face not only extremist violence but also family rejection and community ostracism. Christian women are especially vulnerable to abduction, forced marriage and sexual violence.

With the state weakened by political disruption and disengaged from regional alliances, protections for religious minorities have eroded almost entirely. The military regime's security plan remains unclear, and attacks on Christians frequently go unaddressed. Legal frameworks offer little recourse, and enforcement is nearly non-existent. As of 2025, Niger presents one of the harshest environments in the Sahel for religious minorities, defined by jihadist rule, community hostility and state neglect.

<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

## How the situation varies by region

The level of persecution faced by Christians in Niger varies significantly by region, with the most severe violations occurring in rural and conflict-affected areas. In regions such as Tillabéri, Tahoua and Diffa, where Islamist militant groups like IS-Sahel, JNIM, Boko Haram and ISWAP operate, Christians and churches face extreme danger of attack.

In contrast, the capital city Niamey and a few urban centers offer relatively greater security, due in part to a stronger state presence. However, even in cities, Christians face societal pressure, surveillance and occasional harassment.

## Who is affected?

### COMMUNITIES OF EXPATRIATE CHRISTIANS

Expatriate Christians and missionaries face elevated risks of abduction, especially in rural or conflict-prone areas.

### HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Catholic and Protestant churches face escalating assaults from Islamist militants, with sanctuaries burned and clergy displaced. Boko Haram dominates Diffa in the east, ISIS-Sahel controls Tillabéri in the west, these forces have significantly weakened Niger's Christian presence.

### CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY

Converts from Islam face the highest levels of pressure, particularly within their families and local communities. Relatives often reject or threaten them, while radical imams incite violence against converts and those who support them.

### NON-TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal groups experience similar pressures to historical churches. Despite being less exposed to family-based persecution than Muslim-background believers, they are still targeted by militant groups.

## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### ISLAMIC OPPRESSION BLENDED WITH CLAN OPPRESSION

Islamist extremism and deeply entrenched clan loyalties produce a hostile environment for Christians, particularly converts from Islam. Leaving Islam is perceived as a betrayal of family, clan, and community. Converts are often disowned, attacked, or in extreme cases, killed by their own relatives or local networks seeking to restore family "honor." The Izala group, an anti-Sufi, Salafi-inspired organization originating in northern Nigeria, actively preaches intolerance toward Christians and non-conforming Muslims. In southern areas such as Maradi and Niamey, Tariqa Sufi orders, though traditionally more moderate, have also applied communal pressure on those perceived as deviating from Islamic norms.

### ORGANIZED CORRUPTION AND CRIME

Transnational criminal networks, some aligned with jihadist groups, capitalize on state fragility and border insecurity to traffic people, arms, wildlife, narcotics, and precious resources such as gold and uranium. These networks finance insurgent operations and deepen regional instability. While the administration of former President Issoufou introduced anti-corruption legislation aimed at public officials and political elites, enforcement remains weak. Security and judicial institutions are often penetrated by the same networks they are meant to combat. For Niger's small and vulnerable Christian community, this lawlessness means there is little recourse when they are targeted by armed actors or harassed by local authorities. Criminal networks often collaborate with violent extremist groups, providing them with funding, logistics, and safe passage in exchange for protection or access to smuggling corridors. In this environment, where state protection is for sale and armed actors profit from instability, Christians suffer doubly, from persecution and abandonment. criminal control in their communities.



## How are men and women differently affected?

### WOMEN

Women and girls are vulnerable to abduction, rape and sexual abuse by extremist groups and others. Families often do not report instances of rape out of fear it will impact the victim's marriage prospects, with the attached stigma and shame. Female converts can be denied custody of their children, forced into marriage with a Muslim man and raped. Many have also been denied their inheritance rights for converting to Christianity. Niger has the world's highest child marriage rate, with 76% of girls married by 18 ([Girls Not Brides, 2025](#)).

#### **Female typical pressure points:**

- Abduction
- Denied access to social community/networks
- Denied custody of children
- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family/house arrest
- Military/militia conscription/service against
- Trafficking
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

### MEN

Male converts risk being rejected by their families, expelled from their family home, or put under house arrest. Christian men can also face dismissal from their jobs or have their business boycotted by the Muslim community, leaving his wider family vulnerable. Boys in particular risk abduction and forced recruitment into the ranks of militant groups. Christian men and boys have also been targeted for killings by extremist groups. A surge in attacks by violent Islamist militants has forced many, especially church leaders, to flee.

#### **Male typical pressure points:**

- Abduction
- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- Enforced religious dress code
- Imprisonment by government
- Trafficking
- Violence – death
- Violence – psychological



## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2026	26	72
2025	28	72
2024	27	70
2023	28	70
2022	33	68

Niger scored 72 points on the WWL 2026, the same as in 2025, placing it at Rank 26. The stability in the score reflects a situation where the core drivers of pressure and violence remain firmly in place rather than improving. Christians live under a persistent mix of jihadist violence and social pressure, especially in the Tillabéri, Tahoua and Diffa regions where ISIS-Sahel and JNIM enforce their presence through killings, abductions, village raids, extortion and roadblock interrogations. Churches, Christian households, converts from Islam face the sharpest backlash from relatives and communities, often without any protection from authorities. The 2023 coup and the state's weakened capacity have left large rural zones effectively controlled by armed groups or criminal networks. This has created a landscape where Christians move cautiously, speak carefully, and worship under the constant awareness that security forces cannot shield them.

## Examples of violence in the reporting period

- According to local researchers, thousands of Christians have been displaced across the Tillabéri, Tahoua and Maradi regions since late 2024. Many families fled following direct threats, church burnings, and violent raids. Displaced Christians are now sheltering in Niamey in makeshift camps or crossing into Benin and Burkina Faso.
- Since October 2024:** Church networks and field researchers have documented a wave of attacks on Christian properties across Tillabéri, Tahoua and Diffa regions. Churches, prayer houses, community centers and Christian-owned homes have been burned, looted, or forcibly closed. Congregations have been left without safe places to worship.
- 11 January and 13 April 2025:** Armed militants carried out two separate abductions in the Agadez region, targeting Christian-linked humanitarian workers for ransom or religious coercion. Austrian development worker Eva Gretzmacher was kidnapped in January, followed by Swiss aid worker Claudia Abbt in April.



WWL Year	Christians abducted	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians internally displaced
2026	10*	22	109	1,280
2025	10*	100*	100*	1,000*

*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 Niger's constitutionally secular framework officially recognizes religion as a private matter, this principle is under mounting pressure. Islamist groups, particularly the Izala movement, have increasingly challenged the legitimacy of secular governance and exert growing influence over public norms. Their strong hostility toward Christianity, and even toward Muslims who engage with non-Muslims, has created an atmosphere where even private expressions of Christian faith are unsafe. Converts from Islam face the greatest risk, as acts of private devotion—including prayer, Bible reading or conversations about faith—can result in surveillance, denunciation or violent retribution. In areas influenced by Boko Haram or AQIM, the threat is even more severe. For many Christians, especially converts, the ability to live out their faith privately has become dangerously compromised.

## FAMILY LIFE

Conversion from Islam to Christianity has become one of the most perilous personal decisions in Nigerien society. Converts often face immediate consequences, including forced divorce, loss of child custody, and, in the case of women, coerced marriage or sexual violence. Though Christian parents may petition for custody, such legal efforts are typically undermined by clan loyalties and religious bias. Inheritance rights are also frequently denied, deepening economic vulnerability. Even Christians born into established families

must navigate intra-familial distrust, particularly in areas with strong Islamist militant influence. Fear of betrayal by relatives is ever-present.

## COMMUNITY LIFE

Christian converts are often socially ostracized. In border regions, they are targets of intimidation, exclusion, and sometimes physical violence. In militant-controlled zones, public Christian ceremonies are banned. Even in urban settings, discrimination persists through limited job access, blocked promotions, and boycotts of Christian-owned businesses. For Christian men, this economic marginalization threatens family survival and deepens psychological stress.

## NATIONAL LIFE

Niger's fragile state institutions have failed to contain religious violence. Jihadist threats in the west and southeast have displaced many Christians into IDP camps or across borders. The government offers little effective protection, and Christians must remain invisible to avoid retaliation.

## CHURCH LIFE

Churches, especially in conflict-prone regions, function under threat. Registrations are delayed, public worship discouraged, and gatherings are held in secret. Clergy face ongoing pressure, navigating fear, community hostility and state indifference to sustain even minimal religious life.



## International obligations & rights violated

**Niger 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](#))

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

- Christians can be harassed in the workplace and face discrimination because of their faith (ICCPR Art. 26)
- Christians often experience beatings and pressure to renounce their faith (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 10)
- Christian converts experience pressure and violence from their family and community to renounce their faith (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christians can face harassment and violence if they talk about their faith or engage in proselytization (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)
- Christian converts lose custody of their children and inheritance rights (ICCPR Art. 26)
- Churches face several obstacles to obtain permits for the construction of new buildings and to receive licenses for legal recognition (ICCPR Arts. 21 and 26)

## Situation of other religious minorities

Jehovah's Witnesses and Baha'i, who are mostly present in major urban centers, face the threat of violence from radical Islamist groups and have to tread carefully so as not to attract too much attention or provoke persecution.





## Open Doors in Niger

Open Doors has been involved in Niger since 2011 through local churches in the areas of:

- Economic empowerment
- Persecution preparedness
- Cross-cultural ministry and discipleship





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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.

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