

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2026

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

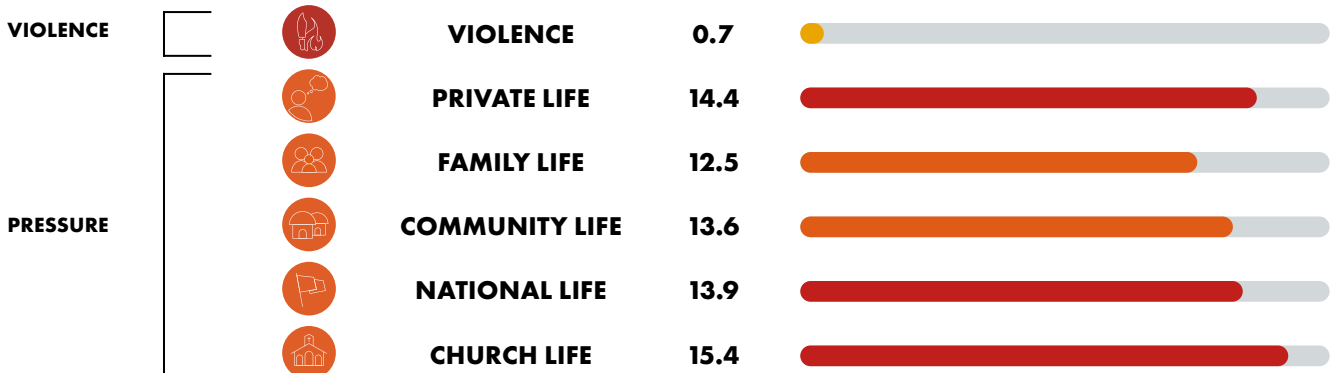
## TURKMENISTAN

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**35**



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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

Turkmenistan is a totalitarian country where state agents constantly monitor individual believers and religious groups (and the rest of society) and impose restrictions. Even Russian Orthodox and Armenian Apostolic churches may experience monitoring of Sunday services. The printing or import of Christian materials is restricted. Christians from a Muslim background suffer the most severe rights violations both at the hands of the state and from family, friends and the community.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

President Serdar Berdimuhamedov

### POPULATION

6,677,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

95,000<sup>1</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Islam

### GOVERNMENT

Authoritarian Presidential Republic



## Context

Religious context	Number of adherents	% of adherents in country
Christians	95,000	1.4
Muslims	6,366,000	95.3
Agnostics/Atheists	212,100	3.2
Others	3,800	0.1
	<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source<sup>2</sup>

Turkmenistan gained independence in 1991 during the collapse of the Soviet Union. Its president is both head of state and head of government. No true opposition parties are allowed. Despite extensive natural resources, unemployment and poverty rates are high. Turkmenistan has a forced labor prison apparatus that incarcerates thousands of people in appalling conditions.

Sunni Islam is the main religion, although the constitution establishes the republic as a secular country and provides for freedom of religion. Many Turkmen people follow their customs and traditions more than the formal teachings of Islam. There are strict restrictions imposed by the government on religion, such as the state appointing Islamic clerics, surveilling and dictating religious practice, and punishing nonconformity through imprisonment, torture and administrative harassment.

According to the World Christian Database, the next largest religious categories are agnostics and atheists, found particularly in the capital Ashgabat

and other major cities. Turkmenistan's small Christian minority is weak due to high levels of division and little cooperation between the denominations, which plays into the hands of the government. According to World Christian Database data, as of May 2024, the largest official church denominations in Turkmenistan are the Russian Orthodox Church and the Armenian Apostolic Church. Protestants are frequently branded "extremists" due to their religious activities outside of state-sanctioned structures.

According to the [US State Department's 2023 IRFR report](#) on Turkmenistan: "The law requires all religious organizations, including those that had registered previously, to reregister with the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) whenever the organization changes its address or amends its legal charter."

The [USCIRF 2025 Turkmenistan Chapter](#) classifies Turkmenistan as RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC). "In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Turkmenistan remained dire. The government maintained strict control over all religious activities and particularly targeted Muslims who adhered to a form of Islam that differed from the state's preferred interpretation."

Christians in Turkmenistan need to be extremely careful. Police and secret services constantly monitor their activities. It is very difficult for foreign Christians to visit Turkmenistan either as a tourist or in any other role. Citizens are also hindered from visiting Christians in other countries. Exit visas are required and are often denied.

<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 institutions are allowed. Protestants are frequently branded “extremists” due to their religious activities outside of state-sanctioned structures. The government views Protestants as a threat to the political status quo, in need of control and suppression.

### ISLAMIC OPPRESSION BLENDED WITH CLAN OPPRESSION

Muslims who convert to Christianity are likely to experience pressure and physical violence from their families and local communities, who seek to compel them to return to Islam. Some converts experience domestic incarceration or exclusion from their communities. As a result, many attempt to keep their faith a secret.



## How the situation varies by region

Rights violations by government officials against Christians occur all over the country. Pressure from family and the community on Christian converts from a Muslim background is stronger in rural areas.

## Who is affected?

### HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

The Russian Orthodox Church has accustomed itself to the limitations set by the government and is therefore left more or less undisturbed. Services may be monitored, but they are conducted unhindered. Printing or importing Christian materials is restricted.

### CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY

Christian converts from a Muslim background experience violations from the state and strong pressure from family and the community.

### NON-TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Non-traditional Christian communities include Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal groups. Aside from converts, these communities experience the highest levels of rights violations for their faith. Violations include raids, threats, arrests and fines, especially when their churches have not been registered.





## How are men and women differently affected?

### WOMEN

Prevalent Islamic culture places women in a subordinate position to men, and women and girls face serious restrictions on their autonomy and dignity. Female converts are particularly vulnerable to beatings, house arrest, verbal abuse, threats, sexual abuse, abduction and forced marriage. A country expert explains: “pregnant Muslim-background believers and other women can be beaten violently by their husbands in order to cause a miscarriage. Women and girls rarely report violent incidents due to stigma and shame, and impunity is regularly granted to perpetrators. Abusing women is used as a tool to intimidate and distress of their husbands, families and churches.

#### Female typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings and rites
- Denied access to social community/networks
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family (house arrest)
- Violence – physical
- Violence – sexual

### MEN

Turkmen men normally hold leadership roles within families and churches. Consequently, persecution directed against men impacts their families and congregations, causing fear, anger and financial hardship. State agents look for any excuse to fine Christian men, and authorities exert influence over those in leadership positions. Christian leaders face challenges obtaining training, and there are tight restrictions around religious education. In mandatory military service, men face discrimination, intolerance and persecution. At a family and community level, Muslims obstruct Christian business activities and converts face harassment, interrogation, discrimination, shaming and beatings..

#### Male typical pressure points:

- Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings and rites
- 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 – psychological
- Violence – verbal



## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2026	35	71
2025	29	71
2024	29	70
2023	26	70
2022	25	69

The overall score has remained the same, although there were fewer violent incidents recorded than in WWL 2025, but the country has dropped 6 ranks in WWL 2026, compared to WWL 2025. The situation is one of stability, with only minor changes in some areas of pressure and violence in the country. Islamic oppression (blended with Clan oppression) dominates in the Private and Family spheres of life, while Dictatorial paranoia dominates in the National and Church spheres of life. State agents constantly monitor churches and Christians. Muslim families, friends and villagers exert pressure on converts.

## Examples of violence in the reporting period

- Protestant pastors and house-church leaders said they were harassed, threatened with arrest, and intimidated by local officials. In one case in mid-2025, a pastor was told that if he continued holding Christian meetings, he could be put in prison. Even though these threats did not lead to physical violence; they still caused serious fear and mental pressure.

WWL Year	Christians physically/mentally abused	Christians forced to flee their country
2026	10*	1
2025	500*	1

*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

The government strictly controls all religious literature whether it is imported or produced in the country. It is dangerous to privately own Christian materials; possession is considered evidence of conversion, which is viewed as a betrayal of both family and culture. Family and the surrounding community will often react to conversion with social pressure, economic exclusion or even violence.

### FAMILY LIFE

The predominantly Muslim society places immense pressure on the children of converts. In particular, they receive Islamic teachings in school, even against the will of their parents. Children of converts and Protestants are often ostracized from the wider community as a way to compel them back to Islam.

### COMMUNITY LIFE

Converts are threatened by family and community (including local Islamic leaders) in an effort to make them give up their Christian faith. Community members and state authorities alike monitor and harass Christians from unregistered Protestant

groups whom they accuse of evangelism. As a result, Christians face threats, discrimination, obstruction and fines. The most egregious examples are state-led raids, usually at the behest of local Muslim informers.

### NATIONAL LIFE

The hostility of Turkmen society towards Christians is supported by a large and antagonistic state apparatus that seeks to compel social, and therefore religious, unity on the population. The Law on Religion includes a ban on unregistered religious organizations and a ban on private religious education. The regime censors Christians, controls the media and prohibits opposition parties.

### CHURCH LIFE

Obtaining legal status for non-registered churches is virtually impossible. All registered churches are required to re-register every three years under the new law, a complicated and time-consuming procedure. Churches, especially Protestant, can also struggle to obtain buildings due to societal hostility by landlords against Christians.



## International obligations & rights violated

**Turkmenistan 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](#))

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

- Group 6784, Grouped object Non-registered churches are raided, with members arrested, threatened, and fined (ICCPR Arts. 9 and 18)
- Group 6785, Grouped object Christians and their activities are closely monitored by the authorities (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Christian converts experience pressure and violence from their family and community to renounce their faith (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Group 6786, Grouped object Access to religious literature is severely restricted and subject to official screening and approval (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)
- Group 6787, Grouped object Female converts face physical beatings, house arrest, verbal and physical abuse, threats, and rejection from their own family because of their faith (ICCPR Arts. 9, 12 and 18)

## Situation of other religious minorities

The government does not focus on any specific religious group. Muslims, Christians, Jews and Baha'is all experience a high level of state surveillance and oppression.

According to [USCIRF 2024 Turkmenistan Chapter](#): “Muslim prisoners of conscience remain jailed under unsubstantiated national security pretenses for engaging in peaceful religious activities.”



## Open Doors in Turkmenistan

Open Doors provides immediate aid to Central Asian believers when they are jailed, excluded from families and communities, and deprived of livelihood and employment because of their faith in Christ. We also strengthen 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.*