

WORLD WATCH LIST 2024

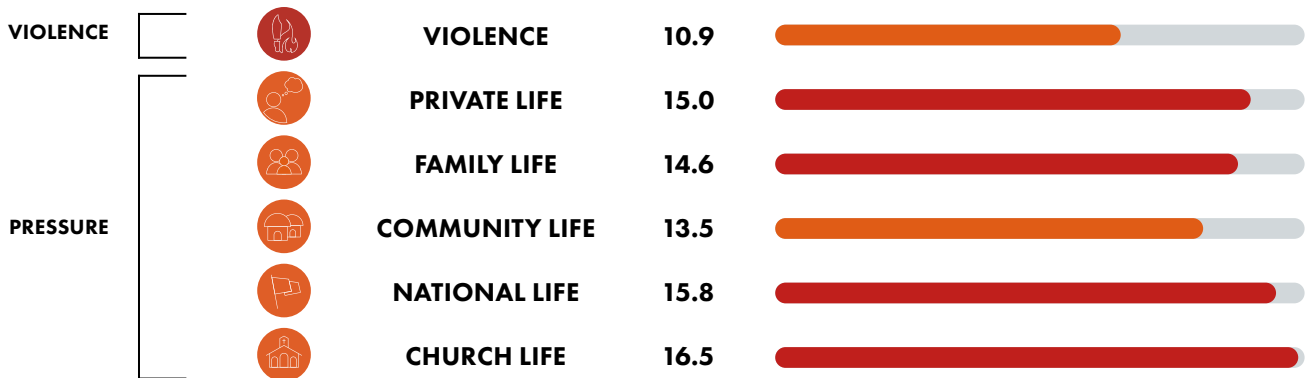
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO. **9**

IRAN



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

Converts from Islam to Christianity bear the brunt of religious freedom violations, carried out by the government in particular and to a lesser extent by society and the converts' families. The government sees Iranian Christians as an attempt by Western countries to undermine Islam and the Islamic regime of Iran. Leaders of Christian convert groups, as well as members and Christians of other denominational backgrounds supporting them, have been arrested, prosecuted and have received long prison sentences for "crimes against national security". The historical communities of Armenian and Assyrian Christians are recognized by the State but are treated as second-class citizens. Being Muslim is a requirement for most jobs, especially in the government. They suffer from legalized discrimination, including being denied the use of Persian for any religious activity or Christian material. In addition, historical Christian communities are not allowed to contact Muslim-background Christians (speaking Persian) or have them attend church services.

Quick facts

LEADER

Supreme Leader Ayatollah
Ali Khamenei

POPULATION

86,976,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

1,245,000 (OD estimate)

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Theocratic Republic



Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	1,245,000	1.4
Muslims	85,087,503	97.8
Bahais	250,249	0.3
Agnostics	244,290	0.3

Source¹

Iran became an Islamic Republic when the Shah was removed in the 1979 Revolution and Shia Islamic clerics took control, banning Western influence (which they see as Christian) from their country. Today, the most senior and influential cleric is the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, a Principlist (conservative). He pulls all political strings and appoints the Guardian Council, which has veto power over all legislation and vets all candidates for political positions.

In September 2022, a new round of protests followed the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini after being mistreated by Iran's morality police for not wearing her headscarf correctly. In contrast to previous protests, more sections of society joined this time, including many young people. The Iranian regime responded with harsh sentences for thousands of arrested protesters, including death penalties for dozens of them. Since the beginning of 2023, at

least 352 persons have been executed (a significant increase compared to previous years), including at least seven for their involvement in the protests ([Iran Human Rights](#), accessed 26 June 2023). Many Christians, historical and convert, have supported these protests.

Officially, most Iranians follow the state religion: Shia Islam, with a significant minority (10%) following Sunni Islam. Iran's Constitution recognizes four religious groups: Muslims, Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians. However, everyone who is not Shia Muslim experiences discrimination and legal limitations. For example, the Civil Code prohibits a non-Muslim man from marrying a Muslim woman. The hijab is compulsory even for Christian women, and Christians may not inherit property from a Muslim.

Unrecognized minorities (converts to Christianity, Bahai, Dervish and non-believers) suffer severe violations. The majority of the thousands of Iranians converting to Christianity gather in small house groups. The biggest threat is from the Iranian security services, who monitor Christians' online activity and gather information to use against them as evidence of 'acting against national security' or 'espionage for Zionist regimes'. It is believed that thousands of Iranian Christians from a Muslim background flee the country out of fear of arrest, psychological torture (including solitary confinement) and long-term prison sentences.

¹ Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023) (Adapted according to OD-estimate)

How the situation varies by region

Government control is highest in urban areas, while rural areas are less monitored. However, the anonymity of urban areas gives Christians more freedom to organize meetings and activities than in rural areas, in which social control is higher.

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

This group consists of Christian expatriates from the Far East (e.g., Philippines, South Korea) and the West, many of whom have a Catholic, Lutheran or Presbyterian background. Of the small number of churches, some expatriate churches have been forced to shut down after local converts with an Islamic background started attending. Joint annual prayer meetings between church leaders of different denominations were also canceled in the past due to pressure from Iran's security apparatus.

It is absolutely forbidden for expatriate Christians to interact with Iranian converts from Islam to Christianity, let alone welcome them into their church communities.

Historical Christian communities

Historical ethnic Christian minorities such as the Armenian and Assyrian Christians are relatively free to practice their beliefs. They are allowed to preach in their own language, but it is forbidden to minister to people with a Muslim background (speaking Persian) or have them attend church services. Although

formally recognized and protected by law, historical Christians are treated as second-class citizens and face legal and societal discrimination.

Converts to Christianity

Converts from Islam to Christianity constitute the largest category in the country. They bear the brunt of persecution carried out by the government, and to a lesser extent by their (extended) families and society. Baptism is seen as a public declaration of one's denunciation of Islam and is therefore forbidden. Also, children born to converts from Islam to Christianity are automatically registered as Muslims, since their parents cannot change their religious affiliation. Previously, the leaders of Christian convert groups were arrested, prosecuted and received long prison terms for crimes against national security. However, an increasing number of non-leaders have received similar charges too, as well as Christians of other denominations supporting them. There is also a growing community of Iranian Christian converts worldwide, as over the years many converts have fled the country and other Iranians have become Christians abroad.

Non-traditional Christian communities

Although it is difficult to make a sharp distinction between this category and the communities of converts, there are Christians belonging to Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal communities. They often have an Armenian, Assyrian, Jewish or a Zoroastrian background. Others include the children and grandchildren of converts from Islam. They face the same severe persecution from the government and are discriminated against by society, especially if they engage in any evangelistic or house-church activities.



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Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression

All laws must be consistent with Sharia law. A Guardian Council, appointed by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and consisting of Shia scholars and clerics, reviews all legislation as well as candidates for the highest public appointments e.g., the presidency and parliament. Ethnic Persians are considered Muslim, so converts to Christianity are seen as apostates. This makes almost all Christian activity illegal, especially in the Persian language. Local Muslim clerics sometimes incite violence against religious minority groups. Iranian society is less fanatical than its leadership due to the widespread influence of moderate Sufi Islam as well as the pride of the Iranian people in pre-Islamic Persian culture. Nevertheless, religious families often put pressure on family members converting from Islam to Christianity.

Dictatorial paranoia

The regime aims to protect the values of the 1979 Revolution, from which it derives its legitimacy. Christianity is viewed as a dangerous Western influence and a threat to the Islamic identity of Iran. This explains why especially converts from Islam are convicted of crimes against national security. In addition, the violent repression of all opposition shows that the regime above all cares about keeping its power base.

Organized corruption and crime

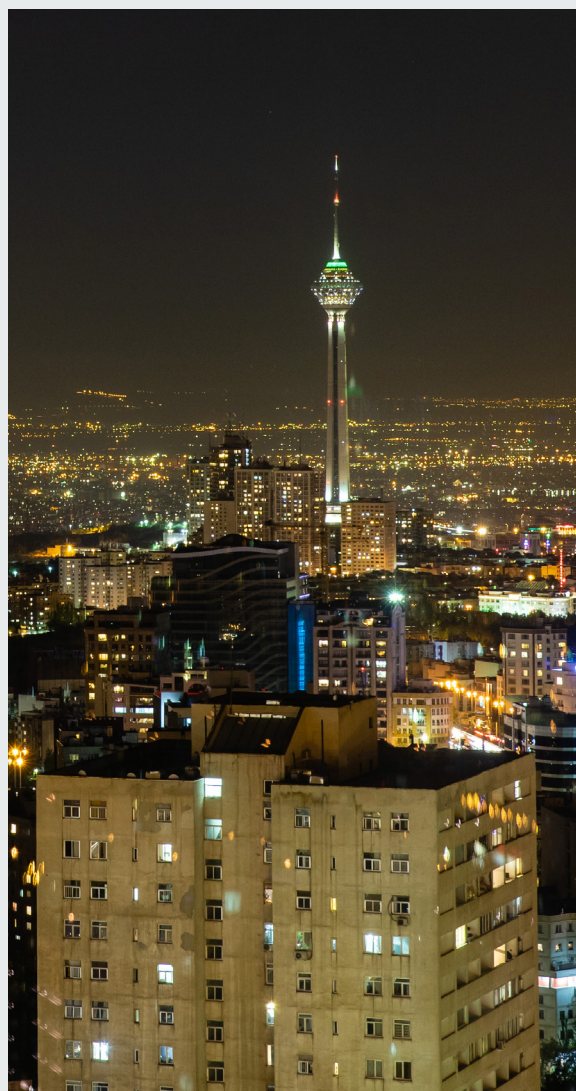
Imprisoned Christians, especially converts, are regularly offered release on bail. This often involves large amounts of money – reportedly varying between 2,000 and 150,000 USD – forcing Christians or their families to hand over title deeds to homes and sometimes businesses. Those released on bail often silence themselves due to fear of losing their family's property. The Iranian regime puts pressure on them to leave the country and forfeit their bail.

Clan oppression

Iran has an honor and shame culture, especially present in rural areas. In addition, the population is multicultural, with some ethnic groups having strong group identities. Conversion to Christianity is often seen as a betrayal of the group and bringing shame to the family. This can lead to additional pressure on converts to Christianity.

Christian denominational protectionism

The Iranian authorities like to highlight the presence of representatives of the Armenian and Assyrian churches in the media and in international settings to portray a positive impression of the country's religious tolerance. These church representatives make public statements about "the freedom all Christians enjoy", while just a small section of the Christian community enjoys a very limited level of freedom. These statements are often used to delegitimize other Christian denominations (mostly Protestant converts from a Muslim background) who do not conform to the government's restrictions and who want to exercise their religious freedom to a greater degree.



How are men and women differently affected?

Women

The death of Mahsa Amini brought fresh attention to the situation of Iranian women. Female Christians detained for their faith are shamed and can be sexually assaulted. Some Christian women, particularly Muslim background converts, are forced to marry Muslims. If already married, her children can be taken away to ensure they are raised as Muslims. Within marriages, Christian women are unprotected against sexual abuse and domestic violence; this lack of legal protection creates impunity for perpetrators of violent religious persecution of Christian women in private and public spheres.

Female typical pressure points:

- Denied access to social community/networks
- Denied custody of children
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Imprisonment by government
- Incarceration by family (house arrest)
- Travel bans/restrictions on movement
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

Men

Men are more likely to be arrested, prosecuted and imprisoned for lengthy periods, especially in urban areas. They are usually the primary providers for their families. When converting to Christianity, men risk losing their jobs. If they apply for a business registration or permit and the officer discovers their faith, the application is likely to be refused. This puts extra financial and psychological pressure on their families. Men also face monitoring, threats and harassment; the stress of which can force them to flee the country.

Male typical pressure points:

- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- Forced to flee town/country
- Imprisonment by government
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2024	9	86
2023	8	86
2022	9	85
2021	8	86
2020	9	85

There has been very little change in score in the WWL 2024 reporting period: Pressure has remained extreme in virtually all Spheres of Life, and violence has risen very slightly. Converts from Islam to Christianity face difficulties from government, society and their families. The government sees these Iranian Christians as an attempt by Western countries to undermine Islam and the Islamic regime of Iran. Historical communities of Armenian and Assyrian Christians are recognized by the state but are treated as second-class citizens.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

Amended articles 499 and 500 of the Penal Code

November 2022: A group of three converts from Islam to Christianity had been convicted and given the maximum sentence of five years under article 500 of the penal code in April 2022. They appealed their conviction, denying “any activities contrary to the country’s laws”. Judges in similar cases have admitted that they have been under considerable pressure from security agencies to hand out maximum sentences to Christians from a Muslim background ([Article Eighteen](#), 9 November 2022). At a second trial on identical charges in November 2022, all three men were acquitted. However, their first conviction still stands, with only one of them having his prison sentence reduced. In addition, a week after the hearing, their lawyer was arrested ([Article Eighteen](#), 29 November 2022). All three men were allowed a short period of leave over Christmas in 2022 after paying substantial amounts of bail; they then returned to continue serving their sentences ([Article Eighteen](#), 11 January 2023).

Mass arrest

- **July 2023:** Between 1 June and 17 July 2023, the Iranian authorities arrested at least 69 Christians in 11 different cities. Most of them are converts from Islam to Christianity, but at least two are Christians from Armenian backgrounds. Some of those released have been forced to sign commitments to refrain from further Christian activities, or ordered to attend Islamic re-education sessions. Those released on bail had to pay high bail amounts (with amounts ranging between 400 million (\$8,000) and 2 billion tomans (\$40,000)). Others were also ordered to leave Iran or their employment was terminated. At least 10 Christians are still in detention. The wave of arrests followed a period of very few publicly reported arrests, and is an indication that the very oppressive nature of the regime remains unchanged.

Adopted daughter cannot stay with Christian parents

- **Case still pending in WWL 2024 reporting period:** In September 2020, an Iranian appeal court ruled that the very young adopted daughter of Sam Khosravi and Maryam Falahi could not stay with her parents as they are Christians. Despite the acknowledgement in the first ruling that there was “zero chance” another adoptive family would be found for Lydia given her health problems, the couple was judged “not to be fit” to take care of her, given their conversion. Even fatwas issued by two grand ayatollahs, the most senior Shia Islamic clergy, did not help, nor did an appeal letter from 120 Iranian activists and lawyers ([Article Eighteen](#), 13 October 2020). It is believed that the hands of the judges were tied and that the actual verdict came from the Ministry of Intelligence, showing that the Iranian judiciary is not independent at all. They have taken their case to the Iranian Supreme Court and are awaiting a new verdict ([Article Eighteen](#), 22 April 2021).

WWL Year	Christians detained	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians Imprisoned or punished by the government	Christians forced to flee their countries
2024	122	22	16	1000*
2023	48	15	32	1000*

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - for full results see the violence section of the Full Country Dossier. 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.*

Private life

It is risky for Christians, especially converts, to express their faith publicly (e.g., in blogs or on social media) since the internet is monitored and this can be used as evidence prior to an arrest. Sharing Christian messages (especially in Persian) can be interpreted as an act of proselytization. Accessing online Christian materials and contacting foreign Christians are risky activities, and possessing Christian materials in Persian – especially in significant quantities – suggests they are for distribution to Muslim-background Iranians. Meetings involving converts from an Islamic background are monitored and frequently raided.

Family life

Christians cannot adopt Muslim children, but Armenians and Assyrians have their own orphanages from where they can adopt. The children of converts are automatically registered as Muslim and must attend Islamic-based education, which has been further Islamized since the 1979 Revolution. Even the children of Armenian and Assyrian Christians are forced to take Islamic classes at elementary school. Opposition to this has led to court cases against parents and threats against the children involved. At university level, courses like Islamic history, Quranic teachings and Arabic are mandatory. University application forms require the applicants to indicate their religion. If a Muslim-born individual lists Christianity, he or she will not be accepted. Church leaders, and increasingly church members, are often imprisoned for long periods, which has a traumatic effect on the whole family. According to Article 881 of the Civil Code, a non-Muslim cannot inherit property from a Muslim. Even if only one of the heirs of a non-Muslim is Muslim, that person will receive the entire inheritance.

Community life

Christians are monitored, especially if they are suspected of running a house church or engaging in evangelism. These Christians will be frequently summoned for interrogation designed to intimidate. Informers in Western countries report back to Iranian intelligence on the activities of Iranian Christians abroad. All women in Iran have to cover their heads and wear the hijab. The State controls more than 80% of the economy, and doing business in Iran is dependent on clientelism and cronyism. Historical Christians like the Armenians and Assyrians will face discrimination when doing business, while other types of Christians can rarely conduct business in Iran.

National life

High positions in the government are reserved for Shia Muslims; Christians are banned from public office, except for three parliamentary seats reserved

for Armenian/Assyrian Christians. Criticizing the government can be dangerous. The national media is tightly controlled, and both state officials and imams have criticized Christians (typically referring to Zionism and house churches). Sexual harassment is common during the interrogation of arrested Christians, despite it being a violation of the Iranian Penal Code. Family members can harm converts with impunity.

Church life

Most church services are monitored by the police, which leads to fear for attendees. Armenian and Assyrian Christians may conduct services in their own languages as long as they do not welcome Muslim-background Christians. Armenians and Assyrians also run some state-subsidized schools; however, the headteachers are generally Muslim. Over the past few years, the government has intensified efforts to remove Persian-speaking Christians from Iran by shutting down house churches and arresting both leaders and members. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, all four remaining Persian-speaking churches were closed indefinitely and have not been allowed to reopen.



International obligations & rights violated

Iran 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 on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

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

- Christians are arbitrarily arrested, charged for national security crimes, and sentenced without a fair trial (ICCPR Art. 9)
- Peaceful Christian religious activities are monitored and are regularly disrupted by the state on national security grounds (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 21)
- Converts to Christianity are persecuted by the state because of their decision to leave Islam (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christians from all denominations are monitored by the state, in violation of their right to privacy (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Christian children are forced to receive Islamic religious education (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)
- Christians cannot inherit from Muslims and have restricted access to higher education and public employment (ICCPR Art. 26)



Situation of other religious minorities

Bahai, Sunni, Sufi (Dervish) Muslims and other religious minorities (like the Yarsanis) are also persecuted in Iran. Many dissidents from these groups have been executed – mainly on charges of terrorism (instead of “apostasy”). Ethnic minorities such as the Kurds, Baloch and Iranian Arabs face government suspicion and discrimination as well.

Open Doors in Iran

Open Doors is supporting the church in Iran through partners with the following activities:

- Online presence
- Christian multimedia initiatives
- Advocacy



About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the Full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2024 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 01 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- All brief country profiles can be accessed under 'Advocacy resources' on the research pages of the Open Doors International website, along with the more detailed Full Country Dossiers and the latest update of [WWL Methodology](#). These are also available at the [Open Doors Analytical](#) website (password: freedom).

Most of the photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
