

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2024

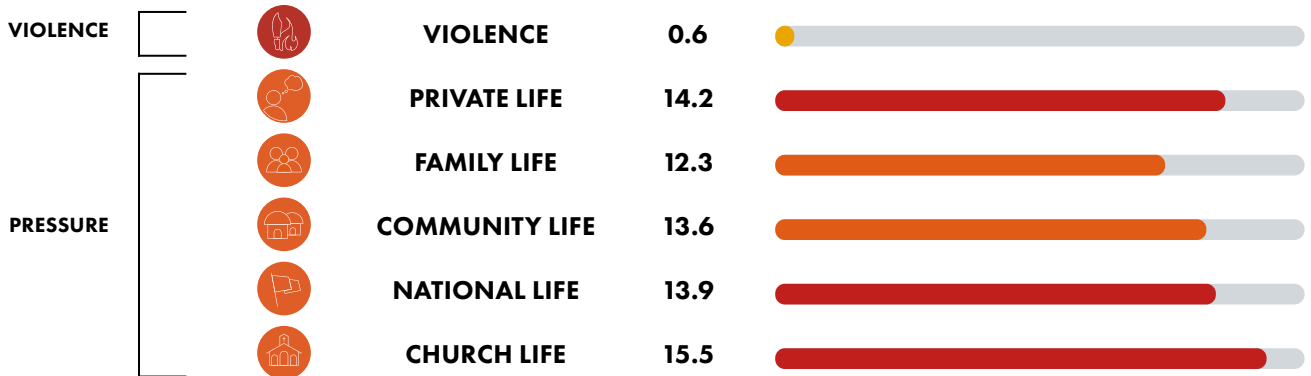
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

## TURKMENISTAN

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**29**



### 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 Berdimuhamedow

### POPULATION

6,283,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

66,000<sup>1</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Islam

### GOVERNMENT

Authoritarian Presidential Republic



## Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	66,000	1.1
Muslims	6,079,000	96.8
Agnostics	110,000	1.8
Atheists	24,100	0.4

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. Most Turkmen follow the traditions rather than the teachings of Islam. There are strict restrictions imposed by the government on religion, such as the state appointing Muslim 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 the World Christian Database data, as of March 2023, the largest official church denominations in Turkmenistan are the Russian Orthodox Church, the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Protestants are frequently branded "extremists" due to their religious activities outside state-sanctioned structures.

According to the US State Department's 2022 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 law permits the registration only of those religious organizations that have at least 50 resident members older than 18; a similar requirement applies to nonreligious civil associations." "Unregistered religious organizations and unregistered subsidiary congregations of registered religious organizations may not legally conduct religious activities; establish places of worship; gather for religious services, including in private residences; produce or disseminate religious materials; or proselytize. Any such activity is punishable as an

<sup>1</sup> Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

<sup>2</sup> Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

administrative offense with fines ranging from 100 to 2,000 manat (\$570), with higher fines for religious leaders and lower fines for members.”

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.

## 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?

### Communities of expatriate Christians

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

### Historical Christian communities

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) 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.

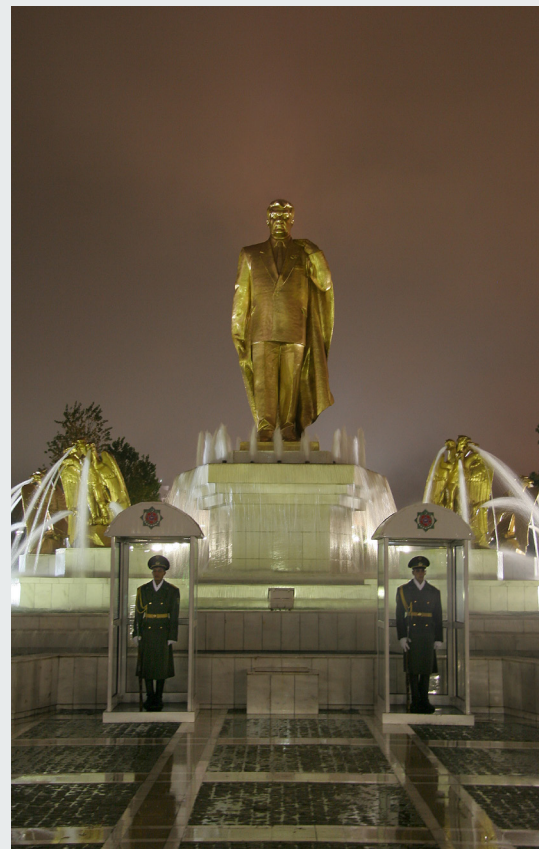
## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### 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 are men and women differently affected?

### Women

Gaps remain regarding women’s legal protection in Turkmenistan, including against domestic violence. Prevalent Islamic culture places women in a subordinate position to men. Female converts are particularly vulnerable to beatings, house arrest, verbal abuse, threats, rejection, abduction and forced marriage. Women and girls remain vulnerable to sexual harassment and rape, though rarely report cases due to stigma and shame, and impunity regularly granted to perpetrators. Abusing women is used as a tool for the intimidation and distress of their husbands, families and churches.

#### Female typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family (house arrest)
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual
- Violence – verbal

### 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 in 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
- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- Economic harassment via fines
- Imprisonment by government
- Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
- 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
2024	29	70
2023	26	70
2022	25	69
2021	23	70
2020	22	70

The WWL 2024 score for Turkmenistan is slightly higher than that of WWL 2023 (but less than 1 point). The situation is one of stability, with only minor changes in some areas of pressure and violence in the country. State agents constantly monitor churches and Christians. Muslim families, friends and villagers exert pressure on converts.



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# Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **Christians attacked:** Sources reported that at least 22 Christians were physically or mentally abused. The majority of reported cases involved violence within a convert’s family - beatings, forced isolation, etc.

WWL Year	Christians physically or mentally abused
2024	22
2023	22

*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

The government strictly controls religious literature 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 the family and culture. Family and 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, 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 into 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 will monitor and harass unregistered Protestants 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 which 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:

- Non-registered churches are raided, with members arrested, threatened, and fined (ICCPR Arts. 9 and 18)
- 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)
- Access to religious literature is severely restricted and subject to official screening and approval (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)
- 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 Bahais all experience a high level of state surveillance and oppression. According to the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Turkmenistan): “[A]n unknown number of Muslims arrested in previous years based on religious grounds remained in prison.” “Jehovah’s Witnesses reported no new instances of conscientious objectors ... being detained or imprisoned during the year.”



# Open Doors in Turkmenistan

Open Doors provides immediate aid to Central Asian Christians 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 ministry
- Presence ministry
- Social and medical ministry
- Vocational training and microcredit
- Social-economic development projects, like rehabilitation centers for children, men and women



### 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).

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

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