

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

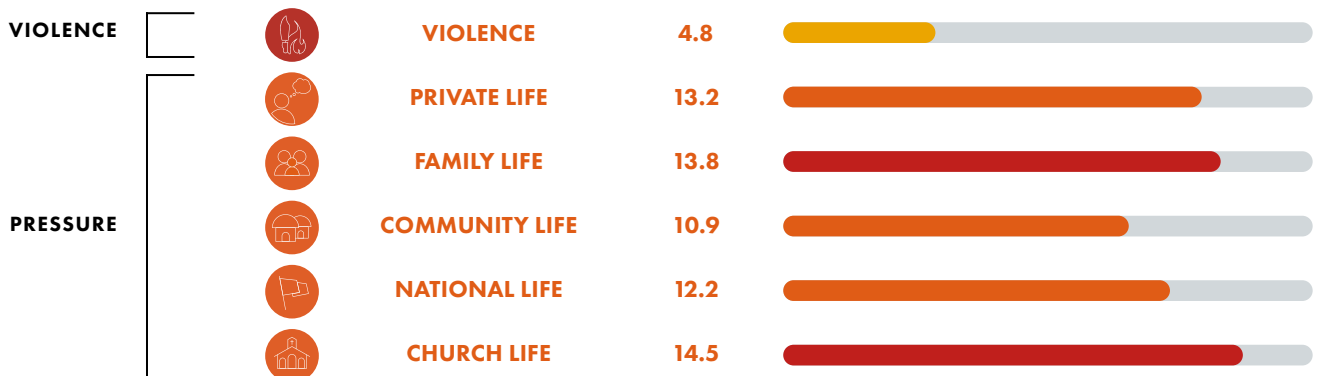
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**29**

## Morocco



### 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

A recurrent problem for Christians who are open about their faith relates to Article 220 of the Moroccan Penal Code, which criminalizes “shaking the faith of a Muslim”. This means many Christians who discuss their faith with others are at risk of arrest and criminal prosecution. Advocates for the rights of Christians have also been targeted by the government and Islamic fundamentalists. While the law only punishes proselytization, converts to Christianity can be punished in other ways, for instance by losing inheritance rights and custody of children.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

King Mohammed VI

### POPULATION

37,773,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

31,300<sup>1</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Islam

### GOVERNMENT

Parliamentary Constitutional Monarchy



## Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	31,300	0.1
Muslims	37,652,000	99.7
Agnostics	48,800	0.1
Baha'is	37,800	0.1

Source<sup>2</sup>

Morocco gained independence from France in 1956. Since then, the country has maintained relative stability and prosperity. In 2011, the Arab Spring reached Morocco. Large numbers of protesters were frustrated by unemployment and sought more civil liberties. The government organized a referendum on constitutional reforms, which allowed the country to avoid the political upheaval that engulfed much of the rest of the Arab world.

Islam is the official state religion and 99% of the population is (mostly Sunni) Muslim. Historically large communities of Jews and Christians have declined significantly since the mid-20th century. Non-Muslim foreign communities can openly practice their faith,

but proselytization with the intent to convert Muslims is illegal. Moroccan Christians, almost all from a Muslim background, face social harassment such as discrimination in the job market, if their conversion becomes known. Some who are considered apostates are referred to the Sharia courts, facing sanctions such as forcible divorce, loss of inheritance, and removal of child custody.

## How the situation varies by region

The Islamic population in rural areas is known to be conservative; most violations take place in the predominately Berber-populated north-east of the country, the Atlas Mountains and the south-eastern desert area. Most converts live in urban areas, where it is easier to escape family and community pressure.



<sup>1</sup> Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

<sup>2</sup> Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)



## Who is affected?

### Communities of expatriate Christians

Expatriate Christians are often under surveillance and risk deportation if they are perceived to engage in acts of evangelization. However, they enjoy relative freedom. Expatriate Christians from sub-Saharan Africa, typically Pentecostal, are usually marginalized and discriminated against.

### Historical Christian communities

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

### Converts to Christianity

Converts to Christianity from a Muslim background meet in house churches because they cannot get permission to congregate in official churches. Converts face pressure from family and society to renounce their faith, though the level of tolerance is higher in urban areas. They tend to be monitored and risk violations if they engage in evangelism.

### Non-traditional Christian communities

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



## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### Islamic oppression:

Morocco displays a more moderate version of Islamic oppression compared to other countries in the region. Restrictions imposed by the Islamic authorities include the confiscation of Christian literature in Arabic (including Bibles) if discovered, bans on cooperating with Christians from abroad, especially if evangelization is planned, and serious challenges in securing recognized places of worship for Christians with a Muslim background. Converts from Islam face pressure from family and community on account of their new faith.

### Dictatorial paranoia:

The Moroccan government views the church, especially activities involving converts, with suspicion. Moroccans are expected to be loyal to Islam, king and country. In past years, the authorities have accused Christians of being disloyal to the king and have deported many foreign Christians without due process. One of the reasons for this sort of government action could be the fear of radical Muslim groups; by appeasing them, the government tries to prevent any unrest.



# How are men and women differently affected?

## WOMEN

Cultural expectations bind women to domestic duties, especially in rural areas. Converts from Islam are most vulnerable to persecution, particularly in the domestic sphere. They risk arbitrary divorces, denial of access to children, domestic confinement, forced marriage, and family expulsion. Gaining access to Christian religious materials is extremely difficult, and rural Christians must adhere to religious clothing and rites. Rape and sexual harassment is a taboo area associated with family honor, making it a powerful tool for religious coercion, which is also used against sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco.

- Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings, and rites
- Denied access to social community / networks
- Denied custody of children
- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Forced out of home – expulsion
- Incarceration by family / house arrest
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual
- Violence – verbal

## MEN

Christian converts are among the most vulnerable in Moroccan society, perceived as having brought shame upon their families. Domestically, family ostracization, the denial of financial support and inheritance, and abandonment by his wife are likely.

If single, there may be pressure to marry a Muslim, though this affects women more. Publicly, men may be interrogated, beaten or imprisoned. The severity of backlash after conversion depends on his social position and political standing. Employment pressure is key, as men are usually the main family providers. Occasionally, discrimination in the education setting also occurs.

- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Discrimination/harassment via education
- Economic harassment via work / job / business
- Forced out of home – expulsion
- Imprisonment by the government
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological

## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2023	29	69
2022	27	69
2021	27	67
2020	26	66
2019	35	63

*The score for Morocco remained the same in WWL 2023, with the average pressure remaining extremely high. The violence score increased from 3.9 to 4.8 points, mainly because a higher number of church buildings, including house churches, were attacked this year.*



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# Examples of violence in the reporting period

- During the WWL 2023 reporting period, monitoring and questioning of Moroccan Christians by the Moroccan police continued. The police sided with the perpetrators in cases of violence against Moroccan Christians. The pervasive monitoring forces many Moroccan Christians into self-censorship.
- Several incidents occurred in which house churches were attacked by members of society.
- During the WWL 2023, at least five cases of forced marriages have been reported. In addition, several converts from Islam to Christianity, mainly young women, were relocated against their will.
- Many Moroccan Christians had to relocate inside the country due to (family) pressure.

WWL Year	Christians detained	Christians raped and/or sexually assaulted	Christians forced to marry	Christians physically or mentally abused
2023	21	10	5	46
2022	11	12	4	34

*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 both local and expatriate Christians to speak about their faith publicly with those outside their immediate family. Doing so carries the risk of being charged with “shaking the faith of a Muslim” under Moroccan law. Community members can sometimes react violently when seeing a convert display a Christian symbol or discuss their faith, and many converts are afraid to share their new faith.

## Family life

Intermarriage between Muslim women and Christian men is prohibited by law. Children of Christians are likely to face discrimination and harassment from peers, as well as isolation from the wider community. Pressure is intentionally placed upon Moroccan Christian families in an effort to force either assimilation or emigration.

## Community life

Christianity is seen as standing outside traditional Moroccan identity. Additionally, it is stigmatized as the faith of imperialists. On this justification, Moroccan security services monitor local and expatriate Christians’ activities. They also prohibit the organization of any groups who identify as overtly “Christian” for fear of evangelism. For Christians with a Muslim background,

societal pressure also makes it difficult to raise their children as Christians. Such pressure could, for instance, take the form of bullying at school or Islamic instruction without parental consent.

## National life

Politically, the situation for Christians in Morocco is difficult, as the Constitution declares Islam to be the state religion. Civil society organizations with clear Christian convictions, or which aim to defend the rights of Moroccan converts, are actively opposed by the government. Christian evangelism is banned, and those who engage in it could be accused of “shaking the faith of Muslims” and risk criminal liability.

## Church life

The fact that Christian activities may be construed as proselytization often hampers the ability of Christian communities to grow and thrive. Expatriate churches are consistently monitored to ensure that Moroccan nationals do not attend their services. The state prohibits Moroccan Christians from establishing their own churches. This effort is supported by the fact that the government refuses to permit the display or sale of Bibles which they believe are intended for use in proselytizing.

# International obligations & rights violated

Morocco has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in 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)

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

- Christian converts are ostracized and faced with opposition by their families, and threatened with divorce and loss of child custody (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Women converts are forcibly married and forced to recant their beliefs. (ICCPR Art. 23.3 and CEDAW Art. 16).
- Christians face harassment and violence if they talk about their faith or engage in proselytization (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)
- Christians face restrictions in employment in the public sector and experience discrimination in the private sector (ICCPR Arts. 25 and 26, and ICESCR Art. 6)





## Situation of other religious minorities

Judaism is the only minority religion officially recognized in the Constitution, and Jews have their own religious courts for family matters. Although Islam is the official religion of the state, de facto only Sunni (Maliki) Islam is socially acceptable. Shia Muslims, Ahmadiyya Muslims, and Baha'is face government restrictions that make it nearly impossible for them to openly practice their faith.



### Open Doors in Morocco

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

- Training
- Media follow-up ministry
- Advocacy
- Literature distribution

Open Doors also raises prayer support for believers in difficult situations.

#### 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: © 2023 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- The Full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology - as well as the complete WWL 2023 ranking and reports - can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

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

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