

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2022

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**4**

## Libya



©Alamy

### 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).<sup>1</sup> Red = extreme level, orange = very high, yellow = high

## Key findings

Since the toppling of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, Libya has suffered a civil war. A mixture of tribal groups and radical Islamic groups, supported by different foreign countries, all fight for (oil) wealth and power. The UN-supported Government of National Unity, the latest attempt to restore a central government, is trying to organize elections but does not have a grip on the different factions.

<sup>1</sup>World Watch Research measures pressure across all spheres of life as well as violence (full methodology [here](#) – password: freedom).

The absence of a central government to impose law and order has led to very high levels of violence against Christians. Various radical Islamic groups and organized criminal groups target Christians to exploit, kidnap, rape, enslave and kill, especially among the sub-Saharan migrants to Europe. Other Christians from sub-Saharan Africa are consistently harassed, threatened and discriminated against on racial and religious grounds. Coptic laborers from Egypt keep their faith completely hidden. Libyan Christians with a Muslim background face intense pressure from family and community to renounce their faith.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh

### POPULATION

6,746,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

34,600 (0.5%)<sup>2</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Islam

### GOVERNMENT

In transition

©Alamy



## Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	34,600	0.5
Muslims	6,675,000	98.9
Hindus	6,200	0.1
Buddhists	20,400	0.3

Source<sup>3</sup>

Life in Libya since the toppling of dictator Gaddafi in 2011 has been characterized by civil war. UN-recognized governments supported largely by Islamist groups, centered in the west of the country around the capital Tripoli, are in conflict with a rival government in the east of the country supported by Field Marshall Khalifa Haftar and his forces. Both factions are supported by foreign backers striving for influence. Hence, the battle for Libya has become a

showdown between two opposing blocs which divide the Sunni Middle East. On one side is the Turkey-Qatar axis, which supports political Islam (Islamism). On the other side is the United Arab Emirates-Saudi-Arabia-Egypt axis, which views political Islamists as an existential threat to their rule and hence supports their opponents.

Virtually all Muslims belong to Sunni Islam. The Amazigh (Berber) ethnic minority include some Ibadi Muslims. There are significant numbers of Christians among sub-Saharan African and Egyptian migrants. Almost all non-Muslims are foreigners; the number of Libyan Christians from a Muslim background remains very low. Both the transitional Constitutional Declaration (2011) as well as the 2017 Draft Constitution declare Islam the country's religion and Sharia law the main source of legislation.

<sup>2</sup>Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

<sup>3</sup>Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

## How the situation varies by region

Christians are at risk all over the country but are especially vulnerable in areas where radical Islamist groups are active, such as the Sirte region. Other radical Islamist groups are in control of areas in and around Tripoli, with most Christians preferring to stay in the less extreme parts of the capital. To the east, radical Islamist groups are present in both rural and urban areas such as Benghazi.

## Who is affected?

### Communities of expatriate Christians

Christian migrant workers (most of them from sub-Saharan Africa and Egypt) are allowed to meet in the small number of remaining churches in the west of the country, although many stay away out of fear. Under no circumstance are Libyans allowed to attend these churches. Some expatriate Christians enjoy limited freedom, but constantly face threats of kidnapping and other forms of abuse. Sub-Saharan African Christians are doubly vulnerable to persecution and discrimination based on race and religion. Christian migrants travelling through Libya on their way to Europe are subject to forms of severe abuse.

### Historical Christian communities

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

### Converts to Christianity

The very small group of Libyan nationals who are Christians keep their faith secret. Libyans are forbidden to attend worship in official churches. The number of Libyan Christians from a Muslim background is very low, but with the appearance of Christian programs on satellite TV and Christian websites in Arabic, interest in Christianity has been increasing.

### Non-traditional Christian communities

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

## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### Islamic oppression:

Libya has a deeply Islamic culture, and converts from Islam to Christianity face immense pressure from family and community. Following Gaddafi's downfall, various radical Islamic groups have gained influence and control in society. At a local level, imams or sheikhs are known to incite hatred against Christians, especially migrants and converts. At the national level, radical Madkhalism Islamic politicians and scholars exert influence via both satellite television and the internet. Sharia law is upheld throughout the country. These factors have combined to result in a sharp increase in violence against Christians in recent years.

### Clan oppression:

Libya's society is conservative and tribal. Converting from Islam to Christianity is not only seen as a betrayal of Islam, but of family and tribe. Additionally, due to issues of ethnicity and racism, migrants from sub-Saharan countries are fiercely discriminated against.

### Organized corruption and crime:

Corruption is common, exacerbated by lack of rule of law and impunity. This source is blended with Islamic oppression, since some Islamic militant groups work with or act as organized criminal groups and engage in human trafficking and other criminal activities. These groups have been known to engage in rape, take hostages and trade in slaves.



# How are men and women differently affected?

## WOMEN

Women have a lower position within Libyan family life than men, caused by tribal norms corresponding to Sharia. If suspected of being interested in Christianity, a woman can face house arrest, sexual assault, forced marriage or even death. Women who experience sexual violence because of their faith, sometimes as a form of punishment, encounter social and cultural barriers to the prosecution of any offense. Christian migrant women crossing Libya are also vulnerable to abduction and trafficking, especially when separated from their male companions such as in migrant detention centers.

- Abduction
- Denied access to Christian religious materials
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family/house arrest
- Trafficking
- Violence - death
- Violence - psychological
- Violence - sexual

## MEN

In general, men face high risks of physical violence in Libya due to an ongoing cycle of violence, atrocities and impunity. Christian men face loss of employment, physical and mental abuse, eviction from their family home, and kidnap for ransom. Forced labor and slavery are widespread for sub-Saharan men who have migrated to Libya, including Christians. Libyan men and boys have been increasingly forced to fight in militias, causing many to flee their home towns to evade such a fate. Migrant Christians in detention camps, too, are forcibly recruited.

- Abduction
- Discrimination/harassment via education
- Economic harassment via work/job/business
- Forced out of home - expulsion
- Imprisonment by government
- Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
- Trafficking
- Violence - death
- Violence - physical
- Violence - psychological

## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution score out of 100
2022	4	90.93
2021	4	91.92
2020	4	90.21
2019	4	87.36
2018	7	86.20

The one point drop in Libya's score from WWL 2021 to WWL 2022 was mainly caused by a decrease in reported violence, although the violence score remains extremely high. Scores in all spheres of life remain at extreme levels. Although the country stabilized to a certain extent and saw less direct conflict during the reporting period, the overall vulnerability of Christians in Libya remains extremely high.



# Examples of violence in the reporting period

- Several church buildings were vandalized or partially demolished.
- Expatriate Christians who discussed their faith with Libyans online were arrested, interrogated and mistreated.
- Many Christian migrants from sub-Saharan Africa were abducted for ransom, detained, raped, abused or used as (domestic) workers under slavery conditions. Although abuse in most cases is not primarily faith-related, it is believed that Christian faith makes people extra vulnerable. Furthermore, at least six Coptic Christian migrant workers disappeared in mysterious circumstances.

WWL Year	Christians killed	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians internally displaced	Christians forced to flee their countries
2022	10	100	12	100
2021	10	250	15	20

*This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - see [here](#) for full results. 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

Christians in Libya hardly dare to inform others about their faith because of the danger from relatives, society and radical Islamic groups. Discussing one's Christian faith with a Muslim could be interpreted as an act of evangelism, which could lead to prosecution or (mob) violence.

## Family life

Religious education is based on Islamic principles. Almost all expatriate Christians have left the country and the main group of Christians currently consists of sub-Saharan migrants and some Egyptian Copts. Their children, if they go to school, must attend Islamic instruction and are vulnerable to harassment.

## Community life

The majority of Libyans are of Arab or Berber decent. Many Christians are sub-Saharan expatriates seeking better economic opportunities. They face discrimination due to both their religion and race.

## National life

Converts can be harmed or killed with impunity; when attacks are carried out by family members, it will be considered a matter of family honor. Other Christians can be killed with impunity by both radical groups as well as government officials. Sub-Saharan Christians are especially vulnerable in this regard. Foreign Christians must be careful not to cause provocation by criticizing

the government in any way. Even the few registered church buildings are careful not to have religious symbols outside their buildings, since the public display of Christian symbols is considered an indirect form of proselytization. It can attract serious punishment from the authorities and even public lynching.

## Church life

Depending on the region, migrants can gather in churches but face serious security risks. To bring Christian literature and Bibles in Arabic into the country remains strictly forbidden. Proselytizing or missionary activity among Muslims is de facto prohibited.



## International obligations & rights violated

Libya 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)

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

- Christians are targeted and killed by extremist groups on the basis of their faith (ICCPR Art. 6)
- Christians are harassed and targeted for wearing religious symbols (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christian converts are tortured and pressured to recant their conversion from Islam (ICCPR Arts. 7 and 18)
- Christians are arrested and detained on blasphemy charges for sharing Christian material online (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)

## Situation of other religious minorities

Ibadi and Sufi Muslims in Libya who do not belong to the Sunni Islamic traditions face violations in the form of violent attacks by militant groups like Islamic State (IS). They also face general discrimination from society. In addition, atheists and those who openly question Sunni Islamic doctrine are very much at risk.



# Open Doors in Libya

Open Doors raises prayer for believers in Libya.



©Unsplash

#### 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: © 2021 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2022 reporting period was 01 October 2020 - 30 September 2021.
- 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 2022 ranking and reports, can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

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

---