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## Turkmenistan: Country Dossier

December 2019



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

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# Introduction

## World Watch List 2020

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017	Total Score WWL 2016
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	11.1	94	94	94	92	92
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.0	93	94	93	89	88
3	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.5	9.4	92	91	91	91	87
4	Libya	15.3	15.5	15.8	16.0	16.4	11.3	90	87	86	78	79
5	Pakistan	14.0	13.9	15.0	14.9	13.7	16.7	88	87	86	88	87
6	Eritrea	14.5	14.9	15.9	15.9	15.4	10.9	87	86	86	82	89
7	Sudan	14.2	14.6	14.5	15.7	16.1	10.4	85	87	87	87	84
8	Yemen	16.6	16.4	16.4	16.7	16.7	2.6	85	86	85	85	78
9	Iran	14.1	14.3	14.1	15.8	16.5	10.4	85	85	85	85	83
10	India	12.9	13.0	13.5	15.0	13.5	14.8	83	83	81	73	68
11	Syria	13.5	14.2	13.0	13.9	14.4	12.6	82	82	76	86	87
12	Nigeria	12.2	11.9	13.5	12.8	13.0	16.7	80	80	77	78	78
13	Saudi Arabia	15.1	14.9	14.1	15.5	16.5	2.4	79	77	79	76	76
14	Maldives	15.4	15.6	14.0	15.9	16.6	0.7	78	78	78	76	76
15	Iraq	14.0	14.6	13.9	14.5	13.6	5.6	76	79	86	86	90
16	Egypt	12.1	13.1	10.7	13.2	10.5	16.1	76	76	70	65	64
17	Algeria	13.5	14.3	10.4	12.8	13.2	9.3	73	70	58	58	56
18	Uzbekistan	15.1	12.9	14.1	12.2	15.7	3.0	73	74	73	71	70
19	Myanmar	11.8	11.9	13.5	12.5	12.2	10.7	73	71	65	62	62
20	Laos	12.8	9.9	14.1	14.4	14.9	5.6	72	71	67	64	58
21	Vietnam	12.3	8.5	12.9	13.6	14.5	9.8	72	70	69	71	66
22	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.2	13.8	13.3	15.7	1.9	70	69	68	67	66
23	China	11.6	8.4	11.6	12.8	15.1	10.2	70	65	57	57	57
24	Mauritania	13.9	14.0	13.0	13.7	13.4	0.2	68	67	57	55	50
25	Central African Republic	10.1	9.1	13.1	9.8	10.2	15.6	68	70	61	58	59
26	Morocco	12.4	13.3	10.8	11.7	14.1	4.1	66	63	51	49	47
27	Qatar	13.6	13.4	10.8	12.2	14.1	2.2	66	62	63	66	65
28	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	10.2	9.4	11.8	15.6	66	48	-	-	-
29	Mali	9.2	8.2	12.8	10.0	11.7	13.7	66	68	59	59	55
30	Sri Lanka	11.5	9.0	11.0	10.9	9.6	13.1	65	58	57	55	53
31	Tajikistan	13.9	12.3	11.9	12.4	13.1	1.1	65	65	65	58	58
32	Nepal	12.4	10.8	9.9	12.1	12.2	7.0	64	64	64	53	53
33	Jordan	13.1	14.1	10.7	11.7	12.5	1.7	64	65	66	63	59
34	Tunisia	12.0	12.8	10.3	10.8	12.3	5.4	64	63	62	61	58
35	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.5	10.7	12.4	14.0	1.7	64	63	63	56	55
36	Turkey	12.6	11.8	10.7	13.3	11.3	3.7	63	66	62	57	55
37	Brunei	13.8	14.3	10.7	10.3	13.5	0.6	63	63	64	64	61
38	Bangladesh	11.1	9.9	12.7	11.1	8.9	9.3	63	58	58	63	57
39	Ethiopia	10.0	9.2	10.6	10.8	10.4	11.9	63	65	62	64	67
40	Malaysia	12.1	14.6	12.7	12.0	9.6	1.5	62	60	65	60	58
41	Colombia	8.9	7.8	11.9	9.8	8.9	15.0	62	58	56	53	55
42	Oman	12.7	13.1	10.0	11.5	12.7	2.0	62	59	57	53	53
43	Kuwait	13.2	13.1	9.9	11.5	13.4	0.7	62	60	61	57	56
44	Kenya	11.7	10.5	10.9	8.3	10.9	9.1	61	61	62	68	68
45	Bhutan	12.8	10.9	11.8	11.6	13.9	0.0	61	64	62	61	56
46	Russian Federation	12.2	8.3	10.7	10.4	12.1	6.9	60	60	51	46	48
47	United Arab Emirates	12.9	13.0	9.5	11.1	12.6	1.1	60	58	58	55	55
48	Cameroon	8.8	7.2	11.6	7.0	10.4	15.0	60	54	38	-	45
49	Indonesia	10.9	11.1	11.6	10.2	9.5	6.5	60	65	59	55	55
50	Niger	9.4	9.5	13.3	7.2	11.1	9.3	60	52	45	47	53
51	Palestinian Territories	12.2	13.0	9.2	10.2	11.9	3.1	60	57	60	64	62
52	Mexico	8.4	6.8	12.2	10.6	10.0	11.5	60	61	59	57	56
53	Azerbaijan	13.0	10.0	9.3	11.1	12.4	1.5	57	57	57	52	57
54	Comoros	11.7	11.5	9.1	9.9	13.9	0.9	57	56	56	56	56
55	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.3	11.1	9.4	11.9	1.1	57	56	54	48	46
56	Djibouti	12.3	12.3	10.3	10.0	11.2	0.2	56	56	56	57	58
57	Democratic Republic of the Congo	5.6	6.7	10.6	7.4	10.4	15.6	56	55	33	-	53
58	Chad	11.5	8.2	10.2	9.6	10.3	5.9	56	48	40	-	51
59	Bahrain	12.1	12.3	9.1	10.1	10.5	0.9	55	55	57	54	54

60	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	7.0	55	52	53	59	57
61	Cuba	9.6	5.6	9.5	11.8	12.0	3.5	52	49	49	47	42
62	Uganda	8.1	4.6	6.7	6.7	9.1	13.0	48	47	46	53	45
63	Burundi	5.1	5.8	9.7	9.2	9.6	8.7	48	43	-	-	-
64	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	7.0	8.1	3.7	45	46	-	-	-
65	South Sudan	5.7	1.5	7.0	6.3	7.8	15.6	44	44	-	-	-
66	Mozambique	6.9	4.6	7.1	5.2	8.0	11.7	43	43	-	-	-
67	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.7	8.3	8.8	1.1	43	43	-	-	-
68	Angola	6.4	3.6	7.0	8.7	10.4	6.7	43	42	-	-	-
69	Venezuela	3.8	4.4	10.6	9.3	9.5	4.8	42	41	34	-	-
70	Ivory Coast	9.8	8.6	8.2	5.5	6.6	3.5	42	43	-	-	-
71	Rwanda	5.3	4.4	6.7	7.8	10.1	7.2	42	41	-	-	-
72	Nicaragua	5.8	4.2	8.5	9.8	9.0	4.1	41	41	-	-	-
73	Togo	8.6	6.7	8.5	7.1	8.4	1.1	41	42	-	-	-

## Copyright notice

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## Brief note on sources and definitions

This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD). The highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. The WWL 2020 reporting period was 1 November 2018 - 31 October 2019.

The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”.

This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.

The latest update of WWL Methodology including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

# WWL 2020: Persecution summary / Turkmenistan

## Brief country details

Pop 2019	Christians	Chr%
Turkmenistan		
5,943,000	70,500	1.2

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2019).

World Watch List Turkmenistan	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2020	70	22
WWL 2019	69	23
WWL 2018	68	19
WWL 2017	67	19
WWL 2016	66	19

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2016-2020 reporting periods.

## Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Turkmenistan: Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials , Political parties, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs
Islamic oppression	One's own (extended) family, Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Government officials

Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.

## Brief description of persecution situation

Even Russian Orthodox and Armenian Apostolic churches may experience Sunday services being monitored. The printing or importing of Christian materials is restricted. Christians from a Muslim background bear the brunt of the persecution both at the hands of the state and from family, friends and community. Where churches have not been registered, Christians suffer repeatedly from police raids, threats, arrests and fines.

## Specific examples of persecution in the reporting period

- In November 2018, a female convert to Christianity was called to the police station where she was interrogated about Christian literature and meetings in her home. She was threatened with arrest. (Source: Open Doors research).
- Church activities are often interfered with and hindered by families of converts, the local Muslim community and the local authorities.
- There have been tighter controls on church life ever since a [new law on religion](#) was introduced on 12 April 2016.

## External Links - WWL 2020: Persecution summary

- Specific examples of persecution in the reporting period: new law on religion - <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/05/turkmenistans-secret-additions-already-restrictive-religion-law/>

# WWL 2020: Keys to understanding / Turkmenistan

## Introduction

### Link for general background information

See BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-16094646>.

## Recent history

After 69 years as part of the Soviet Union Turkmenistan declared its independence on 27 October 1991. Until the death of former President Saparmurat Niyazov in 2006, the country had been in the tight grip of his quasi-religious personality cult, based on his book, called "Ruhnama". The philosophy embedded in this "book of the Turkmen soul" dominated public life and was taught in schools and universities. Perhaps the climax of this reverence was the construction of a huge tower in the capital Ashgabat which was topped by a golden, rotating statue of the president. The statue was always facing the sun. The official explanation was that the sun followed the statue, not the other way round. It is hardly surprising that observers used to refer to the country as the North Korea of Central Asia.

Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov took office after President Niyazov's death in December 2006 and cancelled some of his decisions, e.g. to re-name months and days according to Turkmen heroes, but he had to move carefully in deposing his predecessor who had been revered almost like a god. The compulsory teaching of Ruhnama in the country's education system was gradually reduced. The golden statue was moved to the outskirts of Ashgabat.

It did not take long before Berdymukhamedov developed his own personality cult around the honorary title "Arkadag" (Protector). After Berdymukhamedov's re-election in 2012, an "Era of Supreme Happiness" was announced. The regime decided to tear down thousands of homes and rebuild the capital Ashgabat as a white marbled city. On 25 May 2015 the authorities in Turkmenistan unveiled a giant statue of President Berdymukhamedov on horseback, holding a dove - everything covered with a layer of 24-carat gold. In September 2016 constitutional amendments were made to allow the president to run in future presidential elections regardless of his age.

In July 2019 there was a lot of commotion in Turkmenistan when the rumour spread that President Berdymukhamedov was [dead](#), after not being seen in public for a number of weeks. However, he re-appeared later in August 2019 at the [opening of a conference](#). No explanation was ever given for his absence, but it shows how central the president is to the life of the nation.

## Political and legal landscape

Turkmenistan is a presidential republic, whereby the President of Turkmenistan is both head of state and head of government. No true opposition parties are allowed. Power is concentrated in the presidency; the [judiciary](#) is wholly subservient to the government, with all judges appointed for five-year terms by the president without legislative review.



Turkmenistan is the Central Asian country with the highest level of state control in almost every aspect of life. The US State Department reports that the regime has imposed “laws and policies that restrict religious freedom through registration requirements, strict regulation of the production and dissemination of religious literature, and restrictions on permissible activities of religious groups and individuals.”

According to [IRF 2017](#), since May 2015, the State Commission on Religious Organizations and Expert Evaluation of Religious Information Resources (SCROEERIR) is responsible for controlling religious affairs. The Law on Religious Organizations and Religious Freedom requires all religious organizations, including those already registered under the previous law on religion, to reregister with the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) to operate legally, a process involving the concurrence of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), the Ministry of National Security (MNB), the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), and other government agencies. The law states the MOJ will not register a religious organization if its goals or activities contradict the country’s constitution or if it is not recognized as a religion by the State Commission on Religious Organizations and Expert Evaluation of Religious Information Resources (SCROEERIR), under the grand mufti’s leadership. The law also states the government may dissolve a religious organization for activities violating the lawful interests of the country’s citizens or for harming their “health and morale.” It prohibits all activity by unregistered religious groups.

## Religious landscape

According to the World Christian Database (WCD 2019) 96.3% of the population is Muslim – predominantly Sunni. However, it would be wrong to call Turkmenistan a Muslim country. 70 years of atheism during the Soviet era have left a deep influence. The government (the heirs of the atheist Soviets) is staunchly secular and has Islam firmly under control. Muslim citizens follow basic Islamic culture rather than strict Muslim teachings.

According to WCD, the next largest religious categories are agnostics and atheists, found particularly in the capital Ashgabat and other major cities. This is the result of 70 years of forced atheism by the government of the USSR from 1917 to 1991.

Christians are a very small group making up 1.2% of the population. The overwhelming majority of them are Russian Orthodox (i.e. ethnic Russians). As in many other countries in Central Asia the Christian community is having to face the emigration of many Russians. This is not compensated by the increase in the number of converts to Christianity, who currently number about 1,000. One of the major problems for Christians in Turkmenistan (and the other countries in Central Asia) is the fact that there is much division and little cooperation between the various denominations. Unfortunately this makes the Church very weak and it plays into the hands of the government.

There is no freedom of religion in Turkmenistan despite the claims to the contrary in the country’s Constitution. The dictatorial government of Turkmenistan uses a huge body of state agents (police, secret services, local imams) to closely monitor all religious activities. It has imposed so many restrictions on religious freedom that one can say that it simply does not exist in Turkmenistan. This is the case for all religions, not only for the Christian faith.

Religious Context: Turkmenistan	Numbers	%
Christians	70,500	1.2
Muslim	5,726,000	96.3
Hindu	0	0.0
Buddhist	770	0.0
Ethnoreligionist	910	0.0
Jewish	2,700	0.0
Bahai	1,200	0.0
Atheist	26,500	0.4
Agnostic	113,000	1.9
Other	680	0.0

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2019). OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.

Most Christians belong to ethnic minorities - mainly Russian. According to the [2012 census](#) Turkmen form about 85.6% of the population of Turkmenistan, while Uzbeks are 5.7%, Russians 5.1%, Azeris 1.2% and 3.5% others. Except for the indigenous church, the overall number of Christians in Turkmenistan is hardly growing at all. One of the major problems for Christians in Turkmenistan (and the other countries in Central Asia) is the fact that there is much division and little cooperation between the various denominations. Unfortunately this weakens the Church and plays into the hands of the government.

## Economic landscape

The state is in charge of both the production and export sectors. As the country is abundantly rich in resources like oil, natural gas and other raw materials, also in cotton and grain, those responsible for managing these industries can earn a lot of money. Purchasing and trade monopolies are a means of keeping prices well below the world market, but are also points where corruption enters. At least eight of the twelve domestic banks are state-owned and as the state decides which ministerial debts are to be cancelled, banking practice is limited.

Despite the country's potential wealth due to enormous amounts of natural gas and other commodities, only a very small elite benefits from it. The unemployment and the poverty rate remain at a very high level and the considerable growth of GDP – per capita as well as in percentage – has not improved the living conditions of all citizens on an equal basis. The huge drop in the oil price since 2014 has had a negative effect on Turkmenistan's economy, causing the planned reconstruction of the capital Ashgabat to be delayed.

## Social and cultural landscape

The [unemployment rate](#) in Turkmenistan stood at 3.9% of the working population in 2019. There was a peak in unemployment in 1999 when the rate was at more than 12.5%, but the rate has improved markedly since then. Since 2010 the rate hovers around 4%.

Corruption is endemic on all levels of administration and government. The power groups within the regime have no interest in losing their opportunity of making money.

Thanks to the former Soviet system of education, practically every citizen in Turkmenistan is literate. This means that people who are interested in the Christian message can receive materials in their own language. The restrictions imposed by the government (all materials must be approved and only registered groups may be active) mean that most distribution etc. must be done unofficially.

Turkmenistan has a bad reputation as far as human rights are concerned and its prisons and labor camps are constantly overpopulated. Literally thousands of people are held in appalling conditions. The best known of these is the Seydi labor camp in the desert some 40 kilometers (25 miles) north-west of the city of Turkmenabad near the Amu Darya River and Uzbek border. Every year there are amnesty days when hundreds of prisoners are released.

In general, Christians experience the same problems as all other people in the country and are not especially targeted economically or socially. The only exception to this is the pressure from the social environment (family, local imams, villagers) on Christians with a Muslim background.

## Technological landscape

Turkmenistan is one of the most closed countries when it comes to the Internet. According to the [latest available statistics](#), about 18% of the population are using Internet. There are several Internet cafés in the capital Ashgabat, but access to most international websites is blocked. The government has a monopoly on Internet access, and uses a computer program to search emails for coded words and block suspicious messages. Foreign Christian sites are blocked. The speed of the connection does not allow the downloading of content from the few websites that are available.

Turkmentelekom, in cooperation with foreign partners, has installed high-speed fiber-optic lines and has upgraded most of the country's telephone exchanges and switching centers with new digital technology; mobile-cellular teledensity is about 160 per 100 persons; Russia's Mobile TeleSystems (MTS), the only foreign mobile-cellular service provider in Turkmenistan, suspended operations in September 2017 due to the state-owned telecom company cutting MTS' access to international and long-distance communication services and Internet; Turkmenistan's first telecommunication satellite was launched in 2015 and is understood to have greatly improved connectivity in the country.

Broadcasting media are government-controlled and censored. There are [seven state-owned](#) TV and four state-owned radio networks. The only alternative to the state-run media are satellite dishes. They enable people to receive programmes produced outside state control. But from time to time the regime will launch campaigns to remove satellite dishes from buildings so there is always uncertainty if one should invest large sums of money on a dish that could be confiscated at any moment.

## Security situation

Turkmenistan is a tightly controlled country. It has inherited many security aspects from the former Soviet Union. All borders are guarded by police, secret services and the army, especially the borders with Iran and Afghanistan. There are checkpoints along all major routes. Media are monitored, and public rooms and also hotel rooms are likely to be tapped.

All religious activities in Turkmenistan are monitored. Christians occasionally have to report to police stations for interrogation.

[Visa requirements](#) for Turkmenistan are strict. The border between Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan is currently closed to traffic. The European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) has suspended Turkmenistan Airlines flights to and from the EU pending confirmation that it meets international air safety standards.

## Trends analysis

The keyword is stability. Over the past decades there have been hardly any changes at all in Turkmenistan. The dictatorial government has not faced any serious challenges from any form of opposition (including no demonstrations of any kind) and it has consistently imposed severe surveillance in almost every aspect of life. Thousands of people are sent to prison or labor camps every year. Turkmenistan has been called the ‘North Korea’ of Central Asia.

## External Links - WWL 2020: Keys to understanding

- Link for general background information: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-16094646>. - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-16094646>
- Recent history: dead - <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmen-celebs-try-to-debunk-rumors-of-president-s-death/30082030.html>
- Recent history: opening of a conference - <https://www.rferl.org/a/gurbanguly-berdymukhammedov-turkmenistan-/30105422.html>
- Political and legal landscape: judiciary - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics\\_of\\_Turkmenistan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics_of_Turkmenistan)
- Political and legal landscape: IRF 2017 - <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dlid=281038>
- Religious landscape: 2012 census - [http://www.asianews.it/news-en/First-\(actual\)-demographic-data-for-Turkmenistan-released-33436.html](http://www.asianews.it/news-en/First-(actual)-demographic-data-for-Turkmenistan-released-33436.html)
- Social and cultural landscape: unemployment rate - <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?display=graph+tajikistan%2C+public+spending+on+education%2C+total%25%25%25%252525252525252520282520of+gdp%29&locations=TM>
- Technological landscape: latest available statistics - <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/tx.html>
- Technological landscape: seven state-owned - <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/tx.html>
- Security situation: Visa requirements - <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/turkmenistan>

## WWL 2020: Church information / Turkmenistan

### Christian origins

The first Christians to enter Central Asia (including Turkmenistan) were Nestorian missionaries in the 4th century. From the 5th century onwards there were great movements of peoples in Asia and Europe and for Turkmenistan this meant the arrival of a Turkic tribe from eastern Asia named Oghuz (the ethnic ancestors of the Turkmen). In the 8th century Islam entered the region, following the tracks of the Silk Road trade route, and Christians disappeared from the country.

In the 16th century Turkmenistan became part of the Uzbek khanates of Khiva and Bukhara which deeply influenced the country's culture and religion.

The current presence of Christians in Turkmenistan dates from the 19th century. In 1867 the Russian Empire expanded its territory into Central Asia during a number of military campaigns, conquering the khanates of Khiva and Bukhara. The regime brought in ethnic Russians, who mostly belonged to the Russian Orthodox Church. During the Second World War, Joseph Stalin ordered the deportation of large numbers of ethnic Germans, Ukrainians, Poles and Koreans to Central Asia. With them, other Christian denominations found their way into Turkmenistan.

### Church spectrum today

Church networks: Turkmenistan	Christians	%
Orthodox	54,200	76.9
Catholic	200	0.3
Protestant	3,100	4.4
Independent	10,400	14.8
Unaffiliated	2,600	3.7
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>70,500</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	600	0.9
Renewalist movement	3,800	5.4

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2019).

*Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. Roman Catholics: All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. Protestants: Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. Independents: Believers who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). Unaffiliated Christians: Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. Doubly-affiliated Christians: Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. Evangelical movement: Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. Renewalist movement: Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.*

# WWL 2020: Persecution Dynamics / Turkmenistan

## Reporting period

1 November 2018 – 31 October 2019

## Position on World Watch List (WWL)

With a score of 70 points, Turkmenistan ranked 22 in WWL 2020, rising 1 point in score in comparison to WWL 2019.

Christians in Turkmenistan continue to suffer from a high level of control by the authoritarian government – especially in the *Private* and *Church spheres of life*.

## Persecution engines

Persecution engines: Turkmenistan	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Clan and ethnic antagonism	CEA	Not at all
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Not at all
Communist and post - Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Very strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Not at all

*The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.*

### Dictatorial paranoia (Very strong):

No religious activities beyond state-run and state-controlled institutions are allowed. Protestants are frequently branded "extremists" due to their religious activities outside state-sanctioned structures. Members of Protestant churches are often regarded as followers of an alien sect that has only one goal, namely to spy on and destroy the current political system. From this perspective they need to be not only controlled, but if necessary, even eradicated.

### Islamic oppression (Strong):

If indigenous citizens (who are Muslim) convert to Christianity, they are likely to experience pressure and occasionally physical violence from their families, friends and local community to force them to return to their former faith. Some converts are locked up by their families for long periods, beaten and may eventually be expelled from their communities. Local mullahs preach against them, so adding pressure. As a result, converts will do their best to hide their faith – they become so-called secret believers.

## Drivers of persecution

Drivers of Persecution: Turkmenistan	IO	RN	CEA	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	STRONG	-	-	-	-	-	VERY STRONG	-
Government officials	Medium	-	-	-	-	-	Very strong	-
Ethnic group leaders	Strong	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Strong	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Strong	-	-	-	-	-	Medium	-
One's own (extended) family	Very strong	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Political parties	-	-	-	-	-	-	Strong	-
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Organized crime cartels or networks	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.) and embassies	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology.

### Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia:

- **Government officials (Very strong):** At all levels, these are very hostile towards religious groups. All religious activity is closely monitored to see if they are sanctioned. If not raids, detentions, confiscations and fines are very common in Turkmenistan.
- **Political parties (Strong):** Although few political parties are allowed in Turkmenistan, the ruling party which controls the government of President Berdymukhamedov by definition participates in persecution insofar as much of the persecution is government-sanctioned.
- **Normal citizens (Medium):** Especially at the local level citizens will monitor any religious activities they see and report to the authorities.

### Drivers of Islamic oppression:

- **Extended family (Very strong):** Especially in the countryside, Muslim family members will exert high pressure on converts to Christianity. This can lead to threats, beatings, house arrest or ostracism.

- **Ethnic leaders (Strong):** With the support of the authorities, Turkmen ethnic leaders encourage all the forms of persecution mentioned above. Mahalla community groupings have been provided government sanction in many cases to carry out the state's persecution of Christians, particularly to prohibit missionary activity.
- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Strong):** Muslim clerics are open in their hostility towards non-Orthodox Christians and particularly against converts from Islam.
- **Normal citizens (Strong):** At the community level these people will exert additional pressure on converts to return to Islam. In the case of conversion, converts are persecuted severely by the local community and religious leaders.
- **Government officials (Medium):** At the community level there is a link between local government and Muslim pressure. Often, active Muslims and local officials know each other. This is why the pressure on converts is stronger at the community level than at the state level, where officials claim that they are secular.

## Geographical hotspots of persecution

The level of persecution by government officials in Turkmenistan is the same all over the country. Pressure from family, friends and community on converts is stronger outside the urban areas.

## Christian communities and how they are affected

**Communities of expatriate Christians:** These do not exist according to Open Doors sources and were therefore not counted as a separate category in the WWL analysis.

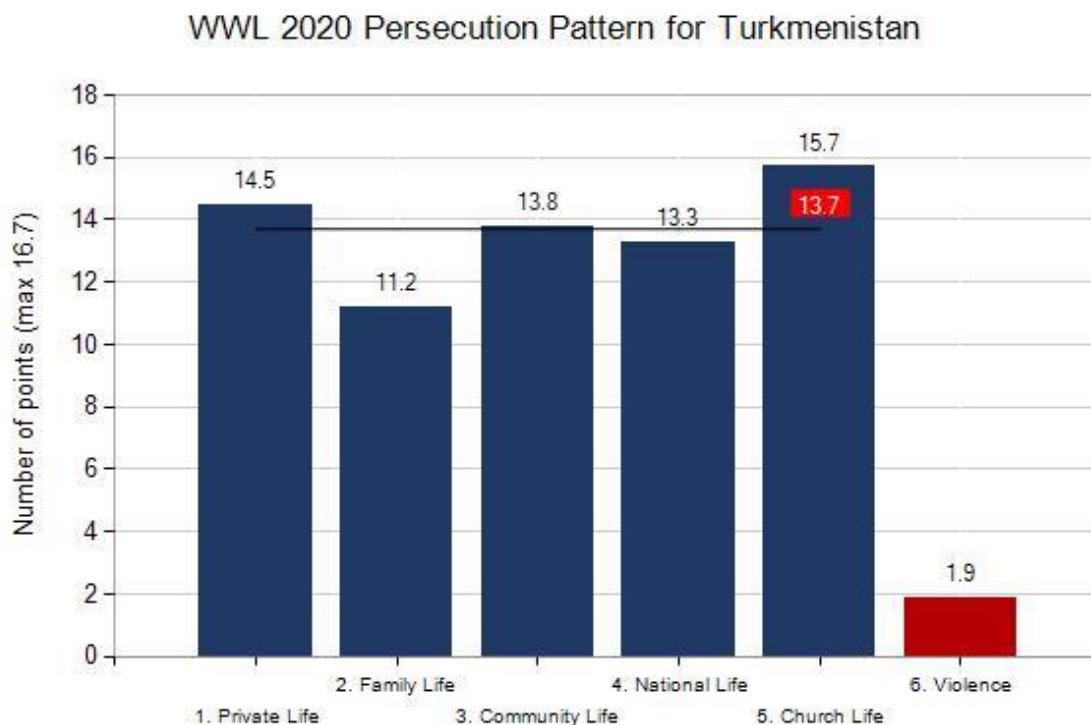
**Historical Christian communities:** The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has accustomed itself to the limitations provided by the government and is therefore left more or less undisturbed. Sunday services may be monitored, but they are conducted unhindered and members can meet. Printing or importing Christian materials is restricted.

**Converts to Christianity:** Christian converts from a Muslim background bear the brunt of persecution in Turkmenistan. Apart from the state, they are also under strong pressure from family, friends and community. The latter pressure is by far the more powerful because it dominates their everyday life.

**Non-traditional Christian communities:** After converts, this category of Christians are the second most persecuted group, especially when the churches have not been registered. Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal groups suffer from raids, threats, arrests and fines.



## The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2020 Persecution pattern for Turkmenistan shows:

- The average pressure on Christians is at a very high level (13.7), rising from 13.5 points in WWL 2019. Pressure increased in the *Family* and *Church spheres of life*, while it decreased slightly in the *Private* and *National spheres of life*. The pressure in the *Community sphere of life* remained the same.
- The scores for pressure are extremely high in *Church life* (15.7), *Private life* (14.5) and *Community life* (13.8). The highest score in the *Church sphere of life* is a reflection of the many restrictions on Christians imposed by the state.
- The score for violence is low, rising from 1.3 to 1.9 in WWL 2020, but very few violent incidents were reported.

### Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, details are shown from four of the highest scoring block questions, with those items scoring highest listed first. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale 0 – 4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom.

### Private sphere:

- ***It has been dangerous to privately own or keep Christian materials (Block 1.3 / Score: 3.75 points):*** In the case of converts, the persecution comes from their family or community if they find Christian materials. Christian materials are considered as hard evidence for conversion. When such materials are found they will be destroyed and the convert will be harassed. The government has a strict requirement for all religious literature both imported and produced in the country to be screened by the state authorities. Otherwise it is illegal and banned. Houses and churches are regularly raided by police in search of illegal religious materials. One church leader said: "All electronic devices, computers, mobile phones, androids etc. will be confiscated and checked for content".
- ***It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols (Block 1.5 / Score: 3.75 points):*** Converts know that this will draw unwanted attention from their family and community and (non-convert) Protestants are also at risk because the Muslim community will accuse them of attempting to evangelize. Converts and Protestant Christians will also draw unwanted attention from state agents if they openly wear Christian symbols.
- ***It has been risky for Christians to access Christian radio or TV, or Christian materials in the Internet (Block 1.6 / Score: 3.75 points):*** Converts need to be very careful in doing this in their homes. Discovery by their family will lead to strong reactions. Accessing foreign Christian media is difficult for all Christians in Turkmenistan. Internet access goes via state ISPs and is therefore under surveillance.
- ***Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable (Block 1.1 / Score: 3.5 points):*** Conversion is viewed as betrayal of the family and culture, as well as Islam. This could lead to physical violence too. Officially, there is no hindrance to conversion since the laws are secular. However, the government disapproves of anything that is likely to lead to tension among the population.

*All questions in the Private sphere in Turkmenistan have a score of 3 points or more. Christians in Turkmenistan have also experienced difficulties in conducting acts of worship, revealing their faith, speaking about their faith, meeting with other Christians, and in being isolated.*

### Family sphere:

- ***Parents have been hindered in raising their children according to their Christian beliefs (Block 2.7 / Score: 3.5 points):*** The surrounding family will try to keep the children of converts within Islam and raise them according to traditional customs. There is no official religious education in public schools; private religious education is restricted by the government.
- ***Christian children have been pressed to attend anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education (Block 2.8 / Score: 3.5 points):*** The Muslim environment (family, friends, community) will pressurize children of converts in particular into receiving Islamic teaching – sometimes even against the wishes of their parents. It is compulsory for students to participate in all activities organized by schools or other educational institutions.

- ***Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith (Block 2.9 / Score: 3.5 points):*** Children of converts and Protestants are usually isolated from having fellowship with other children. They are often being humiliated and slandered at schools in front of all other children.
- ***Christian Baptisms have been hindered (Block 2.4 / Score: 3.25 points):*** For the family, friends and community of converts baptism is regarded as the final farewell to the faith of the fathers and will therefore be opposed. Baptisms in unregistered churches are not allowed and if the state knows about it, the meeting will be raided, Christians interrogated and fined.

#### **Community sphere:**

- ***Christians have been harassed, threatened or obstructed in their daily lives for faith-related reasons (Block 3.1 / Score: 3.75 points):*** Converts are threatened by family, friends and community (including the local imam) in an effort to make them give up their faith. Local Muslim communities will also harass Protestants whom they accuse of evangelism. (Unregistered) Protestants face harassment, threats, discrimination, obstruction etc. from the authorities.
- ***Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (Block 3.2 / Score: 3.75 points):*** Converts will be monitored by members of their family and community. Protestants will also be monitored by the Muslim community as they are constantly suspected of carrying out evangelism. The state is constantly monitoring all religious activities, even by installing informers in religious communities.
- ***Christians have been fined for faith-related reasons (Block 3.12 / Score: 3.75 points):*** Levying Muslim taxes (jizya) is not allowed in Turkmenistan. Fines are constantly issued by state agents. Christians are fined for an endless list of offences, such as meeting illegally, possession of religious literature, having Christian songs on their smartphones, etc.
- ***Christians have been interrogated or compelled to report to the local police for faith-related reasons (Block 3.13 / Score: 3.75 points):*** Known converts will be harassed and interrogated harshly by their family and community. The state regularly raids Christian meetings, even those of registered groups. All those present will be interrogated, many will be detained, many will be fined, and all materials found will be confiscated.

*Christians in Turkmenistan have also experienced difficulties in participating in communal institutions; they have been under pressure to renounce their faith and they have been discriminated against in employment.*

#### **National sphere:**

- ***The Constitution or comparable national or state law limit freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Block 4.1 / Score: 4 points):*** The Law on Religion (2016) contains many restrictions on religious freedom including a ban on unregistered religious organizations (even though it is practically impossible for a church to obtain official registration), a ban on private religious education, the requirement for religious literature to be screened by the authorities etc..

- **Christians have been forced by law or in practice to act against their conscience (Block 4.3 / Score: 4 points):** Military service is compulsory, and Christians cannot refuse to serve in the army on grounds of conscience.
- **Christians have been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public (Block 4.8 / Score: 4 points):** The media are all state-controlled and are inaccessible for Christians to make their opinions public. Internet access is also controlled, and Christian opinions are blocked. Muslims consider Christian preaching/evangelism undesirable and will obstruct this with all means available.
- **Christian civil society organizations or political parties have been hindered or forbidden (Block 4.9 / Score: 4 points):** The state will not allow Christian organizations or political parties. Muslims would also regard Christian organizations as an attempt to convert people to Christianity and would oppose them.

*Christians in Turkmenistan have also experienced difficulties in being discriminated against when engaging with the authorities, in being barred from public office, in facing biased media, in being subjected to smear campaigns, in not being able to display religious symbols, in being deprived of equal treatment in court; also, the international monitoring of Christians in trials was hindered.*

#### **Church sphere:**

- **It has been difficult to get registration or legal status (Block 5.2 / Score: 4 points):** In 2016 a new law on religion was introduced which increased the number of Christians needed to register a church from 5 to 50. However, even before that it was practically impossible to obtain registration. At the same time non-registered churches and home groups are forbidden. All registered churches have to go through the process of re-registration under the new law. Re-registration is not easy for the registered churches and one major hindrance is the lack of buildings. The churches need to provide confirmation that they either own or rent a place of worship. It is practically impossible to find places to rent, especially since the owners of potential buildings are warned by the state not to rent to Protestants. Russian Orthodox congregations and other traditional churches also have to re-register.
- **Work among youth has been restricted (Block 5.6 / Score: 4 points):** Only registered churches can carry out youth work and only then if they have the written permission of both parents of the children involved. However, all meetings where children and youth are present (especially summer camps) are regularly monitored and raided. Local Muslims oppose Christian activities aimed at youth and are known to block youth events and summer camps.
- **Christians have been hindered in training their own religious leaders (Block 5.10 / Score: 4 points):** Officially, the training of religious leaders should be conducted in special religious institutions that possess a license from the state and which only use educational resources screened by the authorities. However, not a single Christian education institution exists in Turkmenistan - even the Russian Orthodox Church does not run a seminary. Private religious education is also forbidden.

- **Churches have been hindered in importing Christian materials (Block 5.13 / Score: 4 points):** All imported religious materials must pass the official screening by the CRA. In most cases the items are confiscated and destroyed. For that reason, Protestants do not try to bring printed materials into Turkmenistan. Muslims will report to the authorities if they discover Christians are importing religious materials illegally.

*Christians in Turkmenistan have also experienced difficulties through being monitored, hindered, disturbed or obstructed in their activities, in building or renovating church buildings, in organizing activities inside or outside their places of worship, and in integrating converts. Christian materials have been inspected and confiscated. The printing, selling and distribution of religious materials was banned.*

## Violence

*The following table is based on reported cases as much as possible. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers below must be understood as being minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100 or 1000) is given. (A symbolic number of 10 could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100 could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1000 could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain.) In cases where it is clear that (many) more Christians are affected, but a concrete number could be given according to the number of incidents reported, the number given has to be understood as being an absolutely minimum figure.*

Turkmenistan	Reporting period	Christians killed	Christians attacked	Christians arrested	Churches attacked	Christian-owned houses and shops attacked
WWL 2020	01 Nov 2018 - 31 Oct 2019	0	30	10	0	3
WWL 2019	01 Nov 2017 - 31 Oct 2018	0	25	7	0	2
WWL 2018	01 Nov 2016 - 31 Oct 2017	0	20	6	0	10

*Christians killed refers to the number of Christians killed for faith-related reasons (including state-sanctioned executions). Christians attacked refers to the number of Christians abducted, raped or otherwise sexually harassed, forced into marriage to non-Christians or otherwise physically or mentally abused (including beatings and death-threats) for faith-related reasons. Christians arrested refers to the number of Christians detained without trial or sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment or similar things for faith-related reasons. Churches attacked refers to the number of churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons. Christian-owned houses and shops attacked refers to the number of houses of Christians or other property (including shops and businesses of Christians) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons.*

In the WWL 2020 reporting period:

- **Christians killed:** No incidents of this type were recorded..
- **Christians attacked:** Around 30 Christians were attacked; most of these were harassed by (local) government officials (Dictatorial paranoia).
- **Christians arrested:** At least 10 Christians were detained by police in the reporting period.
- **Churches attacked:** No incidents of this type were recorded this year in Turkmenistan.
- **Christian homes/shops attacked:** 3 homes of Christians were attacked and damaged. Most of the time, these are illegal meetings in the homes of Christians.

Violent incidents are rarely reported. This is because Christians in Turkmenistan do not dare to share this kind of information with foreigners (out of fear that the information might be traced back to them).

## 5 Year trends

The following three charts illustrate how the situation for Christians in Turkmenistan has deteriorated gradually since the WWL 2016 reporting period.

### Chart 1:

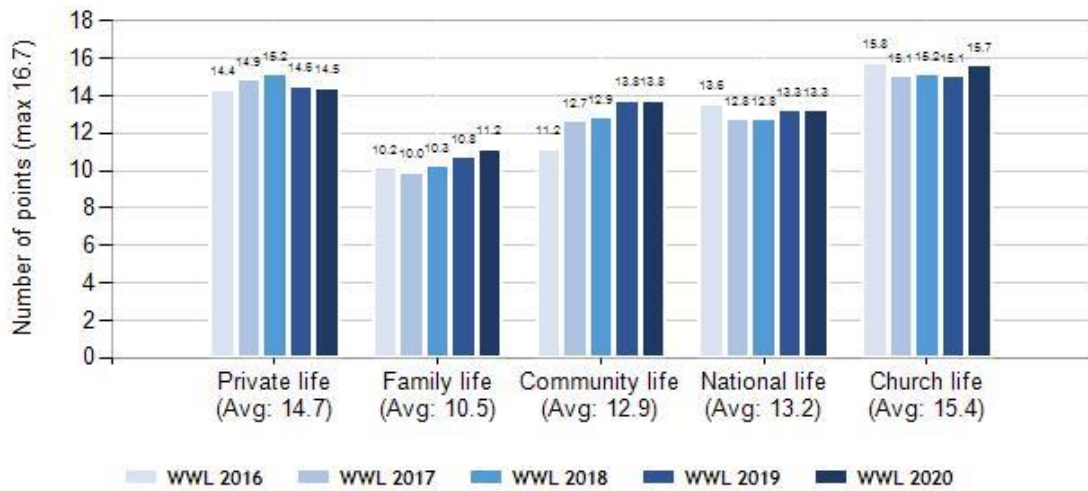
Since WWL 2016 the overall pressure on Christians in Turkmenistan has been at a very high level and risen steadily.

WWL 2016 - WWL 2020 Persecution Pattern history: Turkmenistan	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2020	13.7
2019	13.5
2018	13.3
2017	13.1
2016	13.0

### Chart 2:

While the levels of pressure in the *private, national and church spheres of life* have been more or less stable over the last five years, there has been a gradual increase in pressure in the *family and community spheres of life*.

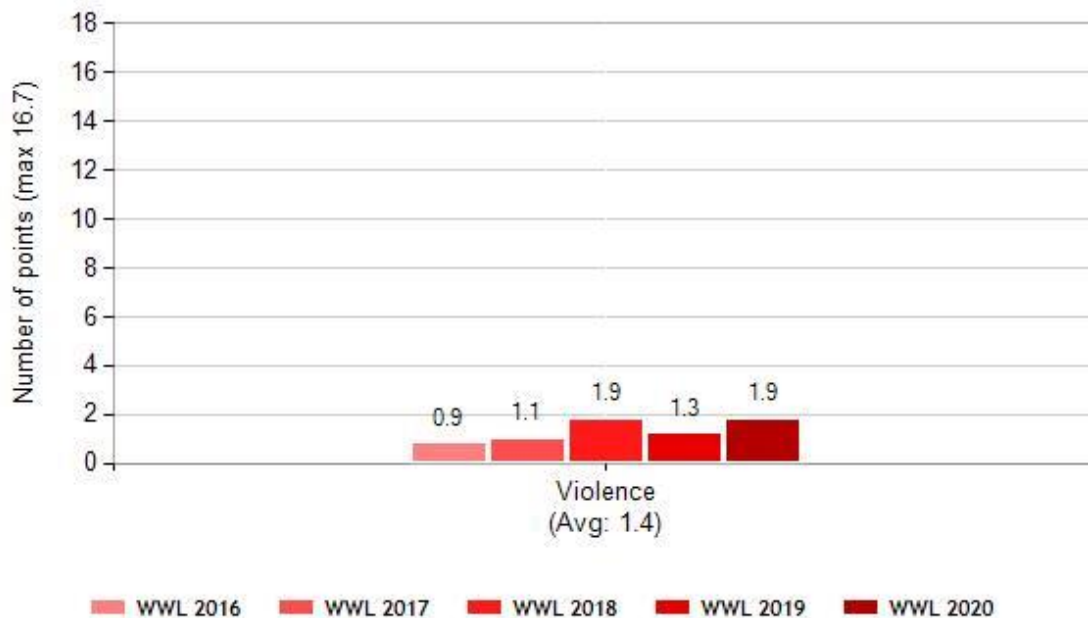
### WWL 2016 - WWL 2020 Persecution Pattern for Turkmenistan (Spheres of life)



**Chart 3:**

The scores for violence have remained more or less stable at a relatively low/very low level over the last five reporting periods.

### WWL 2016 - WWL 2020 Persecution Pattern for Turkmenistan (Violence)



## Gender profile of persecution

### Female Pressure Points:

- ***Abduction***
- ***Forced marriage***
- ***Incarceration by family***
- ***Violence – physical***
- ***Violence – psychological***
- ***Violence – sexual***
- ***Violence – verbal***

According to a [survey](#) completed by the Gender and Water in Central Asia Project of the Asian Development Bank, only about a quarter of men and women in Turkmenistan consider the position of women as equal to men. The prevalence of Islamic culture places women in a subordinate position to men. Total submission is expected of women, both to their husbands as well as to their parents.

Female converts therefore, who by turning away from Islam challenge the existing accepted social order, are particularly vulnerable to persecution. They face physical beatings, house arrest, verbal and physical abuse, threats, disinheritance and rejection. Female converts may also experience abduction, rape and sexual harassment. Sexual assault causes victims to feel shame, preventing them from seeking support or pressing charges. Cases of crimes against women are [rarely seen](#) in Turkmen courts. Some abducted women are forcibly married off to Muslims, as a corrective measure. Converts may also be forced into marriages not due to kidnappings, but due to the obligation to follow pre-marital arrangements made by her parents prior to conversion.

Christian women are also discriminated against in the workplace, sometimes losing their job altogether. As many young women rely heavily on their parents for financial stability, the loss of work makes them even more reliant on their family unit - often a source of persecution in itself.

Abusing women is used as an instrument to persecute their husbands and family members, thereby pressuring the wider Christian community and fostering fear and feelings of helplessness across the Turkmen Church.

### Male Pressure Points:

- ***Denied access to religious Christian literature***
- ***Denied access to social community/networks***
- ***Denied inheritance/possessions***
- ***Discrimination/Harassment via education***
- ***Economic harassment via work/job/business***
- ***Economic harassment via fines***
- ***Incarceration by family/house***
- ***Incarceration by government***
- ***Military/militia conscription/service against conscience***
- ***Violence – physical***



- ***Violence – psychological***
- ***Violence – verbal***

Men in Turkmenistan normally hold leadership roles within the family, as heads of the family and bread winners, and within the Church. Persecution against them affects entire families and congregations, causing fear, anger and financial hardship. Christians feel that state agents look for any excuse to issue fines to Christian men, for instance for holding illegal gatherings, for the possession of religious literature, even for downloading Christian songs. Pressure also comes from the community on a local level; Muslims obstruct business activities of converts and Protestants (whom they view as a sect), forcing many Christian business owners to keep their faith a secret.

Church leaders in Turkmenistan are especially targeted for persecution. Muslims consider them primarily responsible for the conversion of their people and attack those they deem to be most active evangelistically. Church leaders also face challenges in obtaining religious training. The authorities expect a certain level of cooperation from those in leadership to inform them of anybody with radical or 'extremist' views. With this in mind, it comes as no surprise that they authorities also influence the choice of who assumes leadership positions. Tight restrictions exist over religious education and institutions in Turkmenistan; training can only be conducted in special, state-licensed religious institutions. There are, however, no such institutions in Turkmenistan.

Christian men also face persecution within the context of the armed forces; military service remains mandatory in Turkmenistan, and objection on grounds of conscience are not permitted. Additionally, male converts face harassment and interrogation by their families and local communities. They can also experience home detention, disinheritance, shaming and beatings.

## Persecution of other religious minorities

Some Shia Muslim communities have had applications for registration rejected. Jehovah's Witnesses are finding it currently impossible to gain legal status. Many religious communities have stopped applying for registration, and have decided to operate quietly without formal legal status. (Source: Forum 18, [Religious freedom survey](#), January 2017).

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

Examples:

- On 7 January 2019, a court in the eastern Lebap Region handed 18-year-old Azamatjan Narkulyev the maximum two-year jail term for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of conscience. He is one of 12 conscientious objectors - all of them Jehovah's Witnesses - known to be in prison. (Source: [Forum 18](#), 22 January 2019)
- In 2019, a Muslim in the western city of Balkanabad stopped going to the mosque after being interrogated by the police. (Source: [Forum 18](#), 28 May 2019)
- On 31 July 2019 an Ashgabad court jailed 20-year-old Jehovah's Witness Azat Ashirov for two years for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of conscience. (Source: [Forum 18](#), 5 September 2019)

## Future outlook for the church

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

- **Dictatorial paranoia:** The current government exerts a very high level of control over the country. Government officials at all levels are the strongest persecutors of Christians in Turkmenistan. They have imposed all kinds of legal restrictions, monitor all religious activities, raid meetings and block the use of religious materials. The chances that this situation will change are very slim indeed.
- **Islamic oppression:** Islam is not the state religion and is treated by the authorities in the same manner as other religions. However, Islam is the traditional religion of most of the population and the Muslim pressure on Christians in Turkmenistan comes from the far-reaching influence of family, friends and community on converts. Since this is a matter of culture, it is highly unlikely that this situation will change.

## External Links - WWL 2020: Persecution Dynamics

- Gender profile of persecution: survey - [http://www.gender.cawater-info.net/knowledge\\_base/case\\_study/turkmenistan1\\_e.htm](http://www.gender.cawater-info.net/knowledge_base/case_study/turkmenistan1_e.htm)
- Gender profile of persecution: rarely seen - <https://wunrn.com/2008/08/turkmenistan-gender-issues/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Religious freedom survey - [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2244](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244)
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Forum 18 - [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2443](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2443)
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Forum 18 - [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2481](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2481)
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Forum 18 - [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2504](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2504)

## Additional reports and articles

### WWR in-depth reports

A selection of in-depth reports is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>  
(password: freedom).

### World Watch Monitor news articles

Articles are available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/turkmenistan>

### Recent country developments

Up-to-date articles are available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Turkmenistan>  
(password: freedom).