

WORLD WATCH LIST 2024

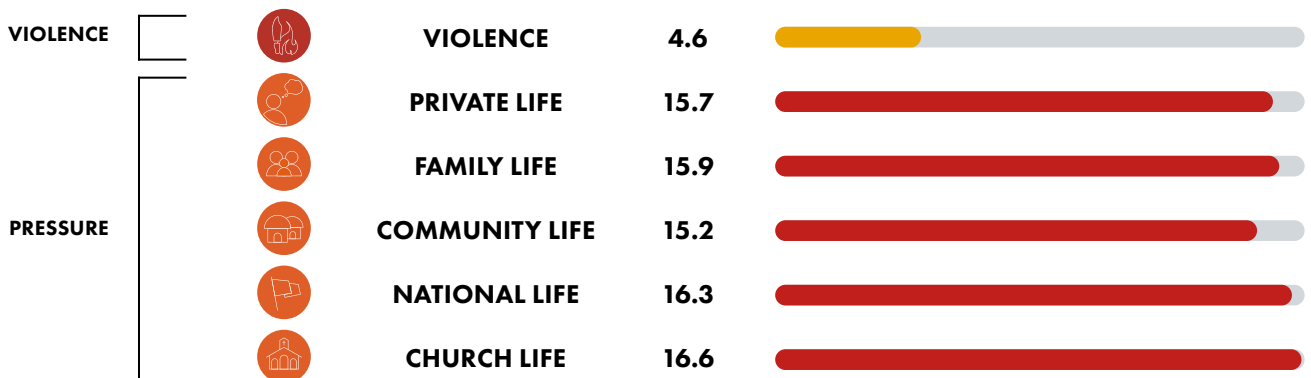
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

AFGHANISTAN

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
10



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

Almost all Afghan Christians are converts from Islam and are not able to practice their faith openly. Leaving Islam is considered shameful and is punishable by death under the prevailing Islamic law. If exposed, Christian converts have to flee the country. The family, clan or tribe must preserve its 'honor' and deal with any known converts. After the Taliban took over government control in August 2021, most Christians tried to leave the country and/or went into hiding. The takeover made things worse for Christians and for women, who are confined to their homes once again.

Quick facts

LEADER

Hibatullah Akhundzada
(interim Taliban government)

POPULATION

41,681,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

Thousands (OD estimate)

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Islamic Emirate
of Afghanistan



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Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	Thousands	-

Source¹

Afghanistan has not known peace for more than 40 years. This has left the infrastructure, economy, and social fabric in ruins and led to widespread Islamic radicalization, criminal activity, and corruption. The Taliban held power over roughly three-quarters of the country from 1996 until 2001. In August 2021, the Taliban took control again and reintroduced a harsh interpretation of Islam, including banning secondary education for girls. Most people (even the [wealthier](#)) have been struggling with the consequences of the economic collapse. Much of the population lives below the poverty line, which has led many farmers to rely on illicit drugs like opium as a source of income.

A Taliban spokesman [denied outright that Christians exist](#) in Afghanistan when he was directly asked about it (Voice of America, 16 May 2022); this is the official standpoint of the Taliban. The small groups of Christians in the country have had to adapt to the new circumstances by either relocating within the country, seeking refuge abroad for security reasons, or trying to stay hidden. As the Taliban enjoys widely

unchallenged power and is implementing a strict version of Islamic Sharia law, Christians cannot expect any space in society, and they may also be affected by possible infighting between the various Taliban factions as well as by the Taliban's battle against Islamic State of the Khorasan Province (ISKP).

Pressure groups working on social development and/or issues concerning women, minorities or human rights can do little to influence the country's political development and can even become a target for attacks. Groups supporting the rule of law, participation in the political process or government accountability are quickly suspected of being agents of the international community, furthering the agenda of the West. These are also often labeled 'non-believers'. This would seem to apply also to Western NGOs working in the country, including the few Christian ones. The Taliban has carried out [targeted killings](#) of "collaborators" with the old government and of citizens claimed to be "militants" (Human Rights Watch, 7 July 2022).

Afghanistan's international isolation continues. Due to the decrease in international aid being sent to Afghanistan, several hospitals had to be shut down and the UN has cut its programs twice leading to dire economic and social circumstances.

¹ According to OD-estimate

How the situation varies by region

Generally, control and supervision in rural areas is stricter than in most cities. The whole country is strictly Islamic, so Christians face severe difficulties all over.

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

NGOs are beginning to send workers back to Afghanistan. Due to moderately improved security, expatriates are not restricted to highly-secured

compounds anymore. However, it is impossible for expatriate Christians to mix with other Christians, so they are still involuntarily isolated.

Historical Christian communities

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

Converts to Christianity

Converts to Christianity from a Muslim background try their utmost not to be discovered by family or community since discovery would risk their lives.

Non-traditional Christian communities

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

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression blended with dictatorial paranoia

Afghanistan does not recognize conversion to Christianity, which is seen as apostasy and brings shame on family and community. Converts hide their faith for fear of violence from Muslim religious leaders, local authorities or family members. The Taliban puts a strong emphasis on frequent mosque attendance. The extreme violence used by groups related to IS (e.g. ISKP) has led to a number of people being killed in attacks or displaced.

Clan oppression blended with ethno-religious hostility

The collectivistic nature of the Afghan family unit leaves little room for privacy, which means a high risk of discovery of converts. Conversion from Islam is seen as a threat to the predominantly Islamic identity of the country and results in high pressure being exerted to ensure that person returns to traditional norms. Additionally, the Christian religion in particular is considered Western and hostile to Afghan culture, society, and Islam.

Organized corruption and crime

80% of the country's GDP comes from the informal sector. Corruption and crime are omnipresent. Growing illicit drugs, such as

opium, is much more lucrative than virtually any other crop. The income from poppy cultivation funds both armed militant groups and corruption. This particularly affects Christians who tend to be from the low-income majority of society.



How are men and women differently affected?

Women

The 2021 Taliban takeover of Afghanistan effectively stopped the advancement of women’s rights. Women have long been viewed as second-class citizens, but under Taliban rule, they face additional pressure. Reflecting the downward trend of women’s rights, girls’ school attendance is restricted and women are barred from the workplace. When a woman converts she is likely to keep it a secret, risking physical abuse, house arrest, forced marriage and rape. Due to the honor-shame culture and lack of legislative justice, female Christians are unlikely to report abuse.

Female typical pressure points:

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

Men

The Taliban pressurizes men to show that they are good Muslim heads of family by praying five times a day, attending mosques, fasting and wearing a “proper” beard. Christian men, even if only suspected of having converted or being interested in the Christian faith, face ridicule, imprisonment, torture, sexual abuse and potentially death because of their faith. If married, converts will likely have their wives and children removed. In light of these pressures, Christian men, particularly converts, choose to keep as low a profile as possible, with some choosing low-level positions in the workplace to avoid unwanted attention.

Male typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Denied access to social community/networks
- Imprisonment by government
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual
- Violence – verbal

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2024	10	100
2023	9	84
2022	1	98
2021	2	94
2020	2	93

For many years, Christians in Afghanistan endured the same extreme levels of pressure as in North Korea, although by different means and actors. In terms of scoring for the spheres of life, Afghanistan and North Korea did not differ at all, scoring the maximum for each of the five spheres. However, the takeover of the government by the Taliban changed everything, as this meant that many Christians relocated within the country for security reasons or tried to leave the country. As a result, many (if not all) house churches closed, Christians had to leave behind everything they owned and the violence score in WWL 2022 increased to an unprecedented level of 15 points. For WWL 2024, it remained impossible to obtain concrete evidence of a similar level of violence occurring. As a result, the violence score dropped sharply from 15.0 to 4.6 points. While details are given in the Violence section below, it has to be emphasized here that this does not mean that the country has become safer for Christians. A second change is the return of the expatriate community as a separate category (see explanation in Christian communities above); as some questions across the spheres of life are limited to converts, this has led to a decrease in the score for pressure. Again, this does not mean that the situation for converts has improved in any way.

The overall score for Afghanistan remains extremely high. This does not mean that each and every Christian in the country is being forced to flee (although each and every Christian will hide his or her faith even more carefully with the Taliban in power); it does not mean that church life is not possible at all or that house-churches cannot meet at all. It also does not suggest that the persecution situation cannot get worse again. However, as one country expert put it: “There is no way to speculate on the growth of the church. The usual indices are missing. Even reports of persecution are non-existent as the underground church is maintaining silence.” Another external expert observed that Christians are detained, interrogated and tortured in order to uncover Christian networks rather than simply be killed and added that this may be even more devastating for the church in Afghanistan.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

For security reasons, no details can be published here.

Private life

The tight-knit tribal social society means social control is high and converts risk being discovered. When the Taliban enforced [cell phone checks](#) in the regions they controlled (even before taking over the whole country), many converts disposed of their cell phones and relocated to other areas in an effort to hide.

Family life

Even the suspicion of having converted from Islam can lead to severe consequences, such as arrest or destruction of home. There is strong pressure to divorce or nullify a marriage in the case of a Christian spouse. Since the Taliban government requires children to be raised as Muslims, Christian spouses face loss of custody of their children.

Community life

There is no option for Christian converts except pretending to be Muslim - following the dress code, attending mosque or growing a beard. If a Christian woman chooses not to wear a head covering, she will draw unwanted attention and locals will try to manipulate her into wearing one. Many Christian converts are leaving the country if they can.

National life

The Constitution, now suspended by the Taliban, guaranteed that adherents of other religions are free

to exercise their faith. However, Article 3 states that no law shall contravene the tenets of Islam, which led to restrictions in many areas. Conversion was seen as blasphemy. This is true under Taliban rule as well, as the regime implements Sharia law. Now, under the Taliban, all travel by anyone suspected of being Christian is monitored and often hindered if authorities suspect a journey is being undertaken for faith-based reasons. The Taliban is known for their frequent raids.

Church life

The only functioning chapel in Afghanistan is in the Italian embassy in Kabul and is only open to the small number of expatriates still working in the city. Other Christian meetings are underground and secret, perhaps just looking like a group of people meeting over a meal. All Christian materials are hidden, and even sharing electronically can have life-threatening consequences if traced. As one of Open Doors' field expert said: "Anyone in possession of Christian materials, especially the Bible, will be subjected to harsh punishment, even death. Naturally, this will extend to investigating to find the source of such material."



International obligations & rights violated

Afghanistan 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)

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

- Christian converts are killed on suspicion of their faith (ICCPR Art. 6)
- Women converts are forcibly married and forced to recant their beliefs (ICCPR Art. 23.3 and CEDAW Art. 16)
- Afghans are assumed to be Muslims and are not allowed to change their religion (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christians cannot display any religious images or symbols (ICCPR Art. 18 and 19)
- Children of Christian converts are forced to adhere to Islamic religious precepts and receive Islamic teaching (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)



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Situation of other religious minorities

The small numbers of Sikh, Hindu and Bahai followers in Afghanistan hardly have more freedom than Christians do, their sole advantage being that they are not perceived as being Western and alien.

According to US State Department IRFR 2022 Afghanistan: “attacks against Hazara Shia and other Shia Muslims continued, resulting in great loss of civilian life. It was often unclear whether the perpetrators of the threats and violence were members of ISIS-K, local Taliban, or a combination of both.”

In 2021, the last known Jew in Afghanistan [decided to leave](#) Kabul for Israel, due to an ever-deteriorating security situation and increasing hardships in daily life (Gandhara, 29 March 2021).

Open Doors in Afghanistan

Because of the risks faced by our partners and the people they serve, we are restricted in the information we can provide about Afghanistan.



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- 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).

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