

WORLD WATCH LIST 2026

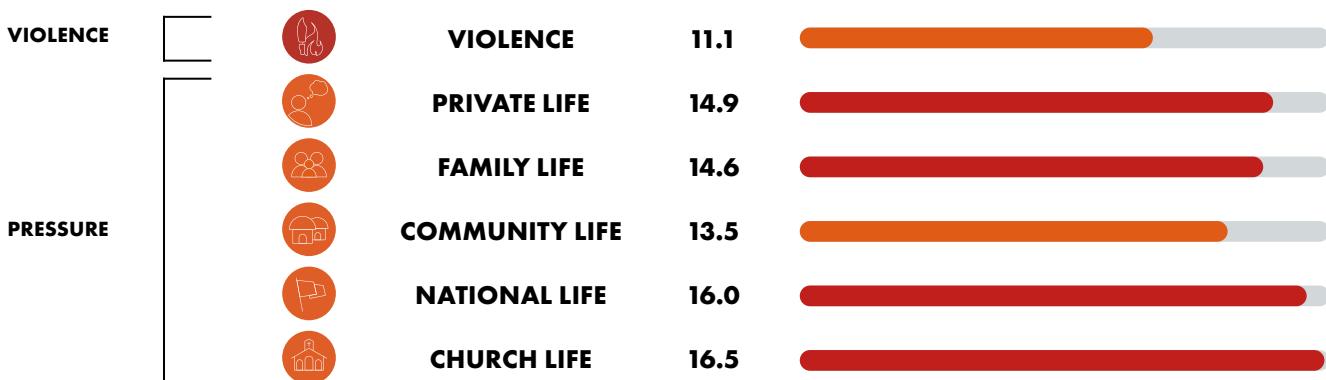
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
10

IRAN



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 ($6 \times 16.7 = 100$).

Key findings

Converts from Islam to Christianity in Iran face the harshest religious freedom violations, primarily from the government but also from society and families. The regime views conversions as a Western threat to undermine the Islamic Republic. Leaders and members of convert groups, and Christians assisting them, face arrests, prosecutions, and lengthy sentences, typically on charges of “national security” violations. This repression intensified after the June 2025 Israel-Iran war, when authorities began openly accusing converts of aiding Israel (Article 18, 25 August 2025). In the immediate crackdown after the war, at least 50 Christians were detained. The parliament also rushed through a new espionage bill that introduces the death penalty under broad definitions, granting the government sweeping powers to punish perceived dissent. Revelations from a 2024 leak of judiciary files showed more than 300 Christians were prosecuted in Tehran alone between 2008 and 2023, with most cases previously unreported, highlighting systematic under-recording. Meanwhile, recognized Armenian and Assyrian communities remain subject to legalized discrimination, with restrictions on employment, language use and contact with Persian-speaking converts.

Quick facts

LEADER

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei

POPULATION

90,411,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

800,000 (Open Doors estimate)

MAIN RELIGION

Shia Islam

GOVERNMENT

Theocratic Republic



Context

Religious context	Number of adherents	% of adherents in country
Christians	800,000	0.9
Muslims	88,818,000	98.2
Agnostics/Atheists	361,300	0.4
Others	432,000	0.5
	Total	100%

Source¹

Iran has been an Islamic Republic since the 1979 Revolution, when Shia Islamic clerics took control and banned Western influence, which they associate with Christianity. The Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, a conservative (Principalist), holds ultimate power, appointing the Guardian Council that vets legislation and political candidates.

The regime has demonstrated a pattern of violent repression throughout its history, starting with the 1988 executions of thousands of political prisoners (HRW, 8 June 2022). Protests have grown in scale, as has the government's harsh response, from the 1999 Student protests to the 2009 Green Movement, culminating in the 2019 "Bloody November" protests when approximately 1,500 people were killed.

In September 2022, nationwide "Woman, Life, Freedom" protests erupted following the death of 22-year old Mahsa Amini in morality police custody.

The regime responded harshly, killing at least 550 protesters, arresting and torturing thousands, and executing 10. Since then, authorities have intensified persecution of women's rights activists and enforcement of mandatory veiling laws (Amnesty International, 17 March 2025).

The human rights situation has deteriorated further. At least 975 people were executed in 2024, with "ethnic minorities in Iran being overrepresented in death penalty statistics" (Iran Human Rights, 20 February 2025). In 1990, convert Pastor Hossein Soodmand was executed by the regime. International pressure coincided with a halt in further legal executions, although several other convert leaders were killed extrajudicially during the 1990s.

Geopolitically, Iran maintains a contentious relationship with the USA and Israel. The regime supports proxy groups across the Middle East while pursuing nuclear capabilities. In June 2025, Israeli air raids killed several top Iranian military and nuclear officials, as well as around 600 Iranian citizens. In an unprecedented step, the US also bombed three nuclear facilities. Another significant development was the fall of Syria's Assad regime in December 2024, costing Iran a major regional ally. While officially a Shia Muslim majority country, independent research suggests less than 40% of Iranians identify as Shia Muslims (GAMAAN 2023). Iran's Constitution recognizes four religious groups: Muslims, Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians. However, all non-Shia groups face discrimination, with unrecognized minorities suffering severe violations.

¹ Other refers to all the rest to make up 100%: Gina A. Zurlo, ed., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2025 – adapted to incorporate OD-estimate

Thousands of Christian converts meet secretly in small house groups, constantly threatened by security services that monitor their activities. Thousands flee Iran annually, fearing arrest, psychological torture (including solitary confinement), and lengthy imprisonment.

How the situation varies by region

Government surveillance is most concentrated in urban centers, while rural areas experience less direct monitoring. However, this creates a paradoxical situation, despite a stronger government presence, urban Christians benefit from greater anonymity, allowing them to organize gatherings with less community scrutiny. Conversely, rural Christians face intense social monitoring from neighbors and community members who might report suspicious activities to authorities.



Who is affected?

COMMUNITIES OF EXPATRIATE CHRISTIANS

Foreign Christians from Asia and the West, many of whom have a Catholic, Lutheran or Presbyterian background, face restrictions and monitoring. Interaction with Iranian converts is strictly forbidden and some churches have been closed after converts attended.

HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Armenian and Assyrian Christians can practice in their languages but cannot minister to Muslim-background individuals. Despite constitutional recognition, they face systematic discrimination in marriage rights, inheritance laws, and employment opportunities.

CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY

This largest Christian group faces the harshest persecution from authorities and, to a lesser extent, from family and society. Converts gather in small house churches under constant surveillance. Both leaders and ordinary members face prosecution and lengthy prison sentences for “national security crimes”.

NON-TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Evangelicals, Baptists and Pentecostals face severe restrictions, especially those engaged in evangelism or house-church activities.



Main sources of persecution and discrimination

ISLAMIC OPPRESSION

Iran's legal system requires all legislation to conform to Sharia law. The Guardian Council, appointed by Supreme Leader Khamenei and comprised of Shia scholars and clerics, scrutinizes all legislation and vets candidates for high government positions. Ethnic Persians are automatically considered Muslim, making converts to Christianity apostates under Islamic law. This classification renders virtually all Christian activities illegal, particularly those conducted in Persian. While local clerics occasionally incite violence against Christians, Iranian society generally demonstrates less religious fanaticism than the leadership due to the influence of moderate Sufi Islam and pride in pre-Islamic Persian culture. Nevertheless, religious families frequently pressure members who convert to Christianity.

DICTATORIAL PARANOIA

The regime vigorously defends the 1979 Revolution's values, which form the basis of its legitimacy. Christianity is perceived as a dangerous Western influence threatening Iran's Islamic identity, explaining why converts face charges of crimes against national security. The violent suppression of all opposition demonstrates the regime's primary concern with maintaining power.

ORGANIZED CORRUPTION AND CRIME

A systematic pattern of financial exploitation targets imprisoned Christians, particularly converts. Authorities regularly offer release on bail, demanding sums between \$2,000 and \$150,000, forcing families to surrender property deeds. Those released on bail often self-censor due to fear of property confiscation, while authorities pressure them to leave Iran and forfeit their bail.

CLAN OPPRESSION

Iran's honor-shame culture, especially prevalent in rural areas, intensifies persecution. Within Iran's multicultural society, conversion to Christianity is frequently viewed as betrayal of group identity, bringing shame to the family and community.

CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONAL PROTECTIONISM

Iranian authorities showcase Armenian and Assyrian representatives in media and international forums to project religious tolerance, while these representatives make statements about "freedoms" that only apply to a small segment of the Christian population.



How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Iranian women face severe repression under compulsory hijab laws, now enforced with surveillance cameras and punishments including flogging, imprisonment, and loss of work or education. Christian women, especially converts, are highly vulnerable. Many participate in house churches, but risk arrest, sexual harassment, and verbal abuse during interrogations. They may be forced to marry Muslims or lose custody of their children if already married. Within marriages, they remain unprotected against sexual abuse and domestic violence. With travel restrictions, fleeing danger or finding shelter is extremely difficult.

Female typical pressure points:

- Denied custody of children
- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Imprisonment by government
- Travel bans/restrictions on movement
- Violence – sexual

MEN

Christian men in Iran are more likely to be arrested, tortured and imprisoned for years, often in deplorable conditions with no phone calls, exercise, or due process. Many face job loss, denial of business permits, or expulsion from education, leaving families in financial ruin. As primary providers, imprisonment or unemployment causes deep strain, sometimes leading to divorce or trauma for children. Converts endure monitoring, threats, and harassment, and many ultimately flee the country under acute stress, leaving families vulnerable and divided.

Male typical pressure points:

- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- Forced to flee town/country
- Imprisonment by government
- Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological



WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2026	10	87
2025	9	86
2024	9	86
2023	8	86
2022	9	85

The overall score for Iran rose by 1 point due to a slight increase in reported violence. Pressure has remained at an extreme level in all except one of the Spheres of Life, with the score for violence remaining very high. The government sees Iranian converts to Christianity as an attempt by Western countries to undermine Islam and the Islamic regime of Iran. Following the Iran-Israel war, the government now publicly brands them as spies and collaborators. Historical communities of Armenian and Assyrian Christians are recognized by the state but are treated as second-class citizens. State surveillance is on the rise.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

- December 2024:** Authorities arrested at least 40 Christians in coordinated raids across multiple cities during the Christmas period. Many were detained without access to legal representation, with officials confiscating phones, computers and religious materials. Several detainees reported psychological torture during interrogations ([Article 18, 7 January 2025](#)).
- March 2025:** Two brothers were arrested during a Christmas gathering and received a four-year prison sentence for “propaganda against the state” and “gathering and collusion against national security.” Court documents specifically cited their possession of Bibles and Christian literature in Persian as evidence against them ([Article 18, 31 March 2025](#)).
- March 2025:** In March 2025, three Christian converts received combined prison sentences exceeding 40 years. One defendant, Narges Nasri, is pregnant with her first child ([Article 18, 10 March 2025](#))



WWL Year	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians' private property damaged or confiscated	Christians physically or mentally abused
2026	0	28	35	487
2025	0	17	42	452

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period – for full results see the violence section of the country's corresponding WWL Persecution Dynamics. 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. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*.*

PRIVATE LIFE

Christians, particularly converts, face severe risks for expressing faith publicly or online, as authorities monitor internet activities to gather evidence for arrests. Sharing Christian content in Persian is considered proselytization, while accessing Christian materials online or contacting foreign Christians invites surveillance. Even private possession of religious items like Bibles, songbooks or cross necklaces has been used as criminal evidence.

FAMILY LIFE

The family sphere presents multiple challenges for Iranian Christians. Children of converts are automatically registered as Muslims and must attend Islamic education, while even recognized Armenian and Assyrian Christians' children face mandatory Islamic classes. University applications require religious declaration, with Muslim-background individuals who identify as Christian being rejected. Christians cannot adopt Muslim children, though Armenian and Assyrian communities maintain separate orphanages. According to Article 881 of the Civil Code, non-Muslims cannot inherit from Muslims, and if just one heir is Muslim, they receive the entire inheritance, leaving Christian family members disinherited.

COMMUNITY LIFE

Christians face constant community-level surveillance, particularly those suspected of house church involvement or evangelism. Many endure repeated intimidation through summons for interrogation. Iranian intelligence employs informants internationally to monitor expatriate Christian activities. The state's control of over 80% of the economy enables

systematic discrimination, with historical Armenian and Assyrian Christians facing business obstacles while other Christians rarely receive business permits. The mandatory hijab requirement applies to all women regardless of faith.

NATIONAL LIFE

All high government positions are reserved for Shia Muslims, with Christians banned from public office except for three token parliamentary seats allocated to Armenian and Assyrian representatives. Government criticism carries severe risks, while state-controlled media frequently portrays Christians negatively, particularly associating them with "Zionism" and "illegal" house churches. Despite violating Iran's own Penal Code, sexual harassment during interrogation of arrested Christians continues with impunity. The justice system consistently fails to protect converts from family violence, as authorities consider such matters "private family issues" outside legal jurisdiction.

CHURCH LIFE

Police surveillance of church services creates pervasive fear among attendees. Armenian and Assyrian Christians may conduct services in their native languages but are forbidden from welcoming Persian-speaking converts. These recognized communities operate some state-subsidized schools, though Muslim headteachers are typically imposed. The government has intensified efforts to eliminate Persian-speaking Christianity by raiding house churches and arresting leaders and members. Following COVID-19 restrictions, all four remaining Persian-language churches have remained indefinitely closed.



International obligations & rights violated

Iran 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 on the Rights of the Child ([CRC](#))

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

- Christians are arbitrarily arrested, charged for national security crimes and sentenced without a fair trial (ICCPR Art. 9)
- Peaceful Christian religious activities are monitored and are regularly disrupted by the state on national security grounds (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 21)
- Converts to Christianity are persecuted by the state because of their decision to leave Islam (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christians from all denominations are monitored by the state, in violation of their right to privacy (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Christian children are forced to receive Islamic religious education (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)
- Christians cannot inherit from Muslims and have restricted access to higher education and public employment (ICCPR Art. 26)

Situation of other religious minorities

The Baha'i community faces systematic persecution, with leaders imprisoned and properties confiscated. Sunni Muslims (10% of the population) experience discrimination in employment and worship site restrictions. Sufi Dervishes, Yarsanis and Zoroastrians also encounter harassment and legal limitations. In recent years, executions have surged while disproportionately targeting ethnic and religious minorities, particularly Kurds, Baloch, and Iranian Arabs ([HRW, 27 May 2025](#)).



Open Doors in Iran

Open Doors' partners work in neighboring countries to help Iranian believers with training, discipleship, trauma care and online ministry. Open Doors raises prayer support for Christians in Iran.



ABOUT THIS DOSSIER

- The content of this Country Dossier is based on detailed analysis carried out by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. This dossier may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2026 Open Doors International.
- All 50 Country Dossiers – along with the latest update of WWL Methodology – can be accessed [here](#).
- The WWL 2026 reporting period was 01 October 2024 - 30 September 2025.

Some photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.