

WORLD WATCH LIST 2026

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

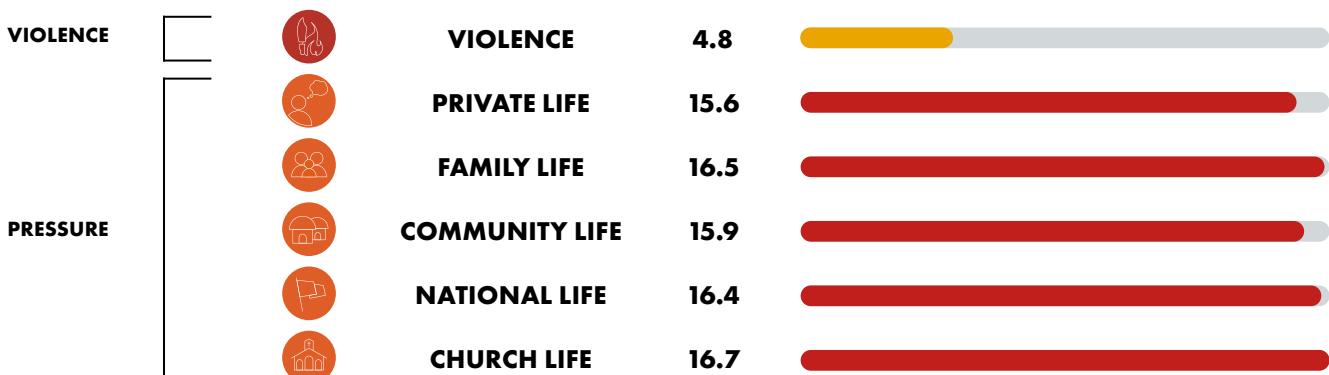
WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
11

AFGHANISTAN



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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

Christians in Afghanistan have gone underground since the Taliban regained power in August 2021, as the Taliban do not acknowledge the possibility that any Afghan could be a Christian. Almost all Christians are converts from Islam, which is considered a shameful apostasy, punishable by death under Islamic law. Families, clans, and tribes feel obligated to preserve their honor by dealing harshly with known converts. Given the risk of meeting with other Christians, the church exists only in increasingly fragmented, secretive gatherings, making an accurate assessment of their situation difficult. Christians who fled the country, or became Christians while living as refugees, have slightly more freedom, but also serious challenges, particularly in Pakistan. In the last year, an increasing number of Afghans who fled to neighboring countries have returned. Those returning as Christians face intense challenges in holding onto their faith. The situation for women has further deteriorated, with Christian women facing double persecution—both for their gender and their faith.

Quick facts

LEADER

Taliban Leader Haybatullah Akhundzada

POPULATION

44,516,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

Thousands (Open Doors estimate)

MAIN RELIGION

Sunni Islam

GOVERNMENT

Theocratic



Context

Religious context	Number of adherents	% of adherents in country
Christians	*	-
Muslims	44,453,000	99.9
Baha'is	10,700	0.0
Others	52,300	0.1
Total		100%

Source¹. *For security reasons no numbers can be provided.

Afghanistan has experienced over four decades of continuous conflict, devastating its infrastructure, economy, and social fabric. This prolonged instability has fueled Islamic radicalization, criminal activity, and widespread corruption. The Taliban, which previously ruled approximately three-quarters of the country from 1996 to 2001, regained control in August 2021 and swiftly reinstated their harsh interpretation of Islamic law.

Now into the fifth year of Taliban rule, the country is sinking deeper into a socioeconomic crisis. While there has been some modest economic growth, it doesn't offset the shrinking of international aid ([World Bank, April 2025](#)) such that an estimated 75 per cent of the population struggles to meet their daily needs, and those most affected are female-headed households, rural communities and internally displaced persons ([UNDP, April 2025](#)). A particular feature of the Taliban's oppressive rule

are the restrictions to the home: only seven per cent of Afghan women were working outside of the household in 2024 ([UN News, May 2025](#)) and girls' secondary and higher education remains banned.

Since the Taliban rule was consolidated, the number of Afghans forced to leave the country almost doubled to about 10 million, ([University of Oxford Migration Observatory, 25 October 2024](#)) which created large communities of Afghan refugees in the West, but predominantly in neighboring countries, particularly Pakistan and Iran.

In the last year the pressure on the population inside the country has been compounded by an acceleration of returns from those countries to which Afghans had sought refuge. In 2025, about two million Afghans have returned from Pakistan and Iran, the majority of which are forcible returns ([United Nations, 18 July 2025](#)).

The Taliban denies the existence of Christians in Afghanistan, meaning there are no protections for Christians. Any group supporting minority rights, democratic principles or government accountability risks being labeled Western agents or "non-believers".

While the Taliban's control has brought some order to society, there remain isolated terrorist attacks by sectarian Islamist groups. In particular, the Islamic State-Khorasan Province conducted multiple attacks on the Taliban, though these are decreasing in frequency as the Taliban continues to consolidate control ([International Crisis Group, 10 July 2025](#)).

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

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

ISLAMIC OPPRESSION BLENDED WITH DICTATORIAL PARANOIA

Afghanistan, under Taliban rule, considers apostasy from their interpretation of Islam a capital offense. After nearly five years of control, the regime has systematically enforced religious conformity, making conversion to Christianity effectively a death sentence. Christians conceal their faith, fearing extreme violence from religious authorities, local officials, and even family members. The Taliban's mandatory mosque attendance policy creates dilemmas for believers who must either risk exposure or participate in Islamic worship.

CLAN OPPRESSION BLENDED WITH ETHNO-RELIGIOUS HOSTILITY

Afghanistan's deeply collectivistic family and tribal structures leave virtually no privacy for individuals, creating a high risk of Christians being discovered. Extended families typically live together, making religious practices impossible to conceal from relatives. Conversion is viewed as a betrayal of family honor and Islamic identity, triggering severe pressure to recant or face potentially lethal consequences. Christianity is particularly targeted as a Western religion and perceived to be fundamentally hostile to Afghan culture, society, and Islamic values. For those Afghans who are being returned after fleeing their homeland, there is likely to be increased suspicion and hostility on the basis that they have betrayed their community and country by leaving.

ORGANIZED CORRUPTION AND CRIME

Despite Taliban prohibition of opium cultivation, organized crime remains entrenched, with about three-quarters of Afghanistan's GDP derived from informal or illicit sectors ([ACAPS, July 2024](#)). The resultant economic instability disproportionately impacts vulnerable groups, including Christians who predominantly come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

How the situation varies by region

Generally, control and supervision in smaller communities in rural areas is stricter than in most cities. However, even in cities like Kabul, there is a very high level of social control and increasing levels of CCTV surveillance ([BBC Afghan Service, 27 February 2025](#)) and so Christians face difficulties across the whole country.

Who is affected?

COMMUNITIES OF EXPATRIATE CHRISTIANS

NGOs have gradually reintroduced workers to Afghanistan since 2023. Though security has modestly improved, allowing expatriates some movement outside their compounds, they remain under strict surveillance. Expatriate Christians cannot worship with each other, nor connect with local believers, without endangering both parties, resulting in continued isolation.

HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

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

CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY

Converts from Islam represent virtually all indigenous Afghan Christians. They face execution if discovered and must conceal their faith completely. As such, they are not a visible community.

NON-TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

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



How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

The Taliban's rule since 2021 has entrenched severe gender persecution, described as a "war on women." Girls are barred from secondary schools and universities, women are excluded from most jobs, forced into strict dress codes, and restricted in movement. Female converts to Christianity face extreme danger: discovery can lead to beatings, house arrest, forced marriage, rape, or honor killing. Stigma and lack of justice mean women are unable to report abuse. Many Christian women conceal their faith, remaining highly isolated.

Female typical pressure points:

- Denied access to social community/networks
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Trafficking
- Travel bans/restrictions on movement
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – sexual

MEN

Since the Taliban takeover, Christian men face relentless pressure. Those suspected of converting to Christianity have been targeted, with many beaten, tortured, killed, or forced underground. Men and boys risk forced recruitment by the Taliban and must show obedience; insubordination can expose their faith. Male converts endure harassment, social isolation, beatings, or death, and may lose wives and children. Greater freedom of movement makes them more exposed to community violence. To avoid detection, men keep low profiles, choosing low-level jobs, and are forced to live outwardly as Muslims.

Male typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2026	11	86
2025	10	85
2024	10	84
2023	9	84
2022	1	98

The one point rise this year reflects the ever-increasing pressure on Christians in Afghanistan. Since the church has almost completely gone underground, violent confrontations with Christians are relatively rare, but the risks Christians face continue to grow. Specifically, the Family Life score increased as we are seeing that even for expatriate Christians who might be working in Afghanistan, even just living out their faith in their family risks drawing the attention of the Taliban. The wider context is that the ever-tightening restrictions on women and girls in public life add to the pressure on doubly vulnerable Christian women. While the risks of connecting with other Christians, or accessing any Christian media, are high for everyone, it is even more difficult for women and girls who are largely confined to their homes.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

For security reasons, no specific details of violence against Christians can be published.

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PRIVATE LIFE

Afghanistan's tight-knit tribal society creates intense social surveillance, making privacy virtually nonexistent. The Taliban has intensified random cell phone inspections nationwide, searching specifically for religious content. Believers have resorted to extreme measures—abandoning digital communications, using coded language, or relocating frequently.

FAMILY LIFE

Mere suspicion of Christian conversion can trigger catastrophic consequences—immediate arrest, home destruction, or honor killings. Taliban authorities systematically nullify marriages involving Christian converts and remove children from Christian influence. All children must receive an Islamic education, with no exceptions permitted. Baptisms are impossible to conduct safely. Christian parents must instruct children to maintain Islamic appearances publicly while cautiously sharing their faith at home. Funerals for Christians must follow Islamic rites, with no Christian elements permitted. Recent Taliban edicts specifically prohibit religious funeral practices outside Islamic tradition ([USCIRF, March 2025](#)).

COMMUNITY LIFE

Christians must meticulously maintain Muslim appearances—strictly following Islamic dress codes, attending mosque prayers, growing proper beards for men, and wearing full covering for women. The slightest deviation invites dangerous scrutiny. Heightened community vigilance means neighbors actively report suspicious behavior to authorities, motivated by both ideological commitment and financial rewards. Taliban representatives have instituted mandatory neighborhood reporting systems where citizens must report religious nonconformity. Employment discrimination is severe, with Christians in government positions and private sector jobs at increased risk of being found out. Many believers remain unemployed or work in isolation to avoid detection.

NATIONAL LIFE

Under Taliban rule, Afghanistan operates under strict Sharia law that explicitly criminalizes apostasy from Islam. Christians have no legal protection whatsoever. All official identification documents classify citizens



as Muslim by default, with no alternative options. Travel restrictions have intensified, with checkpoint personnel specifically instructed to inspect for religious materials. Christians avoiding mosque attendance risk being reported by designated neighborhood monitors. The legal system offers no recourse for Christians facing persecution, as conversion itself is illegal.

CHURCH LIFE

No visible church exists in Afghanistan. All Christian gatherings occur under extreme secrecy, typically disguised as family meals or social events. Groups remain very small—usually 3-5 people—and frequently change meeting locations. No Christian literature can be openly possessed, imported, or distributed. Bible access occurs primarily through memorization or carefully hidden digital files. That said, there are a number of Christian media ministries that reach Afghans both inside and outside the country, providing some access to Christian teaching and potentially some fellowship.

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).

Situation of other religious minorities

Afghanistan's Ahmadiyya and Shi'a Muslim communities, along with the smaller Sikh, Hindu, and Baha'i communities, all face severe persecution. According to [USCIRF's 2025 report](#), these minorities are subject to physical and sexual violence (in particular against women and children), arbitrary detention, torture, corporal punishment, and other abuses and there appears to be a particular targeting of Shi'a communities, by the Taliban and the sectarian Islamic State of Khorasan Province.



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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- 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.

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