

WORLD WATCH LIST 2026

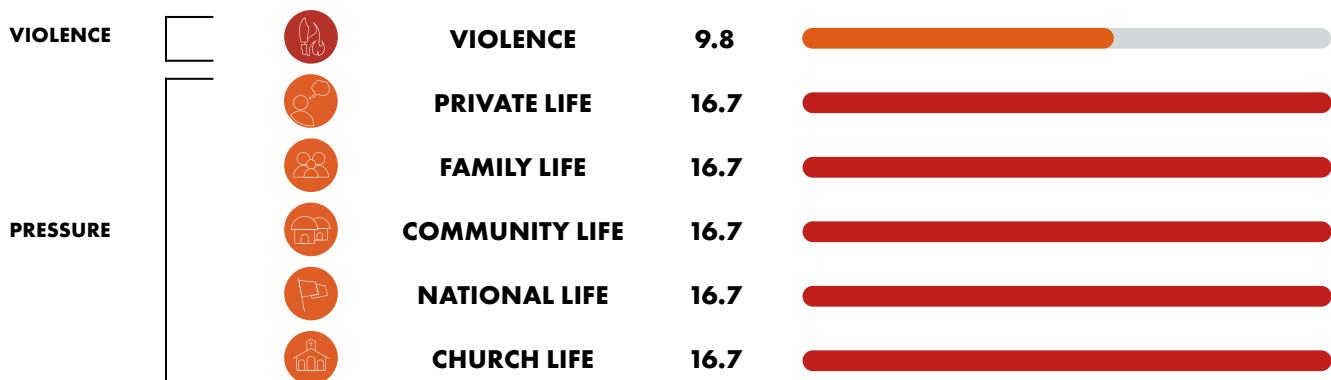
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
3

YEMEN



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

Escalating violence, growing Houthi and Islamic State (IS) influence, intensified surveillance, economic collapse, and radicalization have further worsened conditions for Yemeni Christians, increasing fear, isolation and the desire to flee, with dozens of informal fellowships no longer able to meet. A coordinated media campaign has additionally targeted Christian leaders, fueling anti-Christian rhetoric and heightening threats, repression and risks to believers' lives. The indigenous church consists mainly of converts from a Muslim background and their children, who must practice their faith in secret. They face violations of religious freedom by the state and Houthi authorities, their families and radical groups, with apostasy punishable by death. Tribal identity is closely linked to Islam, exposing converts to severe pressure from the community and violence from their tribe for leaving Islam. Christians married to Muslims risk forced divorce and loss of custody of their children. Christians also suffer from the general humanitarian crisis in the country, but Yemeni Christians are particularly vulnerable because emergency aid is preferably distributed through mosques to local Muslims, who discriminate against people who are not considered devout Muslims.

Quick facts

LEADER

Chairperson, Presidential Leadership Council Rashad Muhammad al-Alimi

POPULATION

36,000,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

A small number (Open Doors estimate)

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

In transition



Context

Religious context	Number of adherents	% of adherents in country
Christians	*	-
Muslims	35,721,000	99.2
Hindus	238,000	0.7
Others	41,000	0.1
Total		100%

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

In 2014, the Houthi rebels, a Shia minority group, took control of Yemen's capital, Sana'a, opposing President Hadi's regime. Hadi fled to Saudi Arabia, which formed a coalition to restore him and counter Iran's influence. Saudi Arabia expected a quick victory through airstrikes, but the civil war has dragged on, causing hundreds of thousands of deaths both from direct conflict as well as from hunger and disease due to the humanitarian crisis. Almost 83% of the population live in poverty caused by the war according to UNDP data. The escalation of the Yemen civil war, including Houthi attacks against Israel and retaliatory US and Israel strikes, combined with the worsening humanitarian and economic crisis, has made life increasingly dangerous for Christians. Western airstrikes are framed by the Houthis as "Christian aggression," fuelling hostility toward Christians and the West and radicalizing youth. The May 2025 ceasefire brought little relief, leaving Christians in extreme isolation with fragmented underground communities,

heightened fear and a growing desire to flee the country. Subsequently, a coordinated media campaign targeting and exposing Christian leaders has spread anti-Christian rhetoric and escalated threats, endangering Christians' lives, while some communities experienced faith-driven growth.

Yemen is an authoritarian Islamic republic and Sharia (Islamic law) is the principal source of law according to the 1994 constitution. Blasphemy, defamation of religions and non-Islamic proselytizing is forbidden. Apostasy is a crime punishable by death if the apostate refuses to recant. Islamic personal status laws forbid marriage between Muslims and apostates and between Muslim women and non-Muslim men. Non-Islamic religious groups cannot formally register, and no new non-Islamic places of worship have been authorized for years.

Due to security concerns and the lack of reliable data, precise figures on the Christian population in Yemen cannot be published. Open Doors estimates 'a few thousand' Christians remain.

Before the civil war, many expatriate Christians worshipped in registered churches in Aden and Sana'a but most have since fled country due to the dangerous situation, and many of their churches have been ransacked or severely damaged. Today, Yemen's Christian population consists mainly of local converts who face severe risks, including threats from their own families and tribes, alongside Ethiopian and Eritrean Christian transit migrants.

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

In Yemen, Islam is the state religion and Sharia is the basis of all laws. Conversion from Islam is forbidden, and proselytizing is banned. Yemeni Christians face strong pressure mainly from non-state actors like families, tribes and radical Islamic groups, especially amid ongoing conflict and weak governance. These groups, including the Houthis, AQAP, have targeted and even killed Christians while promoting a strict form of Islam.

CLAN OPPRESSION

Yemeni society is primarily tribal, with government authority often secondary. Islamic identity is intertwined with ethnic identity. In many areas, tribal elders enforce tribal law and custom, which prohibits members from leaving or marrying outside the tribe, especially to a Christian. Christian converts are considered threats to tribal and religious unity. Punishment for disobedience can be death or banishment.

DIKTATORIAL PARANOIA

In Yemen, dictatorial paranoia drives non-state actors like the Houthis to harshly repress Christians, especially converts, who are seen as threats to the ruling order and face arrest, interrogation and violence for deviating from the dominant religious or political order. In areas under the internationally recognized government, persecution is less systematic, but converts still live in secrecy due to social stigma, legal risks and a lack of protection against religiously motivated violence.

ORGANIZED CORRUPTION AND CRIME

In Yemen's weak rule of law and ongoing conflict, Christians, often associated with the West and believed to be linked to sources of finance, are especially vulnerable to crime, with perpetrators acting with impunity.

How the situation varies by region

The situation for Christians is dangerous across Yemen. In the south, fragmented governance and the presence of radical groups such as Al-Qaeda and IS keep conditions perilous. In Houthi-controlled northwestern regions - home to up to 80% of the population- pressure is particularly severe. These areas are heavily policed, dissent is brutally repressed and suspected Christian converts from Islam face surveillance, arrest and torture. Alongside growing oppression and risk of violence, access to necessities such as food and medical care continues to decline.

Who is affected?

COMMUNITIES OF EXPATRIATE CHRISTIANS

Remaining migrant Christians, mainly Ethiopians, suffer racial and religious persecution. As their numbers have significantly declined and they are largely transient, the Christian community now consists primarily of local converts, with foreign Christians no longer treated as a separate category in World Watch List analysis.

HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

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

CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY

At least 95% of the Yemeni church is made up of converts from Islam. Vulnerability of converts remains very high throughout the country due to traditional family/community/tribal attitudes, the impunity with which radical Islamist groups are able to operate and the refusal of state (or de facto state) authorities to tolerate any form of dissent.

NON-TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

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

How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Amid Yemen's ongoing conflict and strict patriarchal norms, Yemeni women experience increasing gender-based repression, especially under Houthi control. Women must often travel with a male guardian, restricting access to work, services, and public life. Female Christian converts bring family dishonor and risk isolation, confiscation of phones, abuse, forced marriage or honor killing, with Yemen's penal code granting leniency to perpetrators. Christian women have limited access to faith resources and church life, leaving them spiritually isolated.

Female typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings and rites
- Denied access to social community/networks
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced to flee town/country
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family (house arrest)
- Travel bans/restrictions on movement
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

MEN

Amid Yemen's ongoing war, Christian men face forcible militia recruitment, including boys as young as 13, despite international agreements banning the practice. Converts risk job loss, beatings, imprisonment and torture in Houthi detention, where conditions are dire and often deadly. As household providers, their imprisonment or death causes severe hardship for families, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation. Pastors and leaders are especially targeted for detention. Because persecution is more public for men, many choose to flee the country.

Male typical pressure points:

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



WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2026	3	93
2025	3	94
2024	5	89
2023	3	89
2022	5	88

Pressure across all spheres of life for Christians in Yemen remained at the maximum level of 16.7 points. The violence score dropped slightly—from 10.6 to a still very high 9.8—mainly because, unlike the previous year, no Christians were reported killed for their faith in WWL 2026. As a result, the overall score dropped by one point from 94 to 93 points. The indigenous Church consists mostly of Christians with a Muslim background and need to live their faith in secret. Christians in Yemen have been faced with physical and mental abuse, sexual harassment and rape as well as forced marriages. They face violations of religious freedom from their family and the authorities (both from the official authorities and from Houthi rebels acting as local authorities) as well as from radical Islamist groups.

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Examples of violence in the reporting period

Several Christians were reported to have been detained during the WWL 2026 reporting period. Dozens of converts faced physical violence, mental abuse or sexual harassment and rape, forced marriage or abduction while dozens of other Christians had to move to other places in the country - sometimes returning later - and still others reportedly left the country. The motivation for fleeing can vary from fear of assassination (for their faith) to war-related reasons and are often a combination. Most families are so angry and ashamed to discover a family member has left Islam that they are ready to kill, possibly via a radicalized relative or local militant group.



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PRIVATE LIFE

All Yemenis are considered Muslims. Converts to Christianity run the risk of honor killing or physical violence if their families or communities discover their faith. Private worship has become particularly risky for Christians in areas controlled by radical Muslims. The Houthis control much of northern and northwestern Yemen while AQAP maintains a presence in parts of the south and east.

FAMILY LIFE

In Yemen's strictly Islamic society, converting to Christianity is seen as a dishonor, leading to immense family pressure. Christian rituals must be secret, and converts with children face pressure to raise them as Muslims, risking custody loss if discovered. Families may arrange marriages to conservative Muslims to 'correct' converts, with refusal risking imprisonment, honor killings or attacks by militant Islamist groups.

COMMUNITY LIFE

The ongoing conflict and humanitarian crisis in Yemen have severely impacted Christians. New converts face intense pressure to renounce their faith; refusal can lead to imprisonment, violence or death. In rural villages, communal and religious pressures are stronger due to close family ties. Converts hiding their faith are seen as less devout

Muslims and often deprioritized in food and aid distribution, worsening their vulnerability.

NATIONAL LIFE

In Yemen, the near collapse of the justice system and widespread discrimination, especially in Houthi-controlled areas and regions where AQAP and IS operate, make fair trials rare, with Christian testimony often valued less than that of Muslims. Converts from Islam risk imprisonment or death, as apostasy is a capital offense under Yemen's criminal code. In both tribal and official systems, strict interpretation of Islamic principles dominates, severely disadvantaging Christians. Crimes against them often go unpunished, and in the workplace, suspected Christians are denied advancement.

CHURCH LIFE

The three official church buildings (all located in Aden, on Yemen's south coast) which served Christian expatriates or transit migrants have been damaged in the war and are closed. Most Christians only meet at secret locations. Distribution of Christian materials is forbidden by law, and the punishment is severe. Churches that organize humanitarian efforts risk being attacked. It has become increasingly difficult for Christians to meet, especially in Houthi controlled areas, due to the risk involved.



International obligations & rights violated

Yemen 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](#))

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

- Christian converts are pressured by the state and society to recant their conversion (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christians suffer from biased distribution of emergency relief because of their faith (ICCPR Art. 26)
- Christian converts, male and female, face divorce and lose custody of their children because of their conversion (ICCPR Art. 23 and CEDAW Art. 16)
- Distribution of non-Islamic religious material is forbidden by law (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)
- Female Christian converts are forced into house imprisonment and held hostage because of their faith (ICCPR Arts. 9 and 12 and CEDAW Art. 15)

Situation of other religious minorities

Other religious minorities like Baha'is and Jews also face severe rights violations. Baha'is are discriminated against, imprisoned and tortured by Houthis, pressured to renounce their faith. Jewish prisoner Libi Marhabi, the last known Jew in Yemen, remains detained and reportedly tortured in prison despite a court-ordered release. The Houthis also restrict the freedom of Sunni Muslims.



Open Doors in Yemen

Open Doors supports the Body of Christ in Yemen through organizing prayer, training of believers and pastors. We also distribute humanitarian aid to believers and seekers. We offer shelter and protection to persecuted believers and give different forms of training and livelihood to believers and their relatives.



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.

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.