

WORLD WATCH LIST 2026

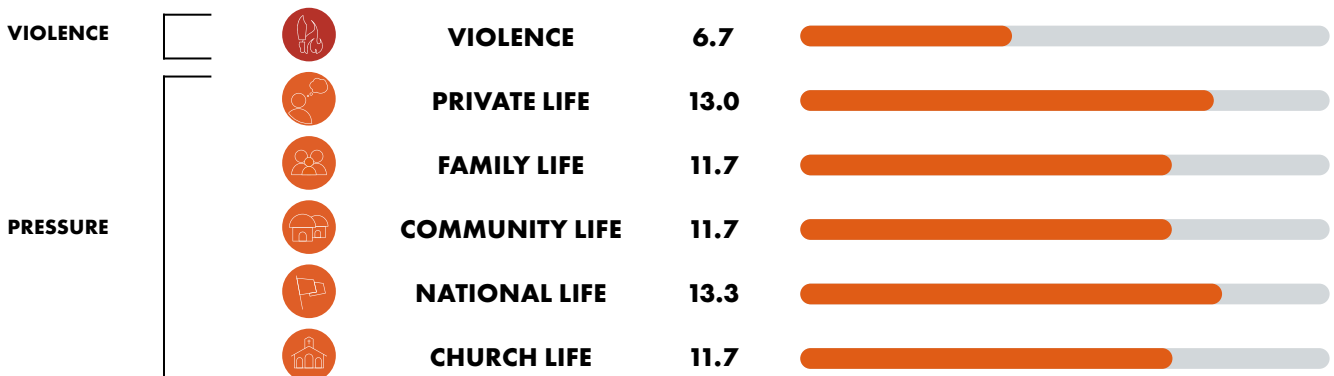
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

TÜRKIYE

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
41



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

In Türkiye, nationalism and Islam are intrinsically linked and anyone who is not a Muslim, particularly a convert or someone who openly lives out their different faith, is not seen to be a loyal Turk. Since 2019, the government has banned over 200 foreign (Western) Christians from the country and even targeted foreign Christians with Turkish spouses and children. Although conversion from Islam to Christianity is not legally forbidden, converts from both Islamic and secular backgrounds can be put under pressure by their families and communities to recant their new faith. Some Christians therefore lead a double life and hide their conversion. However, others boldly and openly live out their faith, reflecting diversity both within the Turkish church as well as within Turkish society. Christians from all categories of Christian communities have limited access to state employment, and experience discrimination in private employment, especially where employers have ties to the government.

Quick facts

LEADER

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan

POPULATION

86,696,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

251,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



Context

Religious context	Number of adherents	% of adherents in country
Christians	251,000	0.3
Muslims	84,997,000	98.0
Atheists/Agnostics	1,175,200	1.4
Others	272,600	0.3
	Total	100%

Source²

Türkiye is a transcontinental nation strategically located mainly in Anatolia (West Asia) with a smaller part in south-east Europe, serving as a historical crossroads between East and West, shaped by major civilizations including the Greeks, Romans, Byzantines and Ottomans.

Christianity in Türkiye traces its roots to 1st century AD, when apostles such as Paul established early congregations in Asia Minor. With Emperor Constantine's adoption of Christianity and the founding of Constantinople, the region became a major center of Eastern Orthodoxy until the Great Schism of 1054, after which Byzantium was the heart of Orthodox Christianity and the Byzantine Empire. Following the Ottoman conquest in 1453, Christians came under Muslim rule, facing gradual Islamization and, eventually, severe decline due to the Hamidian Massacres (1894-1896) and the Armenian Genocide (1915-1923) which decimated the Armenian, Syriac and Greek Christian populations and left Christianity a minority faith in modern Türkiye.

Based on the Lausanne Treaty, only two Christian denominations are recognized: Greek Orthodoxy and Armenian Apostolic. Turkish legislation does not allow the training of church clergy. The Catholic and Protestant churches can provide catechetical training for their children on church premises, but do not have official facilities. Purchasing premises for church use can prove difficult, and whether permission is granted will depend on the inclination of the mayor and the attitude of the local population. Non-Muslims are tacitly banned from jobs in state administration and the security forces.

Türkiye is a presidential republic, currently under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Though officially a secular state since Atatürk's reforms in the early 20th century, in Erdoğan's Türkiye the state controls religion and promotes Sunni Islam at home and abroad through the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet). Starting with the attempted coup in July 2016, the government took on more dictatorial powers, culminating in widespread crackdowns on opposition politicians, including the arrest of Ekrem İmamoğlu, the mayor of Istanbul and potential presidential candidate.

Since 1984, Türkiye has engaged in a prolonged fight against separatists from the Kurdish minority, particularly the PKK. In May 2025, after a historic call by imprisoned leader Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK announced its dissolution and end to armed struggle, marking a potential turning point toward a political solution.

¹ Gina A. Zurlo, ed., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2025

² Other refers to all the rest to make up 100%: Gina A. Zurlo, ed., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2025

How the situation varies by region

Historical Christian groups like the Armenian and Assyrian (Syriac) churches face high pressure and hostility in south-eastern Türkiye. For decades, they were casualties of the conflict between the Turkish army and Kurdish nationalist groups. Nowadays, they face ongoing land theft and violence. Most Turkish Christian communities are in western coastal cities, including Istanbul. These cities tend to be more moderate and secular, while inland areas strictly follow Islamic laws, and socially hostile towards Christians, including converts from Islam to Christianity.

Who is affected?

COMMUNITIES OF EXPATRIATE CHRISTIANS

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

HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Historical Christian communities in Türkiye, such as the Armenian Apostolic, Greek Orthodox, Assyrian and Syriac churches, face government monitoring, bureaucratic obstacles and community harassment. Despite the 2023 inauguration of a new Syriac Orthodox church (the first church built since the establishment of the Turkish republic), these groups are still often treated as “foreign” and must seek government approval for key religious decisions, such as appointing church leaders.

CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY

Converts to Christianity from a Muslim background bear the brunt of rights violations. Pressure comes from family, the community and local authorities. They are considered traitors to Turkish identity.

NON-TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Non-traditional Christian communities include Baptists and Pentecostals. This category is blended with the community of converts to Christianity. They mostly exist as small groups and meet in private homes. A new growing group of Christians in Türkiye consists of Christian refugees from neighboring countries, including Iran. They face high levels of social hostility.

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

ISLAMIC OPPRESSION BLENDED WITH RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM – ISLAMIC

Fierce, fanatical nationalism affects all ethnic minorities in Türkiye. Conversion to Christianity from Islam is seen as an offense to family and nation. Converts face harassment and familial, communal and economic exclusion. The general opinion is that a true Turk is a Muslim. Conversion is not only a question of family honor being damaged, it is also seen as “insulting Turkishness”. Some converts may even face threats of violence from radical nationalist Islamist groups. Other ethnic minorities (such as Greeks, Armenians and Syriacs) face similar societal pressure and violence, as well as legal challenges and economic exclusion.

ETHNO-RELIGIOUS HOSTILITY

This source has grown stronger in the context of the Kurdish conflict. Syriac Christians in the south-eastern region particularly feel the pressure from ethnic tensions in the region and are caught between Kurdish clans and militants and the government. Tribal leaders use their power to push out the Syriacs from their homeland in the south-east.

CLAN OPPRESSION

Tribal law and customs still play an important role, especially in the eastern provinces of Türkiye. Converts from Islam are likely to face more pressure there, as conversion to Christianity is not only seen as a betrayal of Islam, but also of family and clan.

DICTATORIAL PARANOIA

Since the failed coup in July 2016, President Erdoğan’s government has cracked down against opposition, becoming increasingly anti-democratic and openly restricting freedom throughout Turkish society. The media has been curtailed, while journalists and opposition politicians are being imprisoned.

How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

In Türkiye, domestic violence and femicide remain widespread, worsened since the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention. Although some female converts can live out their new faith freely, others are especially vulnerable, as conversion is seen as dishonoring the family. They risk house arrest, beatings, sexual abuse, harassment and rejection. Unmarried or financially dependent women face the greatest dangers. In an honor/shame culture, victims often suffer in silence. In some jobs and conservative areas, women also face pressure to conform to Islamic dress and conduct. Many young converts hide their faith to avoid expulsion or disownment.

Female typical pressure points:

- Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings and rites
- Enforced religious dress code
- Violence – physical
- Violence – sexual

MEN

In Türkiye, Christian men face institutional discrimination and cultural pressure to uphold Islam and Turkishness, deterring many from open faith practice. Men and boys are more likely to be detained, threatened or arrested, while converts can face job loss, family rejection and forced mosque attendance. Military service can bring harassment, bullying and suspicion, with Christian conscripts usually being unable to openly practice their faith. Church leaders receive death threats and intimidation, while widespread discrimination in both public and private sectors undermines livelihoods, leaving families and communities economically vulnerable.

Male typical pressure points:

- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- Forced out of home – expulsion
- Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – verbal



WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2026	41	68
2025	45	67
2024	50	64
2023	41	66
2022	42	65

The overall score for Türkiye rose 1.6 points. This was mainly caused by a rise in the violence score from 5.4 to 6.7 points. A greater number of churches were attacked, shot at and vandalized, while several churches were closed by local authorities or the police. At the same time, numerous foreign Christians continued to receive security codes and entry bans, effectively forcing them and their families to leave the country. Overall, pressure on the church in Türkiye remained very high.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

- Several churches were attacked or damaged. On 31 December 2024, shots were fired at the Salvation Church in Istanbul's Çekmeköy district ([SCF, 2 January 2025](#)). Another church in Samson was vandalized through stone-throwing.
- Turkish police and authorities interfered with Protestant churches on several occasions. In May 2025, police sealed the premises of a church in Istanbul, claiming regulatory violations over serving refreshments, even though the church had operated without issues for nearly two decades. In another case, police cautioned potential landlords against renting property to a church association. A different church was closed on alleged earthquake safety grounds, despite holding certified safety standards, while nearby buildings were permitted to continue operating.
- Several cases of inciting speech and harassment against Christians have been reported, including someone violently disrupting a Sunday worship service.
- The Turkish government continued to ban expatriate Christians from (re)entering the country, often on vague security grounds. These bans have severely affected many families and church relationships, leaving a void in the Protestant churches.



WWL Year	Christians killed	Churches or public Christian properties attacked or closed	Christians forced to flee the country	Christians internally displaced
2026	0	8	100*	10*
2025	2	4	10*	10*

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

Public expressions of non-Muslim faiths can result in harassment. Displaying Christian symbols can provoke hostility and physical violence. Traditional Christians are socially and economically excluded from the wider Turkish society. Converts from Islam to Christianity can lose their jobs, face harassment from family and friends or receive threats after their new faith has come to be known.

FAMILY LIFE

Children of Christian converts are often harassed and bullied because their family is perceived as having betrayed both the faith and the nation. Children whose parents are either expatriates or who belong to one of the historical Christian communities are also seen as “enemies of Türkiye” because they are viewed as being part of the “Christian West”. The Turkish educational curriculum is heavily influenced by Turkish nationalism and portrays Christianity as foreign and hostile to Turkish society.

Applications for Christian cemeteries have been denied in several parts of the country. In those areas, Christians can only be buried according to Christian rites in sections reserved for all non-Muslims or in the nearest historically Christian cemetery (sometimes more than 500 km away).

COMMUNITY LIFE

Christians have no access to state employment and experience discrimination in private employment. Islamic education is compulsory. While non-Muslim children can opt out, they are likely to face ostracization and discrimination from teachers and

classmates. The media is heavily influenced by nationalist pressure from the state and regularly attacks non-Muslim minorities. Christians are consistently scapegoated and discriminated against by newspapers and television as a way of both suppressing Christian voices and intimidating more tolerant Turks into silence.

NATIONAL LIFE

For Christians, access to public sector employment and other social and economic opportunities is highly restricted. Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code states that: “A person who publicly denigrates the Turkish Nation, the Republic or the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye, shall be punishable by imprisonment,” meaning that Christians must exercise caution when expressing themselves in public.

CHURCH LIFE

It is impossible to register as a new religious community, and Protestant churches are not recognized as official places of worship causing many bureaucratic hurdles to establish church communities. Although there is an option for churches to register as a “religious foundation” or “association”, the process is lengthy, difficult, and some applications have been denied.

Obtaining permits to build, repair, or renovate churches is slow and difficult, often hindered by anti-Christian sentiment within the bureaucracy. Training Christian leaders legally is impossible. The seminaries of the historical Christian communities were closed in the 1970s and remain shut, leaving only unofficial training possible.



International obligations & rights violated

Türkiye 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](#))

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

- Christian converts are ostracized and faced with opposition by their families, threatened with divorce and loss of child custody (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christian children are harassed because of their parents' faith (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)
- Churches are attacked by members of the state task force (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christians face restrictions in employment in the public sector and experience discrimination in the private sector (ICCPR Arts. 25 and 26, and ICESCR Art. 6)
- Christians face harassment and violence if they talk about their faith or engage in proselytization (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)

Situation of other religious minorities

The Gülen Movement has been heavily persecuted since the 2016 coup attempt. Yazidis in Türkiye's southeast face similar issues as the Syriac Christians. Nusayri refugees (Alawites) from Syria feel enormous pressure to leave the country. The Alevites are also discriminated against as well as Kurds in general.



Open Doors in Türkiye

Open Doors occasionally supports Persian Speaking refugee believers in Türkiye through trusted partners. This support is mainly through training, resources and practical support. Open Doors raises prayer support for believers in difficult situations and prayer in general for Türkiye.



© Unsplash

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.

Most photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.