

World
Watch
Research

Iran: Country Dossier

November 2020



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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Introduction

World Watch List 2021

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	11.1	94	94	94	94	92
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.2	94	93	94	93	89
3	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.3	9.8	92	92	91	91	91
4	Libya	15.6	15.4	15.9	16.3	16.3	12.4	92	90	87	86	78
5	Pakistan	13.9	14.2	15.1	14.9	13.5	16.7	88	88	87	86	88
6	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.9	15.9	15.4	11.1	88	87	86	86	82
7	Yemen	16.6	16.6	16.5	16.7	16.7	3.9	87	85	86	85	85
8	Iran	14.5	14.5	13.9	15.7	16.5	10.6	86	85	85	85	85
9	Nigeria	13.3	13.2	13.9	14.1	14.1	16.7	85	80	80	77	78
10	India	13.0	12.9	13.5	14.9	13.7	15.4	83	83	83	81	73
11	Iraq	13.6	14.6	14.2	14.8	13.8	11.5	82	76	79	86	86
12	Syria	13.3	13.9	13.5	14.5	14.0	12.0	81	82	82	76	86
13	Sudan	13.4	13.4	13.7	13.6	15.7	9.1	79	85	87	87	87
14	Saudi Arabia	15.1	13.9	14.4	15.8	16.6	2.2	78	79	77	79	76
15	Maldives	15.4	15.5	13.9	15.8	16.6	0.4	77	78	78	78	76
16	Egypt	12.5	13.2	11.5	12.7	11.0	14.1	75	76	76	70	65
17	China	12.6	9.7	12.0	13.2	15.4	11.1	74	70	65	57	57
18	Myanmar	11.9	12.0	13.1	12.9	12.3	11.9	74	73	71	65	62
19	Vietnam	12.1	8.8	12.7	14.0	14.5	10.0	72	72	70	69	71
20	Mauritania	14.3	14.0	13.5	14.1	13.6	1.9	71	68	67	57	55
21	Uzbekistan	15.1	12.9	14.1	12.2	15.7	1.3	71	73	74	73	71
22	Laos	12.1	10.2	13.6	13.5	14.3	6.9	71	72	71	67	64
23	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.8	13.3	15.7	1.5	70	70	69	68	67
24	Algeria	13.9	13.9	11.5	13.1	13.4	3.9	70	73	70	58	58
25	Turkey	12.5	11.5	10.8	13.3	11.6	9.3	69	63	66	62	57
26	Tunisia	12.0	13.1	10.4	11.5	13.2	7.4	67	64	63	62	61
27	Morocco	12.6	13.5	11.2	12.4	14.1	3.7	67	66	63	51	49
28	Mali	9.4	8.2	12.7	10.3	11.5	15.4	67	66	68	59	59
29	Qatar	14.0	13.9	10.8	13.1	14.1	1.5	67	66	62	63	66
30	Colombia	11.4	8.8	12.4	11.0	9.7	13.9	67	62	58	56	53
31	Bangladesh	11.5	10.3	13.0	11.3	10.1	10.6	67	63	58	58	63
32	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.0	9.4	11.8	14.3	67	66	48	-	-
33	Tajikistan	14.0	12.3	11.9	12.5	13.2	2.2	66	65	65	65	58
34	Nepal	12.4	9.7	9.9	13.0	12.3	8.5	66	64	64	64	53
35	CAR	9.0	8.6	13.1	9.6	9.9	15.6	66	68	70	61	58
36	Ethiopia	9.9	8.5	10.7	10.3	10.8	14.4	65	63	65	62	64
37	Mexico	10.3	8.1	12.4	10.7	10.3	12.6	64	60	61	59	57
38	Jordan	13.1	13.9	11.4	11.6	12.4	2.0	64	64	65	66	63
39	Brunei	13.9	14.6	10.7	10.9	13.5	0.7	64	63	63	64	64
40	DRC	8.0	7.9	11.2	9.4	11.6	16.1	64	56	55	33	-
41	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.5	11.0	12.5	13.4	2.4	64	64	63	63	56
42	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.0	12.3	15.7	64	60	54	38	-
43	Bhutan	13.1	12.1	11.9	12.7	13.8	0.0	64	61	64	62	61
44	Oman	13.2	13.5	10.3	12.5	13.0	0.9	63	62	59	57	53
45	Mozambique	9.3	7.6	11.3	7.9	11.1	16.1	63	43	43	-	-
46	Malaysia	12.1	14.3	12.9	11.5	10.0	2.4	63	62	60	65	60
47	Indonesia	11.5	11.4	12.4	10.7	9.3	7.8	63	60	65	59	55
48	Kuwait	13.2	13.5	9.9	12.2	13.2	1.1	63	62	60	61	57
49	Kenya	11.7	9.2	10.5	8.0	10.3	12.8	62	61	61	62	68
50	Comoros	12.5	11.1	11.4	11.3	14.2	1.9	62	57	56	56	56

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017
51	Cuba	10.9	7.7	11.8	12.9	13.4	5.4	62	52	49	49	47
52	Sri Lanka	12.2	9.1	11.7	12.2	9.7	7.0	62	65	58	57	55
53	UAE	13.4	13.3	9.7	12.0	12.4	1.1	62	60	58	58	55
54	Niger	9.4	9.5	13.3	7.2	11.6	10.6	62	60	52	45	47
55	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.3	11.2	10.4	12.0	1.3	58	57	56	54	48
56	Palestinian Territories	12.5	13.3	9.1	10.4	11.7	0.9	58	60	57	60	64
57	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	10.2	58	55	52	53	59
58	Russian Federation	12.3	8.0	10.2	10.5	12.1	3.9	57	60	60	51	46
59	Djibouti	12.3	12.3	10.3	10.0	11.2	0.0	56	56	56	56	57
60	Bahrain	12.1	12.5	9.1	10.7	10.5	0.9	56	55	55	57	54
61	Azerbaijan	12.8	9.8	9.4	11.1	12.6	0.0	56	57	57	57	52
62	Chad	11.5	8.2	10.2	9.6	10.3	3.7	53	56	48	40	-
63	Nicaragua	6.9	4.6	9.9	11.3	10.0	8.1	51	41	41	-	-
64	Burundi	5.1	5.8	9.7	9.2	9.6	8.9	48	48	43	-	-
65	Uganda	8.1	4.6	6.7	6.7	9.1	12.0	47	48	47	46	53
66	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	7.0	8.1	5.9	47	45	46	-	-
67	Honduras	6.8	5.0	10.6	7.6	9.0	7.6	46	39	38	-	-
68	Angola	6.4	3.6	7.0	10.1	11.4	7.2	46	43	42	-	-
69	South Sudan	5.7	1.5	7.0	6.3	7.8	15.0	43	44	44	-	-
70	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.7	8.3	8.8	0.6	43	43	43	-	-
71	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	9.8	0.7	43	41	42	-	-
72	Rwanda	5.3	4.4	6.7	7.8	10.1	8.1	42	42	41	-	-
73	Ivory Coast	9.8	8.6	8.2	5.5	6.6	3.3	42	42	43	-	-
74	El Salvador	6.6	4.9	9.8	4.2	8.7	7.8	42	38	30	-	-

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Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- The highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”.
- The WWL 2021 reporting period was 01 October 2019 - 30 September 2020.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

Effect on data-gathering during COVID-19 pandemic

In the WWL 2021 reporting period, travel restrictions and other measures introduced by the governments of various countries to combat the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic did cause delays and create the need for restructuring grass-roots research in some cases. Through the agile cooperation of Open Doors field networks, research analysts, external experts and an increased use of technological options, Open Doors is confident that the WWL 2021 scoring, analysis and documentation has maintained required levels of quality and reliability.

External Links - Introduction

- Sources and definitions: World Watch List Documentation - <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>

WWL 2021 Short country profile / Iran

Brief country details

In the table below, the number of Christians shown is an Open Doors (OD) estimate.

Iran: Population (2020 UN estimate)	Christians	Chr%
83,587,000	800,000	OD estimate

Iran: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2021	86	8
WWL 2020	85	9
WWL 2019	85	9
WWL 2018	85	10
WWL 2017	85	8

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2017-2021 reporting periods

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Iran: Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials
Islamic oppression	Non-Christian religious leaders, Government officials, Political parties, Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups, One's own (extended) family
Clan oppression	Ethnic group leaders, One's own (extended) family
Organized corruption and crime	Government officials

Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.

Brief description of the persecution situation

Converts from Islam to Christianity bear the brunt of religious freedom violations, carried out by the government in particular and to a lesser extent by society and the converts' families. The government sees these Iranian Christians as an attempt by Western countries to undermine Islam and the Islamic regime of Iran. Leaders of Christian convert groups have been arrested, prosecuted and have received long prison sentences for 'crimes against national security'. The historical communities of Armenian and Assyrian Christians are recognized and protected by the State but are treated as second-class citizens and are not allowed contact with Muslim background Christians (speaking Persian) or have them attend church services.

Summary of international obligations and rights violations

Iran has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in 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)
- Christian peaceful religious activities are monitored and regularly disrupted by the state under 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)

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

- The Iranian regime continued its practice of asking exorbitant sums for releasing detained Christians on bail. In July 2020, an unprecedented high amount of around \$150.000 was set for Iranian-Armenian house-church leader Joseph Shahbazian, who was arrested along with around 35 other Christians during coordinated raids on homes and house-churches in Tehran, Karaj and Malayer on 30 June and 1 July 2020 ([Article 18, 23 July 2020](#)). It is believed that the Iranian regime requires such high sums of money for bail in order to financially bankrupt Christians and to enrich high officials ([The Guardian, 28 November 2016](#)). Instead of imprisoning them, the Iranian regime severely threaten Christians after their release, forcing them to flee the country, thus forfeiting their bail. Many Iranian Christians have had to sell their (business) properties or hand over their title deeds to be able to pay; those who do not have the financial means often remain imprisoned.
- In August 2020, after three years of postponed hearings and legal uncertainty, Iranian-Assyrian Christians Victor Bet-Tamraz and Shamiram Issavi were told that their appeal against 15 years of combined prison sentences had been rejected by the appeals court. They had previously been sentenced to ten and five year prison sentences for "acting against national security by establishing and managing 'house churches', participating in Christian seminars abroad, and training Christian leaders in Iran for the purposes of espionage". They have since left the country safely ([Article 18, 19 August 2020](#)).

Specific examples of positive developments

No positive developments have been reported during the WWL 2021 reporting period. The regime brutally suppressed the November-December 2019 demonstrations, killing around 1500 Iranians. The parliamentary elections of February 2020, which were boycotted by the opposition, saw the conservatives win a landslide victory. The June 2020 adjustment of the Iranian Penal Code, which makes it easier to sentence religious prisoners of conscience, including Christians, can be viewed as a negative result of the election.

External Links - Short country profile

- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Rights of the Child - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: Article 18, 23 July 2020 - <https://articleeighteen.com/news/6496/>

- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: The Guardian, 28 November 2016 - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2016/nov/28/iranian-judicial-authorities-attempt-arrest-of-mp-mahmoud-sadeghi>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: Article 18, 19 August 2020 - <https://articleeighteen.com/news/6652/>

WWL 2021: Keys to understanding / Iran

Link for general background information

- [Iran country profile - BBC News](#)

Recent history

In the Revolution of 1979, the Shah was removed and Iran was changed into an Islamic Republic. During his reign (1941-1979), the Shah had introduced a program of modernization and Western influences further developed in the country. At the same time, all dissidents were heavily oppressed by his US trained and supported secret service, which had been in place since the USA and United Kingdom initialized a coup which toppled Iran's democratically elected government in 1953. As a result, the Shah lost the support of powerful religious, political and popular forces, paving the way for another coup. Shia Islamic clerics took political control, banning all Western (or Christian, which is virtually the same from their viewpoint) influence from the country. Today, the most senior and influential cleric is the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

In July 2015 an agreement between Iran and six world powers aiming to restrict the Iranian nuclear program was made in exchange for the lifting of sanctions. President Rouhani, who is known as a moderate, struck this deal in his first term and was re-elected in May 2017. In February 2016, moderates won in the parliamentary elections and this seemed to confirm the rise of moderate politics in Iran. However, in the elections for the head of the Iranian Assembly of Experts – the council responsible for selecting the Supreme Leader – an anti-Western hardliner was elected. In addition, hardliner Ebrahim Raisi was appointed as the head of the judiciary in March 2019 ([Reuters, 12 March 2019](#)). The February 2020 parliamentary elections saw the hardliners win a landslide victory, after the hard-line dominated Guardian Council rejected the candidacy of thousands of mostly moderate and reformist candidates - including 90 sitting members of parliament ([AP, 14 January 2020](#)). This all shows that in the end – in spite of what seems to be a democratic process – it is the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who pulls the political strings in Iran.

The July 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – which is popularly known as "The Iran Deal" – led to a more prosperous and confident Iran, whose influence in the region grew. However, in May 2018 the USA announced its withdrawal from the nuclear deal and reinstated its sanctions against Iran. As a result, the Rial currency fell in value and the Iranian economy has been struggling ever since. The moderates, including President Rouhani, tried to uphold the deal with the other signatories (mainly the EU, Germany, France and the United Kingdom). However, increasing tensions between Iran and the USA, starting in May 2019 with the deployment of an

American aircraft-carrier in the Persian Gulf, have led to Iran breaching the terms of the agreement ([BBC News, 17 May 2019](#); [The Independent, 6 November 2019](#)). Tensions kept rising during 2019, including the downing of a US drone in June, several unclaimed attacks on oil tankers in the Persian Gulf, and an attack on Saudi Arabia's biggest oil refinery claimed by Yemenite Houthi rebels backed by Iran in September. Tensions escalated further and on 31 December 2019 the US embassy in Baghdad was partially set on fire by an Iraqi militia backed by Iran. In an unexpected and major response which shocked the Iranian government, on 3 January 2020 the USA assassinated Major General Qasem Soleimani, Iran's most influential military commander, a 'living martyr' of the Iran-Iraq war and public hero ([Al-Monitor, January 2020](#)). Iran retaliated by striking US bases in Iraq, causing only minor damage, after which tensions seemed to have decreased ([BBC News, 8 January 2020](#)). However, being on high alert, Iranian forces accidentally downed a Ukrainian civil aircraft, killing all 176 passengers on board ([BBC News, 11 January 2020](#)).

The COVID-19 outbreak in 2020 caused Iran to become the worst-hit country in the Middle East. Although official figures were far lower, it is believed that by July 2020 around 42,000 people had died from COVID-related symptoms and the emergence of a second wave seemed to indicate that the virus was still not under control in August 2020 ([BBC News, 3 August 2020](#)).

Meanwhile, ten years after the Green Movement protests ([BBC News, 28 December 2009](#)), the deteriorating economic circumstances and the overall oppression of dissidents (including female activists) ([BBC News, 11 March 2019](#)), led to weeks of bloody protests in November and December 2019. It is believed that around 1500 demonstrators were killed during these protests ([Reuters, December 2019](#)).

Both Christians from the historical Christian communities as well as converts from Islam to Christianity remain oppressed. Although the Armenian and Assyrian Christians enjoy some religious freedom, they remain tightly monitored and restricted. They are not allowed to use Persian in their church services, they are excluded from many (government) roles, which are only open to Muslims, their women have to wear a headscarf (like all women in Iran), all educational materials and staff have to be approved by the authorities and many Armenian and Assyrian schools are headed by state-appointed Muslims. In addition, it is strictly forbidden to proselytize a Muslim and thus there is almost no contact between historical church Christians and Christians from a Muslim background. The latter do not enjoy any religious freedom and have to keep their faith hidden. If a convert's new faith becomes known, they are very likely to lose their employment. Government officials in particular will put them under pressure to renounce their faith, as will wider society (but to a lesser extent).

Political and legal landscape

Within the current Iranian political spectrum, there is a division between the Islamic left (Reformists) and the Islamic right (referred to as "Principlists" or "hardliners"). Before the February 2020 elections, the Islamic Consultative Assembly (i.e. the parliament) was dominated by the Reformists, reflecting to a certain extent the voice of the Iranian people (although only

political parties and factions loyal to the establishment and to the state ideology are permitted to operate). However, the hardliners took over after the elections in February 2020 were boycotted by the opposition. Re-elected President Rouhani can be seen as a Reformist, but has now increasingly become under pressure. Especially since the Principlists also dominate the Guardian Council, which has the power to veto all legislation from the parliament. The appointments of the Guardian Council are controlled by the supreme leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, (who has highest authority in the country) and is a Principlist himself. Hence, ultimate power rests in his hands, as do the unelected institutions under his control. These institutions, including the security forces and the judiciary, play a major role in the suppression of dissent and other restrictions on civil liberties. Even Reformist parties have come under increased state repression, especially since 2009. This makes it unlikely that Iran will see any significant political change in the short term. As long as the right wing sees Iran as an Islamic country for Shiite Muslims threatened by Western (Christian) countries and culture, Christians, especially converts, will be persecuted.

The legal landscaping facing women and girls is additionally restrictive, in particular making marriage a place of enacting violent repression of female converts. Iran is one of just six UN states not to have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and it has one of the world's lowest female participation [rates](#) in Parliament (Index Mundi). The 1979 Islamic Revolution crippled the rights of women in relation to marriage, divorce and child custody by terminating the Family Protection Law. The legal age for marriage currently stands at 13 for girls and 15 for boys, although marriages can be carried out earlier with the consent of a male guardian and court judge (Civil Code, Article 1041). [17% of girls](#) are reportedly married by the age of 18 (Girls Not Brides). While few statistics are available on rates of domestic abuse within marriages, it is estimated that [66% of women](#) experience domestic abuse (Hajnasari et al, 2017, "Domestic Violence Among Iranian Women: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis"). There is no legislation that specifically addresses domestic violence, which is widely considered to be a private matter.

Divorce laws prevent women and girls from escaping an abusive situation. A man has the right to divorce his wife by *talaq*, whereas women must file through the courts for divorce. In addition to the challenges of providing considerable evidence to support her case, many women fear the stigma attached to divorce. Upon divorce a woman will likely lose [custody](#) of their children, particularly if she is a convert to Christianity (UNDP, 2019, "Gender Justice and the Law" p.21).

Other sources report:

- Iran is classified by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) as 'authoritarian' ([EIU Democracy Index 2019](#)).
- [Human Right Watch](#) reports (accessed on 26 August 2020): "Iranian judicial authorities have dramatically increased the cost of peaceful dissent, sentencing dozens of human rights defenders and activists to decades-long prison sentences. ... They also brutally repressed the nationwide protests in November 2019, using excessive and unlawful force and mass arbitrary arrests. To this date, authorities have failed to conduct transparent investigations and provide accountability for serious abuses committed by security and intelligence authorities."

- The FFP Fragile States Index reports in its [Country Dashboard](#) (FSI, accessed 26 August 2020) that factionalized elites and group grievances are increasing, leading to an increase in potential conflict between those in power and the common Iranian citizen.

Religious landscape

Iran: Religious context	Number adherents	of %
Christians	800,000	1.0
Muslim	82,196,378	98.3
Hindu	36,914	0.0
Buddhist	479	0.0
Ethno-religionist	4,789	0.0
Jewish	7,981	0.0
Bahai	219,488	0.3
Atheist	9,977	0.0
Agnostic	227,470	0.3
Other	83,904	0.1
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed February 2020). (Adapted according to OD-estimate)

Iran is home to a rich variety of religious and ethnic groups who have a long history in the region. Most Iranians follow Twelver Ja'afari Shia Islam, which is the official state religion. However, a significant minority of [10% follows Sunni Islam](#) (World Population Review, accessed 26 August 2020).

Interest in Christianity (and other non-Islamic religions) has continued unabated among a population predominantly disillusioned with Islam. Christians in Iran report an increase of agnosticism and nominal adherence to Islam, especially in urban areas. Being a non-Muslim brings an unlimited number of limitations and unfair discrimination to one's private and public life in Iran. Religious and political leaders in Iran continue to speak out against Christianity and hardliners maintain their almost absolute power in domestic affairs, which affects human rights. It is therefore unsurprising that the Christian community experiences repression in various forms.

The Iranian intelligence service (MOIS) closely monitors Christian activities and other religious minorities, together with the Revolutionary Guard (IRCG). They are responsible for raids on Christian gatherings in private homes, arresting all in attendance and confiscating personal property. Those arrested are subjected to intensive and often aggressive interrogation.

Christianity is considered a condemnable Western influence and a constant threat to the Islamic identity of the Republic. This is especially the case since Christian numbers have grown considerably over recent years - especially the number of Christians with a Muslim background - and allegedly even children of political and spiritual leaders are leaving Islam for Christianity. Since virtually all Persian-language church services are prohibited, most converts gather in informal house-church meetings or receive information on the Christian faith via satellite TV and websites.

Converts with a Muslim background constitute the largest group of Christians in the country and there are also many Iranians abroad who convert to Christianity. The second largest group are the Armenian and Assyrian Christian communities, the only Christians who are officially recognized by the Iranian government and protected by law but treated as second-class citizens.

Apart from Christians, the rights of other religious minorities like Jews, Bahai, Zoroastrians, Dervish and Sunni Muslims are violated as well. Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism are recognized in the Constitution, while religions that are not recognized in the Constitution, like Bahai, are particularly affected. According to recent reports, converts from Islam to Christianity are treated worse than non-recognized minorities.

Islamic law dictates that women must adopt Islamic dress in public spaces – a cloth head-covering ('*hijab*') and a long jacket ('*manteau*'), or a large full-length covering ('*chador*', as is mandatory at government functions). Should they fail to do so they may be [arrested](#) and sentenced to flogging and/or a fine (Iran Human Rights Review, 2016, p.3). Within this Islamic context, Christian converts face extreme hostility. In particular, male converts are perceived as leaders who ought to represent the Islamic faith; whereas a woman is viewed as “misguided” for turning away from Islam, men are perceived to be willfully making the wrong choice. Their punishment is consequently harsher, forcing many to flee the country and migrate to the West. This destabilizes the church and deprives it of mature male leaders and role models.

Other sources report:

- About the state of religious freedom, a report by [Freedom of Thought](#) (accessed 26 August 2020) notes: "The constitution declares that Islam (Ja'afari Shiism) is the state religion. Articles 12 and 13 divide citizens of the Islamic Republic of Iran into four religious categories: Muslims, Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians. Nonbelievers are effectively left out and precluded from certain legal rights or protections: Iranians must declare their faith in one of the four officially recognized religions in order to be able to claim a number of legal rights, such as the capacity to apply for the general examination to enter any university in Iran. The authorities classify Yarsanis as Shia Muslims practicing Sufism, although Yarsanis identify Yarsan as a distinct faith. Similarly, Sabean-Mandaeans do not consider themselves as Christians, but the government classifies them among the Christian groups."

- Interestingly, a 2020 survey titled "Iranians attitudes towards religion" found that only 32.2% of the Iranians consider themselves Shi'ite Muslim, with 22.2% not identifying with any religion or belief. According to the survey, 1.5% respondents indicated to be Christian ([GAMAAN, last accessed 24 November 2020](#) / [Christianity Today, 3 September 2020](#)).

Economic landscape

According to the [UNDP 2019 report](#) (page 300) and [World Factbook](#) (accessed 27 August 2020):

- **Gross National Income per capita:** 18.166 USD (in 2011 PPP)
- **Poverty:** 18.7% of the population lives below the poverty line (2007 est.)

According to [World Bank's May 2020 update](#):

- **GDP:** Iran's GDP in 2019/20 is estimated at US\$463 billion. It contracted by 7.6% between April and December 2019, which was largely caused by a 37% decline in the oil sector. Facing a growing Covid-19 pandemic, low oil prices and increasing sanctions, Iran's GDP growth is projected to remain subdued until 2023.
- **Unemployment rate:** Approximately 11.4%, with youth unemployment being more than twice as high at 27.3%

Iran's economy profited from the lifting of (economical) sanctions following the nuclear deal in 2015. Although increased oil revenues was a great boost, Iran's economy kept struggling, especially because of a lack of institutional reform. This situation has worsened since the withdrawal of the USA from the deal and the re-imposition of sanctions by the USA.

One major issue in the country is that Article 44 of the Iranian Constitution prescribes "that all major industries should be government owned" ([Radio Farda, 25 July 2017](#)). In May 2005, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei provided an important new interpretation of this Article, allowing more privatization and a decrease of the state sector. Instead of private companies, the very conservative Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) used this opportunity to build its own semi-state economic empire. As the IRGC is very well connected to the judiciary and other state branches, it has become almost impossible for moderate President Rouhani to carry out major reforms. This explains why economist Dr. Bijan Khajepour writes on Iran: "Although privatization picked up pace ..., it happened for all the wrong reasons, especially as a process for expanding the economic interests of the semi-state sector which put additional pressures on the genuine private sector." ([Anatomy of the Iranian Economy](#), May 2020, p.16)

Iranian Christians report that economic uncertainty is very high. Iran's unemployment rate has been above 10% for the last decade. As mentioned above, while the average unemployment rate was around 11% in 2019, the unemployment rate among young Iranians reached 27%. The situation for university graduates is particularly difficult since they make up 40% of the unemployed ([Iran News Wire, 6 January 2019](#)). Iran's economy, which is reliant on government initiatives, has little growth potential as it is hardly capable of creating new jobs. One of the characteristics of the Iranian government is the discrimination it imposes on the job market. Individuals who at least pretend to be loyal to the Islamic Republic are in a better position for finding employment with government employers.

Symbolic for Iran's semi-state-driven economy is its blacklisting by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), the global anti-money laundering watchdog. This will make it harder to obtain foreign currency and makes it more difficult for foreign companies to invest in Iran ([Iran News Wire, 24 February 2020](#)). Even more telling is the regime's response to this blacklisting, when it claimed that complying with the anti-terrorism norms would endanger its survival.

The result of COVID-19 is that the recovery process in the wake of the re-imposition of US sanctions will be further prolonged and that the Iranian GDP will shrink further in the foreseeable future. According to Dr. Bijan Khajepour: "The likely economic impact of the COVID-19 means that it is conceivable that the economy will not have ended its period of contraction by March 2021 as had been expected." ([Anatomy of the Iranian Economy](#), May 2020, p.16)

Iranian Christians, both from a historical church and Muslim background, face great difficulties in the midst of this economic uncertainty. On top of the general economic problems, they face high levels of legal and societal discrimination.

Women are, in general, the most economically vulnerable in Iran. Reportedly, the female labor participation rate was as low as 12% in recent years, with the unemployment rate of educated women being two or three times higher than comparable men ([BTI Iran Country Report 2020, p.17](#)). This is in part due to low education rates. Other factors include poverty, gender inequality and girls entering early marriages. Women and girls regularly lose their inheritance rights, too. Sharia rules of inheritance are applied, whereby daughters typically receive half the share that sons receive. Considering these economic vulnerabilities, Christian women depend heavily on their husbands and families. Should this support be lost, they are likely to be without the means to financially support themselves. Christian converts face discrimination in the workplace, too. The primary breadwinners for their families – usually men – risk losing their job, being denied promotions, being arrested, losing out on business registrations or trade permits, or experiencing mental abuse.

Social and cultural landscape

According to the [UNDP 2019 report](#) (page 300) and [World Factbook](#) (accessed 27 August 2020):

- **Main ethnic groups:** The majority of the population is from Persian descent, with other ethnicities being Azeri, Kurd, Lur, Baloch, Arab, Turkmen and Turkic tribes
- **Main languages:** The official language is Persian (Farsi), with minority groups speaking Azeri and other Turkic dialects, Kurdish, Gilaki and Mazandarani, Luri, Balochi and Arabic
- **Urban population:** 75.9% of total population lives in urban areas, with an annual urbanization rate of 1.7%
- Literacy rate: 85.5% of the population over 15 years of age can read and write, with a significant difference between men (90.4%) and women (80.8%) (2016)
- **Median age:** 31.7 years. The younger generation - up to 24 years of age - makes up almost 38% of the population.
- **Education:** in general, Iranians enjoy 15 years of education.
- **IDPs/Refugees:** around 2.5 - 3 million mainly Afghani refugees reside in the country.

According to the [UN Global Human Development Indicators](#) (2019):

- **HDI score and ranking:** Iran ranks #65 out 189 countries. Despite the ongoing difficulties, the combined ratio of life expectancy, education and per capita income gives a high score on the Human Development Index (HDI). Iranians view education of both men and women as highly important. As a result, Iran is "witnessing the emergence of a young, dynamic and educated society" ([Anatomy of the Iranian Economy](#), May 2020, p. 9). Nonetheless, "minorities generally lack equal access to public sector jobs and university education and are excluded from many other social and economic sectors" ([Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index - BTI, Iran Country Report 2020](#)).
- **Life expectancy:** 74.5 years on average; women (76 years), men (73.1 years).
- **Gender inequality:** With a Gender Development Index (GDI) score of 0.874, women are still clearly disadvantaged in comparison to men. The GDI measures the differences in life expectancy, years of education and GNI per capita per gender. Hence, although declining, gender inequality is still high.

Iranian society and culture is conservative on the surface, but there is a significant underground culture dominated by the younger generation and dissenting artists. Persian culture can be traced to origins long before the arrival of Islam and Iranians are proud of these pre-Islamic cultural roots. This also finds its expression in the Persian names given to children. Urbanization is rapidly increasing with vast numbers of people leaving rural areas to seek more opportunities and a better life in the cities, which also leads to a further secularization of society.

Iranian Christians report that many of Iran's youth have no interest in Islam and work to get around its restrictions. Women's rights movements and educated women will likely grow in influence, with the government taking harsh measure against them ([Amnesty International, accessed 27 August 2020](#)). The "brain drain" from Iran will likely continue, as few believe change is possible and choose instead to leave the country. Therefore, the Iranian Diaspora is growing rapidly and is presently estimated at about 6 million. Faced with limited opportunities at home, between [150,000-180,000 Iranians](#) leave the country each year to work abroad (Radio Farda, 11 March 2019).

Iranians invest in education. Although no less than 2640 universities exist in the country, levels of education are poor on the whole. Education is often driven for ideological reasons rather than for increasing rational-decision making ([BTI, Iran Country Report 2020](#)). This is probably part of the reason why Iran ranked #128 out 141 countries on "critical thinking in education" and #92 in "overall skills" ([The Global Competitiveness Report 2019](#)).

Violations of the rights of Christians in Iran is mainly state-driven and societal views on Christianity, especially in urban areas, is more positive than in neighboring countries. Nonetheless, family pressure, stemming from a mixture of Islamic conviction and concepts around preserving the honor of the family, remains a significant problem for Iranian converts from Islam to Christianity. In addition, there is a growing trend among the younger generation to view all religion, including Christianity, with scepticism.

Despite an evolving socio-cultural landscape, patriarchal and Islamic norms continue to dominate. Women and girls are viewed as second-class citizens who should fulfil traditional roles as a wife and mother. Indeed, there is an explicit restriction on women becoming the head of a household or the head of a family. Pressures are particularly high on female converts from a Muslim background, who may be forcibly married to a Muslim, denied access to Christian community and verbally and physically assaulted. Male converts, too, face extreme pressures. Under the pressure of intense monitoring and harassment, many choose to flee the country. Men have greater freedom to flee as they do not require a male guardian to obtain a passport or to travel freely, unlike women.

Iran has a strong honor-shame culture and so-called 'honor killings' remain prevalent. Incidences of violence against women have reportedly increased [in the context of COVID-19](#) (Pirnia et al, Oct 2020, "Honour killings and violence against women in Iran during the COVID-19 pandemic")

Technological landscape

According to [World Internet Stats](#) (accessed June 2020):

- **Internet usage:** 80.5% penetration - survey date: December 2019
- **Facebook usage:** 47.6% penetration – survey date: December 2019

According to [World Bank's Country profile](#) (2018):

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 108.5 per 100 people

According to Freedom House's [Freedom on the Net Report 2019](#):

Freedom House rates Iran as "Not Free", with a very low score of 15/100 points. It is ranked the worst country in the Middle East with regard to Internet freedom. According to the report, websites, social media and other communications platforms face widespread censorship and pro-government commentators actively manipulate online discussions. The Iranian Cyber Police unit has no less than 42,000 volunteers who monitor online speech. Those who are found opposing the regime, are likely to be arrested and imprisoned. The report also states that the Iranian government actively tries to hack government critics and human rights organizations.

Although the majority of the Iranian population has Internet access, usage differs greatly between rural and urban communities. The government is known to limit access or even slow down the Internet in order to contain discontent and protests, while censoring all Internet content. Mobile phones are widely used but with constant monitoring of all calls and SMS texts.

According to the [2020 World Press Freedom Index](#):

Freedom for journalistic activity is decreasing: "Iran has been one of the world's most repressive countries for journalists for the past 40 years. State control of news and information is unrelenting and at least 860 journalists and citizen-journalists have been imprisoned or executed since 1979. The Islamic regime exercises extensive control over the media landscape

and its harassment of independent journalists, citizen-journalists and independent media has not let up. They are constantly subjected to intimidation, arbitrary arrest and long jail sentences imposed by revolutionary courts at the end of unfair trials. The media that are still resisting increasingly lack the resources to report freely and independently."

In an effort to stop Western influence, the government has prohibited the possession of satellite dishes (although many do possess them). The authorities hinder the access to satellite broadcast channels and Internet sites they disapprove of, including Christian media. Part of their goal is to slow down the growth of the Church and especially Christian sites focusing on evangelization are blocked. However, Iranian Christians report that contact with the wider world is nonetheless growing rapidly through such media as satellite TV and Internet, despite all restrictions and monitoring by the government.

Iran has bought one of the best monitoring systems from China and is able to monitor its citizens, including their movements, purchases, tele-communications and online activity. There is evidence to suggest that Iran monitors individuals from religious minorities, who are considered to be a threat, even when they are outside the country. Thus, those inside the country active in Internet ministry among Muslims (and also Muslims interested in Christianity) run the risk of being questioned and/or arrested if discovered. But even a Christian's public and private online presence (including email correspondence) while located outside of Iran could lead to the Iranian government's identification of their faith. (Source: [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Iran's Internal Targets, 4 January 2018](#))

According to [Georgetown](#), 93.6% of women use a mobile phone. Whilst small compared to other countries, there remains a gender gap in relation to mobile phone usage (Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, "Women, Peace and Security Index 2019/20" p.21).

Security situation

In November 2019, Iran saw some of the bloodiest protests in decades. Probably around 1500 demonstrators were killed, in what started as a protest against rising petrol prices ([Reuters, 23 December 2019](#)). The Iranian security forces, especially those directly under control of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei are well-trained, well-equipped and well-known for using violence against demonstrators. They are supported by a variety of intelligence services and Iran's secret service is also known for its operations abroad (also in the West), executing Iranians who oppose the government ([AIVD, 8 January 2019](#)).

In the past few years, Iran has increased efforts in forging alliances with Middle Eastern countries in the fight against "The West" and against the threat of the (Sunni) Islamic State group (IS) and its affiliates. Alliances with Hezbollah (Syria, Lebanon) and Hamas (Gaza) are well-known, but smaller Shiite groups also enjoy Iran's support. These alliances are mainly supported by members or units of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). This elite force is experienced in fighting opposition in Iran internally and has also been deployed in several other countries (such as Syria and Iraq). Apart from the Revolutionary Guard Corps, there is also the Basij Militia. This militia consists of volunteers and is part of the Revolutionary Guard. Both will defend Iran at all costs, if attacked. However, it is unlikely that any war will happen in Iran itself, as the Iranians will try to fight their wars abroad.

Another example of the IRGC's involvement abroad is its support for the Houthi rebel movement in Yemen ([Middle East Institute, 6 December 2018](#)). Although the Houthi rebels are not an Iranian proxy force like Lebanon's Hezbollah, it is unlikely that the Houthis would have been able to conduct a wide scale attack on Saudi Arabia's biggest oil processing facility in September 2019 without help from Iran.

Iran faces growing tensions with Saudi Arabia and in particular with the USA ([International Crisis Group, accessed 27 August 2020](#)). These growing tensions are due partly to allegations against Iran made by the US-president and partly to violent activities in the Strait of Hormuz. Iran is being held responsible for so-called terrorist activities in Saudi Arabia and for confiscating foreign (oil)tankers. The assassination of Iran's most senior military commander Maj. Gen. Qasem Soleimani in January 2020 could easily have acted as a tipping point bringing direct war between the USA and Iran, but the Iranian regime probably had to limit its response due to declining internal support and the fear of further domestic unrest.

According to [World Politics Review, 30 April 2019](#): There is a threat of attack by violent Sunni militants in Iran - particularly in the Sistan and Baluchestan provinces. This is a mainly a consequence of Iran's oppression of Iranian Sunni Muslims, as well as its fight against IS militants in Iraq and Syria ([France 24, 23 September 2018](#)).

Internally, Iran's religious police regulate adherence to Sharia-based law and it is common that this police force carries out arrests and issues fines for non-adherence ([BBC News, 22 April 2016](#)). For Christians, especially those from a Muslim background, the biggest threat is from the Iranian security services and especially the MOIS, Iran's Ministry of Intelligence. It is clear that their (online) activities are extensively monitored and are used against them as evidence of their acts against 'national security' or 'espionage for the Zionist regimes' during interrogations and trials. It is believed that thousands of Iranian Christians from a Muslim background flee the country out of fear of arrest, psychological torture (including solitary confinement) and long-term prison sentences. Others are warned and forced to sign papers never to get in (online) contact again with other Iranian or foreign Christians, nor to search for online Christian material. Due to the high levels of pressure, it is likely that many Iranian converts comply and are forced to become isolated believers.

It is particularly risky to be in a position of church leadership in Iran, or a member of a house-church. House-churches are vulnerable to raids. Members risk being arrested by the authorities and women are vulnerable to sexual harassment. Men are, in general, more likely to be in a position of church leadership and in 2019 were subject to higher rates of arrest, prosecution and imprisonment than women. Such arrests are more common in urban areas.

Trends analysis

1) Internal struggle around nuclear deal

The nuclear deal (JCPOA) concluded with six major world powers in mid-2015, is still very relevant for Iran, even though the USA have withdrawn from it. What the consequences of this deal will be in the long run, depends to a large degree on different actors within the Iranian political spectrum. Conservative elements known as "Principlists" (such as the powerful military

and security organization commissioned to protect the regime, Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps - IRGC) are not supportive of this agreement. Iranian leaders fear for their position and fear any violation of the values of the Islamic Revolution of 1979. It is likely that they will try to counter this development by blocking any attempts to implement social and political reform; the withdrawal of the USA helps them to blame the moderates and President Rouhani for concluding the deal with the arch-enemy in the first place. To a certain extent, it can be said that the nuclear deal has further escalated an internal political power-struggle in Iran, with the USA's withdrawal from the JCPOA putting the moderates between a rock and a hard place.

2) Sanctions and new US president

Iran's (economic) future depends to quite an extent on US politics. The re-imposition of US sanctions has hit the Iranian economy hard. It is unlikely that the USA's previous policy of "maximum pressure" will continue under the newly elected president, Joe Biden. It is more likely that the US-Iran relationship will become less tense and the USA might even rejoin the JCPOA. This might end Iran's isolation and encourage economic growth. Nonetheless, the relationship between the USA and Iran will remain more or less hostile as the USA's Gulf allies remain fiercely opposed to the Iranian regime. It is likely that the USA will keep trying to confine Iran's influence in the region.

3) Oppression of any dissent, including Christians

Another way of getting the message across that the nuclear deal does not mean an end to the values of the Revolution, is the crackdown on media, human rights and political activists. Already, the suppression of Iranians holding dual nationality and dissidents (including religious minorities) has increased. These groups are considered a threat to the Islamic character of the republic: Those holding dual nationality are a threat because of their connections to foreign circles and businesses; and dissidents and religious minorities are seen as a threat because of their political or religious convictions. This suppression can be seen in the increased number of arrests but also in the smear campaigns targeting religious minorities, especially Christian converts and adherents of Bahai. As more interaction with the wider world becomes possible for the general public through technological progress, religious minorities like Bahai and Christians are likely to be more closely watched - with the authorities especially looking for any contact with Western co-religionists. Christian Persian-language media are already reported to be under close observation.

External Links - Keys to understanding

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WWL 2021: Church information / Iran

Christian origins

Iranians (Parthians, Medes and Elamites) were among the first believers in Jesus Christ according to the Bible (Book of Acts, chapter 2). 60 Christian tombs dating back to the 3rd century AD have been found on Kharg Island, close to Iran's mainland, indicating a strong early Christian presence.

The Iranian church had some importance as indicated by the fact that Bishop "John of Persia of the churches of the whole of Persia and in the great India" was in attendance at the Council of Nicea in 325. In 344, a wave of persecution started as the Christians were accused of conspiring with the Roman empire. In the next 40 years, at least 35,000 Christians were killed. However, the church survived and at the Synod of Mar Isaac (410) it became the independent Church of the East, adopting the Nicene Creed.

Separation from the Western churches occurred when the Church of the East supported the 'heretical' archbishop Nestorius, adopting their own creed in 486 which rejected both Monophysitism and the Council of Chalcedon. Despite further persecution and heavy resistance from the Zoroastrians, the Church had enough influence for the Shah to declare in 590 AD: "My throne stands on four feet ... on Jews and Christians, as well as Magians and Zoroastrians". The Nestorian church was very active in spreading Christianity to Central Asia, India, Mongolia and even China.

Arabs invaded Persia in 642 AD. As Islam took root, the Christian population was forced into 'dhimmitude'. Public worship became severely restricted, Christians had to pay twice as much tax and had no right to public office. Evangelizing became difficult and many non-Muslims converted to Islam. Nonetheless, the real blow was dealt by the Moguls who between the 12th and 14th centuries completely destroyed the Church of the East. In 1830, remnants of the Nestorian Church entered into agreement with Rome and became "Chaldean Catholics".

It was the Armenian Christians coming in from the north from the 16th century onwards that established a permanent Christian community in Iran, despite times of persecution. The Armenian Christians were well connected with Armenians residing in foreign countries and often fulfilled a bridge function between Iran and the outside world. Although less well-treated since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, they still have an official presence in Iran.

Protestant missions were established from the 19th century onwards, they were responsible for translating the New Testament into Persian for the first time in 1812. However, most Protestant church members came from a Nestorian background since mission-work among the Muslims remained difficult. The Anglican Church, which had the most Muslim converts, counted only 350 of them in 1936. Nevertheless, Christian influence in the 19th and 20th century was significant through church-run schools, hospitals and village clinics. Major restrictions followed the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Proselytizing became illegal, conversion punishable by death and the building of new churches became impossible.

(Source: *Bradley, M: "Iran and Christianity Historical Identity and Present Relevance", New York, 2008, pp. 137-158.*)

Church spectrum today

Iran: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox		31.3
Catholic		1.0
Protestant		5.1
Independent		59.3
Unaffiliated		3.3
Doubly-affiliated Christians		0.0
Total		100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement		14.0
Renewalist movement		49.4

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed February 2020).

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalist movement:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

WWL 2021: Persecution Dynamics / Iran

Reporting period

01 October 2019 - 30 September 2020

Position on the World Watch List

Iran: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2021	86	8
WWL 2020	85	9
WWL 2019	85	9
WWL 2018	85	10
WWL 2017	85	8

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2017-2021 reporting periods

The slight rise in score in WWL 2021 was mainly caused by increased pressure in the *Private* and *Family spheres of life*. State surveillance is on the rise as Iran becomes more and more a totalitarian state, which translates into the authorities exerting a firmer grip on daily life and activities. The scores in all *spheres of life* are at an extreme level.

Persecution engines

Iran: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Very strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Not at all
Clan oppression	CO	Medium
Christian Denominational protectionism	CDP	Weak
Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Very weak

Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Very strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Medium

The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.

Islamic oppression (Very strong):

Shia Islam is the official state religion and all laws must be consistent with the official interpretation of Sharia law. The Constitution bans parliament from passing laws contrary to Islam and states that there may be no amendment to its provisions related to the “Islamic character” of the political or legal system or to the specification of Shia Jafari Islam as the official religion. To safeguard Islamic ordinances and to ensure the compatibility with Islam of legislation passed by the parliament, a Guardian Council consisting of Shia scholars and clerics must review and approve all legislation. The Guardian Council also reviews all candidates for the highest public appointments, like the presidency and the parliament. This explains why even the reformists within the government are conservative and why Christians and other religious minorities are barred from high office and other influential positions within the system.

In the view of the government, and to a lesser in the view of society in general, ethnic Persians are by definition Muslim, and therefore ethnic Persian Christians are considered apostates. This makes almost all Christian activity illegal, especially when it occurs in the Persian language - be it evangelism, Bible training, publishing Christian books or preaching in Persian. However, Iranian society is much less fanatic than its leadership. This is partly the result of the widespread influence of a more moderate and mystical Sufi Islam, as well as the pride of the Iranian people in pre-Islamic Persian culture.

Dictatorial paranoia (Very strong):

The zeal to maintain power is blended with *Islamic oppression*. The Islamic regime aims above all to protect the values of the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Christianity is considered a condemnable Western influence and a constant threat to the Islamic identity of the Republic. Only the historical communities of Armenians and Assyrians are accepted as Christian by the regime, although they are treated as second class citizens as well. Any other form of Christianity is treated as a dangerous Western influence, which explains why many Christians, especially converts from Islam to Christianity, are convicted for crimes against national security.

Organized corruption and crime (Medium):

Imprisoned Christians – especially converts – are sometimes offered release on bail. This often involves large amounts of money - reportedly varying between 2,000 and 200,000 USD - forcing the Christians or their families to hand over title deeds of homes and sometimes businesses. Persons released on bail do not always know how long their property will be retained. This uncertainty can silence them due to fear of losing their family’s property. The Iranian regime puts pressure (sometimes with threats) on active Christians who were arrested for their house-church or evangelistic activities to leave the country and hence forfeit their bail.

Clan oppression (Medium): Iran has an honor and shame culture, especially present in the rural areas. In addition, Iran has a multicultural population with some ethnic groups having strong group identities. The Iranian regime puts pressure on all non-Shia and even some (Shia) Sufi groups. This can lead to additional pressure on converts to Christianity.

Christian denominational protectionism (Weak):

Although the influence of this engine is categorized as weak, it is felt that the underlying issue needs explaining. The Iranian authorities like to highlight the presence of representatives of the Armenian and Assyrian churches in the media and in international settings to portray a positive impression of the country's religious tolerance. These church representatives make public statements about "the freedom all Christians enjoy", while in fact just a small section of the Christian community enjoys a very limited level of freedom. These statements are often used to delegitimize other Christian denominations (mostly Protestant converts from a Muslim background) who do not conform to the government's restrictions and who want to exercise their religious freedom to a greater degree.

Drivers of persecution

Iran:									
Drivers of Persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	VERY STRONG	-	-	MEDIUM	WEAK	-	VERY WEAK	VERY STRONG	MEDIUM
Government officials	Very strong	-	-	-	-	-	-	Very strong	Medium
Ethnic group leaders	-	-	-	Medium	Weak	-	-	-	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Very strong	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	-	Weak	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Weak	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Iran:									
Drivers of Persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	VERY STRONG	-	-	MEDIUM	WEAK	-	VERY WEAK	VERY STRONG	MEDIUM
One's own (extended) family	Medium	-	-	Medium	-	-	-	-	-
Political parties	Strong	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Strong	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Organized crime cartels or networks	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology.

Drivers of Islamic oppression:

- **Government officials (Very strong):** These are responsible for the many arrests and sentencing of Christians, especially converts from Islam. State security services monitor all Christian groups closely, even the officially recognized historical communities of Armenian and Assyrian Christians. Through this close monitoring and arrest of those involved in evangelization, the government applies pressure to ensure that no Christian is involved in proselytizing Muslims.
- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Very strong):** Local Muslim clerics sometimes incite violence against minority groups.
- **Political parties (Strong):** The Islamic right-wing politicians (Principlists) dominate the Islamic Consultative Assembly and the Guardian Council, which has the power to veto all legislation from the parliament. As long as the right-wing regards Iran as an Islamic country for Shiite Muslims threatened by Western (Christian) countries and culture, Christians, especially converts, will be persecuted.
- **Paramilitary groups (Strong):** The Principlists strengthen their support base through the Revolutionary Guard's volunteer militia, the Basij. This a fanatical right-wing paramilitary group that is well-known for its loyalty to the supreme leader. The militia has offices and bases all over the country, securing support for the Principlists and acting violently against all enemies of the state (including Christians) if called upon.
- **Citizens (Weak) / (Extended) Family (Medium):** Although Iranian society is much more moderate than its leadership, religious families will often put pressure on family members converting from Islam to Christianity.

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia:

- **Government officials (Very strong):** Dictatorial paranoia and Islamic oppression are intertwined within Iran. Ousting other ideologies and religions helps the leading Iranian clerics maintain power and serves their aim of having a country ruled according to Shia Islam. According to the [BTI 2018 Country Report](#), Iran is de facto run by "a number of influential clerics and their family members [...] holding monopolies in lucrative areas of the economy (especially the import of certain goods)". The same report states that "the private sector only represents around 20% of the economy", indicating the major role played by the State and the enormous (economic) interests of those in power.

Drivers of Organized corruption and crime:

- **Government officials (Medium):** The government uses the bail-system in such a way that it is purposely impoverishing prosecuted Christians and encouraging them to leave the country. It has been reported that some government officials use the system to [enrich](#) themselves.

Drivers of Clan Oppression:

- **Ethnic group leaders (Medium):** depending on the specific ethnic group, ethnic group leaders can play significant roles in encouraging hostility towards converts to Christianity from those groups.
- **One's own (extended) family (Medium):** family members sometimes feel they have to protect the honor of their family, clan or tribe if another family member converts to Christianity. This can especially be the case for female converts.

Drivers of Christian denominational protectionism:

- **Religious leaders of other churches / Ethnic group leaders (weak):** The Armenian and Assyrian ethnic Christian minorities have together three representatives in the Iranian parliament. They tend to depict Iran as a free country where minorities have equal rights with all other citizens. They even go so far as praising the Iranian government and security services for protecting other ethnic Christians abroad, while Christians in their own country are sentenced to lengthy prison sentences. However, due to government pressure, this is probably the only way to survive as an ethnic Christian minority under the current regime.

Map of country



Areas where Christians face most difficulties

Government control is highest in urban areas, while rural areas are less monitored. However, the anonymity of urban areas gives Christians more freedom to organize meetings and activities than in rural areas, in which social control is higher.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians:

This group consists of Christian expatriates from the Far East (e.g. Philippines, South Korea) and the West, of whom many have a Catholic, Lutheran or Presbyterian background. Of the small number of churches, some expatriate churches have been forced to shut down after local converts with an Islamic background started attending. Joint annual prayer meetings between church leaders of different denominations were also cancelled in the past due to pressure from Iran's security apparatus.

Historical Christian communities:

Historical ethnic Christian minorities such as the Armenian and Assyrian Christians are relatively free to practice their belief. They are allowed to preach to fellow countrymen in their own language, but it is forbidden to minister to people with a Muslim background (speaking Persian) or have them attend church services. Although formally recognized and protected by law, they are treated as second-class citizens. Besides this, they will face imprisonment, physical abuse, harassment and discrimination if they do reach out to Muslims.

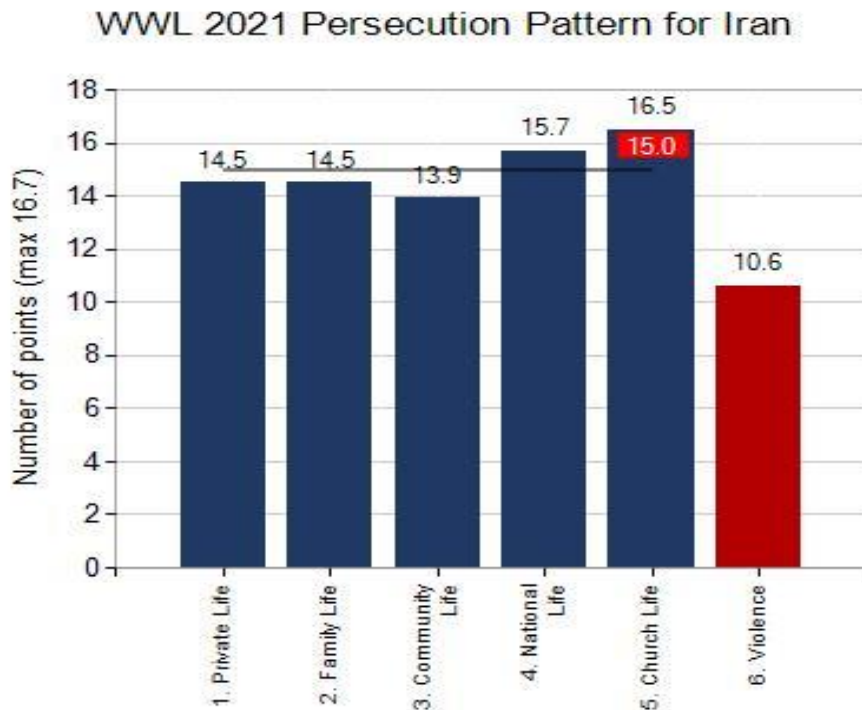
Converts to Christianity:

Converts from Islam to Christianity constitute the largest category in the country. They bear the brunt of persecution carried out by the government and to a lesser extent by their (extended) families and society. In contrast to the historical churches, the government sees them as an attempt by Western countries to [undermine](#) Islam and the Islamic regime of Iran (World Watch Monitor, 12 December 2016). Baptism is seen as a public declaration of one's denunciation of Islam and is therefore forbidden. Also, the majority of children born to converts are automatically registered as Muslims. It is especially the leaders of Christian convert groups who have been arrested, prosecuted and have received long prison terms for crimes against the national security, although since 2014 an increasing number of non-leaders have received similar charges too. Due to such high pressure, converts have to be very careful and many of them practice their faith isolated from other Christians. There is also a growing community of Iranian Christian converts worldwide, as over the years many converts have fled the country and other Iranians have become Christians abroad.

Non-traditional Christian communities:

Although it is difficult to make a sharp distinction between this category and the communities of converts, there are Christians belonging to Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal communities. They often have an Armenian, Assyrian, Jewish or a Zoroastrian background. Others include the children and grandchildren of converts from Islam. They face the same severe persecution from the government and are discriminated against by society, especially if they engage in any evangelistic or house-church activities.

The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2021 Persecution pattern for Iran shows:

- The average pressure on Christians stayed at an extremely high level (15.0 points), comparable to WWL 2020. The Iranian government is exerting pressure on Christians on a large scale.
- Although all *spheres of life* show extreme levels of pressure, pressure is highest in *Church* and *National life*. This reflects that the pressure is mainly coming from the government. All church life is very much restricted, even for the officially recognized ethnic Christians, who are not allowed to evangelize or even to speak in Persian during their church services.
- The score for violence increased from 10.4 to 10.6 points in WWL 2021.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2021 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

Block 1.4: It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (including expressions in blogs and Facebook etc.). (4.00 points)

Security services in Iran monitor social media for Christian-related texts and record such posts as evidence prior to an arrest. Some church leaders have been confronted with private messages and posts during interrogation. Although this mostly concerns converts, there is also a risk for other types of Christian, as sharing Christian messages can be interpreted as acts of proselytization, especially when written in Persian.

Block 1.3: It has been dangerous to privately own or keep Christian materials. (3.75 points)

For all types of Christianity, it can be dangerous to possess Christian materials in Farsi (Persian) – especially in significant quantities - as this would suggest they are for distribution to Muslim background Iranians. Christians from Historic Christian communities are allowed to possess Christian materials in their own language (Armenian or Assyrian).

Block 1.6: It has been risky for Christians to access Christian radio or TV, or Christian material on the Internet. (3.75 points)

Due to the high surveillance of all media, accessing Christian materials comes at a risk. The authorities monitor Christian broadcasts and Internet presence and use them to discover and track converts.

Block 1.9: It has been risky for Christians to meet with other Christians. (3.75 points)

Particularly Christians from a convert background meeting with other convert Christians or other Christians risk being discovered. It is also risky for foreign Christians to meet with local Christians, especially converts, as security services monitor all movements of foreigners in Iran. Christians having contacts with foreign Christians are seen as a security threat.

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

Block 2.6: Christian couples have been hindered in adopting children or serving as foster parents because of their faith. (4.00 points)

Adopting a Muslim child is impossible for any category of Christian. Armenians and Assyrians have their own orphanages where they can go and adopt children from their own background. However, if they go to a state orphanage their application to adopt a child will be rejected.

Block 2.8: Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education. (3.75 points)

The children of converts are automatically registered as Muslim and have to go through the Islamic-based educational system, which has been further Islamized since the 1979 Revolution. Some converts have tried to oppose this, but this has led to court cases against them and threats against the children involved. Many choose not to engage in this legal dispute for the fear of

more persecution. Furthermore, children of Armenian and Assyrian Christians are forced to take Quranic and Islamic classes at elementary school. Courses like “History of Islam”, “Quranic Teachings” and Arabic are mandatory for all post-secondary students regardless of their religion. University application forms require the applicants to indicate their religion. If a Muslim-born individual mentions his/her religion as Christianity, he/she will not be accepted for studying at university. Thus, post-secondary education is practically not available to converts with an Islamic background (unless they do not tell the truth about their religion when they apply).

Block 2.10: Christian spouses and/or children of Christians have been subject to separation for prolonged periods of time by circumstances relating to persecution. (3.50 points)

Church leaders, and increasingly ordinary church members too, are often imprisoned for long periods and this frequently has a negative impact on their family members. Some children are severely traumatized by the absence of their father or mother. Sometimes imprisonment has led to divorce as (non-Christian) spouses were unable to stand the pressure. Such cases cause associated emotional pain for the family.

Block 2.13: Christians have lost their inheritance rights because of their conversion to Christianity or (if a person already was a Christian) other types of Christianity. (3.50 points)

Inheritance laws are part of legalized discriminations in the Civil Code of Iran. For example, according to Article 881 of the Civil Code, a non-Muslim cannot inherit property from a Muslim. Even if only one of the heirs of a non-Muslim is Muslim, the latter (regardless of that person’s relationship with or the distance to the deceased) will receive the entire inheritance to the detriment of all other non-Muslim heirs. In practice, this law not only discriminates against religious minorities but also encourages conversion to Islam for material gain.

Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

Block 3.2: Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (this includes reporting to police, being shadowed, telephone lines listened to, emails read/censored, etc.). (4.00 points)

All categories of Christian are monitored in Iran. Iran uses sophisticated technology to monitor its citizens and if people are suspected of running house-churches or engaging in evangelism, they will be shadowed and often harassed in a variety of ways. This monitoring extends beyond the borders of Iran and there are reliable reports of informers in Western countries reporting back to Iranian intelligence on Christian activity.

Block 3.13: Christians have been interrogated or compelled to report to the local vigilante/police for faith-related reasons. (4.00 points)

Converts and other Christians, especially those suspected of evangelism, are frequently summoned for interrogation or are interrogated upon arrest. Some of them have been summoned dozens of times. The aim of the interrogation in these cases is to intimidate the Christians without the bother of having to prosecute and imprison them. However, some of them are imprisoned and prosecuted after these interrogations, depending on the severity of the allegations and the available 'evidence'.

Block 3.1: Christians have been harassed, threatened or obstructed in their daily lives for faith-related reasons (e.g. for not meeting majority religion or traditional dress codes, beard codes etc.). (3.75 points)

All women in Iran have to cover their heads and wearing the *hijab* is mandatory. Christians have to be sensitive to survive without problems in their communities. Pressure is more intensely felt during certain times of the year, like Islamic religious festivals (Ramadan) or when Christmas and other Christian celebrations coincide with days of mourning for Shia Muslims. Especially converts, if known, can face daily harassment from neighbors, employers, colleagues and others.

Block 3.11: Christians have been hindered in the operation of their businesses for faith-related reasons (e.g. access to loans, subsidies, government contracts, client boycotts). (3.75 points)

The state controls more than 60% of the economy directly and doing business in Iran is very much affected by clientelism and cronyism. Historical Christians like the Armenians and Assyrians will face discrimination when doing business, while other types of Christians do not stand a chance of conducting business in Iran.

Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

Block 4.6: Christians have been barred from public office, or has promotion been hindered for faith-related reasons. (4.00 points)

Minorities in Iran are severely discriminated against and higher positions in both government and society are only given to Shia Muslims. All Christians are banned from public offices, except for three seats reserved for Armenian/Assyrian Christians in parliament.

Block 4.8: Christians have been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public. (4.00 points)

There is no freedom of speech in Iran and criticizing the government can have severe consequences. Armenian and Assyrian Christians have to be careful not to criticize the government or to state anything that might be interpreted as an act of evangelism. Convert and other Christians already have to operate very carefully in private, let alone when it comes to expressing views in public.

Block 4.10: Media reporting has been incorrect or biased against Christians. (4.00 points)

National media in Iran is carefully controlled and does not allow alternative opinions or beliefs to be promoted. At various times state officials will speak up against Christians (typically referring to "Zionism" and house-churches) and this will initiate a wave of hate-speech against Christians. Hate-speech against Iranian Christians, especially Protestants, remained at a high level during the WWL 2021 reporting period in the form of multimedia material published by the government and anti-Christian rhetoric expressed by imams.

Block 4.14: Those who caused harm to Christians have deliberately been left unpunished. (3.50 points)

State officials often use violence against Christians during arrests and interrogations. (Sexual harassment is very common and there has been no attempt to address such injustice, despite these activities being in violation of the Iranian penal code. In addition, family members can harm converts with impunity.

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

Block 5.1: Church activities have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed. (4.00 points)

Many (if not all) public church services are monitored by the secret police. Armenians and Assyrians, while under surveillance, have not been hindered from gathering, as long as they conduct their services in their own languages and do not welcome Muslim-background Christians to their meetings and activities. The government has further intensified its campaign to remove Persian-speaking Christians from the country. During the past years, many churches have been shut down, confiscated or forced to cancel their church services in Persian. Their leaders were also often arrested. Officially, there are now virtually no Persian-speaking churches left in the country. Severe surveillance of house-churches leads to increasing fear among those attending.

Block 5.7: Churches have been hindered from openly integrating converts. (4.00 points)

All churches are forbidden to welcome Persians on a permanent basis. This began as a security strategy in 2008-2010. Churches were visited by security officials or church leaders were summoned to government offices. They were told to supply lists of attendees and refuse entry to ethnic Persians. The Persian language was forbidden for use in church services. Those leaders who refused to comply were put under great pressure and have been forced to leave the country. This policy has not changed and all remaining churches comply with it, knowing that integrating converts will not be accepted.

Block 5.10: Christians have been hindered in training their own religious leaders. (4.00 points)

The Armenian and Assyrian (and Catholic and Anglican) churches are able to appoint clergy trained outside of the country. Non-traditional groups and house-churches, however, have to rely on more informal training. The targeting of church leaders, either by imprisonment or forced emigration, has resulted in a lack of experienced teachers remaining in the country. Christian media and Internet outreach tries to address this deficiency, but the growth and discipleship of the church in Iran has undoubtedly been hindered through state oppression and interference.

Block 5.18: Churches have been hindered in establishing, managing, maintaining and conducting schools, or charitable, humanitarian, medical, social or cultural organizations, institutions and associations. (4.00 points)

Expatriate churches which had established schools, hospitals and other social and humanitarian institutions were forced to hand over their possessions to the Islamic government after the 1979 Revolution. Since then, they have not been allowed to carry out such activities. Protestant and

non-traditional churches followed the same fate in 1990s. The only remaining church institutions and associations (which even receive financial subsidies from the state) belong to the historical Armenian Orthodox and Assyrian Chalcedonian churches. However, usually the heads of Armenian and Assyrian schools are Muslim.

Violence

Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers below must be understood as being minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100 or 1000) is given. (A symbolic number of 10 could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100 could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1000 could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain.) In cases where it is clear that (many) more Christians are affected, but a concrete number could be given according to the number of incidents reported, the number given has to be understood as being an absolutely minimum figure. The symbol “x” denotes a known number which cannot be published due to security considerations.

Iran: Violence Block question	WWL 2021	WWL 2020
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	0	0
6.2 How many churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	17	23
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	110	169
6.4 How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons?	44	25
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	0	0
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	21	10
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	10	10
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	240	262

6.9 How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	75	66
6.10 How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	28	5
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	60	50
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	1000	10

In the WWL 2021 reporting period:

- **Christians killed:** The physical elimination of Christians is not something that the pragmatic government of Iran is willing to do or can politically afford. Gradual and silent elimination is their preferred choice.
- **Christians arrested:** The number of arrested Christians decreased compared to WWL 2020. There was no wave of widespread arrests, although a smaller crackdown took place in June 2020. The fall in the number of arrests is probably because the Iranian security services had their hands full with silencing the protests at the end of 2019, followed by the COVID-19 crisis which occupied the government in other ways. However, more Christians have received prison sentences during the WWL 2021 reporting period than in the previous reporting period.
- **Christians attacked:** Many Christians have been beaten, (sexually) harassed or been put under severe pressure during interrogations. Methods include solitary confinement, sleep deprivation, prolonged interrogation, threats to bring harm to family members (including rape) and death threats to the individuals involved or their family members.
- **Churches attacked:** House-churches have been raided by the security forces and Christian cemeteries have been deliberately damaged on grounds of faith.
- **Christian homes/shops attacked:** Dozens of Christians have been forced to hand over their title deeds to pay the high sums of bail after arrest. Often Christians forfeit their title deeds when fleeing the country out of fear of otherwise receiving lengthy prison sentences. Other houses have been damaged during house raids.

5 Year trends

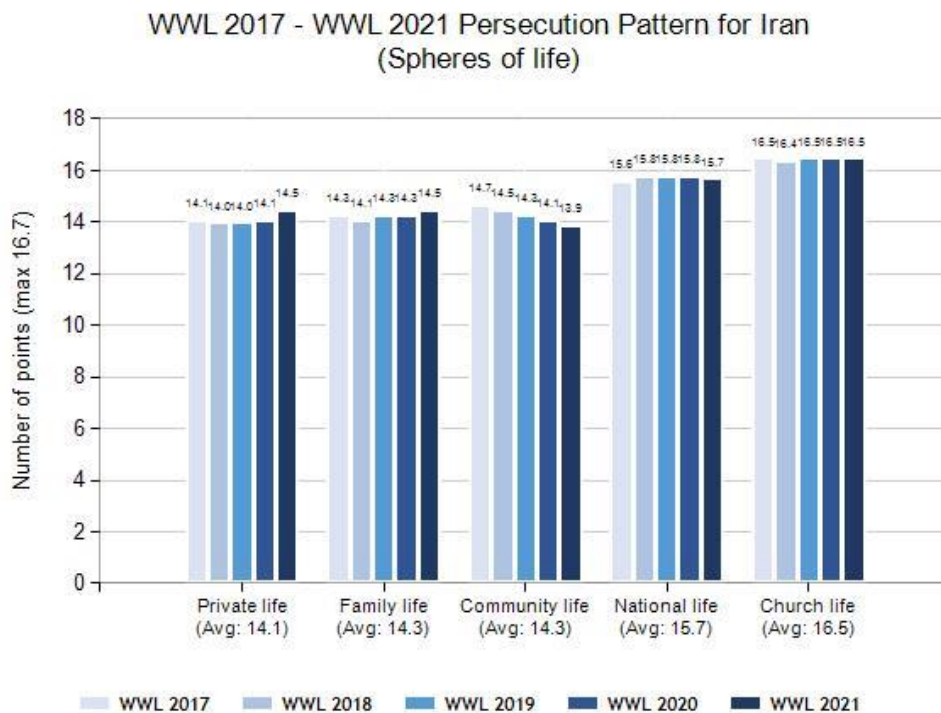
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

5 Year trends: Average pressure

Iran: WWL 2017 - WWL 2021 Persecution Pattern history	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2021	15.0
2020	14.9
2019	15.0
2018	15.0
2017	15.0

The table above shows that the overall level of pressure on Christians has been constant at an extreme level of 14.9/15.0 points over the last five reporting periods.

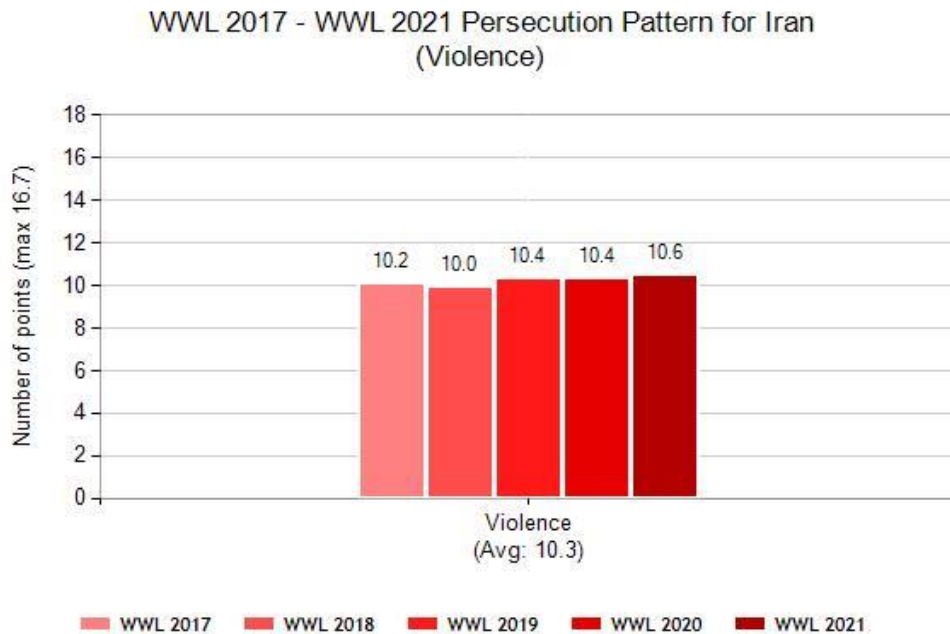
5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life



The chart above shows that the levels of pressure in all *spheres of life* have been at an extreme level in the last five reporting periods. Whereas the levels of pressure in the *Private, Family* and *Community spheres of life* have been more or less stable, there have been increases in the

pressure in the *National* and *Church spheres of life* which correspond with the increased and now stable pressure coming from the government side. The election and re-election of 'moderate' President Rouhani has not brought any change to this situation.

5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



The chart above shows that the score for violent incidents recorded in Iran has not changed dramatically over the last five reporting periods: It is fairly stable at the very high level of just over 10 points. The scores are mainly coming from incidents where Christians have been detained or sentenced, and where Christians' houses and house-churches have been raided. In addition, many Christians, both from Armenian/Assyrian and convert background, fled the country because of persecution.

Gender-specific religious persecution Female

Female Pressure Points
Denied access to social community/networks
Denied custody of children
Economic harassment via business/job/work access
Enforced religious dress code
Forced divorce

Forced marriage
Imprisonment by government
Incarceration by family (house arrest)
Travel bans/restrictions on movement
Violence – physical
Violence – psychological
Violence – sexual

In Iran, women have little individual legal protection, making the situation particularly precarious for Christian women detained for their faith. According to some estimates, the majority of house-church members in Iran are women, as the domestic setting provides more opportunities for them to participate in ministry and leadership. Whilst this has allowed many women to fulfil their calling, it has also made them more vulnerable. They risk being arrested and sexually harassed by the authorities during interrogation and imprisonment. Shaming women in this way is an effective way to stain their reputation and harm their social status.

With many churches forced to shut down and Christians increasingly isolated, some Christian women, particularly Muslim background converts, are forced to marry Muslims. Pressure comes from their family, as well as the local community; a single Christian woman seeking employment will face discrimination and be viewed with disfavor in the marketplace. The legal minimum age of marriage for girls is 13, but girls as young as nine years old may be married [with permission](#) from the court and their fathers (US Department of State, 2018, “Iran 2018 Human Rights Report”). If a female convert is an already-married mother, it is highly likely that the custody of the children will be taken from her in order to ensure the children are raised in an Islamic way. Converts may also be placed under house arrest and denied access to Christian community.

Within marriages Christian women are unprotected against sexual abuse and domestic violence; authorities consider such issues a private matter and legislative justice is lacking. There is an explicit restriction on a woman becoming the head of a household or the head of a family. While rape is illegal, a rape victim must present [four male eye](#) witnesses and two female witnesses in order to prove the crime (ECOSOC, 2005, “Integration of the Human Rights of Women and a Gender Perspective: Violence Against Women” p.16).

This lack of legal protection against violence creates impunity for the violent religious persecution of Christian women in many situations, both in the private and public spheres. Since Iranian women are not free to travel on their own, fleeing a dangerous situation and finding sheltered accommodation becomes problematic.

At a most basic level, Iranian law provides that a woman who appears in public without appropriate Islamic attire may be sentenced to flogging and being fined (Aljazeera, 2 Feb 2018). Female activists against the compulsory *hijab* have been sentenced to 12 and 15 years in prison ([VOA News, 21 November 2020](#), [Radio Farda, 28 August 2019](#))

Gender-specific religious persecution Male

Male Pressure Points

Economic harassment via business/job/work access

Forced to flee town/country

Imprisonment by government

Violence – physical

Violence – psychological

Despite the majority of house-church members now being women, more men are arrested, prosecuted, sentenced by the government, and often imprisoned for many years. Male pastors in particular are affected. Men are more often arrested in urban areas, whereas in rural areas they are forced to flee the town. Lengthy imprisonments have had a familial cost; sometimes the strain and emotional pain caused by separation leads to divorce and child trauma. The child of one pastor could not address him as “dad” upon his recent release, instead calling him “sir.”

Men are usually the primary providers for their families, especially if they have young children. When converting to Christianity, men risk losing their jobs, particularly if they have been arrested. If they apply for a business registration or trade permit and the officer discovers their Christian faith, the application is likely to be turned down. This puts extra financial and psychological pressure on the families. Younger converts may be banned from continuing with their education upon discovery of their faith.

When single Christian men are under acute stress through monitoring, threats and harassment, they are likely to flee the country, which naturally impacts the family emotionally and financially. In contrast to women, men are not seen as “misguided,” but as willfully making wrong choices. Thus, their punishment is harsher, and they are more likely to suffer physical abuse, torture and longer prison sentences. Many are forced to migrate to the West, which weakens the Church, depriving it of experienced and mature male leaders.

Persecution of other religious minorities

Bahai, Sunni, Sufi (Dervish) Muslims and other religious minorities (like the Yarsanis) are also persecuted in Iran. Although no Christian has been killed by the regime for many years, most probably out of fear of the ensuing international consequences, many dissidents from other groups have been executed - mainly on charges of terrorism (instead of “apostasy”). Ethnic minorities such as the Kurds, Baloch and Iranian Arabs face government suspicion and discrimination as well.

According to the [US State Department’s IRF 2019](#) report:

- "Human rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs) continued to report the disproportionately large number of executions of Sunni prisoners, particularly Kurds, Baluchis, and Arabs. (page 1)".
- "The government bars Baha’is from all government employment and forbids Baha’i participation in the governmental social pension system. Baha’is may not receive compensation for injury or crimes committed against them and may not inherit property. A religious fatwa from the supreme leader encourages citizens to avoid all dealings with Baha’is." (page 9).
- "Activists and NGOs reported Yarsani activists and community leaders continued to be subject to detention or disappearance for engaging in awareness-raising regarding government practices or discrimination against the Yarsani community." (page 15).

Other examples are:

- In September 2020, eight Bahai's were sentenced to a total of eleven years in prison. They were charged with “membership in the illegal Bahai organization which is a threat to national security” ([Iran HRM, 9 September 2020](#)).
- In July 2020, it was reported that at least 141 violations of religious minority rights had taken place in June 2020 alone ([NCRI Women Committee, 2 July 2020](#)).
- In July 2020, two Kurds were executed for 'enmity against God' after they had confessed under torture ([Iran HRM, 14 July 2020](#)).
- In October 2019, three young Bahai's were [sentenced to a total of 20 years](#) imprisonment on charges of acting against national security.

Future outlook

The outlook for Christians - as viewed through the lens of:

Islamic oppression:

As long as the current Islamic regime keeps control of all government institutions and keeps a firm grip on the Iranian economy, it is unlikely things will really change in Iran. However, more and more Iranians do not trust the regime anymore and are openly calling for change. A move away from state religion towards a form of secularism might be an option - seeing as the influence of secularism is clearly growing - however, this influence is still too weak to expect any real change in the near future.

Dictatorial paranoia:

As more interaction with the wider world becomes possible (via the internet and also through contact with the thousands of Iranians abroad), the security services are likely to intensify their monitoring. As a result, religious minorities such as Christians (and adherents of Bahai) are likely to be more closely watched - especially those with contacts to Western co-religionists. Christian media and websites in Persian are reported to be particularly closely watched.

Clan oppression:

Although more and more Iranians are dissatisfied with the regime and subsequently Islam, it is likely that hostile social attitudes to Christians and especially converts from Islam to Christianity will remain common, especially in rural areas. Nonetheless, in contrast to other Middle Eastern countries, systematic state persecution and discrimination will remain the major challenge Christians and other religious groups have to face.

Organized corruption and crime:

The Iranian government will probably continue with its practice of financially ruining arrested Christians by setting disproportionately high levels of bail. It is likely that the Iranian authorities are using these violations of the rights of Christians to enrich themselves.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Drivers of persecution description: BTI 2018 Country Report - <https://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-reports/detail/itc/IRN/>
- Drivers of persecution description: enrich - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2016/nov/28/iranian-judicial-authorities-attempt-arrest-of-mp-mahmoud-sadeghi>
- Christian communities and how they are affected: undermine - <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2016/12/iran-church-retreat-centre-confiscated-for-being-funded-by-cia/>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: with permission - <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/IRAN-2018.pdf>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: four male eye witnesses - <http://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/-/media/files/un%20women/vaw/country%20report/asia/iran%20islamic%20republic%20of/iran%20the%20islamic%20republic%20of%20srvaw.pdf?vs=4541>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: VOA News, 21 November 2020 - <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/iranian-anti-hijab-activist-could-face-12-years-prison-if-deported-turkey>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: Radio Farda, 28 August 2019 - <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/anti-hijab-activist-in-iran-sentenced-to-15-years-in-prison/30133081.html>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: US State Department's IRF 2019 - <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/IRAN-2019-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Iran HRM, 9 September 2020 - <https://iran-hrm.com/index.php/2020/09/09/appeals-court-sentences-eight-iranian-bahais-to-11-years-of-prison/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: NCRI Women Committee, 2 July 2020 - <https://women.ncr-iran.org/2020/07/02/141-violations-of-the-rights-of-religious-minorities-in-iran-in-one-month/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Iran HRM, 14 July 2020 - <https://iran-hrm.com/index.php/2020/07/14/iran-executed-two-kurdish-inmates-tortured-to-confess/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: sentenced to a total of 20 years - <https://iran-hrm.com/index.php/2019/10/29/iran-sentences-three-bahais-to-20-years-for-their-religious-beliefs/>

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on World Watch Research's Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom) and on the World Watch Monitor website:

- [Advocacy resources – Open Doors Analytical](#)
- <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Iran>
- <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/iran>