

World  
Watch  
Research

## Iran: Full Country Dossier

January 2023



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

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# Introduction

## World Watch List 2023

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	14.4	98	96	94	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	8.7	92	91	92	92	91
3	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	88	87	85	86
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.2	89	88	88	87	86
5	Libya	15.6	15.5	15.9	16.1	16.3	9.1	88	91	92	90	87
6	Nigeria	13.8	13.8	14.6	14.8	14.4	16.7	88	87	85	80	80
7	Pakistan	13.4	13.8	14.8	14.8	12.9	16.7	86	87	88	88	87
8	Iran	14.5	14.6	13.8	15.8	16.5	10.7	86	85	86	85	85
9	Afghanistan	15.4	15.7	15.4	16.1	16.6	4.6	84	98	94	93	94
10	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	9.4	83	79	79	85	87
11	India	12.3	13.1	13.0	14.8	13.3	15.7	82	82	83	83	83
12	Syria	13.2	14.1	13.6	14.1	14.1	11.3	80	78	81	82	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.9	15.8	16.7	2.4	80	81	78	79	77
14	Myanmar	12.5	11.6	13.9	13.9	12.9	15.4	80	79	74	73	71
15	Maldives	15.4	15.3	13.8	16.0	16.4	0.2	77	77	77	78	78
16	China	12.9	10.0	12.7	14.5	15.6	11.1	77	76	74	70	65
17	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	10.3	15.1	15.0	76	70	67	66	68
18	Iraq	14.1	14.6	14.0	14.8	13.9	4.6	76	78	82	76	79
19	Algeria	14.1	14.1	11.5	13.7	15.1	4.8	73	71	70	73	70
20	Mauritania	14.5	14.2	13.3	14.1	14.2	1.3	72	70	71	68	67
21	Uzbekistan	14.9	12.7	13.9	12.7	15.6	1.5	71	71	71	73	74
22	Colombia	11.8	8.9	13.1	11.3	10.4	15.4	71	68	67	62	58
23	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.5	9.6	13.8	15.6	71	68	67	66	48
24	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	68	66	68	70
25	Vietnam	11.8	9.6	12.8	14.6	14.4	6.9	70	71	72	72	70
26	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.6	14.1	15.7	0.6	70	69	70	70	69
27	Cuba	13.1	8.3	13.1	13.2	14.9	7.0	70	66	62	52	49
28	Niger	9.4	9.5	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.4	70	68	62	60	52
29	Morocco	13.2	13.8	10.9	12.2	14.5	4.8	69	69	67	66	63
30	Bangladesh	12.6	10.7	12.8	11.3	10.6	10.7	69	68	67	63	58
31	Laos	11.7	10.2	13.3	14.2	14.0	5.0	68	69	71	72	71
32	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.6	68	65	63	43	43
33	Indonesia	11.3	12.0	11.6	11.1	9.2	12.8	68	68	63	60	65
34	Qatar	14.2	14.1	10.5	13.2	14.4	1.5	68	74	67	66	62
35	Egypt	12.7	13.5	11.6	12.1	10.8	7.0	68	71	75	76	76
36	Tunisia	12.0	12.8	10.4	12.0	13.5	6.5	67	66	67	64	63
37	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.6	67	66	64	56	55
38	Mexico	10.3	8.3	12.5	11.0	10.5	13.9	67	65	64	60	61
39	Ethiopia	9.9	10.3	13.1	10.4	12.1	10.6	66	66	65	63	65
40	Bhutan	13.2	12.3	11.6	13.9	14.2	1.1	66	67	64	61	64
41	Turkey	12.8	11.5	11.8	13.0	11.5	5.7	66	65	69	63	66
42	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.5	66	63	62	57	56
43	Malaysia	12.8	14.3	11.4	12.2	11.1	3.9	66	63	63	62	60
44	Tajikistan	13.8	12.2	12.3	12.8	13.4	1.1	66	65	66	65	65
45	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.2	13.1	15.9	65	65	64	60	54
46	Brunei	14.8	14.6	10.1	10.9	14.4	0.4	65	64	64	63	63
47	Oman	14.0	14.1	10.3	13.3	12.9	0.6	65	66	63	62	59
48	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.6	11.9	12.7	14.2	1.1	65	64	64	64	63
49	Jordan	13.0	14.0	10.5	12.3	12.7	2.0	65	66	64	64	65
50	Nicaragua	10.8	5.9	11.9	12.8	13.6	9.4	65	56	51	41	41

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	13.3	64	63	62	61	61
52	Kuwait	13.5	13.7	9.8	12.3	13.1	1.1	64	64	63	62	60
53	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	15.6	63	61	58	55	52
54	UAE	13.4	13.4	9.9	11.2	12.8	1.1	62	62	62	60	58
55	Nepal	12.0	9.8	9.4	13.0	12.6	4.4	61	64	66	64	64
56	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	0.6	60	59	56	56	56
57	Palestinian Territories	13.0	13.3	9.7	10.3	12.0	2.0	60	59	58	60	57
58	Azerbaijan	13.2	10.0	9.5	12.0	13.6	0.6	59	60	56	57	57
59	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.2	11.0	10.4	12.0	2.0	59	58	58	57	56
60	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	7.6	58	55	53	56	48
61	Russian Federation	12.3	7.9	10.3	11.8	12.8	2.0	57	56	57	60	60
62	Sri Lanka	12.8	9.1	10.6	11.3	9.5	3.9	57	63	62	65	58
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	8.9	57	50	42	42	41
64	Venezuela	6.0	4.6	11.7	10.2	11.4	11.7	56	51	39	42	41
65	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	11.1	55	52	48	48	43
66	Bahrain	12.7	13.3	8.7	10.7	8.8	0.9	55	57	56	55	55
67	Honduras	7.1	5.0	11.9	7.6	9.8	11.9	53	48	46	39	38
68	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	51	46	43	42
69	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	9.2	14.8	51	48	47	48	47
70	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	5.4	49	44	43	41	42
71	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	3.0	48	43	47	45	46
72	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.0	46	43	43	44	44
73	El Salvador	7.7	4.2	10.6	7.4	9.1	6.7	46	45	42	38	30
74	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	42	42	42	43
75	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	1.1	44	44	43	43	43
76	Belarus	9.5	3.8	4.8	9.4	12.1	3.3	43	33	30	28	35

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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).
- Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. In order to reduce the length of these reference sections, a table containing links to regularly used sources can be found at the beginning of the “Keys to Understanding” chapter under the heading “Links for general background information”. Where one of these sources has been quoted in the dossier text, a quote reference is supplied as indicated in the second column of the table.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- 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).

## WWL 2023 Situation in brief / Iran

### Brief country details

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

Iran: Population (UN estimate for 2022)	Christians	Chr%
86,023,000	1,245,000	OD estimate

### Map of country



Iran: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2023	86	8
WWL 2022	85	9
WWL 2021	86	8
WWL 2020	85	9
WWL 2019	85	9

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods

## Dominant persecution engines and drivers

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

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

## Brief description of the persecution situation

Christianity in Iran is divided between constitutionally recognized and unrecognized Christians. The unrecognized 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. Both leaders and common members of Christian convert groups have been arrested, prosecuted and have received long prison sentences for 'crimes against national security'. The recognized historical communities of Armenian and Assyrian Christians are protected by the state but are treated as second-class citizens with the civil code containing many discriminatory legal provisions against non-Muslims. In addition, they are not allowed to worship in Persian, have contact with Christians of a Muslim background (speaking Persian) or have them attend church services. Recognized Christians that do support converts have received harsh prison sentences, including during the WWL 2023 reporting period.

## 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

### Exorbitant sums for bail demanded

- The Iranian regime continued its practice of requiring exorbitant sums for releasing detained Christians on bail. In recent years, several Christians had to pay high amounts for bail (see for example: [Article 18, 4 October 2021](#), [Article Eighteen, 10 May 2022](#), [Article Eighteen, 7 June 2022](#), [Article Eighteen, 29 June 2022](#), [Article Eighteen, 11 July 2022](#)). 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](#), [Iran Focus, 15 June 2020](#)). Instead of imprisoning them, the Iranian regime severely threatens 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.

### Adopted daughter cannot stay with Christian parents

- **Case still pending in WWL 2023 reporting period:** In September 2020, an Iranian appeal court ruled that the very young adopted daughter of Sam Khosravi and Maryam Falahi could not stay with her parents as they are Christians. Despite the acknowledgement in the first ruling that there was “zero chance” another adoptive family would be found for Lydia given her health problems, the couple was judged “not to be fit” to take care of her, given their conversion. Even *fatwas* issued by two grand ayatollahs, the most senior Shia Islamic clergy, did not help, nor did an appeal letter from 120 Iranian activists and lawyers (Article Eighteen, 13 October 2020). It is believed that the hands of the judges were tied and that the actual verdict came from the Ministry of Intelligence, showing that the Iranian judiciary is not independent at all. They have taken their case to the Iranian Supreme Court and are awaiting a new verdict ([Article 18, 22 April 2021](#)).

### Amended articles 499 and 500 of the Penal Code

- **November 2021:** Three converts from Islam to Christianity started their three-year prison sentences, which they received in appeal after first being sentenced to the maximum sentence of five years imprisonment under the newly amended Article 500. They were convicted for “engaging in propaganda that educates in a deviant way contrary to the holy religion of Islam” ([Article 18, 8 November 2021](#)). The amendments to the Articles 499 and 500 of the Penal Code were signed into law in February 2021 and have since been used to



prosecute several converts from Islam to Christianity.

- **April 2022:** A second group of three converts from Islam to Christianity were also convicted to the maximum sentence of five years under article 500 of the penal code. They have appealed their conviction, denying "any activities contrary to the country's laws". Judges in similar cases have admitted that they have been under considerable pressure from the security agencies to hand out maximum sentences to Christians from a Muslim background ([Article Eighteen, 11 July 2022](#)). In a second trial on identical charges, all three men were acquitted. However, their first conviction still stands, with only one of them having his prison sentence reduced. In addition, a week after the hearing, their lawyer was arrested ([Article Eighteen, 29 November 2022](#)).

#### **Imprisoned for house-church membership**

- **August 2022:** A 64 year old Christian with advanced Parkinson's disease began his prison sentence, together with his wife. They were sentenced in November 2020 to two and eleven years imprisonment respectively (reduced to eight years after appeal) on charges of participating in and allegedly leading a house church. However, in June 2021, upon presenting themselves at the prison, they were sent home. Nonetheless, while expecting to have their confiscated property returned to them, they were summoned again and instead detained ([Article Eighteen, 15 August 2022](#)). The case shows the legal limbo in which the state leaves prosecuted Christians and also demonstrates that seemingly positive steps should not be celebrated too early.

#### **Ethnic minority Christians**

- **April 2022:** Iranian-Armenian Christian Anooshavan Avedian, belonging to the constitutionally protected Christian minority, was found guilty of "establishing and leading an illegal group with the aim of disrupting the security of the country through educational and propaganda activities contrary to and disturbing to the holy religion of Islam, through the dissemination of false claims ... as well as contact with foreign countries, or organizational guidance from abroad." He received a ten year prison sentence under the amended Article 500. Article 500 allows the doubling of the maximum prison sentence of 5 years if the accused received support from abroad. The sentence underlines the fact that even the constitutionally protected minorities of Armenian and Assyrian Christians do not enjoy freedom of religion and belief.
- **August 2022:** Iranian-Armenian Christian Joseph Shahbazian, belonging to the constitutionally protected Christian minority, started his ten-year prison sentence after his appeal was rejected. He was charged with "founding or leading an organization that aims to disrupt national security" and was found guilty of leading a house-church ([Article Eighteen, 30 August 2022](#)). His case shows again that Freedom of Religion and Belief for constitutionally recognized Christians is very limited.

## Specific examples of positive developments

**Supreme Court ruling:** In November 2021 Iran's Supreme Court ruled that involvement in house-churches and even the propagation of what is referred to as the "Evangelical Zionist sect" should not be deemed an act against national security. The ruling has the potential to influence current and future cases involving converts from Islam to Christianity ([Article 18, 25 November 2021](#)). Subsequently, the Tehran Court of Appeal acquitted nine Christian converts accused of "acting against national security" in February 2022 ([Article 18, 28 February 2022](#)). However, one of them was almost immediately rearrested and sent back to prison after a different branch of the Supreme Court reversed a previous acquittal on almost identical charges, while two others were instead charged with "propaganda against the state". The contrasting rulings probably show internal differences within the Supreme Court. The charges of "propaganda against the state" made against the converts mentioned above are most likely related to a successful online campaign in which the accused publicly asked the Iranian regime in video messages where they could worship after their release ([Article 18, 27 October 2021](#)).

**Release from prison:** In October 2022, Christian converts Fariba Dalir and Nasser Navard Gol-Tapeh were unexpectedly released. They were serving prison sentences of two and ten years respectively in Teheran's notorious Evin Prison ([Article Eighteen, 19 October 2022](#)). Their release came amidst ongoing protests and shortly after a fire erupted in the prison ([Article Eighteen, 17 October 2022](#)). However, at least ten other Christian converts remain jailed in Evin Prison.

## External Links - Situation in brief

- 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, 4 October 2021 - <https://articleeighteen.com/news/9337/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: Article Eighteen, 10 May 2022 - <https://articleeighteen.com/reports/case-studies/5941/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: Article Eighteen, 7 June 2022 - <https://articleeighteen.com/reports/case-studies/11196/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: Article Eighteen, 29 June 2022 - <https://articleeighteen.com/reports/case-studies/11206/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: Article Eighteen, 11 July 2022 - <https://articleeighteen.com/reports/case-studies/10380/>
- 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: Iran Focus, 15 June 2020 - <https://www.iranfocus.com/en/economy/34572-the-systematic-corruption-in-iran-s-judiciary/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: Article 18, 22 April 2021 - <https://articleeighteen.com/news/8438/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: Article 18, 8 November 2021 - <https://articleeighteen.com/news/9548/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: Article Eighteen, 11 July 2022 - <https://articleeighteen.com/reports/case-studies/10380/>

- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: Article Eighteen, 29 November 2022 - <https://articleeighteen.com/news/12247/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: Article Eighteen, 15 August 2022 - <https://articleeighteen.com/news/11500/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: Article Eighteen, 30 August 2022 - <https://articleeighteen.com/news/11617/>
- Specific examples of positive developments: Article 18, 25 November 2021 - <https://articleeighteen.com/news/9836/>
- Specific examples of positive developments: Article 18, 28 February 2022 - <https://articleeighteen.com/news/10496/>
- Specific examples of positive developments: Article 18, 27 October 2021 - <https://articleeighteen.com/news/9468/>
- Specific examples of positive developments: Article Eighteen, 19 October 2022 - <https://articleeighteen.com/news/11989/>
- Specific examples of positive developments: Article Eighteen, 17 October 2022 - <https://articleeighteen.com/news/11936/>

## WWL 2023: Keys to understanding / Iran

### Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2021/22 country report – covering 154 countries	AI country report 2021/22 (p. 16)	<a href="https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/POL1048702022ENGLISH.pdf">https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/POL1048702022ENGLISH.pdf</a>	27 May 2022
BBC News country profile	BBC country profile	<a href="https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14541327">https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14541327</a>	27 May 2022
Bertelsmann Transformation Index country report 2022 – covering 137 countries	BTI report 2022	<a href="https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard/IRN">https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard/IRN</a>	27 May 2022
CIA World Factbook	CIA Factbook	<a href="https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/iran/">https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/iran/</a>	27 May 2022
Crisis24 country report (Garda World) - covering 193 countries	Crisis24 country report	<a href="https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/iran">https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/iran</a>	27 May 2022
Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2021 – covering 167 countries	EIU 2021 (p.16)	<a href="https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/eiu-democracy-index-2021.pdf">https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/eiu-democracy-index-2021.pdf</a>	27 May 2022
FFP's Fragile States Index 2022 – covering 179 countries	FSI 2022	<a href="https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/">https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/</a>	2 August 2022
Freedom House's 2022 Democracy index - 29 countries, Iran not included	Democracy Index 2022	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores">https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores</a>	
Freedom House's 2022 Global Freedom Index – covering 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2022	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/country/iran/freedom-world/2022">https://freedomhouse.org/country/iran/freedom-world/2022</a>	27 May 2022
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2021 report – covering 70 countries	Freedom on the Net 2021	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/country/iran/freedom-net/2021">https://freedomhouse.org/country/iran/freedom-net/2021</a>	27 May 2022
Human Rights Watch World Report 2022 (country chapter) – covering 100+ countries	HRW 2022 country chapter	<a href="https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/iran">https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/iran</a>	27 May 2022
Internet World Stats 2022	IWS 2022	<a href="https://www.internetworldstats.com/middle.htm#ir">https://www.internetworldstats.com/middle.htm#ir</a>	27 May 2022
Middle East Concern	MEC Iran country profile	<a href="https://meconcern.org/countries/iran/">https://meconcern.org/countries/iran/</a>	2 August 2022
RSF's 2022 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2022	<a href="https://rsf.org/en/iran">https://rsf.org/en/iran</a>	27 May 2022
Transparency International's 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index – covering 180 countries	CPI 2021	<a href="https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/iran">https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/iran</a>	27 May 2022
UNDP's Global Human Development Indicators (country profile) – covering 189 countries	HDI profile	<a href="https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/IRN">https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/IRN</a>	8 June 2022
US State Department's 2021 International Religious Freedom country reports	IRFR 2021	<a href="https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/iran/">https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/iran/</a>	6 June 2022
USCIRF 2022 country reports – covering 15 CPC / 12 SWL	USCIRF 2022	<a href="https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2022-04/2022%20Iran.pdf">https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2022-04/2022%20Iran.pdf</a>	27 May 2022
World Bank country overview – covering 178 countries	World Bank 2022	<a href="https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/iran/overview#1">https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/iran/overview#1</a>	27 May 2022
World Bank country profile data – covering 222 countries	World Bank profile (2020 data)	<a href="https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfile&amp;id=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=country=IRN">https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfile&amp;id=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=country=IRN</a>	27 May 2022

### Recent history

In the Revolution of 1979, the Shah was removed from power and Iran was changed into an Islamic Republic. During his reign (1941-1979), the Shah had introduced a program of modernization and allowed Western influences to develop 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 initiated 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. In 1979, Shia Islamic clerics took political control, banning all Western influence (or Christian influence, which is regarded as being virtually the same thing) from the country. Today, the most senior and influential cleric is currently 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, known to be 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, the February 2020 parliamentary elections saw the hardliners win a landslide victory after the very conservative Guardian Council rejected the candidacy of thousands of mostly moderate and reformist candidates - including 90 sitting members of parliament ([AP News, 14 January 2020](#)). Similarly, the presidential elections in June 2021 were won by the former head of the judiciary, Ebrahim Raisi, a confidant of the Supreme Leader rumored to become his successor, in a seemingly engineered election process in which only 7 of the almost 600 candidates were approved by the Guardian Council ([BBC News, 19 June 2021](#)) 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 Iranian economy has been struggling ever since. The moderates, including former President Rouhani, tried to uphold the deal with the other signatories (mainly the EU, Germany, France and the UK). However, increasing tensions between Iran and the USA led to Iran breaching the terms of the agreement ([The Independent, 6 November 2019](#)). Tensions escalated further after the US embassy in Baghdad was partially set on fire by an Iraqi militia backed by Iran in December 2019. In January 2020, in an unexpected and major response which shocked the Iranian government, 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](#)).

While Iran continued to expand its nuclear facilities, newly elected US President Joe Biden indicated that he would like to revive the deal. However, both parties have been in stalemate ever since, as Iran first wants the sanctions to be lifted, while the USA first wants Iran to scale down its nuclear activities ([BBC News, 6 April 2021](#)). While negotiations for a new deal were ongoing, Iran further developed its nuclear capacities, even claiming it is technically capable of building a nuclear bomb ([France24, 17 July 2022](#)). In June 2022, Iran removed cameras of the International Atomic Energy Agency from its nuclear sites, thus adding additional pressure on the talks. However, Iran's violent response to the protests following the death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022 and its weapon deliveries to Russia in late 2022 seem to have frozen the talks entirely ([The Guardian, 4 December 2022](#)).

The weapon deliveries in 2022 followed a strengthening of ties between Iran and Russia, after Russia became an international pariah following its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. President Putin visited the country in July 2022 and received strong support for the invasion

from Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei ([The Arab Weekly, 20 July 2022](#)). Russia bought drones from Iran, while Russia's national oil and gas company Gazprom signed deals with its Iranian counterpart potentially worth \$40 billion ([ECFR, 20 July 2022](#), [Reuters, 19 July 2022](#)).

The COVID-19 outbreak in 2020 caused Iran to become the most badly affected country in the Middle East. Although official figures were far lower, BBC Persian service claimed that by July 2020 around 42,000 people had died from COVID-related symptoms ([BBC News, 3 August 2020](#)). The number of official deaths increased to 84,000 in July 2021 ([The Guardian, 3 July 2021](#)). Meanwhile, the Iranian government has been accused of further worsening the situation by prohibiting the import of UK and US-made vaccines ([HRW, 19 August 2021](#)). In July 2022, the official mortality rate stood at 141,000 ([Reuters, accessed 20 July 2022](#)).

Meanwhile, ten years after the Green Movement protests ([BBC News, 28 December 2009](#)), the deteriorating economic situation and 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 1,500 demonstrators were killed during these protests ([Reuters, 23 December 2019](#)). In September 2022, a new round of protests followed the death of 22-year old Mahsa Amini after being mistreated by Iran's morality police for not wearing her headscarf correctly. In contrast with previous protests, more sections of society joined this time, including many young people and teenagers, while the protests even spread to more conservative cities like Qom and Mashhad ([Euronews, 5 December 2022](#)). At least 416 people, including 51 minors have reportedly been killed since the start of the protests ([Iran Human Rights, 22 November 2022](#)).

Many Iranian Christians, both from historical and convert communities inside and outside the country have given support to the most recent uprising of Iran's population for freedom, which uses the now well-known slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom". At the same time, the Iranian regime continued to use the voices of its recognized Christian minority as part of its propaganda drive against the ongoing protests. Armenian and Assyrian religious leaders and parliamentary representatives explicitly warned their members not to be involved in the protests ([Article Eighteen, 10 November 2022](#)). Meanwhile, Christians from both the historical Christian communities and converts from Islam to Christianity remain oppressed - see below: *Religious landscape*.

## Political and legal landscape

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a theocracy combined with a presidential system. The president is elected, but ultimately power rests in the hands of the clergy, with hardliner Ayatollah Ali Khamenei being the Supreme Leader and having the highest authority.

Within the current Iranian political spectrum, there is a division between the Islamic left (Reformists), the Pragmatists 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. In June 2021, the presidential elections saw hardliner

Ebrahim Raisi win the elections, after the opposition boycotted the elections again after most candidates (almost 99%) were rejected by the Guardian Council. The Guardian Council, which has the power to veto all legislation from the parliament and has to approve all major political candidates, is also dominated by the Principlists. The appointments of the Guardian Council are controlled by the Supreme Leader. 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.

### **Christians with official recognition**

Under the Constitution, Christianity is one of the three legally recognized ethnic religious minorities in Iran. Through this recognition, ethnic minority Christians maintain the right, at least in principle, to exercise their faith. Article 13 of the Constitution states: “Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Iranians are the only recognized religious minorities, who, within the limits of the law, are free to perform their religious rites and ceremonies, and to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education.” As interpreted by the Iranian government, these rights pertain only to ethnic minority Christians (not to Iranian converts to Christianity) who act within the limits of the law, including non-codified principles of Islamic law.

However, even ethnic minority Christians suffer from a large amount of legalized and social discrimination. They are not allowed to hold services in Persian (Farsi) or print religious materials in Persian. In addition, they face employment restrictions (being Muslim is a requirement for many jobs, in particular in government positions, and the authorities have been known to force Muslim employers to dismiss Christian employees); marriage restrictions (for instance, the Civil Code prohibits a non-Muslim man from marrying a Muslim woman); unequal treatment by the courts; not being allowed to adopt children; the Islamic hijab is compulsory for all women in Iran, including Christians; and the inability to inherit property from a Muslim (which encourages people to convert to Islam for financial reasons). Moreover, Article 881 of the Iranian Civil Code provides that when an ‘infidel’ dies, if there is any Muslim among the beneficiaries, this legatee inherits all the property even if only a distant relative. Even the recognized religious minorities are referred to as ‘infidels’ in this article. Christians are also not allowed to hold public offices such as being a judge, qualify for the presidency or be elected to local councils (except for three out of five designated seats for religious minorities in the *Majlis*, the Iranian parliament).

The government forces recognized churches to reject any Muslim trying to be baptized into the Christian faith and requires a church to register its members. The government closes any church that does not comply. For this reason, converts are forced to meet in informal house churches or to practice their faith in isolation.

### **Christians without official recognition**

The Iranian regime categorically denies persecuting Christian converts from a Muslim background. Instead of charging converts with apostasy, the regime accuses them of being part



of a wider plot consisting of evangelical Christians conspiring with the Israeli and US governments to overthrow the Iranian regime. Hence, many Iranian converts received long-term prison sentences for 'acting against national security'. As mentioned above in: *Specific examples of positive developments*, the November 2021 ruling from Iran's Supreme Court that house-church activities should not be considered as acts against national security is a hopeful sign. However, despite the fact that even officials within the judiciary recognize that the charges against converts are groundless, it is still unlikely that hardliners within the regime will stop persecuting converts.

### Gender perspective

The legal landscape 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, accessed 10 August 2022). 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, 2022).

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). By law, women receive only half of the inheritance men will receive. They can also not apply for a passport or leave the country without their husbands' permission.

In short, the Iranian regime has created an 'apartheid state' in which women (as well as non-Shia Muslims) are systemically marginalized. Women cannot study certain subjects, play certain sports, enter stadiums or mingle with men. Both women and those belonging to ethnic and religious minorities cannot become judges or get elected or appointed into key positions, including Supreme Leader, President of the Country, President of the Judiciary System, Member of the Guardian Council or Expediency Council, among others. This systematic discrimination is one of the key reason why many Iranians have joined the widespread demonstrations which began in September 2022 under the slogan "Woman, Life, Liberty."

Other sources report:

- Middle East Concern writes (MEC Iran country profile): " Although apostasy is not proscribed by the Penal Code ..., the Code makes provision for judges to rely on authoritative Islamic sources in matters not covered by the Code – effectively providing scope for Islamic law sanctions to be applied for apostasy (though there are no known examples of judicial death sentences having been applied for apostasy since 1990)."
- Iran is classified by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU 2021) as 'authoritarian'.



- Human Right Watch reports (HRW 2022 country chapter): "Iranian authorities continue to repress their own people. The country's security and intelligence apparatus, in partnership with Iran's judiciary, harshly cracked down on dissent, including through excessive and lethal force against protesters and reported abuse and torture in detention. Impunity remains rampant and Ebrahim Raeesi, a serial human rights violator, took over the presidency in unfair and unfree elections. Deteriorating economic conditions due to US unilateral sanctions, government policies, and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic have increased poverty and reduced living standards for millions in Iran."
- The FFP Fragile States Index (FSI 2022) reports that factionalized elites and group grievances remained very high, an indication of the looming conflict between those in power and ordinary Iranian citizens, as displayed in the protests following the death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022.

## Religious landscape

Iran: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	1,245,000	1.4
Muslim	84,136,707	97.8
Hindu	39,312	0.0
Buddhist	496	0.0
Ethno-religionist	4,964	0.0
Jewish	7,545	0.0
Bahai	251,157	0.3
Atheist	9,828	0.0
Agnostic	241,230	0.3
Other	87,061	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 April 2022) (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 7 December 2022).

Although the Armenian and Assyrian Christians enjoy some religious freedom, they remain tightly monitored and restricted (see above: *Political and Legal landscape*). 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).

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 a host 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 Corps (IRCG). They are responsible for raids on Christian gatherings in private homes, arresting those in attendance and confiscating personal property. Those arrested are subjected to intensive and often aggressive interrogation.

As already stated above, Christianity is considered a condemnable Western and Zionist 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 - above all, the number of Christians with a Muslim background - and allegedly even children of political and religious leaders are leaving Islam for Christianity. Since virtually all Persian-language church services are prohibited and only some ageing communities remain, 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 have converted 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.

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 ([Al-Monitor, 2022](#)).

Other sources report:

- Concerning the state of religious freedom, a report by [Freedom of Thought](#) (accessed 7 December 2022) 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, Sabeen-Mandaeans do not consider themselves as Christians, but the government classifies them among the Christian groups."

- Interestingly, a 2020 survey entitled "Iranians attitudes towards religion" found that only 32.2% of the Iranians consider themselves Shiite Muslim, with 22.2% not identifying with any religion or belief. According to the survey, 1.5% respondents indicated they were Christian ([GAMAAN](#), last accessed 7 December 2022 / [Christianity Today, 3 September 2020](#)).

## Economic landscape

According to the CIA Factbook and World Bank country profile:

- **Gross National Income per capita:** 12,400 USD (2020, PPP)
- **Poverty:** in 2019, an estimated 36% of the population lived below the poverty line, with some sources suggesting that even as high as 60% of the population struggle to survive ([IRAM, 31 December 2021](#), [Financial Times, 25 January 2021](#), [World Bank, October 2022](#)).
- **Unemployment rate:** Approximately 11.8% (2017), with youth unemployment being more than twice as high at 23.7% (2020)

According to the World Bank country overview:

- **Economy:** "Iran's economy is slowly emerging from a decade-long stagnation bogged by two rounds of economic sanctions ... and the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite adjustments that partially mitigated the impact of external shocks, the economy remains constrained by widespread inefficiencies and price distortions that have contributed to the economy's subpar performance. While social protection measures partly mitigated pressures, the lack of targeting and inflation indexation reduced their impact over time. Furthermore, climate change challenges in Iran have hurt growth, especially in labor-intensive agriculture and industry sectors, following record high temperatures and low rainfalls. These factors constrain the pace of recovery and the dynamism of the economy in the outlook."
- **GDP:** "Average GDP growth is projected to remain modest in the medium term as the economy remains constrained by the continued impact of the pandemic through weaker domestic and global demand, while trade, especially oil exports, remains restricted by ongoing sanctions."
- **Economic outlook:** "Iran's economic outlook is subject to significant risks. On the upside, further increase in oil prices can directly boost fiscal revenues and indirectly lead to a faster growth in oil export volumes. Downside risks relate to the resurgence of new COVID-19 variants, worsening climate change impact, and heightened geopolitical tensions including the war in Ukraine's impact on global food prices and Iran's imports."

Iran's economy profited from the lifting of (economic) sanctions following the international 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 nuclear deal and the re-imposition of US-sanctions. The re-

imposed sanctions have prolonged the post-COVID-19 recovery process.

A 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), the powerful military and security organization commissioned to protect the regime, 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 to carry out major reforms. This explains why economist Dr Bijan Khajehpour 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](#), Swedish Institute of International Affairs, June 2020, p.16).

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 for Tehran 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 such anti-terrorism norms would endanger its survival.

Women are, in general, the most economically vulnerable in Iran due to both low female employment rates (see UNDP's HDI profile) and patrilineal inheritance practices. Sharia rules of inheritance are applied, whereby daughters typically receive half the share that sons receive ([OECD, 2019](#)). Women have reportedly suffered the most economically through the COVID-19 pandemic ([Wilson Center, November 2021](#)).

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 social discrimination. Iran's unemployment rate has been above 10% for the last decade. The situation for university graduates is particularly difficult since they make up 40% of the unemployed (BTI report 2022). 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 work with government employers.

## Social and cultural landscape

According to the CIA Factbook:

- **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:** 76.8% of total population lives in urban areas (2022), with an annual urbanization rate of 1.32%

- **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 around 37% of the population.
- **Education:** In general, Iranians enjoy 15 years of education. However, although no less than 2,640 universities exist in the country, levels of education are poor on the whole. Education "suffers from both externally imposed sanctions and blatant internal mismanagement and the predominance of religious dogmas over rational decision-making" (BTI report 2022). This is probably part of the reason why Iran ranked 128th out of 141 countries on "critical thinking in education" and 92nd in "overall skills" in the World Economic Forum's [Global Competitiveness Report 2019](#).
- **IDPs/Refugees:** Around 3.4 million Afghan refugees, mostly undocumented, reside in the country, alongside 20,000 Iraqi's (2020).

According to the UN Global Human Development Indicators (HDI profile):

- **HDI score and ranking:** Iran ranks #76 out of 191 countries. Despite the ongoing difficulties, the combined ratio of life expectancy, education and per capita income gives a high HDI score of 0.774. 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](#), Swedish Institute of International Affairs, June 2020, p.9). However, "the Islamic Republic strongly oppresses and discriminates against religious minorities [and] they are the victims of severe socioeconomic exclusion ... Members of minorities do not hold high offices and are often discriminated against in daily life, including through arrests and victimization, suspension of business licenses and closures of shops" (BTI report 2022).
- **Life expectancy:** 73.9 years on average; women (76.8 years), men (71.2 years).
- **Gender inequality:** With a Gender Development Index (GDI) score of 0.880, 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.

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 measures against them (AI country report 2021/22). The "brain drain" from Iran will likely continue, as few believe change is possible and choose instead to leave the country. As a result, the Iranian diaspora is growing rapidly and is presently estimated to number about 6 million. Faced with limited opportunities at home, thou-

sands of Iranians leave the country each year to work or study abroad, often not intending to return ([Migration Policy Institute, 22 April 2021](#)).

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. Women require permission from a male guardian to obtain a passport or to travel freely, restricting their physical freedom ([Al-Monitor, 8 March 2021](#)). Iran has a strong honor-shame culture and so-called 'honor killings' remain prevalent. Incidences of violence against women reportedly increased in the context of COVID-19 ([Human Rights Watch, 2022](#)). Activists have continued to campaign for Iran to adopt the draft law "Protection, Dignity and Security of Women against Violence" (which has been under discussion in parliament since September 2019), although it contains several gaps, such as a failure to address marital rape ([HRW, 4 December 2020](#)).

Violations of the rights of Christians in Iran are 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 skepticism.

## Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (IWS 2022):

- **Internet usage:** 91.0% penetration - survey date: January 2022  
Internet usage saw an increase of almost 11% in two years, with the previous survey showing 80.5% penetration in December 2019.
- **Facebook usage:** 46.6% penetration - survey date: January 2022

According to the World Bank country profile:

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 151.9 per 100 people

According to [Georgetown](#), 91.2% 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 2021/22", p.78).

Freedom House' Freedom on the Net 2021 report rates Iran as "Not Free", with a very low score of 16/100 points. According to the report, websites, social media and other communications platforms face widespread censorship and pro-government commentators actively manipulate online discussions. According to a previous report by Freedom House ([Freedom on the Net 2019](#)), 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; even reporting critically on the spread of COVID-19 in the country saw several journalists end up in jail. The report also states that the Iranian government actively tries to hack accounts belonging to 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 calls and SMS texts.

According to World Press Freedom 2022:

- "Iran is one of the world's ten worst countries for press freedom ... and it remains one of the most repressive ones for journalists. As the country's media is largely controlled by the Islamic regime, the main sources of news and information come from media outlets that are based abroad. Journalists and independent media in Iran are constantly persecuted by means of arbitrary arrests and very heavy sentences handed down after grossly unfair trials before revolutionary courts. ... At least 1,000 journalists and citizen-journalists have been arrested, detained, murdered, disappeared or executed by the Iranian regime since 1979. This crackdown on press freedom is not confined to Iran's borders. Iranian journalists working for international media are also subjected to a great deal of harassment."

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 state-of-the-art monitoring systems from China and is able to monitor its citizens, including their movements, purchases, tele-communications and online activity. There is also 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](#)).

## Security situation

In November 2019, Iran saw some of the bloodiest protests in decades. Probably around 1,500 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 its 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 has experience 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 which consists of volunteers and is part of the Revolutionary Guard. Both will defend Iran at all costs, if the country is attacked. However, it is unlikely that any war will happen in Iran itself, as Tehran will try to fight all 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 attack Saudi Arabia's biggest oil processing facility (September 2019) or industrial areas near Abu Dhabi in the UAE (January 2022) without help from Iran.

Iran faces tensions with Saudi Arabia and in particular with the USA, although rapprochement with the Sunni kingdom is being sought ([Arab News, 4 July 2022](#)). These tensions are partly due to allegations against Iran made by the USA and partly due to violent activities in the Strait of Hormuz. Iran is being held responsible for so-called terrorist activities in Saudi Arabia and for seizing foreign (oil)tankers. The assassination of Iran's most senior military commander Major General 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. However, the naval shadow war with Israel increased in 2021 with the Israelis damaging an alleged Iranian 'spy ship' and with Iran's largest navy vessel mysteriously catching fire and sinking ([BBC News, 7 April 2021](#), [The Guardian, 2 June 2021](#)). In March 2021, Israel apparently downed two Iranian drones heading towards Israel. Meanwhile, Israel has been attacking Iranian targets in Syria for years now. ([New York Times, 13 July 2022](#), [BBC News, 13 January 2021](#), [Reuters, 13 November 2022](#)) In May 2022, Israel assassinated the deputy head of an IRGC special unit in front of his house in Tehran, who was allegedly involved in worldwide kidnappings ([The Times of Israel, 26 May 2022](#)). In June 2022, Turkey foiled an alleged Iranian retaliation plot to kill Israeli tourists in Turkey ([Al-Jazeera, 23 June 2022](#)). In the meantime, the threat of an all-out war between Israel and Iran is not unrealistic, particularly because a) a new nuclear deal is unlikely to be reached anytime soon, b) the Iranian authorities urgently need a distraction from the domestic unrest following the death of Mahsa Amini, and c) in November 2022, Israel elected its most right-wing government ever ([Open Democracy, 12 November 2022](#)).

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 mainly to be seen as a consequence of Iran's oppression of Iranian Sunni Muslims ([Reuters, 2 March 2021](#)). In October 2022, at least 82 Balochi were killed by Iranian security forces to quell protests in the regional capital Zahedan ([Amnesty International, 6 October 2022](#)).

Internally, Iran's religious police, the Guidance Patrol, 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](#)). In September 2022, the force arrested 22-year old Mahsa Amini, who

died during detention and whose death ignited widespread protests. In November 2022, it was rumored that this police force had been disbanded, but those claims seem to be untrue ([AP News, 5 December 2022](#)).

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 information gathered is used against them in interrogations and trials as evidence of action against 'national security' or 'espionage for Zionist regimes'. 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 in which they agree to never get in (online) contact again with other Iranian or foreign Christians or 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.

## Trends analysis

### 1) Nuclear deal needed to ease crippling sanctions

The nuclear deal (JCPOA) between Iran and six major world powers in mid-2015, is still very relevant for Iran, even though the USA withdrew from it in May 2018. The Principlists are mainly opposed to the deal, as they fear that it could lead to social and political reforms and an undermining of the values of the Iranian Revolution. However, the economic necessity of easing the sanctions is forcing Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei to send his envoys back to the negotiation table. If he wants Raisi to succeed him as Supreme Leader, Khamenei needs to make his presidency a success and improve the economy, "which has always been a major factor in the success or failure of any Iranian president" ([Atlantic Council, 10 June 2021](#)). The USA's withdrawal from the JCPOA had previously put the moderates between a rock and a hard place, with the hardliners blaming them for concluding the deal with the arch-enemy in the first place. Now that all political offices are occupied by hardliners, they will have to prove that they can ease the sanctions and revive the economy. The prolonged and widespread protests following the death of Mahsa Amini show precisely that they have failed to do this.

Although currently jeopardized by Iran's violent suppression of the demonstrations and the weapon deliveries to Russia, US President Joe Biden seems still willing to return to the negotiation table. In the meantime, the sanctions imposed by his predecessor are still in place. It is likely that the Biden administration will also keep trying to confine Iran's influence in the region and will only make concessions if Iran significantly scales down its nuclear activities. Until now, it seems unlikely that the parties are willing to compromise. Even if the deal is ultimately revived, the relationship between the USA and Iran is likely to remain more or less hostile. Nonetheless, the USA's traditional Gulf allies have seemed willing for some time now to ease tensions with Iran ([Middle East Institute, 23 August 2022](#)). Yet, even Qatar, which has historically had a good standing with Iran, recently acquired advanced anti-drone weaponry, which can hardly be seen as anything else but concern over a possible drone threat from Iran ([The National, 7 December 2022](#)).

## 2) Oppression of any form of dissent - Christians viewed as a threat

The violent response to the protests following the death of Mahsa Amini, including death sentences for a number of protesters, shows that the regime will not hold back when it feels threatened. Another way of getting the message across that the values of the Revolution are still standing strong, is the continuing crackdown on media, human rights and political activists. The suppression of Iranians holding dual nationality and dissidents (including religious minorities) is at a very high level. 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. 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.

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## WWL 2023: 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 killed thousands of Assyrian Christians and almost completely destroyed the Church of the East. In 1830, some 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		30.3
Catholic		1.0
Protestant		5.3
Independent		60.8
Unaffiliated		2.4
Doubly-affiliated Christians		0.0
<b>Total</b>		<b>99.9</b>
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement		14.3
Renewalist movement		50.6

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

**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.

Although there are no exact numbers regarding the historical Armenian and Assyrian communities, all sources agree that their numbers have decreased significantly since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The once significant historical Armenian community has declined by more than 80 percent. Although there is unclarity and Iranian official figures even suggest a renewed increase over the last two decades, the Armenian community probably declined from 250,000 at its peak before the Revolution to around 30 - 35,000 today.

[Source: James Barry. *Armenian Christians in Iran: Ethnicity, Religion, and Identity in the Islamic Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. if, 245-73.]

Similarly, the Assyrian community dwindled from 200,000 before 1979 to 50,000 today, with other sources claiming that only 20,000 Assyrians remain ([Assyrian Policy](#), accessed 7 December 2022, [Refworld](#), accessed 7 December 2022).

A distinction must be made between ethnicity and denomination here - although the majority of the Armenians and Assyrians belong to the Armenian Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church of the East respectively, others belong to the Armenian Catholic Church and the (Assyrian) Chaldean Catholic Church (both belonging to the wider Roman Catholic Church). An even smaller number have become Protestant, belonging to a number of denominations including the Assemblies of God, the Assyrian Pentecostal Church, the Assyrian Evangelical



Church, the Armenian Evangelical Church and the Anglican Church, among others.

Although the Protestant churches in particular were joined by a (small) number of converts from Islam to Christianity in the past, nowadays it is impossible to integrate converts in any of the Armenian or Assyrian churches. Hence, the majority of the thousands of Iranians converting to Christianity gather in small house groups, forming thousands of unconnected house-churches; others practice their faith in isolation, often only connected to other Christians online. Ethnic Armenians and Assyrians, often belonging to the Protestant denominations involved with and supporting house-churches, have been prosecuted and sentenced to long prison terms in the recent past.

## 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, where 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 most 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. The numbers of expatriate Christians nowadays are reportedly very low (less than 1,000).

**Historical Christian communities:** Historical ethnic Christian minorities such as the Armenian and Assyrian Christians are relatively free to practice their beliefs. 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 face legalized discrimination and 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. In the past, especially the leaders of Christian convert groups were prosecuted; but an increasing number of non-leaders have received similar charges and long prison terms for crimes against national security. 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.

## External Links - Church information

- Church spectrum today - additional information: Assyrian Policy - <https://www.assyrianpolicy.org/iran>
- Church spectrum today - additional information: Refworld - <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4cb826c3c.html>
- Christian communities and how they are affected: undermine - <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2016/12/iran-church-retreat-centre-confiscated-for-being-funded-by-cia/>

# WWL 2023: Persecution Dynamics / Iran

## Reporting period

1 October 2021 - 30 September 2022

## Position on the World Watch List

Iran: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2023	86	8
WWL 2022	85	9
WWL 2021	86	8
WWL 2020	85	9
WWL 2019	85	9

*Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods*

The scores for pressure in all spheres of life are at an extreme level. The 1 point increase in total score was mainly caused by an increase of reported violent incidents, including an abduction. The outlook for Iranian Christians, in particular converts from Islam to Christianity, is by no means improving. The country's political institutions, including the presidency, are all dominated by hardliners. The amendment and tightening of the penal code in 2021, which is also used to prosecute Christians, is all part of a wider development towards Iran becoming a totalitarian state. State surveillance is on the rise and the authorities are increasingly exerting a firmer grip on daily life and activities, an attitude reflected in the harsh responses to the protests that followed the death of Mahsa Amini on 16 September 2022.

## Persecution engines

Iran: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Very strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Weak
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Not at all
Clan oppression	CO	Medium
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Medium
Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
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, with evangelical Christians in particular being considered a Zionist influence as well 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 (see above: *Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period*).

### 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 within these groups.

### Christian denominational protectionism (Medium)

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	MEDIUM			VERY STRONG	MEDIUM
Government officials	Very strong							Very strong	Medium
Ethnic group leaders				Medium	Medium				

Iran:									
Drivers of Persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	VERY STRONG			MEDIUM	MEDIUM			VERY STRONG	MEDIUM
Non-Christian religious leaders	Very strong								
Religious leaders of other churches					Medium				
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Weak								
One's own (extended) family	Medium			Medium					
Political parties	Strong								
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Strong								

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. 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):** Iran is headed by Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who rules in accordance with the *velayat-e faqih* ("the guardianship of the Islamic jurist"), the system of governance that underpins the Shia regime. High ranking Shia clerics fulfill key roles within the Iranian government, while 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 fanatical right-wing paramilitary group 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 blended in 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. In addition, according to the BTI 2020 Country Report, high-ranking "clerics and their family members (the so-called *Aghazadeh-ha*) ... hold monopolies in lucrative areas of the economy and are widely involved in illegal practices, such as corruption, smuggling and tax evasion". The same document reports that "the state sector (state-owned and semi-state-owned companies) accounts for about 80% of Iran's economic activity, while the private and cooperative sectors account for only 20%", indicating the major role played by the state authorities and the enormous (economic) interests of those in power ([BTI 2020 Country Report Iran](#), p. 19).

#### 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 ([The Guardian, 28 November 2016](#)).

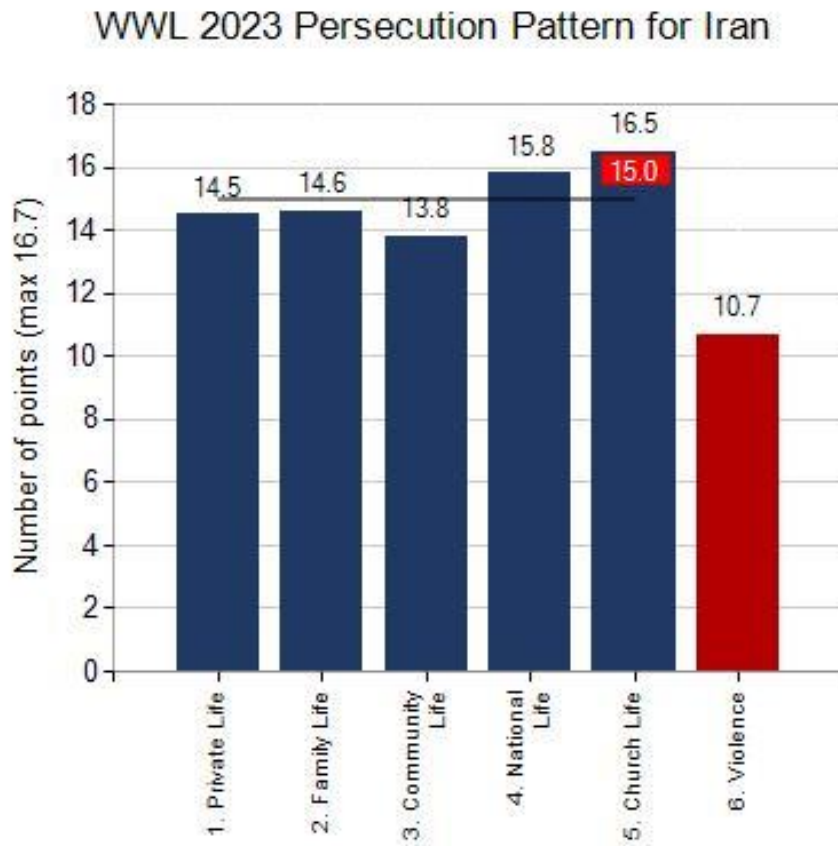
#### Drivers of Clan oppression

- **Ethnic group leaders (Medium):** Depending on the specific ethnic group, ethnic group leaders can play a significant role 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 (Medium):** The Armenian and Assyrian ethnic Christian minorities have altogether 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.

## The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2023 Persecution pattern for Iran shows:

- The average pressure on Christians stayed at an extremely high level (15.0 points), comparable to WWL 2022. The Iranian government is exerting pressure on Christians on a large scale.
- Although all spheres of life show extreme levels of pressure, pressure is by far the strongest in Church and National life. This reflects the fact that the pressure emanates mainly 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 10.7 points in WWL 2023.

## 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 2023 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: <https://openodoorsanalytical.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. Christians have been confronted with private messages and posts during interrogation. Although this mostly concerns converts, there is also a risk for other types of Christians, since sharing Christian messages can be interpreted as acts of proselytization, especially when written in Persian.

In addition, revealing one's faith publicly can lead to extra pressure from society and family, especially within conservative areas and families.

**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 Historical 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.

### **Block 1 - Additional information**

*Even within the Private sphere of life, most pressure stems from persecution by the Iranian government. Because the regime presents itself as the true representation of Islam, many Iranian families have actually distanced themselves from the Islamic faith. Nonetheless, within conservative religious families, especially in rural areas and among ethnic minorities, family pressure on converts from Islam to Christianity can be severe.*

## 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. A clear example is the case of Lydia - see above: Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period, September 2020).

### **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 study at university. Thus, post-secondary education is practically not available to converts with an Islamic background (unless they keep their new faith hidden 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)**

Many church leaders and ordinary church members have been imprisoned for long periods and this frequently has a negative impact on their families. 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 discrimination 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.

In addition, family members might disinherit converts from Islam to Christianity, especially among conservative families and ethnic minority groups.

## Block 2 - Additional information

*Extreme pressure in the Family sphere of life makes it very difficult for a family to live according to Christian faith and values. From baptism to marriage and funeral, all key family moments are severely hindered and very difficult to celebrate or arrange in a Christian way for converts from Islam to Christianity. In addition, providing a Christian education is hindered or made impossible for all Christian communities. It is one of the reasons why many Christians decide to flee Iran.*

## 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 in public 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, for instance during 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 80% of the economy directly and doing business in Iran is very much affected by clientelism and cronyism. Those belonging to Historical Christian communities, such as Armenians and Assyrians, will face discrimination when doing business, while other types of Christian do not stand a chance of conducting business in Iran at all.

### Block 3 - Additional information

*It is difficult for Christians in Iran to participate in daily community life, particularly for converts from Islam to Christianity. Christians experience discrimination in both the public and private sector, especially because most of the economy is controlled by the state. Even officially recognized Christians have to participate in state approved religious ceremonies. Women and girls belonging to the historical Christian communities have to veil themselves, even in their own schools.*

## Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

### **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 2023 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. (4.00 points)**

Both government officials and family members can act with impunity against converts from Islam to Christianity. Many detained Christians are subjected to harsh interrogation and torture by government officials, while converts from Islam to Christianity, especially those belonging to ethnic minorities, can be mistreated by their family members with impunity. For recognized Christians, part of that impunity is even codified in law: for example, Article 310 of Iran's Penal Code decrees retribution in kind for the murder of a Muslim, or if a non-Muslim kills another non-Muslim. However, if a Muslim murders a non-Muslim, no punishment is prescribed. Hence, the murder case of an American woman was delayed for five years, because it was unclear whether she had converted to Islam or not. Ultimately, it was established she had converted to Islam before her death and subsequently the perpetrator was hanged ([Article Eighteen, 17 August 2022](#)). Following the same logic, in 2016, a Bahai man was murdered for his beliefs, but the attackers were released after a few months.

**Block 4.16: International monitoring has been hindered when Christians had to stand trial. (4.00 points)**

It is difficult to monitor judicial prosecutions of Christians in Iran and it is likely that a significant number of faith-related cases against Christians remain unknown because the victims are forced into silence. Even the UN Special Rapporteur and his two most recent predecessors have not been allowed to visit the country.

**Block 4 - Additional information**

*Although officially recognized in the Constitution, even the historical Armenian and Assyrian Christian communities are severely hindered in participating in the National sphere of life. There is almost no room for Christians in any official position, as being a (Shia) Muslim is often a key requirement. While it is impossible for converts to Christianity to establish any sort of NGO or civil society organization, the historical Christian communities are forced to organize their own cultural groups behind closed doors and out of the public eye and are forbidden from letting any Iranian Muslim enter their premises. Other areas of legalized discrimination include employment, military service and inheritance laws, among others ([Article 18, 26 April 2021](#)).*

## 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. Only four Protestant Persian-speaking congregations remain in the country. These congregations are prohibited from accepting converts from Islam to Christianity, are not allowed to accept visitors nor can they take on any new members. All other Persian-speaking churches - both Catholic and Protestant – have been forcibly closed down in recent years. Severe surveillance of house-churches leads to high levels of fear among those attending.

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

All officially recognized churches are forbidden from welcoming Muslim-background Christians to their meetings and activities. 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 (with the above mentioned four small churches being the exception made for reasons of propaganda). 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 Chaldean churches. However, usually the heads of Armenian and Assyrian schools are Muslim. Furthermore, following the Revolution, the number of Armenian and Assyrian teachers in these schools has significantly reduced.

**Block 5 - Additional information**

*Church life remains the most limited sphere of life with only churches with Armenian, Assyrian or expatriate Christian members being able to function officially at all. Since the Revolution of 1979, no new churches have been built in Iran. Churches are not allowed to use Persian in their services or publish Christian material in Persian, making it de facto impossible for Iranians to join in worship, even if they dared to visit a church. In fact, the only visible churches in Iran are the ones that are useful in paying lip service to the regime in upholding its international image of religious tolerance.*

## 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, but since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as being minimum figures. The following 5 points should be considered when using the data provided in the Block 6 table:*

**1. Some incidents go unreported because the Christians involved choose not to speak about the hostility being faced.** Possible reasons for this may be:

- *Doing so would expose them to more attacks. For example, if a family member is killed because of his/her faith, the survivors might decide to keep silent about the circumstances of the killing to avoid provoking any further attacks.*
- *In some circumstances, the reticence to pass on information may be due to the danger of exposure caused by converts returning to their previous faith.*
- *If persecution is related to sexual violence - due to stigma, survivors often do not tell even their closest relatives.*
- *In some cultural settings, if your loved one is killed, you might be under the obligation to take revenge. Christians not wishing to do that, may decide to keep quiet about it.*

**2. Other incidents go unreported for the following possible reasons:**

- Some incidents never reach the public consciousness, because no one really knows about it; or the incident is simply not considered worth reporting; or media coverage is deliberately blocked or distorted; or media coverage is not deliberately blocked, but the information somehow gets lost; or the incidents are deliberately not reported widely for security reasons (e.g. for the protection of local church leaders).
- In situations where Christians have been discriminated against for many years, armed conflict can make them additionally vulnerable. Christians killed in areas where fighting regularly takes place are unlikely to be reported separately. Examples in recent years have been Sudan, Syria and Myanmar.
- Christians who die through the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care (due to long-term discrimination) are unlikely to be reported separately. Christians are not always killed directly; they can be so squeezed by regulations and other oppressive factors that they die – not at once, but in the course of years. This often includes the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care, or exclusion from government assisted socio-economic development projects. These numbers could be immense.

**3. For further discussion** (with a focus on the complexity of assessing the numbers of Christians killed for their faith) please see World Watch Monitor's article dated 13 November 2013 available at:

<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2013/11/number-of-christian-martyrs-continues-to-cause-debate/>.

**4. The use of symbolic numbers:** In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10\*, 100\* etc.) is given and indicated with an asterisk. 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 1,000\* could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000\*, 100,000\* and 1,000,000\*: Each could indicate much higher numbers, but WWR chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.

**5. The symbol "x" in the table:** This denotes a known number which cannot be published due to security concerns.

Iran: Violence Block question		WWL 2023	WWL 2022
6.1	How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	0	0
6.2	How many churches or public Christian properties (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	15	19
6.3	How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	48	49
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?	32	16
6.5	How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	1	0
6.6	How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	10 *	3
6.7	How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	30	30



6.8	How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	212	114
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?	35	14
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?	21	15
6.11	How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	100 *	90
6.12	How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	1000 *	1000 *

In the WWL 2023 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 is comparable to WWL 2022, but more Christians received prison sentences.
- **Christians attacked:** Many arrested 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 previously confiscated Christian buildings have been repurposed by the regime.
- **Christian homes/shops attacked:** 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.
- **Christians forced to flee:** it is estimated that at least 100 Iranian Christians had to relocate within the country for faith-related (safety) reasons. In addition, although it is impossible to know exactly how many Iranians flee the country each year, it is estimated that at least 1000 Christians have fled the country. Reliable sources claim that the number of refugees continued to increase during the WWL 2023 reporting period and might even have reached 5000.

## 5 Year trends

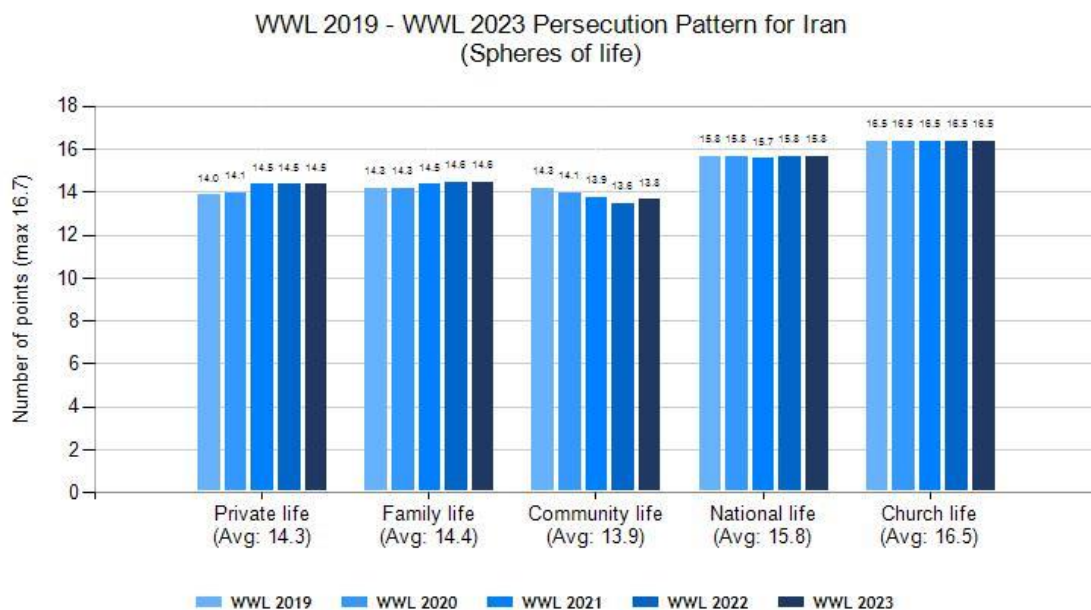
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

## 5 Year trends: Average pressure

Iran: WWL 2019 - WWL 2023 Persecution Pattern history	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2023	15.0
2022	15.0
2021	15.0
2020	14.9
2019	15.0

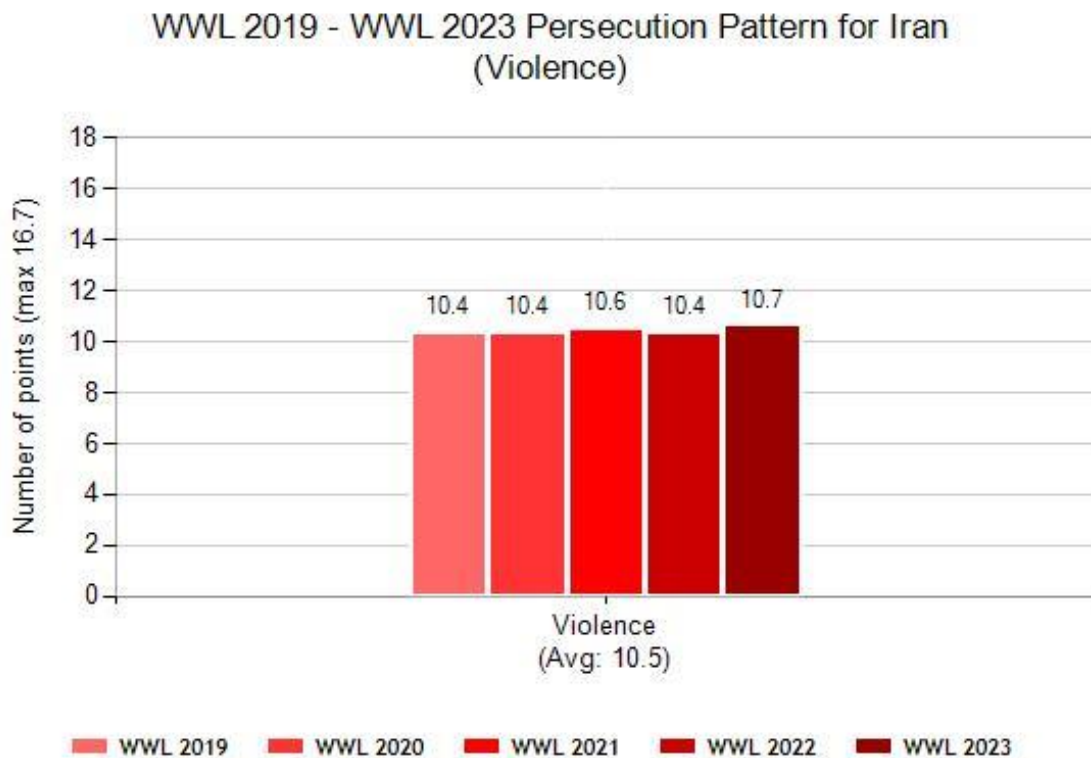
The table above shows that the overall level of pressure on Christians has been constant at an extreme level of 14.9/15.0 points over the last five reporting periods.

## 5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life



The chart above shows that all *spheres of life* have experienced extreme levels of pressure in the last five WWL reporting periods. Levels of pressure remained more or less stable in most spheres of life, with *National* and *Church life* scoring highest. Pressure in *Community life* has shown a slight decrease over the past five years, partly reflecting a growing apathy among the Iranian population towards Islam and the regime.

## 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 WWL reporting periods and has remained stable at the very high level of 10.4-10.7 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

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Denied custody of children; Forced marriage; Imprisonment by government; Travel bans/restrictions on movement
Security	Incarceration by family (house arrest); Violence – death; Violence – physical; Violence – sexual
Social and Cultural	Denied access to social community/networks; Enforced religious dress code; Violence – psychological; Violence – Verbal
Technological	-

Iranian women have few legally protected individual freedoms and are heavily constrained, a situation which came back to international attention with the death of Mahsa Amini. Amini. Her death in September 2022, after being beaten by morality police under hijab regulations, sparked nationwide protests over the restrictions on women and the state of the Iranian nation as a whole ([Euronews, 2 November 2022](#)). “Amini’s death has now become a symbol of the violent oppression women have faced in Iran for decades ...” ([CNN, 25 September 2022](#)).

To additionally be a woman is particularly precarious for Christians 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. While this has allowed many women to fulfil their spiritual 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, and can damage their chances to find work.

With many churches forced to shut down and Christians increasingly isolated, some Christian women, particularly Muslim background converts, are forced to marry Muslims. This pressure from family and local community affects both women and girls; it is possible for girls as young as nine to [legally be married](#) (HRW, Human Rights Report 2020). If a female convert is an already-married mother, it is highly likely that the custody of the children will be taken from her to ensure the children are raised in accordance with Islamic law. A country expert shares: “Forced separation of children from Christian mothers is one of the most terrifying acts for believer women. The arrest and imprisonment of Christian women have in some cases caused serious disturbances in their families.” 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 multiple eyewitnesses, accounting for a women’s testimony being worth half of a man’s.

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

## Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	Economic harassment via business/job/work access
Political and Legal	-

Security	Forced to flee town/country; Military/militia conscription/service against conscience; Violence – physical
Social and Cultural	Denied access to social community/networks; Violence – psychological
Technological	-

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 experiencing physical and mental abuse while detained. Men are more often arrested in urban areas, whereas in rural regions they are forced to flee the area and can be forced out of their homes. Lengthy imprisonments can cost families; sometimes the strain and emotional pain caused by separation leads to divorce and child trauma.

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 are of 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, with an expert commenting: "If the male breadwinner of a family loses his job/business/income because of persecution, it can lead to financial ruin for the family." 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 (including the threat of apostasy) and harassment, they are likely to flee the country, which naturally impacts the family emotionally and financially.

## Persecution of other religious minorities

Bahai, Sunni, Sufi (Dervish) Muslims and other religious minorities (for example, 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 (IRFR 2021):

- "The UN Secretary General's August report compiled by OHCHR, IHR, and other human rights activists continued to report a disproportionately large number of executions of Sunni prisoners, particularly Kurds, Baluchis, and Arabs" (page 15).
- "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 11).

- "Activists and NGOs reported that the government continued to detain or disappear Yarsani activists and community leaders for engaging in awareness-raising regarding government practices or discrimination against the Yarsani community." (page 25).

A 2022 USCIRF report on propaganda against religious minorities noted ([USCIRF, July 2022](#)):

Concerning adherents of Bahá'í:

- "The campaign against the Bahá'ís continued its long-running accusations of political influence and intrigue. A long-standing accusation against the Bahá'ís is the charge that they threaten Iran's territorial integrity by promoting global citizenship and undermining national borders. ... For instance, Fars News ran a story entitled "An Overview of the Bahá'í Institutions' Sabotage in the Economic Arena." The article stated, "The Bahá'í institutions are focused on infiltrating and gaining organized influence on the society's macroeconomics through boosting black markets such as smuggling, hoarding, and money laundering. In recent years, and considering America's economic war against Iran, it has become more intense so that they can fight for the enemy in the front line of this soft war, much more so than other cultish movements."

Concerning Gonabadi Dervishes:

- "The misinformation campaign against Gonabadi Dervishes continued with the theme of portraying them as proponents of political violence. ... Propaganda against Gonabadi Dervishes portrayed them as a violent sect tied to foreign entities. A cartoon published on a news site in February 2018 depicted a Dervish giving an angry stare, with the Star of David as the pupils of his eyes. The cartoon was entitled "ISIS-Zionist Dervishes. ... [and] in 2021, a five-minute video about Gonabadi Dervishes was posted to Aparat, a Persian-language video sharing platform authorized to operate in Iran. ... [The] video stated that Dervishes were plotting against the Iranian government alongside the Baha'is."

Concerning the Jewish community:

- "A recent line of anti-Semitic attacks has involved criticism of Purim celebrations. ... Iranian media have portrayed contemporary Purim celebrations as an anti-Iranian political statement by glorification of the killing of ancient Persians. In a piece published on Mehr News, Purim is described as the most important Jewish holiday and is claimed to celebrate mass murder of Iranians."

Concerning Sunni Muslims:

- "In December 2021, Mohammad Hossein Gorgij, a Sunni cleric ..., stated that the second Caliph, Umar, had arranged the marriage of Hossein, the third Shi'a Imam, and his wife, a Persian princess. Therefore, he argued, if a person does not accept Umar as the rightful caliph, he or she has questioned the legitimacy of Shi'a Imams. This statement was considered offensive and led to his dismissal ... . In a piece published in Fars News, a major conservative news site, the author demanded that the judiciary should take action against him and put down "Saudi-Israeli" seditions. ... Another feature of anti-Sunni sentiment is

expressing alarm over reports that birth rate is higher in areas where Sunnis reside compared to where Shi'as live. Several Shi'a clerics have publicly voiced their concerns."

Other examples:

- President Raisi oversaw the execution of at least 620 people during his term as head of the judiciary. At least 477 executions have taken place during his successor's first year in office ([Iran HRM, 1 July 2022](#)). Hence, the number of executions appears to have increased since Raisi became president. A disproportionate number of those executed belong to ethnic and religious minorities.
- In June 2022, 26 Bahais received a combined total of 85 years in prison, in addition to revocation of their passports and travel bans ([Iran HRM, 12 June 2022](#)).
- The Baha'i International Community reported that Baha'is are regularly refused access to university courses ([BIC, 4 July 2022](#)).
- In October 2022, at least 82 Baluchi were killed by Iranian security forces to quell protests in the regional capital Zahedan ([Amnesty International, 6 October 2022](#)). Earlier on, in February 2021, Iranian security forces dealt violently with protests in Saravan, another city in the Baluchestan province. At least 40 Baluchi citizens were killed ([Iran HRM, 9 December 2021](#)).

## Future outlook

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

### Islamic oppression

As long as the Islamic regime retains control of all government institutions and keeps a firm grip on the Iranian economy, it will be very difficult to bring any real political change in Iran, despite the ongoing protests. However, an increasing number of Iranians do not trust the regime anymore and are openly calling for change, as clearly displayed during the protests following the death of Mahsa Amini. 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. However, in contrast to other Middle Eastern countries, systematic state persecution and discrimination looks set to remain the most signifi-



cant challenge to be faced by Christians and other religious minorities.

### 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 also using these violations of the rights of Christians to enrich themselves.

## External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Drivers of persecution description: BTI 2020 Country Report Iran - <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/IRN>
- Drivers of persecution description: The Guardian, 28 November 2016 - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2016/nov/28/iranian-judicial-authorities-attempt-arrest-of-mp-mahmoud-sadeghi>
- Block 4.14: Those who caused harm to Christians have deliberately been left unpunished. (4.00 points): Article Eighteen, 17 August 2022 - <https://articleeighteen.com/analysis/11503/>
- Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere: Article 18, 26 April 2021 - <https://articleeighteen.com/analysis/8506/>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: Euronews, 2 November 2022 - <https://www.euronews.com/2022/11/02/iran-protests-what-caused-them-who-is-generation-z-will-the-unrest-lead-to-revolution>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: CNN, 25 September 2022 - <https://www.cnn.com/2022/09/24/middleeast/mahsa-amini-death-iran-internet-un-investigation-intl-hnk>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: legally be married - <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/IRAN-2020-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: USCIRF, July 2022 - <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2022-07/2022%20Iran%20Propaganda%20Report.pdf>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Iran HRM, 1 July 2022 - <https://iran-hrm.com/2021/10/07/high-number-of-iran-executions-in-2021/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Iran HRM, 12 June 2022 - <https://iran-hrm.com/2022/06/12/26-iranian-bahais-sentenced-to-85-years-in-prison/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: BIC, 4 July 2022 - <https://www.bic.org/news/44-iranian-bahais-arrested-arraigned-or-jailed-june-leading-human-rights-figure-says-situation-getting-worse>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Amnesty International, 6 October 2022 - <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/iran-least-82-protesters-and-bystanders-killed-bloody-crackdown-baluchistan>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Iran HRM, 9 December 2021 - <https://iran-hrm.com/2021/12/09/human-rights-situation-in-iran-in-2021/>

## Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the new Research & Reports page of the website od.org. As in earlier years, they are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom) using the following links:

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Iran>