

World
Watch
Research

Kuwait: Country Dossier

December 2020



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

December 2020

research@od.org

Contents

Introduction	3
World Watch List 2021	3
Copyright notice	4
Sources and definitions	4
Effect on data-gathering during COVID-19 pandemic.....	4
External Links - Introduction	5
WWL 2021 Short country profile / Kuwait	5
Brief country details	5
Dominant persecution engines and drivers	5
Brief description of the persecution situation	6
Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period	6
External Links - Short country profile.....	6
WWL 2021: Keys to understanding / Kuwait.....	7
Link for general background information	7
Recent history	7
Political and legal landscape	8
Religious landscape	9
Economic landscape.....	10
Social and cultural landscape.....	12
Technological landscape	13
Security situation	14
Trends analysis.....	14
External Links - Keys to understanding	14
WWL 2021: Church information / Kuwait	16
Christian origins.....	16
Church spectrum today.....	16
WWL 2021: Persecution Dynamics / Kuwait	18
Reporting period	18
Position on the World Watch List	18
Persecution engines	18
Drivers of persecution.....	20
Areas where Christians face most difficulties	22
Christian communities and how they are affected	23

The Persecution pattern.....	23
Pressure in the 5 spheres of life.....	24
Violence.....	28
5 Year trends	29
Gender-specific religious persecution Female.....	31
Gender-specific religious persecution Male	32
Persecution of other religious minorities.....	33
Future outlook.....	33
External Links - Persecution Dynamics.....	34
Further useful reports.....	34

Introduction

World Watch List 2021

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

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

Copyright notice

No copyright - This report is the property of World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge WWR as the source.

Sources and definitions

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

Effect on data-gathering during COVID-19 pandemic

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

External Links - Introduction

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

WWL 2021 Short country profile / Kuwait

Brief country details

Kuwait: Population (2020 UN estimate)	Christians	Chr%
4,303,000	513,000	11.9

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

Kuwait: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2021	63	48
WWL 2020	62	43
WWL 2019	60	43
WWL 2018	61	34
WWL 2017	57	38

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

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Kuwait: Main persecution engines	Main drivers
Islamic oppression	Non-Christian religious leaders, Government officials, One's own (extended) family, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Political parties, Ethnic group leaders
Clan oppression	One's own (extended) family, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders, Government officials
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials

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

Brief description of the persecution situation

Expatriate Christians are relatively free to worship informally. However, the existing places registered for worship are very small for the number of people gathering and this can lead to tension between the different Christian groups. Obtaining property for gathering for worship is extremely difficult. In addition, proselytizing in any way is strictly forbidden and will lead to expulsion from the country.

Local converts from Islam bear the brunt of persecution as they face pressure from both family members and the local community to recant their Christian faith. They risk discrimination, harassment, monitoring of their activities by the police, and all sorts of intimidation by vigilante groups. Moreover, conversion from Islam to another faith is not officially recognized and is likely to lead to legal problems in personal status and property matters. Expatriate Muslims converting to Christianity experience pressure similar to that in their home countries, as they are often living within their own national or ethnic communities. Despite this, there are hardly ever reports of Christians being killed, imprisoned or harmed for their faith.

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

- At least one female Kuwaiti convert from Islam to Christianity had to flee the country because of family, societal and government pressure. In general, most Kuwaiti converts seek refuge outside the country after their conversion, indicating the existing very high levels of pressure.
- Violent incidents against Christians are rarely reported. Incidents where Christian migrant workers are targeted probably go unreported because it is in nobody's interest to go public with any details; the victim wants to keep his or her job and other actors (like the government) are not interested in recording such occurrences. Secondly, it is difficult to discern whether or not mistreatment is due to a worker's Christian faith. However, it is estimated that thousands of expatriate Christians face abuse. According to a report by [Amnesty International](#) - AI (AI, "All Work No Pay", 2019), despite promises to improve labor conditions, thousands of migrant workers still suffer from labour abuses. [In an earlier report](#) (AI, "My Sleep Is My Break", 2014), AI highlighted practices of (sexual) abuse of especially female migrant workers, many of whom are Christian.

External Links - Short country profile

- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: Amnesty International - <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE2207932019ENGLISH.PDF>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: In an earlier report - https://www.amnesty.org.uk/files/qatar_my_sleep_is_my_break_final.pdf

WWL 2021: Keys to understanding / Kuwait

Link for general background information

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

Recent history

Kuwait became independent from Britain in 1961, with the Emir always stemming from the Al-Sabah family, which has ruled Kuwait since the mid-18th century. Oil was discovered in the 1930s and has fundamentally changed Kuwait since. The Gulf war (1990-1991) saw Kuwait being invaded by Saddam Hussein's Iraq and subsequently being liberated by a coalition of forces led by the USA. Kuwait has become an even stronger US ally since then. In 1963, Kuwait was the first Gulf state to establish an elected parliament ([BBC Kuwait country profile, last accessed 23 December 2020](#)). The Kuwaiti parliament is one of the strongest parliaments in the region, which has frequently led to political upheaval between elected (opposition) members and the authoritarian government.

In 2011, the Arab Spring uprisings inspired some protests in Kuwait but to little effect. However, the emir-appointed prime minister and his cabinet resigned in December 2011 due to alleged corruption. In October 2012, parliament was dissolved once more due to on-going tensions between government forces and the opposition composed of Islamic and tribal factions. The political crisis continued into 2013 when the country held its third round of parliamentary elections within 16 months. In the 2016 elections, the opposition won 16 of the 50 seats ([The Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2018](#)). The opposition managed to expand their numbers of seats to 24 in the 2020 elections, making up almost half of parliament. The only female MP lost her seat and none of the 29 female candidates were elected ([BBC News, 7 December 2020](#)).

In September 2020, Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmed al-Sabah died at the age of 91. He had ruled the country since 2006, but was nicknamed "the dean of Arab diplomacy" for overseeing Kuwait's foreign policy since 1963 ([BBC News, 29 September 2020](#)). He has been succeeded by his 83-year old half-brother Sheikh Nawaf al-Ahmed, which seems to have been a choice for continuity and stability over younger candidates of the royal family.

In February 2018, a [diplomatic row erupted](#) between Kuwait and the Philippines, after a Philippine domestic worker was found dead in a freezer, revealing the tip of the iceberg of domestic worker abuse (The Washington Post, 3 April 2018). In reaction, Philippine President Duterte imposed a travel ban for Philippine migrants to Kuwait. After both governments came to an agreement about worker rights in May 2018, the travel ban was lifted. The solutions include the right for Philippine domestic workers to keep their passport during employment, even when they have a day off. Under the *kafala* system, domestic workers had to hand over their passport to their employers to prevent them from potentially running away. A Kuwaiti blogger pointed out that employers invest [thousands of dollars](#) to employ such workers and publicly criticized this new arrangement and was subsequently accused of having a 'slavery mentality' (World Gulf, 23 July 2018). Abuse of domestic workers is a big problem in Kuwait but it is difficult to discern to what extent an employee's Christian faith adds to their vulnerability.

Political and legal landscape

Kuwait is a constitutional monarchy whose head of state is the Emir of the al-Sabah family and was the first Arab country in the Gulf to have an [elected parliament](#). In May 2005 parliament gave women the right to vote and stand as candidates in elections for the 50-seat National Assembly. However, it took until the 2016 elections before the first female MP was elected. No female MP was elected during the 2020 parliamentary election.

Kuwait tries to keep a neutral position at the international level and did not join Saudi Arabia and the UAE in its boycott of Qatar. It is actively trying to reconcile the Qatari crisis, with Emir Sheikh al-Sabah [stating](#) in October 2019 that "it is not acceptable to have a dispute among our brotherly GCC states" (Al-Jazeera, 29 October 2019). Its neutral position is also pragmatic, as Kuwait has a significant Shia minority (30%), while Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood enjoy support as well and have seats in the parliament. Hence, normalizing ties with Israel like the UAE and Bahrain would most probably jeopardize stability in the country ([Reuters, 16 August 2020](#)).

Compared to other countries in the Arabian Peninsula Kuwait generally ranks better in civil liberties and freedom of the press and Kuwaitis are proud of their tradition of active political participation. Freedom House's [Freedom in the World 2020 Report](#) ranks Kuwait "partly free", making it an exception in the wider region. However, [Human Right Watch](#) reports (HRW, last accessed 23 December 2020):

- "Kuwait continued to restrict free speech, using provisions in the Constitution, the national security law, and other legislation to stifle political dissent."
- "Despite recent reforms, migrant workers do not have adequate legal protections, and remain vulnerable to abuse, forced labor, and deportation for minor infractions."
- "The government has yet to ensure a transparent and fair process to address the citizenship concerns of an estimated 100,000 Bidun, who claimed to be stateless in Kuwait."

Indigenous and expatriate Christians enjoy some protection under the Constitution, but are also limited by it. [Middle East Concern](#) reports (last accessed 23 December 2020):

- "The constitution of Kuwait enshrines Islam as the religion of the State and Islamic law as a main source of legislation. However, the constitution also affirms the principle of non-discrimination, including on the basis of religion. It guarantees State protection of freedom of religious practice, 'in accordance with established customs', provided that religious practice 'does not conflict with public policy or morals'. Public defamation of an officially recognised religious group or of their practices is a criminal offence. Nationality laws preclude the naturalisation of non-Muslims."

Religious landscape

Kuwait: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	513,000	11.9
Muslim	3,565,000	82.8
Hindu	160,000	3.7
Buddhist	0	0.0
Ethno-religionist	0	0.0
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	11,500	0.3
Atheist	700	0.0
Agnostic	35,000	0.8
Other	17,000	0.4
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

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

According to the US State Department's [2019 Report on International Religious Freedom](#), the majority of the 1.4 million Kuwaitis (70%) are Sunni. However, a significant majority (30%) is Shia, which makes the Sunni Kuwaiti government careful in its dealings with Iran. In addition to a small number of Kuwaiti converts from Islam to Christianity, Kuwait has a small community of indigenous Kuwaiti Christians (numbering around 290). However, the overall majority of Christians are expatriates.

[Middle East Concern](#) reports (MEC, last accessed 23 December 2020):

- "Expatriate Christians enjoy comparative freedom in Kuwait, provided that their activities are restricted to designated compounds and, in particular, that they avoid interaction with Muslims that could be construed as proselytism. Most churches find their current facilities inadequate, and church compounds are typically overcrowded on days of worship as they seek to accommodate multiple congregations of various nationalities and languages. Requests made in recent years for additional building or land have been refused. Some churches are frustrated by the limited number of visas available for clergy and staff."

- "The small number of indigenous Kuwaiti Christians (i.e. from Christian backgrounds) generally enjoy good standing in society. In 2018, a Parliamentary Committee proposed a change to legislation to allow for non-Muslims to be eligible for Kuwaiti citizenship, but that proposal did not progress."
- "Kuwaiti nationals or other Muslims who choose to leave Islam are likely to face strong family and societal pressure. In extreme cases those who leave Islam can face violent responses from family members. Those considered apostates could also face imprisonment under the defamation provisions, and sanctions such as forcible divorce and removal of child custody under personal status laws overseen by Shari'a courts."

Humanist International's [Freedom of Thought Report](#) (updated 30 November 2020) ranks Kuwait as having "grave violations" and notes that the Constitution limits Freedom of Religion and Belief:

- "The Constitution guarantees freedom of religious practice, nevertheless it specifies that such practice must not contravene public order or morals and must work in accordance with established customs (Article 35). The government does not recognize Bahai, Buddhist, Hindu or Sikh groups which are not included in the Islamic principle of Abrahamic faiths (ahl al-kitab: Muslims, Jews, Christians). It also denied the recognition of several Christian groups. The recognition by the state often take years for approval and is not transparent."
- During recent years, human rights activists and others have been convicted for spreading atheism and secularism.

Although Kuwait has accepted some of the major United Nations conventions on human rights (e.g. the 1996 Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the 1996 Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights) non-Islamic religions face much opposition. In 2012, a member of Parliament [announced](#) a bill to put a halt on non-Islamic places of worship being built (Arabian Business, 19 February 2012). The bill was not approved but churches still have to operate carefully. Proselytizing Muslims is both illegal and socially unacceptable and churches tend to apply self-censorship to avoid this. Criticizing Islam or the Prophet Muhammed will lead to public prosecution; even suggesting that the Kuwaiti Constitution should have priority over the Quran in state affairs [can lead to charges and public hatred](#) (BBC News, 14 April 2016).

Economic landscape

According to the [World Factbook](#) (accessed 23 December 2020) and [World Bank data](#) (December 2020):

- **GPD per capita (PPP):** \$33,087 (2018 est.)
- **Unemployment:** 2.3%, with youth unemployment being 16.5% (2020), indicating the need for economic opportunities for the young population.
- **Percentage of population below national poverty line:** No data available, but probably low. The Kuwaiti government is known to take care of all citizens.

According to [World Bank's April 2020](#) and [October 2020 Economic Update](#):

- **COVID-19:** "Broad-based measures to stem the pandemic included suspending flights, closing schools/ universities, banning public gatherings, suspending nonessential work, and imposing 24-hour curfew. Kuwait's persistence with variants of these measures is one of the longest continuous stretches in the world. These measures have significantly impacted private spending, investment activity and overall GDP."
- **Economic growth:** "The protracted nature of the pandemic and slow government response has led to a downgrade in forecasts. Real GDP is now expected to contract by 7.9% of GDP in 2020 (compared to -5.4% forecasted in June 2020) as non-oil GDP growth is subdued by protracted public health measures ... Over the medium-term growth in Kuwait will recover with continued recurrent public spending and credit growth, reaching to 2.9% by 2022."
- **Decline in global demand for oil:** "Notwithstanding Kuwait's large oil reserves, the global shift to cleaner energy threatens economic and fiscal sustainability over the long term. Large financial assets underpin Kuwait's economic resilience, but fiscal and structural reform are key to offset the risks of lower oil prices and uncertain output."

Other sources report:

- The World Bank's [World by Income and Region report](#) (accessed 23 December 2020) puts the Kuwaiti economy in the high income category .
- The [2020 Fragile State Index](#) (accessed 23 December 2020) shows improvement in the economic indicators on average, with "Human Flight and Brain Drain" being relatively low.
- The [Economist Intelligence Unit](#) (accessed 23 December 2020) writes: "... The initial economic recovery from the pandemic will be muted. The reversal of OPEC-mandated oil output cuts in 2022 will boost growth in 2022-23, to an average of 4.9% a year."
- The [Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2020](#) states: "Kuwait's economy is highly dependent on oil and lacks diversity. Therefore, revenues are volatile and affected by oil price fluctuations. The drastic fall in the value of crude oil from mid-2014 to 2017 impacted GDP performance considerably. ... nominal GDP declined almost by 33%, from \$164 billion in 2013 to \$110 billion in 2016 ... reducing the contribution of oil to GDP from 66% in 2013 to 41% in 2016. With assets valued at \$592 billion, the Sovereign Wealth Fund Institute ranks the Kuwait Investment Authority (KIA) the fourth wealthiest sovereign wealth fund in the world."

Oil and gas wealth has eliminated much poverty in Kuwait, although poverty among expatriate workers is probably under-reported. High oil prices led to significant growth until the global financial crisis started in 2008 and heavily affected the country's economic performance. Nevertheless, Kuwait remains a relatively wealthy country, although the COVID-19 crisis created extra concerns on top of the low oil prices. Kuwait's immigrant workforce is larger than its citizen population. The total population of Kuwait is [estimated at](#) 4.3 million (World population review, last accessed 23 December 2020). According to the US State Department's [2019 IRF report](#), "there are 1.4 million citizens and 3.3 million non-citizens".

Although probably not primarily faith related, Christian expatriates do experience labor abuse, including low and non-paid salaries, confiscation of passports and other ways of unfair treatment. Kuwaiti converts from Islam to Christianity are very likely to face economic pressure. There is high chance they will lose employment and economic benefits provided by the state.

Social and cultural landscape

According to the [World Factbook](#) (accessed 23 December 2020):

- **Main ethnic groups:** The majority of the Kuwaiti population are from Arab decent. Other ethnicities include other Arab, Asian and African groups, among the wide variety of ethnicities that can be found within the expatriate community.
- **Main languages:** The official language is Arabic, with English being widely spoken as well.
- **Urban population:** In 2020, 100% of the population lived in urban areas, with an annual urbanization rate of 1.78%.
- **Literacy rate:** 96.1% of the population can read and write; with a small difference between men (96.7%) and women (94.9%)
- **Population/age:** The total population is around 4.4 million, with immigrants making up nearly 70.0% of the total population (2019 est.). The younger generation - up to 24 years of age - makes up almost 40.0% of the population, making it another country in the wider region with a young population in need of (economic) opportunities.
- **IDPs/Refugees:** Around 92000 stateless persons reside in Kuwait. They belong mostly to the Bidoon, descendants of (minor) Bedouin tribes who were not registered after Kuwait became an independent country.
- **Life expectancy:** 78.6 years on average; women (80.2 years), men (77.2 years).

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

- **HDI score and ranking:** Kuwait ranks #64 out 189 countries. The combined ratio of life expectancy, education and per capita income gives a very high score on the Human Development Index (HDI).
- **Education:** On average, Kuwaitis are expected to have 14.2 years of schooling.
- **Gender inequality:** with a GDI (Gender Development Index) score of 0.983, women are only slightly disadvantaged in comparison to men. The GDI measures the differences in life expectancy, years of education and GNI per capita per gender.

Society in Kuwait continues to be Islamic, conservative and organized along tribal lines. Sharia law prescribes a wide range of rules for personal, family and community life. According to Humanist International's [Freedom of Thought Report](#) (updated 30 November 2020), women face discrimination in law and practice. There are no laws against domestic violence or marital rape. According to the law, a male citizen of any religion transmits citizenship to their children. A Kuwaiti woman requires the permission of her father to marry. A Muslim man is allowed to marry Muslim, Jewish or Christian women, a female Muslim can only marry a Muslim man in accordance with Islamic law. The children have to be brought up in their father's faith and Islamic law is applied in marital disputes.

Under the official *kafala* sponsorship system, domestic workers are tied to their employers, who confiscate their passport and often force them to work excessive hours. This leaves them vulnerable to abuse. (Source: Amnesty International, [Amnesty International Report 2017/18](#), p. 288.) Hence although not primarily faith related, Christians in Oman do experience discrimination or abuse. Skin colour and ethnical background play a significant role in determining who is vulnerable for abuse. Hence, Western (white) Christian expatriates are far less likely to experience harassment than African or Asian Christian expatriates. In addition, high-skilled expatriates will face less difficulties than low-skilled migrants. In short, a low-skilled Christian migrant from an African background will be most vulnerable in Kuwait.

Technological landscape

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

- **Internet usage:** 99.1% penetration - survey date: December 2019
- **Facebook usage:** 95.8% penetration – survey date: February 2020

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

- **Mobile phone usage:** 178.6 per 100 people

Although Kuwait is not included in Freedom House's Freedom on the Net Report 2019, the advancement of communication technology and the increased use of social media has not led to an increased level of freedom of speech:

- Humanist International's [Freedom of Thought Report](#) writes: "Since the events of the Arab Spring throughout the Arab world, Kuwait has been cracking down on online media freedoms. Under the far-reaching Cybercrime Law passed in 2015, which imposes prison sentences and fines for insulting religion and religious figures, and for criticizing the emir over the Internet, the authorities have detained and prosecuted government critics and activists" (Humanist International, last accessed 23 December 2020).
- [Human Rights Watch](#) reports: "Kuwaiti authorities have invoked several provisions in the constitution, penal code, Printing and Publication Law, Misuse of Telephone Communications and Bugging Devices Law, Public Gatherings Law, and National Unity Law to prosecute journalists, politicians and activists for criticizing the emir, the government, religion, and rulers of neighboring countries in blogs or on Twitter, Facebook, or other social media" (HRW, last accessed 23 December 2020).
- [Reporters without Borders](#) describes the freedom of the press as highly restricted: "The vaguely-worded provisions of a cyber-crime law that took effect in January 2016 pose a threat to bloggers and online journalists who post any critical content. ... The restrictions are reflected in online censorship and in arrests and convictions of bloggers and online activists, who are accused of destabilizing Kuwait if they make any disparaging comment about the emir, his family, its allies or religion" (RSF, last accessed 23 December 2020).

Like everyone else in Kuwait, Christians have to be careful when expressing themselves (online). Criticizing the Emir or Islam, or sharing (online) material that can be perceived as proselytism can lead to deportation for expatriate Christians. Indigenous Kuwaiti Christians are in a similar situation as expatriate Christians. However, Kuwaiti converts from Islam to Christianity have to hide themselves and can only be active on the internet anonymously.

Security situation

The security situation in Kuwait is stable. In the aftermath of the Iraqi-Kuwait war in 1990-91, Kuwait's security forces received training from Western countries to counter criminal, terrorist and foreign threats confidently. Even amid the heightened tensions between the USA and Iran in 2019, Kuwait seemed unaffected, despite the fact that around 30% of the population is Shiite.

As with neighboring countries, Kuwaiti citizens have been among fighters of the Islamic State group (IS) abroad, but this has not led to any attack in the country itself.

Christians are in general safe from violence and crime, as the country is well policed and violent religious groups or others who might endanger public safety are oppressed.

Trends analysis

1) Although Kuwaiti society is Islamically conservative, there are liberal influences emerging

The conservative nature of society has produced an environment which is basically hostile to Christians. The government is likely to allow this to continue (so long as it does not feel challenged in its administration of power) in order to appease the radical Islamic groups in society. However, there is also a growing influence of more liberal youth, especially coming from the large numbers of Kuwaiti's who have studied abroad. This is encouraging for the expatriate Christian communities who are hopeful that the degree of acceptance will continue and be reinforced - but there is still a long way to go before the right to change one's religion is granted or respected. Converts with a Muslim background will continue to face pressure.

2) Foreign Christian workers are likely to continue coming to the country regardless of the existing pressure

As long as the country maintains its openness to the world economy, Christian workers are likely to continue coming to the country. Despite the regional turmoil (such as the Qatari crisis and the ongoing civil war in Yemen), Kuwait has been politically stable during the WWL 2021 reporting period and there has been no significant rise in levels of persecution. However, the fear among Christians (especially converts) will continue as the general environment is basically hostile. Society is likely to become more conservative and the government looks as if it will allow this as long as its authority is not openly challenged by radical Islamic groups. This will probably not deter Christian workers from abroad continuing to take up employment.

External Links - Keys to understanding

- Link for general background information: Kuwait country profile - BBC News - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14644252>
- Recent history: BBC Kuwait country profile, last accessed 23 December 2020 - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14644252>

- Recent history: The Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2018 - https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1427395/488311_en.pdf
- Recent history: BBC News, 7 December 2020 - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-55212642>
- Recent history: (BBC News, 29 September 2020) - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-54340988>
- Recent history: diplomatic row erupted - https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/04/03/how-a-maid-found-dead-in-a-freezer-set-off-a-diplomatic-clash-between-the-philippines-and-kuwait/?utm_term=.2f4ea1628ab7
- Recent history: thousands of dollars - <https://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/kuwait/kuwaiti-blogger-under-fire-over-comments-on-filipinos-1.2255665>
- Political and legal landscape: elected parliament - <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14644252>
- Political and legal landscape: stating - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/kuwait-emir-gulf-dispute-longer-acceptable-tolerable-191029095032440.html>
- Political and legal landscape: Reuters, 16 August 2020 - <https://uk.reuters.com/article/us-israel-emirates-kuwait/kuwait-position-towards-israel-unchanged-al-qabas-newspaper-idUSKCN25COA0>
- Political and legal landscape: Freedom in the World 2020 Report - <https://freedomhouse.org/country/kuwait/freedom-world/2020>
- Political and legal landscape: Human Right Watch - <https://www.hrw.org/middle-east/n-africa/kuwait>
- Political and legal landscape: Middle East Concern - <https://www.meconcern.org/countries/kuwait/>
- Religious landscape description: 2019 Report on International Religious Freedom - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/kuwait/>
- Religious landscape description: Middle East Concern - <https://www.meconcern.org/countries/kuwait/>
- Religious landscape description: Freedom of Thought Report - <https://fot.humanists.international/countries/asia-western-asia/kuwait/>
- Religious landscape description: announced - <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/kuwaiti-mps-call-for-ban-on-construction-of-churches-445971.html>
- Religious landscape description: can lead to charges and public hatred - <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36046706>
- Economic landscape: World Factbook - <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ku.html>
- Economic landscape: World Bank data - <https://data.worldbank.org/country/kuwait>
- Economic landscape: World Bank's April 2020 - <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/gcc/publication/kuwait-economic-update-april-2020>
- Economic landscape: October 2020 Economic Update - <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/gcc/publication/economic-update-october-2020-kuwait>
- Economic landscape: World by Income and Region report - <http://datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators/the-world-by-income-and-region.html>
- Economic landscape: 2020 Fragile State Index - <https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/>
- Economic landscape: Economist Intelligence Unit - <http://country.eiu.com/kuwait>
- Economic landscape: Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2020 - https://www.bti-project.org/content/en/downloads/reports/country_report_2020_KWT.pdf
- Economic landscape: estimated at - <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/kuwait-population/>
- Economic landscape: 2019 IRF report - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/kuwait/>
- Social and cultural landscape: World Factbook - <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ku.html>
- Social and cultural landscape: UN Global Human Development Indicators - <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/KWT>
- Social and cultural landscape: Freedom of Thought Report - <https://fot.humanists.international/countries/asia-western-asia/kuwait/>
- Social and cultural landscape: Amnesty International Report 2017/18 - <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/POL1067002018ENGLISH.PDF>
- Technological landscape: World Internet Stats - <https://www.internetworldstats.com/middle.htm#kw>

- Technological landscape: World Bank's Country profile - https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfile&id=b450fd57&bar=y&dd=y&inf=n&zm=n&country=KWT
- Technological landscape: Freedom of Thought Report - <https://fot.humanists.international/countries/asia-western-asia/kuwait/>
- Technological landscape: Human Rights Watch - <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/kuwait>
- Technological landscape: Reporters Without Borders - <https://rsf.org/en/kuwait>

WWL 2021: Church information / Kuwait

Christian origins

The earliest signs of Christian presence in Kuwait are the ruins of churches on the offshore islands Failaka and Akkaz. Archaeologists date these churches between the 5th and the 9th centuries. If this latter date is correct, Christianity survived the conquest by Islam longer than often assumed. (Islamic tradition - which is increasingly being subjected to historical scrutiny - sets the date of conquest very early at 633 AD.) The site in Failaka was a monastery with a church surrounded by a densely settled area and formed the focal part of a Nestorian community that lived on the island. The Kingdom of Hirah north of Kuwait had a large Nestorian population. By the 10th century these sites had been vacated; there is no more sign of a Christian presence in Kuwait for almost a millennium, although its position in the Arabic and Ottoman Empires makes it highly likely that at times, Christians from those Empires lived and worked in Kuwait.

Only after the Sheikdom became a British protectorate in 1899, could mission work begin in Kuwait. Samuel Zwemer of the Arabian Mission of the Reformed Church in America moved to Kuwait in 1903 and opened a Bible shop. The National Evangelical Church of Kuwait was organized that same year, though it did not have a building for worship until 1926. In 1910 the Mission also opened a clinic that developed into a hospital for men; a hospital for women followed.

After the discovery of oil in 1937, migrant workers from Palestine, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, India and Egypt came to Kuwait bringing with them a diversity of churches, including Greek Catholic, Roman Catholic, Evangelical, Syrian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Church of South India and other denominations.

Church spectrum today

Kuwait: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	90,000	17.5
Catholic	400,000	78.0
Protestant	12,600	2.5

Independent	7,100	1.4
Unaffiliated	3,600	0.7
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
Total	513,300	100.1
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	10,300	2.0
Renewalist movement	105,000	20.5

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

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

The around 300 indigenous Kuwaiti Christians stem from Turkish Christians who settled in Kuwait early in the twentieth century. Some of them worked together with the American Arabian Mission of Samuel Zwemer, which opened a bookshop (1903) and two hospitals (1913 / 1919) in Kuwait. Their National Evangelical Church (1931) is still present and is currently headed by a Kuwaiti Christian. Other churches followed in the 1950s and 1960s. Not surprisingly around the same time that the number of Christians began to rise with the influx of expatriate workers following Kuwait's oil-fueled 'Golden Era' (1946-1982). Today the number of Christians in Kuwait stands at 513,000, but is likely to decrease since the economic decline, accelerated by the COVID-19 crisis, is making Kuwait less welcoming to expatriates.

Source: Ross R K, Tadros M and Johnson T M (eds.), *Edinburgh Companions to Global Christianity. Christianity in North Africa and West Africa*, Edinburgh University Press, 2018, p. 182

WWL 2021: Persecution Dynamics / Kuwait

Reporting period

1 October 2019 - 30 September 2020

Position on the World Watch List

Kuwait: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2021	63	48
WWL 2020	62	43
WWL 2019	60	43
WWL 2018	61	34
WWL 2017	57	38

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

The increase in score of one point in WWL 2021 was mainly caused by a slight increase in average pressure in the *spheres of life*, rising from 12.2 to 12.4 points. Pressure remains at a very high level, with converts from Islam bearing the brunt of persecution as they face opposition from both family members and the local community.

Persecution engines

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

Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Medium
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Not at all

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 (Strong)

As in many countries in the region, *Islamic oppression* is the main engine behind the persecution of Christians in Kuwait. It is operating strongly at both national and local community levels. The whole region is in a volatile situation, with society generally becoming very conservative – this is the context for the situation in Kuwait where the laws and Constitution also affirm the conservative nature of society. According to the Constitution, Islam is the state religion and Islamic law (Sharia) is an important source for legislation. The government requires Islamic religious instruction for all pupils in state and private schools. Teaching Christianity in state-run high schools is prohibited, even to legally recognized Christian groups. In the past, a significant number of Kuwaitis were tolerant towards non-Muslim residents; however, this has begun to change due to the growing influence of radical Islamic groups, who do not want to see Christians in the country. Even though the Islamic State group (IS) has been weakened militarily, its influence is still present and it enjoys a notable resonance among a significant number of Sunni radicals. Kuwaiti citizens are known to have fought for IS in Iraq and Syria.

Converts from Islam to Christianity, particularly those with a Kuwaiti background, face the highest levels of pressure. For converts from Pakistan or the Levant (e.g. Jordan, Lebanon, the Palestinian Territories and Syria, among other countries), much depends on the response within their surrounding community in Kuwait. As long as they do not create unrest, they have less to fear from the Kuwaiti government, although their Kuwaiti employers may decide to end their work contract, which could result in deportation if they cannot find another job. Within those expatriate communities, the consequences for converts depend more on the cultural norms from their home country, than on the cultural practices of Kuwait. For expatriates, conversion to Christianity is sometimes easier than in their home country, because family and relatives are often far away and social pressure is less stringent.

Clan oppression (Strong)

Typical for this Persecution engine are situations in which age-old norms and values shaped in a tribal context (such as family honor) are forced upon Christians. In the case of Kuwait, *Clan oppression* is clearly mixed with Islam. This particularly affects converts from Islam to Christianity, especially Kuwaiti converts, because of their strong family ties. Turning away from Islam is not only regarded as religious betrayal, but also as betrayal of the family and tribe. Converts are seen as disrespecting their own fathers and grandfathers, a disloyalty which is socially unacceptable. In general, families put strong social pressure on converts to make them return to Islam, leave the region or to be silent about their new faith. In many cases, converts are alienated from their families as a result of their conversion.

Dictatorial paranoia (Medium)

The government of Kuwait is restrictive in many ways. For instance: Getting church registration is a very complicated and lengthy procedure. *Dictatorial paranoia* is behind most of the government restrictions, as the country's ruler does not want his hegemony threatened in any way. Freedom of expression, freedom of press and freedom of association are also restricted. Although the country has one of the strongest parliaments in the region, the ruling royal Sunni family still dictates everyday life. (In 2016, two former members of parliament, who were critical of the government and their allies, received prison sentences.)

Drivers of persecution

Kuwait:									
Drivers of persecution per engine	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	STRONG	-	-	STRONG	-	-	-	MEDIUM	-
Government officials	Strong	-	-	Medium	-	-	-	Medium	-
Ethnic group leaders	Medium	-	-	Medium	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Strong	-	-	Medium	-	-	-	-	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Medium	-	-	Medium	-	-	-	-	-
One's own (extended) family	Strong	-	-	Very strong	-	-	-	-	-
Political parties	Medium	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Organized crime cartels or networks	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

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

Drivers of Islamic oppression

- **Extended family (Strong):** Although clearly mixed with issues of family honor, strongly held Islamic convictions are a significant reason for families to target family members who convert to Christianity. Conversion from Islam to Christianity is socially unacceptable in Kuwait. Families will most certainly expel converts from their home, as

they see conversion not merely as being an attack on Islam, but also on the family honor.

- **Government officials (Strong):** Although there is no criminal penalty for conversion, it is socially unacceptable and a change of faith (away from Islam) is not officially recognized. Some Kuwaiti Christians (mostly converts from Islam to Christianity) have been interrogated by government officials, commanded to stop meeting, and have faced threats of losing their jobs and homes. Conversion is likely to lead to legal problems in personal status matters. For example, fathers who leave Islam are likely to lose custody of their children. Foreign Christians have to practice their faith carefully as the government will act against any Christian who makes an attempt to speak about the Christian faith publicly; proselytizing is illegal and punishable under the law. Christian expatriate workers have been interrogated and instructed not to share their faith, or risk losing their visas. No Christians have been officially prosecuted for proselytizing, but some have been expelled from the country without due process in recent years.
- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Strong):** The fear of hostile pronouncements or actions by Islamic leaders contributes to the high degree of caution converts feel compelled to exercise.
- **Citizens (people from the broader society) (Medium):** Conservative Islamic society is a significant driver of pressure against Christians in Kuwait. Employees are bound by contract to their employers and thus vulnerable to their bosses' demands. The latter can easily discriminate, humiliate or abuse expatriate Christians, especially the poor and low-skilled workers from Southeast Asia and North Africa. Expatriate Christians also face discrimination or mistreatment by their fellow Muslim expatriates in some cases.
- **Ethnic group leaders (Medium):** Family and tribal heads will make sure that Islam is respected within their tribe or extended family. They will put pressure on family members to make sure that converts recant their faith.
- **Political parties (Medium):** Kuwait has one of the strongest parliaments of the Middle East. Some of the elected politicians are hardline Islamists and openly encourage the government to take action against Christians, especially converts.

While the country tries to be open and modern, a strict interpretation of Islam continues to have its grip on society. Society and government enforce conservative Islamic customs in public, e.g. by enforcing public dress codes, prohibiting the drinking of alcohol, by limiting the freedom of expression (i.e. criticism of Islam) and by allowing other religions only to worship in private.

Drivers of Clan oppression:

- **One's own (extended) family (Very strong):** Although it is clear that the Islamic punishment for apostasy - capital punishment - is a key element in the reasons to persecute a convert family member, this cannot be viewed separately from the concept of 'family honor'. Age old norms (such as protecting family honor) are still intact. Conversion from Islam to Christianity is the betrayal of everything a conservative Muslim

family stands for and brings shame upon the family name. Converts face the risk of being ostracized by their families and might even be killed for shaming their families.

- **Ethnic group leaders (Medium):** Tribal and family heads will make sure that the honor of their group is not 'defiled' by a member that converts from Islam to Christianity, which is felt as a great disgrace.
- **Government officials (Medium):** The government adds to the influence of *Clan oppression* in that they work to maintain the status quo in society and its cultural practices. The government will not protect a convert against its own family, but regard any punishment as a 'family matter'.
- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Medium):** Local imams will encourage the upholding of cultural norms, which are intertwined with Islamic principles.
- **Citizens (people from the broader society) (Medium):** Tribalism still has a widespread influence within Kuwaiti society and the social standing of tribe and family is very important to Kuwaitis. Thus, there is social pressure to keep up societal norms in order not to shame the good name of the tribe and family.

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia

- **Government officials (Medium):** The Kuwaiti government does not allow any criticism of state affairs, including how it manages religious affairs. The country is well policed, with the security forces monitoring activities in the country closely. Expatriates speaking out against the government will most probably be deported. Freedom House's [Freedom in the World 2020 Report](#) stated that journalists and social media users whose articles insult the Emir (or Saudi Arabia) often face prosecution, and that the government continues to stifle criticism of policies.

Despite its restrictive policies, the heavy pressure on Christians is not coming from the government in the first instance. Christians have most to fear from members of Kuwait's conservative society. There is a clear dichotomy in the country between Kuwaitis (by definition Muslim) and the many immigrant workers, even more so if the latter are Christian. As a result, due to the already existing societal abuse and discrimination, Christians frequently exercise self-restraint for safety reasons.

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

Kuwait is a very small country with the capital city (Kuwait) being the centre of all activities. The risks that Christians face - especially converts from Islam to Christianity - depend on the sort of community Christians are part of, rather than the geographical area where they live. Kuwaiti converts face the highest risks as Kuwaitis are conservative and family ties are strong. Western Christian expatriates are most often free to practice their beliefs, as long as they refrain from proselytizing. Non-Western Christians with lower levels of skills are more likely to face discrimination and abuse, especially female domestic workers. Many of these are from the

Philippines. It is a matter of debate to what extent their non-Muslim faith adds to their vulnerability in the case of abuse.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Of the four WWL categories of Christianity, two are present in Kuwait:

Communities of expatriate Christians: Of the total number of Christians in Kuwait, the majority of them are foreign workers. They are relatively free to worship. However, the existing places for meeting are very small for the number of people gathering. It is extremely difficult to obtain property for worship purposes.

According to page 4 of the US State Department's [International Religious Freedom 2019 report](#), there are seven officially recognized Christian churches: The National Evangelical Church (Protestant), the Roman Catholic Church, the Greek Catholic (Melkite) Church, the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Armenian Orthodox Church, the Greek Orthodox Church and the Anglican Church. Some religious groups can conduct worship services without government interference provided they do not disturb neighbors or violate laws regarding assembly and proselytizing. The government allows such groups to operate in rented villas, private homes, or the facilities of licensed churches.

Historical Christian communities: There is a small number of native Kuwaiti Christians residing in the country. [Reportedly](#), there are 12 Christian families and a total number of less than 300 Christians (Al-Arabiya, 25 December 2017). These do not exist as a separate category for scoring in WWL analysis; they are included in the category for expatriates above (Al Arabiya, 25 December 2017).

Converts to Christianity: Converts from Islam to Christianity face daunting challenges in many forms. The main drivers of persecution are family, community members, radical Muslims and, to a lesser extent, the authorities. They risk discrimination, harassment, monitoring by police and all sorts of intimidation. Moreover, a change of faith (away from Islam) is not officially recognized and is likely to lead to legal problems in personal status and property matters.

Non-traditional Christian communities: These do not exist as a separate category for scoring in WWL analysis; they are included in the category for expatriates above.

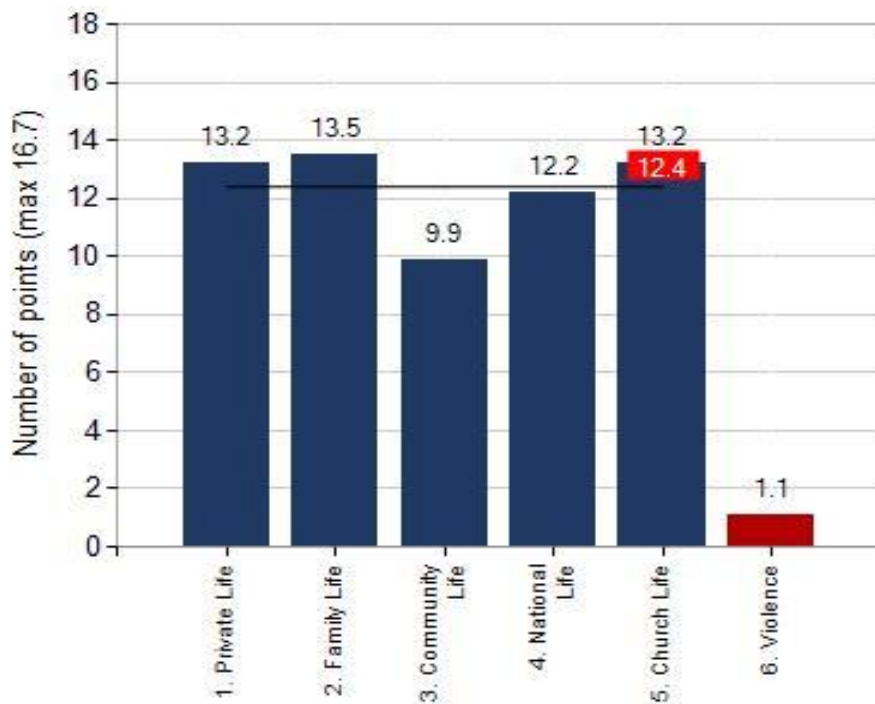
The Persecution pattern

The WWL 2021 Persecution pattern for Kuwait below shows:

- The average pressure on Christians is at a very high level (12.4 points), rising from 12.2 in WWL 2020.
- Although all *spheres of life* show high or very high levels of pressure, pressure is highest in the *Family, Private and Church spheres of life*. This reflects on the one hand the difficult situation for convert Christians who face very high pressure from their (extended) family and cannot have an official Christian marriage or a Christian funeral. On the other hand, church life is difficult for both converts and expatriate Christians, as proselytizing and integrating converts from a Muslim background are socially unacceptable.

- The score for violence rose from 0.7 in WWL 2020 to 1.1 in WWL 2021 due to a reassessment of the situation of domestic workers.

WWL 2021 Persecution Pattern for Kuwait



Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

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

Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

Block 1.8: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others). (3.50 points)

Risks are highest for Kuwaiti converts; for non-Kuwaiti converts the level of risk depends on the specific norms of their own migrant worker community. Expatriate Christians can be accused of proselytism when speaking about their faith with Muslims, which will lead to deportation.

Block 1.1: Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another. (3.25 points)

In a very conservative and tribal society that regards leaving Islam as a betrayal of family values, conversion to Christianity always brings difficulties. As a result, even though the law does not formally prohibit conversion, both society and government put hurdles in the way for people who convert. For instance, they will not get an official document with their new faith recorded on it.

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.). (3.25 points)

Converts from Islam to Christianity face the highest risk as posting faith-related items could lead to discovery of their conversion. However, expatriate Christians can also not openly proselytize or criticize Islam.

Block 1.5: It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols. (3.25 points)

Converts cannot wear any Christian symbol as it would be likely to lead to discovery of their faith. Expatriate Christians are sometimes careful, as publicly displaying a cross can lead to negative remarks or other types of harassment, especially when working in a Kuwaiti home (as a domestic worker, for example).

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

Block 2.1: Babies and children of Christians have automatically been registered under the state or majority religion. (3.50 points)

All children born to Kuwaitis are considered to be Muslim. This principle also applies to the children of Kuwaiti converts.

Block 2.3: Christians have been hindered in celebrating a Christian wedding for faith-related reasons. (3.50 points)

A female Kuwaiti Christian from a Muslim background is only permitted by law to marry a man also born Muslim; while a man would have freedom to marry a non-Muslim - but in both cases Islamic procedures apply. Hence, celebrating the marriage between a Christian and a Kuwaiti convert in a church would be impossible.

Block 2.8: Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education. (3.50 points)

Converts often do not receive any inheritance from their deceased parents, as their leaving Islam has dishonored the family.

Block 2.4: Christian baptisms have been hindered. (3.25 points)

Baptisms of converts must be conducted discreetly as open baptism might attract severe abuse and harassment from family members as well as from the community at large.

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.). (3.50 points)

Christians are in general monitored not only by the government but also by society, who will inform the security services if they are aware of 'suspicious circumstances'. Especially expatriates suspected of evangelism will be followed by the security services.

Block 3.5: Christians have been put under pressure to take part in non-Christian religious ceremonies or community events. (3.25 points)

During the month of Ramadan, Christians struggle to cope with the de facto requirement to fast imposed by the government and community. In addition, converts from Islam to Christianity will have to take part in all Islamic religious ceremonies in order to keep their new faith a secret.

Block 3.7: Christians have been pressured by their community to renounce their faith. (3.25 points)

There is always pressure on converts to renounce Christianity, also at the community level. Known converts will be ostracized, probably lose their job and will not be seen as being part of the community anymore.

Block 3.10: Christians have been discriminated against in public or private employment for faith-related reasons. (3.00 points)

Known Kuwaiti converts would definitely be discriminated against and have great difficulty in finding employment. It is an accepted fact that Christian expatriate workers can experience discrimination on the work-floor. Their Christian faith is an extra vulnerability in this regard, although racism also often plays a very negative role.

Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

Block 4.1: The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (4.00 points)

The [Constitution](#) declares that Islam is the state religion. The freedom of religion enshrined in the Constitution does not meet international standards fully as it focuses purely on the observance of religious rites, which are not allowed to conflict with Kuwaiti (i.e. Islamic) morals - see Article 35. Hence, the Constitution does not guarantee the freedom to convert from Islam to Christianity.

Block 4.9: Christian civil society organizations or political parties have been hindered in their functioning or forbidden because of their Christian convictions. (3.75 points)

Only Christian organizations with a clear benefit for Kuwaiti society, such as a hospital, will be welcomed. It is impossible to establish a Christian organization with the intention of proselyt-

izing; organizations with a clear Christian profile will be under constant suspicion and opposed.

Block 4.2: Officials have refused to recognize an individual's conversion as recorded in government administration systems, identify cards (etc.). (3.50 points)

No convert from a Muslim background would apply to have their conversion officially recognized because they know that this cannot be granted (based on apostasy provisions of Islamic law) and because to make such an application would expose them to the authorities and so be extremely dangerous.

Block 4.8: Christians have been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public. (3.50 points)

All Christians will try to keep a low profile in order to avoid pressure. Criticizing both the Kuwaiti government or Islam is impossible and will probably lead to deportation for expatriate migrants. Thus, for example, speaking about social justice from a Christian perspective can only be done with great sensitivity.

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

Block 5.6: Work among youth in particular has been restricted. (3.75 points)

It is possible to organize activities for Christian youth, but it is impossible to organize activities directed at Muslim youth as these will be interpreted as acts of proselytism.

Block 5.7: Churches have been hindered from openly integrating converts. (3.75 points)

The government has prohibited non-Muslim missionaries from working in the country and from proselytizing Muslims. Openly integrating converts within church communities would be seen as a clear sign that proselytizing is taking place.

Block 5.14: Openly selling or distributing Bibles (or other Christian materials) has been hindered. (3.75 points)

The selling of Christian materials is only permitted at outlets within the church compound. The free distribution of Christian materials is not permitted outside church compounds as this would be considered to be an act of proselytization. In practice most Christians would exercise extreme caution in distributing Christian materials, effectively exercising self-censorship. In previous years, the distribution of Christian material has led to deportation of the expatriate offender.

Block 5.5: Churches have been hindered from organizing Christian activities outside church buildings. (3.50 points)

As organizing public Christian activities will often be interpreted as proselytism, churches will not be allowed to organized them. Most churches apply self-censorship in this regard in order to avoid any problems with the government or society. Many congregations have to gather in homes as there is a lack of church space, but those churches make sure they keep a low profile.

Violence

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

Kuwait: Violence Block question	WWL 2021	WWL 2020
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	0	0
6.2 How many churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	0	0
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?	0	0
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	0	0
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	10	1000
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	0	0
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	10	1
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?	0	0
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?	0	0

6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith related reasons?	0	0

For the WWL 2021 reporting period:

- Christians attacked:** It is widely known that house-maids working in the domestic sphere are vulnerable to incidents of (sexual) abuse. However, statistics are scarce as almost all persons, organizations and states involved have no interest in revealing the true situation: Kuwait needs the domestic staff to work in households, but has a shame culture and does not want a bad reputation. Also, the home countries of the house-maids need the money coming in from the thousands of migrants working in the Gulf states and do not want to put their economic interests at stake. However, Philippine President Duterte did impose a temporary travel ban to Kuwait, after the body of a Philippine maid was found in the [freezer](#) of a Kuwaiti home in February 2018 (Gulf News, 16 February 2018).

The employers of abused house-maids are either the perpetrators of the abuse themselves or have no real interest in their well-being. The house-maids themselves are often ashamed because of the abuse and do not want to be seen as "dirty", whether in Kuwait itself or by their family at home. In addition, many provide a very much needed source of income for their families in their home countries. The home families are proud of the work being done in Kuwait, and the house-maid does not want to disappoint her family. Therefore, statistics and evidence of sexual abuse are very difficult to provide. It is also difficult to prove that any sexual abuse is due to the house-maid being a non-Muslim.

Nevertheless, given the high number of Christian expatriates in the country, conservative estimates agree that at least 10 Christian house-maids were (sexually) abused because of their faith in the WWL 2021 reporting period

- Christians forced to leave the country:** At least one female convert from Islam to Christianity fled the country fearing family, societal and government persecution.

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.

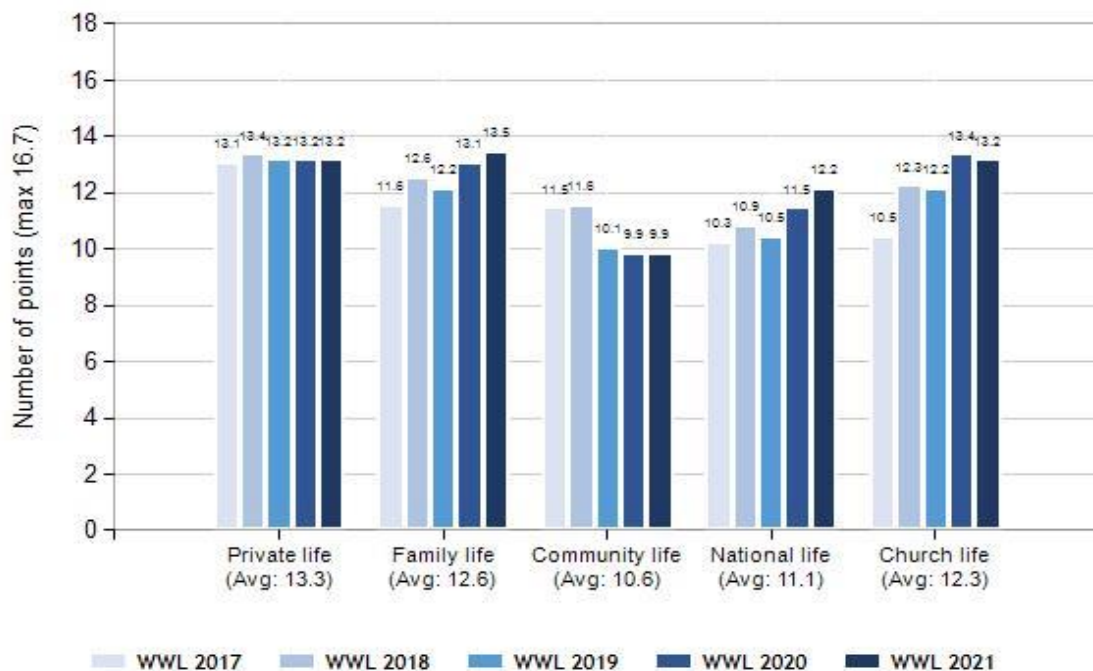
5 Year trends: Average pressure

The average pressure on Christians has increased since WWL 2017. It now appears to be levelling off at the 11.7 - 12.4 point mark, as the table below shows:

Kuwait: WWL 2017 - WWL 2021 Persecution Pattern history	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2021	12.4
2020	12.2
2019	11.7
2018	12.2
2017	11.4

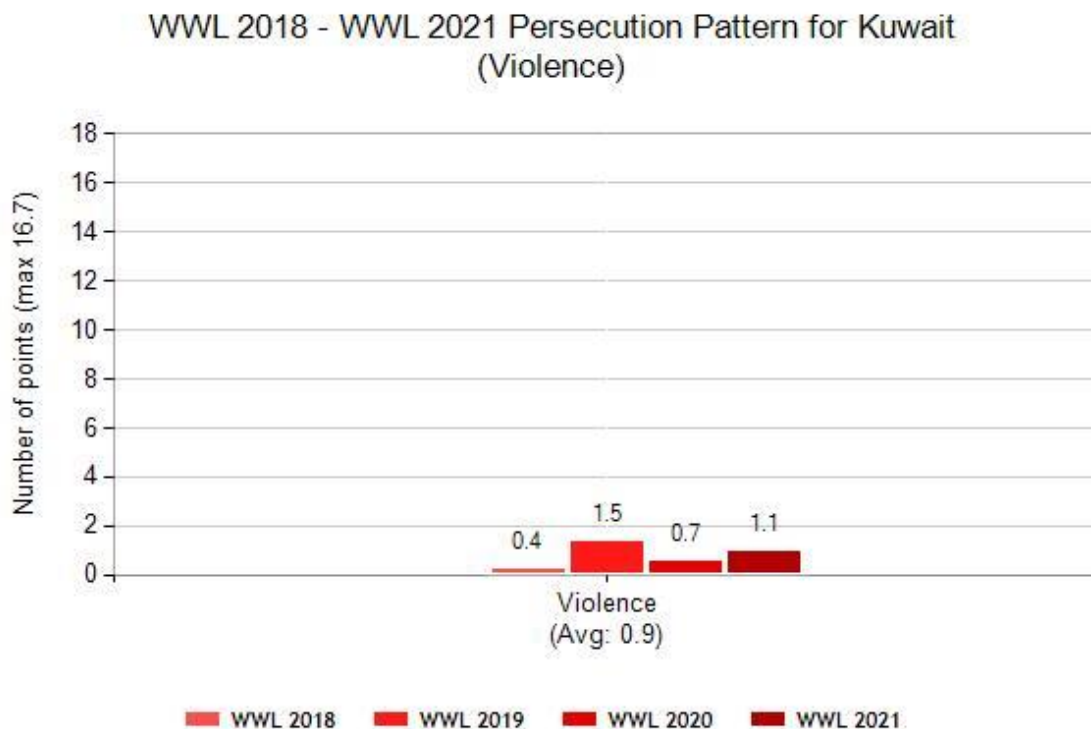
5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life

WWL 2017 - WWL 2021 Persecution Pattern for Kuwait (Spheres of life)



The chart above shows: While the very high level of pressure in the *Private sphere of life* has been more or less stable over the last five reporting periods, there have been noticeable increases in the pressure in the *Family, National and Church spheres of life*. Only in *Community life* does there appear to be a trend of pressure reducing (in the last three reporting periods).

5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



The number of violent incidents recorded in Kuwait has not changed dramatically over the years and so the violence score has remained more or less stable at a very low level (except in WWL 2019). The rise in WWL 2019 was mainly due to an increase in points scored for the abuse of expatriate domestic workers. Less cases were reported during the WWL 2020 and WWL 2021 period, resulting in a slightly lower score.

Gender-specific religious persecution Female

Female Pressure Points
Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse
Forced divorce
Incarceration by family (house arrest)
Violence – sexual

Although there are relatively few Kuwaiti Christians, many of the foreign domestic maids in Kuwait are Christian. This is significant in a country where the foreign population outnumbers the indigenous population. According to Kuwaiti delegates attending a [CEDAW review](#) in 2017, the ill-treatment of migrant workers, including sexual abuse, is a major issue. Statistics on the issue are scarce, as employers of abused maids or the perpetrators of the abuse have no interest

in reporting the issues, and the maids themselves are often ashamed because of the abuse and do not want to be seen as "dirty" within their society in Kuwait or by their family at home. Reports indicate that the COVID-19 lockdown has [further intensified](#) the pressures experienced by domestic workers (The Telegraph, 20 Oct 2020). House maids working in Kuwait often face sexual harassment or slave-like treatment. The ill treatment of migrant workers, including sexual abuse, has become a high-profile issue at the international level. Although not primarily faith-related, many Christian domestic migrant workers, almost all of whom are female, experience sexual abuse.

According to [Chatham House](#), the passing of a new family protection law is “a major step forward for a country which has long suffered from high levels of domestic abuse.” (Chatham House, 16 September 2020). Time is needed however to see how effective implementation of this law is in practice. For now, experts are concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence levels.

Native Kuwaiti Christian women of Muslim background will encounter severe family pressure to reject their new faith. They may be put under house arrest, pressurized to marry a Muslim or sexually harassed (although there have been no reported instances of forced marriage in the WWL 2021 reporting period). Women may also be threatened with the possibility of honor killings to restore the honor of the family following her conversion. If already married, female converts are vulnerable to being divorced by their husbands. Perhaps the most difficult law for Christian converts hoping to establish their own Christian household is that women from a Muslim background are restricted by law from marrying a non-Muslim.

Gender-specific religious persecution Male

Male Pressure Points

Economic harassment via business/job/work access

Forced out of home – expulsion

Among the small number of Kuwaiti converts to Christianity, most pressure comes from family and community – these would typically be felt most keenly by women and girls, followed by younger men, followed by older men. This reflects levels of status and freedom generally within the culture.

In Kuwait, men who convert to Christianity fear the rejection of their immediate and extended families and the repercussions that would have on their livelihood. In this Islamic society, male converts are likely to be ostracized by their families, simultaneously losing their respect and their financial support. Often, this means that Christian men or boys are forced to leave the family home. Without family support, it is difficult for men to find or keep their job and marrying becomes almost impossible. Christian men are especially subject to discrimination and hostilities on the work-floor. The isolation of conversion is further amplified by the difficulty that converts from a Muslim background have in forming sustainable church groups.

Persecution of other religious minorities

Not only Christians have to face the sometimes oppressive hand of the government, other minorities (such as the Shia community) also experience discrimination and have to operate carefully. Although the sizeable Shia community has traditionally enjoyed greater levels of acceptance in Kuwait than in some other countries in the region, restrictions on religious freedom have increased; this is primarily due to political changes concerning Kuwait's relationship to Saudi Arabia and Iran. However, these dynamics have so far not been strong, as Kuwait tries to remain a neutral profile at the international level.

Religious groups such as Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs are relatively free to practice their faith in private, although they lack facilities to worship. Conservative groups within parliament view all non-Muslim religious activities with suspicion and regularly oppose them.

According to the US State Department's [2019 International Religious Freedom report](#) (p. 10):

- "Members of non-Abrahamic faiths and nonregistered churches continued to state they remained free to practice their religion in private but faced harassment and potential prosecution if they disturbed their neighbors or violated laws regarding assembly and proselytizing. They ... avoid conflict with authorities by not proselytizing or disparaging the government or other faiths. ... they did not publicly advertise religious events or gatherings to avoid bringing unwanted attention to their organizations both from the public and from government authorities. ... Almost uniformly across these communities, members said they lacked sufficient religious facilities and religious leaders or clerics to lead prayers, bless births and marriages, and conduct appropriate death rituals."

Future outlook

The future of Kuwait, like that of other countries in the Gulf, is intrinsically linked to the political situation in the region. The Middle East and the Gulf region remain unpredictable. The outlook for Christians can be summarized, viewed through the lens of the main persecution engines:

Islamic oppression

If the authorities feel compelled (for reasons of political expediency) to become more hostile towards Iran and closer to Saudi Arabia, this could potentially lead to Sunni conservatives exerting greater political influence which could result in the political climate becoming more hostile to Christians (including expatriate churches). In addition, although IS has suffered serious defeat from a military point of view, its influence still remains. The rise in Sunni radicalism has been an issue not only for Christians in the region, but also for individual country leaders and the international community. Sunni majority countries, including Kuwait, are on the alert to make sure that militant groups do not establish their networks in their country.

Clan oppression

Although urbanization, modernization and the rise of the Internet are also a major influence on the younger generation, it is likely that clan influence will remain high. Globalization could even strengthen this factor since Kuwaitis may feel threatened and seek to protect their own identity. In such a climate, conversion from Islam to Christianity will remain a very sensitive issue.

Dictatorial paranoia

The Kuwaiti government will continue to do everything necessary to eradicate any dissent and avoid public unrest.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Drivers of persecution description: Freedom in the World 2020 Report - <https://freedomhouse.org/country/kuwait/freedom-world/2020>
- Christian communities and how they are affected: International Religious Freedom 2019 report - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/kuwait/>
- Christian communities and how they are affected: Reportedly - <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2016/12/27/An-inside-look-at-a-Gulf-Christian-community.html>
- Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere: Constitution - https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Kuwait_1992.pdf?lang=en
- Violence / Block 6 - commentary: freezer - <https://gulfnews.com/world/asia/philippines/family-grieves-philippine-maid-found-dead-in-kuwait-freezer-1.2174514>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: CEDAW review - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22341&LangID=E>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: further intensified - <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/climate-and-people/want-leave-scared-pandemic-increases-risk-violence-gulfs-domestic/>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: Chatham House, - <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/09/kuwait-brighter-future-beckons-domestic-violence-sufferers>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: 2019 International Religious Freedom report - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/kuwait/>

Further useful reports

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

- <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>
- <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Kuwait>
- <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/Kuwait>