
World Watch Research

Iran: Persecution Dynamics

January 2025



Open Doors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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World Watch List 2025 – Top 50

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2025	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	14.4	98	96	98	96	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.7	11.1	94	93	92	91	92
3	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.6	94	89	89	88	87
4	Libya	16.0	16.2	15.9	16.2	16.4	10.6	91	91	88	91	92
5	Sudan	14.1	14.2	15.5	14.9	15.3	16.1	90	87	83	79	79
6	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.9	12.2	89	89	89	88	88
7	Nigeria	13.5	13.9	14.6	14.9	14.5	16.7	88	88	88	87	85
8	Pakistan	13.6	13.9	15.0	15.0	12.9	16.7	87	87	86	87	88
9	Iran	15.0	14.6	13.5	15.9	16.5	10.9	86	86	86	85	86
10	Afghanistan	15.6	15.9	15.9	16.4	16.7	5.0	85	84	84	98	94
11	India	12.2	12.9	13.3	14.9	13.9	16.5	84	83	82	82	83
12	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.8	15.8	16.6	3.3	81	81	80	81	78
13	Myanmar	12.6	11.1	13.5	14.1	12.9	16.5	81	79	80	79	74
14	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	13.0	15.2	15.6	80	79	76	70	67
15	China	13.2	10.1	12.8	14.6	16.1	11.1	78	78	77	76	74
16	Maldives	15.6	15.3	13.7	15.8	16.5	0.7	78	78	77	77	77
17	Iraq	14.2	14.4	14.3	14.8	13.9	6.1	78	79	76	78	82
18	Syria	13.5	14.4	13.9	14.4	14.3	7.0	78	81	80	78	81
19	Algeria	14.7	14.3	11.5	14.7	16.0	6.3	77	79	73	71	70
20	Burkina Faso	11.7	9.7	13.2	11.5	14.0	15.6	76	75	71	68	67
21	Morocco	13.2	13.8	11.6	12.9	14.3	8.3	74	71	69	69	67
22	Laos	11.8	10.7	13.5	14.1	13.9	9.8	74	75	68	69	71
23	Mauritania	14.6	14.2	13.8	14.2	14.2	2.8	74	72	72	70	71
24	Bangladesh	12.4	10.6	12.7	11.3	10.4	16.1	74	71	69	68	67
25	Uzbekistan	14.6	12.7	13.5	12.4	15.5	4.4	73	71	71	71	71
26	Cuba	13.2	8.5	13.9	13.3	15.1	9.1	73	73	70	66	62
27	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	14.0	15.6	72	70	70	68	66
28	Niger	9.4	9.6	14.5	7.7	14.6	15.7	72	70	70	68	62

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2025	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021
29	Turkmenistan	14.3	12.3	13.6	13.9	15.3	1.5	71	70	70	69	70
30	Nicaragua	12.4	7.6	13.7	13.3	14.1	9.6	71	70	65	56	51
31	Mexico	11.7	9.0	12.5	11.8	11.0	14.6	71	68	67	65	64
32	Oman	14.5	14.1	10.9	13.8	14.1	3.0	70	69	65	66	63
33	Ethiopia	9.9	9.7	12.6	10.4	12.1	15.6	70	69	66	66	65
34	Tunisia	12.4	13.2	10.1	12.6	13.8	8.1	70	69	67	66	67
35	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	10.8	14.5	16.1	70	67	67	66	64
36	Bhutan	13.2	13.2	12.3	14.1	14.2	2.2	69	68	66	67	64
37	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.9	68	68	68	65	63
38	Kazakhstan	13.3	11.6	12.2	12.8	14.2	4.3	68	65	65	64	64
39	Tajikistan	14.1	12.7	12.7	13.2	13.7	1.9	68	66	66	65	66
40	Egypt	12.7	13.7	12.1	12.4	10.9	6.3	68	68	68	71	75
41	Qatar	14.2	14.2	10.5	13.2	14.4	0.7	67	67	68	74	67
42	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	2.6	67	66	66	63	62
43	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	8.4	13.1	16.1	67	66	65	65	64
44	Vietnam	10.8	9.5	12.2	14.1	14.1	5.9	67	68	70	71	72
45	Turkey	13.0	11.7	11.7	13.2	11.5	5.4	67	64	66	65	69
46	Colombia	11.0	7.9	12.7	11.5	10.5	12.6	66	68	71	68	67
47	Kyrgyzstan	13.5	10.3	11.7	11.4	12.4	6.9	66	59	59	58	58
48	Brunei	14.8	14.8	10.8	10.8	14.0	0.6	66	66	65	64	64
49	Chad	11.0	8.2	10.2	9.9	10.3	15.9	65	61	58	55	53
50	Jordan	12.9	14.3	10.4	12.2	12.8	2.4	65	65	65	66	64

World Watch List 2025 – Ranks 51-78

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2025	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021
51	Malaysia	12.8	13.7	11.7	12.4	11.2	3.0	65	64	66	63	63
52	Azerbaijan	13.3	10.2	9.6	12.2	13.7	5.6	65	60	59	60	56
53	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	13.9	64	63	64	63	62
54	Nepal	12.2	10.6	9.5	12.6	12.3	5.9	63	62	61	64	66
55	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	15.4	63	62	63	61	58
56	Russian Federation	12.7	7.9	10.7	13.1	14.1	4.4	63	58	57	56	57
57	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.1	1.7	61	61	60	59	56
58	Kuwait	13.1	13.6	9.4	12.0	12.2	0.9	61	61	64	64	63
59	Indonesia	10.9	11.9	10.9	11.6	10.2	5.7	61	66	68	68	63
60	UAE	13.3	13.4	9.5	11.3	12.8	0.6	61	61	62	62	62
61	Sri Lanka	12.7	8.7	11.5	11.5	8.5	7.6	60	60	57	63	62
62	Palestinian Territories	13.1	13.3	10.3	10.7	12.1	0.2	60	60	60	59	58
63	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	14.6	59	57	55	52	48
64	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	12.1	9.4	58	58	57	50	42
65	Honduras	7.9	4.7	11.7	7.3	9.9	13.1	55	55	53	48	46
66	Togo	9.2	6.7	10.4	7.1	11.5	9.3	54	52	49	44	43
67	Bahrain	12.0	13.2	8.6	11.3	8.5	0.6	54	55	55	57	56
68	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	8.9	54	52	48	43	47
69	Ukraine	6.8	5.0	7.8	12.5	13.5	7.2	53	44	37	37	34
70	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	8.3	53	52	52	51	46
71	Venezuela	6.3	4.4	11.1	10.0	10.8	9.6	52	53	56	51	39
72	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	8.8	16.1	52	52	51	48	47
73	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	9.6	51	44	44	42	42
74	Lebanon	11.5	10.1	7.0	6.2	6.7	7.2	49	48	40	35	34
75	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	4.4	48	47	44	44	43
76	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	8.1	15.6	47	46	46	43	43

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2025	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021
77	Belarus	9.9	3.7	5.0	10.8	14.1	3.1	47	46	43	33	30
78	Philippines	9.2	6.6	6.6	6.1	5.7	8.5	43	40	32	34	26

Copyright, sources and definitions

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- [Background country information](#) (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

These documents are the property of World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. They include data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and 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 end of each document under the heading “External links”. These documents may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © Open Doors International.

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 can be found on the research pages of the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/>.

Reporting period

The WWL 2025 reporting period was 1 October 2023 - 30 September 2024.

Brief country details

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

Iran: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
89,810,000	800,000	0.9

Iran: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	800,000	0.9
Muslim	88,288,763	98.3
Hindu	45,679	0.1
Buddhist	821	0.0
Ethnic religionist	5,810	0.0
Jewish	8,214	0.0
Bahai	277,477	0.3
Atheist	10,117	0.0
Agnostic	275,474	0.3
Other	96,165	0.1
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024 (Adapted according to OD-estimate)

Map of country



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
Organized corruption and crime	Government officials
Clan oppression	Ethnic group leaders, One's own (extended) family
Christian denominational protectionism	Ethnic group leaders, Religious leaders of other churches

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:

- **Recognized:** 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. Christians from these historical communities that have supported converts, have received prison sentences.
- **Unrecognized:** 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 ordinary members of Christian convert groups have been arrested, prosecuted and have received long prison sentences for 'crimes against national security'.

Summary of international obligations and rights violations

Iran has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in the following international treaties:

1. [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR)
2. [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#) (ICESCR)
3. [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (CRC)

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

- Christians are arbitrarily arrested, charged for national security crimes and sentenced without a fair trial (ICCPR Art. 9)
- Christian peaceful religious activities are monitored and regularly disrupted by the state under national security grounds (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 21)

- Converts to Christianity are persecuted by the state because of their decision to leave Islam (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christians from all denominations are monitored by the state, in violation of their right to privacy (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Christian children are forced to receive Islamic religious education (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)
- Christians cannot inherit from Muslims and have restricted access to higher education and public employment (ICCPR Art. 26)

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

The following is a small selection of examples:

- **Wave of arrests:** December 2023: At least 46 Christians were arrested over the Christmas period ([Article 18, 18 June 2024](#)). This wave of arrests followed an even larger one that took place in the period 1 June - 17 July 2023, when the Iranian authorities arrested at least 106 Christians in twelve different cities. Most of these were converts from Islam to Christianity, but at least two were Christians from Armenian background. Some of those released have been forced to sign commitments to refrain from further Christian activities, or ordered to attend Islamic re-education sessions. Those released on bail had to pay high bail amounts, with amounts ranging from 400 million tomans (\$8,000) to 2 billion tomans (\$40,000). Others were also ordered to leave Iran or their employment was terminated. The waves of arrests followed a period of very few publicly reported arrests and is an indication that the very oppressive nature of the regime remains unchanged ([Article 18, 10 August 2023](#)).
- **Growing number of long-term prison sentences:** In November 2024, Iranian convert Toomaj Aryan-Kia was at least the sixth Christian to receive a 10-year prison sentence in 2024 ([Article 18, 18 November 2024](#)).
- **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. 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 (within the judiciary). 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.
- **Convictions through amendments to the Penal Code:** The amendments to 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. Eight Christians sentenced in May 2024 to a combined total of 45 years in prison, with one them sentenced to 15 years, were reportedly convicted under Article 500 of the Penal Code ([Article 18, 18 June 2024](#)).
- **Challenges for Ethnic minority Christians:** In June 2024, Armenian Christian Hakop Gochumyan received a 10 years prison sentence for visiting a Persian language house church and being in possession of Persian language New Testaments, while on holiday in Iran ([Article 18, 11 June 2024](#)).

- **Adoption case still pending in WWL 2025 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 were 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 ([Article 18, 22 April 2021](#)). Having taken their case to the Iranian Supreme Court, the Christian couple are still awaiting a new verdict.

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 re-arrested 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](#)).

Reduced sentences or release from prison following pardon

- **February 2023:** Well-known Pastor Yousef Nadarkhani was pardoned and released. He was initially sentenced to death in 2011. An international outcry prevented his execution, but he received a ten-year prison sentence in 2017. Despite his pardon, he was told that he would still be flogged and have to serve two years in exile, far away from his home town ([Article 18, 1 March 2023](#)).
- **February 2023:** Three other converts were also pardoned and released from prison on the occasion of the 44th anniversary of the Islamic Republic ([Article 18, 6 March 2023](#)).
- **March 2023:** Three Christians earlier sentenced under the amended Article 500 were released (see above: *Specific examples of violations of rights*).
- **April 2023:** Due to her son's severe illness, another convert was pardoned by the Supreme Court in April 2023. In August 2022, she had started a six year prison sentence for “acting against national security by promoting ‘Zionist’ Christianity” ([Article 18, 26 April 2023](#)).
- **September 2023:** Iranian-Armenian pastor Joseph Shahbazian was pardoned and released after serving one year of his reduced two year (original ten year) prison sentence ([Article 18, 14 September 2023](#)).
- **September 2024:** Iranian-Armenian pastor Anooshavan Avedian was acquitted and released after serving one year of his ten year prison sentence ([Article 18, 25 September 2024](#)).
- **September 2024:** Iranian convert Yasser Akbari released after serving nearly five years of his 10 years prison sentence ([Article 18, 9 October 2024](#)).

- **December 2024:** Iranian convert Pastor Matthias released after serving nearly three years of his six years prison sentence. Pastor Matthias has been in and out of prison since 2006 and still has another case pending against him ([Article 18, 16 December 2024](#)).

Although welcomed, it should be noted that the (unexpected) pardons do not change the fact that grave injustice has been committed against these Christians. They were pardoned, not acquitted, and the laws used against them have not changed.

Acquitted in appeal

- In May 2023, a 64 year old Christian with advanced Parkinson's disease and his wife were acquitted by the 34th branch of the Tehran appeal court, the same court that in February 2022 had acquitted nine Christian converts accused of "acting against national security" - see above: Supreme Court ruling ([Article 18, 10 May 2023](#)). 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 18, 15 August 2022](#)). This case shows the legal limbo in which the state leaves prosecuted Christians and also demonstrates that seemingly positive steps should not be celebrated too soon. However, their acquittal remains a positive sign.

Mosques closing

- **December 2023:** A senior government minister warned against the significant fall in mosque attendance in Iran. Reportedly, the number of active mosques had dropped by a third. A senior cleric had earlier claimed: "50,000 of Iran's 75,000 mosques are now closed" ([Iran International, 12 December 2023](#)). The Iranian regime's claim to be the sole representative of Islam, has led to many Iranians perceiving Islam as the religion of the regime. Hence, the widespread fall in attendance can be interpreted as a sign that support for the regime among the general population is low.

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 low (less than 10,000).

Historical Christian communities: Historical ethnic Christian minorities such as the Armenian and Assyrian Christians have limited freedom 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. Baptism is seen as a public declaration of one’s denunciation of Islam and is therefore forbidden. Also, the children born to converts are automatically registered as Muslims.

In the past, it was mainly the leaders of Christian convert groups who were prosecuted; however, an increasing number of non-leaders have received similar charges and long prison terms for crimes against national security. Nonetheless, Christian leaders remain under particularly close scrutiny by Iranian authorities. Leadership in the house-church movement is not limited to those who have studied theology. For instance, a person who converted to Christianity six months ago could be evangelizing and starting discipleship groups.

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.

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.

Position on the World Watch List

Iran: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2025	86	9
WWL 2024	86	9
WWL 2023	86	8
WWL 2022	85	9
WWL 2021	86	8

There has been very little change in score in the WWL 2025 reporting period: Pressure has remained at an extreme level in all except one of the Spheres of Life, with the score for violence also remaining very high. The outlook for Iranian Christians, in particular converts from Islam to Christianity, is by no means improving. The government sees Iranian converts to Christianity as an attempt by Western countries to undermine Islam and the Islamic regime of Iran. Historical communities of Armenian and Assyrian Christians are recognized by the state but are treated as second-class citizens. The country's political institutions are ultimately dominated by hardliners. 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 "Woman, life, freedom" protests that followed the death of Mahsa Amini on 16 September 2022 and has continued since. Furthermore, converts to Christianity are often accused of being part of a "Zionist cult", i.e. having ties with the state of Israel. Reportedly, this has led to growing pressure following the increasing tensions between Iran and Israel.

Persecution engines

Iran: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Very strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Not at all
Clan oppression	CO	Medium
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	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, such as the presidency and 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 the majority of 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 sums 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, particularly evident in 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 on 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 fraction 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				
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, conservative Islamic 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 2024 Country Report Iran](#), p.19: "[T]he Islamic Republic's political economy prioritizes regime loyalists over the general population The economy is characterized by a monopolistic power structure, with institutionalized state-business-military relationships. This structure is aptly described as a 'monopolistic, religious-commercial system' or a 'capitalist state with a paramilitary polity and theocratic rule'. It encompasses the economic empires of the IRGC, the bonyads and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei." The same document reports that "approximately 80% of Iran's economic activity is driven by the state sector, which includes state-owned and semi-state-owned companies. The private and cooperative sectors account for the remaining share." This indicates the major role played by the state authorities and the enormous (economic) interests of those in power.

Drivers of Organized corruption and crime

- **Government officials (Medium):** The government uses the bail-system in such a way that it is purposely impoverishing prosecuted Christians and encouraging them to leave the country. Corruption and fraudulent enrichment are reported to be rampant among both the government and judiciary ([Khosravi M., 23 March 2023, Power Relations and Judicial Corruption in the Islamic Republic of Iran](#)).

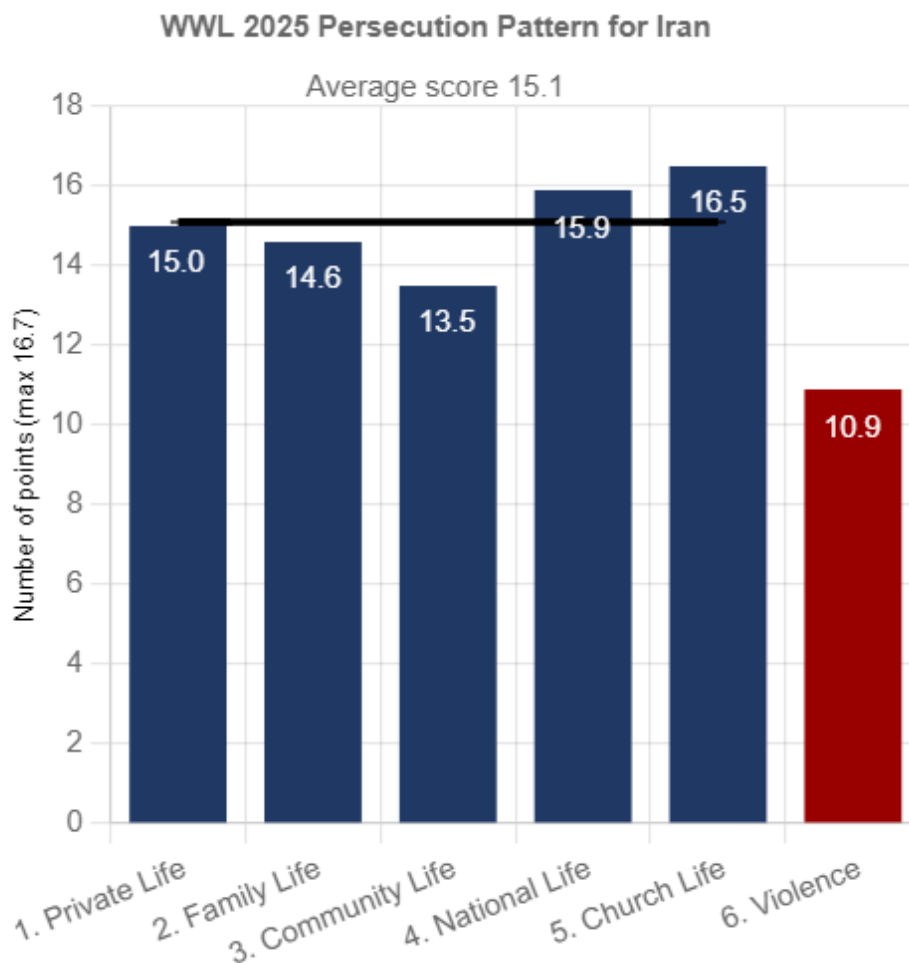
Drivers of Clan oppression

- **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 is particularly 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 2025 Persecution pattern for Iran shows:

- The average pressure on Christians stayed at an extremely high level (15.1 points), comparable to WWL 2024. The Iranian government is exerting pressure on Christians on a large scale.
- Although all except one of the 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 minority Christians, who are not allowed to evangelize or even to speak in Persian during their church services.
- The score for violence remained at 10.9 points.

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 2025 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://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/>.

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*).

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 Muslim-born individuals mention their religion as Christianity, they 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 in 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 such interrogation, depending on the severity of the allegations and the availability of '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. To survive without undue problems in their communities, Christians have to act wisely. 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

Particularly for converts from Islam to Christianity, it is difficult for Christians to participate fully in daily communal life. 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 wear head-coverings, even in their own church-run 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 cautiously 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 out against Christians (typically referring to "Zionism" and house-churches) and this will invariably initiate a wave of hate-speech against Christians. Hate-speech against Iranian Christians, especially Protestants, can also be seen in multimedia material published by the government and in 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 very harsh interrogation 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 18, 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. 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. 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. 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 try to address this deficiency, but the growth and discipleship of the church in Iran has undoubtedly been hindered through state oppression and interference.

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

Expatriate churches which had established schools, hospitals and other social and humanitarian institutions were forced to hand over their possessions to the Islamic government after the 1979 Revolution. Since then, they have not been allowed to carry out such activities. Protestant and non-traditional churches followed the same fate in 1990s. The only remaining church institutions and associations (which even receive financial subsidies from the state) belong to the historical Armenian Orthodox and Assyrian Chalcedonian churches. However, the heads of Armenian and Assyrian schools are usually Muslim. Furthermore, following the Revolution, the number of Armenian and Assyrian teachers in these schools has significantly reduced.

Block 5 - Additional information

The *Church sphere of life* is the sphere with the most restrictions - only churches with Armenian, Assyrian or expatriate Christian members are 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 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. 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.

Iran: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire	WWL 2025	WWL 2024
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?	17	22
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	113	122
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?	43	16
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	10	12
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	4	6
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)?	452	330
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?	42	75

(table continues below)

Iran: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire	WWL 2025	WWL 2024
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?	45	32
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	100 *	130
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	1000 *	1000 *

In the WWL 2025 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 detained/sentenced:** The number of Christians that received prison sentences increased significantly compared to WWL 2024, while the number of arrested Christians was at a more or less similar level to WWL 2024. A wave of arrests took place at the beginning of the WWL 2025 reporting reporting period, resulting in an increase in the numbers of Christians receiving a prison sentence. In addition, the leak of judicial files in 2024 has shown that a significant number of cases remain unreported ([Article 18, 29 August 2024](#)).
- **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 public Christian properties 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:** At least 100 Iranian Christians had to relocate within the country for faith-related (safety) reasons. In addition, although it is not possible 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 2025 reporting period and might even have reached 5000.

5 Year trends

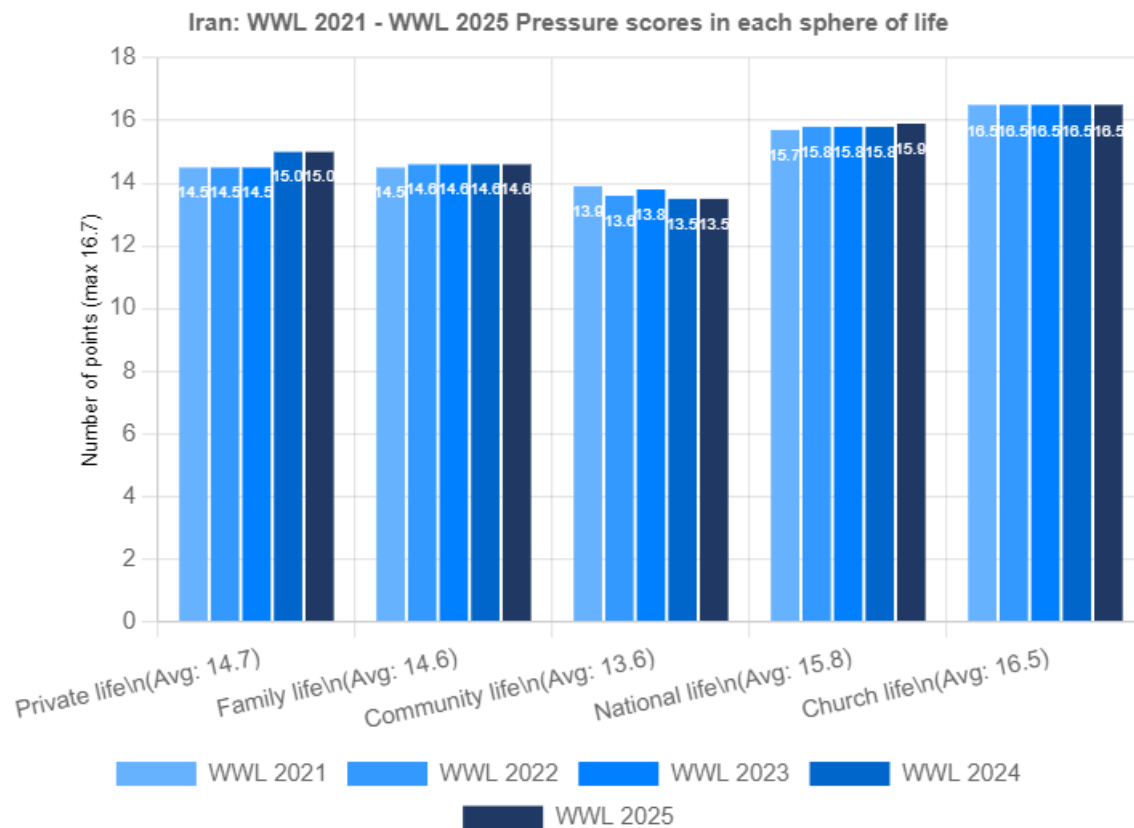
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

5 Year trends: Average pressure

Iran: WWL 2021 - WWL 2025	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2025	15.1
2024	15.1
2023	15.0
2022	15.0
2021	15.0

The table above shows that the overall level of pressure on Christians has been constant at an extreme level of 15.0/15.1 points over the five most recent WWL 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. However, pressure in *Community life* has shown a decreasing tendency,

partly reflecting a growing apathy among the Iranian population towards Islam and the regime. *Private life* saw a 0.5 point rise during WWL 2024, as increased state pressure has forced Christians to be even more cautious when speaking with non-family members, which did not change in WWL 2025. Levels of pressure remained more or less stable in the other spheres of life, with *Church* and *National life* scoring highest.

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 - 10.9 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

Iran	Female Pressure Points Most frequently recorded PPs: WWL 2019 - WWL 2024
	Denied access to social community/networks Denied custody of children Enforced religious dress code Forced divorce Forced marriage Imprisonment by government Incarceration by family (house arrest) Travel bans/restrictions on movement Violence – physical Violence – psychological Violence – sexual

Iranian women have few legally protected individual freedoms and are heavily constrained, a situation which was brought once again to international attention with the death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022. Amini died after being beaten by morality police under Iran’s hijab regulations, which re-ignited nationwide protests over the restrictions on women ([Euronews](#), December 2022). “Amini’s death has now become a symbol of the violent oppression women have faced in Iran for decades” ([CNN](#), 20 December 2022). All women, including Christian women and school-age girls, are under pressure to comply to the strictly enforced hijab law; surveillance cameras are used in public places to allow identification of unveiled women ([Reuters](#), 11 April 2023). This has been criticized as unacceptable, gender-based persecution by UN experts and is being resisted by the next generation of Iranian women ([UN Press Release](#), 14 April 2023; [InterPress Service](#), 20 September 2023).

To be a Christian woman, a minority group in Iran, is particularly precarious. 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. A country expert explains: “Christian women detainees may be subjected to violence, insults, or verbal abuse during interrogation by the interrogators and many of these women refuse to reveal these issues due to social and family conditions and to protect their reputation, which ... affects their soul and spirit a lot”. Shaming women in this way is an effective way to stain their reputation and harm their social status. In addition, the expert reports that Christian women face persecution via limited access to work and education, with their businesses being disrupted and “at a disadvantage for employment because of their faith in addition to their gender, [often] banned from continuing their education.”

With many churches forced to shut down and Christians increasingly isolated, some Christian women, particularly Muslim background converts, have been 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](#) (US State Department, Iran 2020 Human Rights report). If a female convert is an already-married mother, it is highly likely that the custody of the children will be taken from her to

ensure the children are raised in accordance with Islamic law. A country expert shares: “Forced separation of children from Christian mothers is another type of torture of Christian women in Iran.”

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

Iran	Male Pressure Points Most frequently recorded PPs: WWL 2019 - WWL 2024
	Economic harassment via business/job/work access Forced to flee town/country Imprisonment by government Violence - physical Violence – psychological

Despite the majority of house-church members now being women, more men are arrested, prosecuted, sentenced by the government, and often imprisoned for many years 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. A country expert shares that “while women are sometimes arrested and detained, typically the men are detained for longer”. In prison, reports suggest Christian men are treated worse than other prisoners by not being given access to outside space for exercise, not being granted phone calls, and by being subjected to torture and extended interrogation. Lengthy imprisonments bring high costs for families; sometimes the strain and emotional pain caused by separation leads to divorce, and trauma for any children involved.

Men are usually the primary providers for their families. When converting to Christianity, men risk losing their jobs, particularly if they are or 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 a country 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, including a young university student who, being discovered a Christian by the government, was barred from receiving the last six credits that would have allowed him to complete his degree.

When single Christian men are under acute stress through monitoring, physical violence, 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 2023 Iran](#)):

- "A June [2023] report by the UN Secretary-General stated that ethnic and religious minorities were 'significantly affected' in the context of the nationwide protests following the September 2022 death in custody of Mahsa (Zhina) Amini. ... The report also stated the government disproportionately imposed death sentences on persons belonging to ethnic minorities, including members of the Baloch, Arab, and Kurdish minorities" (page 2).
- "The law bars Baha'is from founding or operating their own educational institutions. A Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology order requires universities to exclude Baha'is from access to higher education, or to expel them if their religious affiliation becomes known" (page 17).
- "The government bars Baha'is from all government employment and forbids Baha'i participation in the government's social pension system. Baha'is may not receive compensation for injuries 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 18).
- "Activists and NGOs reported the government continued to detain or disappear Yarsani activists and community leaders for raising awareness regarding government practices or discrimination against the Yarsani community, such as the requirement that Yarsanis identify themselves as Shia in order to access employment or higher education" (page 37).

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."

Further information

- Late 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 appear to have increased during Raisi's term. Amnesty International issued a warning in March 2023 that an "execution spree" was taking place in the country ([AI, 2 March 2023](#)). The number of executions during 2024 were at a similar level, with at least 249 executions reported during the first half year of 2024. A disproportionate number of those executed belong to ethnic and religious minorities ([HRW, 20 Augustus 2024](#)).
- The decades long persecution of Bahais continued in 2024, with a recent HRW report highlighting the "widespread and systematic violations of Baha'is' fundamental rights" ([HRW, 1 April 2024](#)). The Baha'i International Community reported that in October 2023, 26 Bahais received a total of 126 years in prison. The majority of those recently arrested are women, usually between their twenties and thirties. The report states a long list of violations, including refusal of education and burial rights as well as confiscation of property ([BIC, July 2024](#)).
- On 30 September 2022, at least 100 Baluchi were killed by Iranian security forces to quell protests in the regional capital Zahedan, in an event now called the "Bloody Friday of Zahedan" ([IranWire, 30 September 2024](#)). 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](#)). It was reported that at least 627 ethnic Baluch were killed between March 2022 and March 2023 ([IranWire, 30 March 2023](#)).

Trends Summary

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 form the main opposition 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 had hoped for the now deceased Raisi to succeed him as Supreme Leader, Khamenei needed 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 seemed willing to return to the negotiation table. In the meantime, the sanctions imposed by his predecessor are still in place. The Biden administration tried to confine Iran's influence in the region and was only prepared to make concessions if Iran were to significantly scale down its nuclear activities. Until now, the parties have been unwilling to compromise. Even if the deal is ultimately revived, the relationship between the USA and Iran is likely to remain more or less hostile. Nevertheless, 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, 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](#)).

The Biden government downplayed the role of Iran in the attack on Israel by Hamas on 7 October 2023, probably to avoid further escalation ([FDD, 1 November 2023](#)). The Israel-Hamas war has distracted any efforts to revive talks and the ongoing hostilities between Israel and Iran constitute a major setback in the diplomatic relationship between the USA and Iran. It is unlikely these will improve any time soon.

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.

3) Fall of Assad regime - a major setback

The fall of the Assad regime in Syria in December 2024 is considered to be a major setback for the Iranian regime. Supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei once described Syria as the "pillar" of his "axis of resistance" against US and Israeli influence. It is believed that the regime has provided the Assad dictatorship with at least 30 billion USD in support since the start of the Syrian uprising in 2011 ([DW, 12 September 2024](#)). The sudden changes in Syria took place outside the WWL 2025 reporting period and it is still too early to draw any further conclusions how the fall will impact the wider region.

Further useful reports

Further background information per country and a selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-background/>
- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.
- [Iran - The reality for Christians - Revised May 2021](#)

External Links

- Copyright, sources and definitions: Background country information - <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-background/>
- 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, 18 June 2024 - <https://articleeighteen.com/news/14877/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: Article 18, 10 August 2023 - <https://articleeighteen.com/news/13706/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: Article 18, 18 November 2024 - <https://articleeighteen.com/news/15325/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: exorbitant sums - <https://articleeighteen.com/news/14791/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: high amounts - <https://articleeighteen.com/news/15421/>
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- Specific examples of positive developments: Article 18, 26 April 2023 - <https://articleeighteen.com/news/13151/>
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- Specific examples of positive developments: Article 18, 25 September 2024 - <https://articleeighteen.com/news/15151/>
- Specific examples of positive developments: Article 18, 9 October 2024 - <https://articleeighteen.com/case-studies/15198/>
- Specific examples of positive developments: Article 18, 16 December 2024 - <https://articleeighteen.com/news/15431/>
- Specific examples of positive developments: Article 18, 10 May 2023 - <https://articleeighteen.com/news/13208/>
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- Specific examples of positive developments: Iran International, 12 December 2023 - <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202312124517>
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- Further useful reports: Iran - The reality for Christians - Revised May 2021 - <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/reports/Iran-The-reality-for-Christians-Revised-May-2021-Final.pdf>