

World
Watch
Research

Iran: Country Dossier

January 2020



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

January 2020

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Introduction

World Watch List 2020

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017	Total Score WWL 2016
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	11.1	94	94	94	92	92
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.0	93	94	93	89	88
3	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.5	9.4	92	91	91	91	87
4	Libya	15.3	15.5	15.8	16.0	16.4	11.3	90	87	86	78	79
5	Pakistan	14.0	13.9	15.0	14.9	13.7	16.7	88	87	86	88	87
6	Eritrea	14.5	14.9	15.9	15.9	15.4	10.9	87	86	86	82	89
7	Sudan	14.2	14.6	14.5	15.7	16.1	10.4	85	87	87	87	84
8	Yemen	16.6	16.4	16.4	16.7	16.7	2.6	85	86	85	85	78
9	Iran	14.1	14.3	14.1	15.8	16.5	10.4	85	85	85	85	83
10	India	12.9	13.0	13.5	15.0	13.5	14.8	83	83	81	73	68
11	Syria	13.5	14.2	13.0	13.9	14.4	12.6	82	82	76	86	87
12	Nigeria	12.2	11.9	13.5	12.8	13.0	16.7	80	80	77	78	78
13	Saudi Arabia	15.1	14.9	14.1	15.5	16.5	2.4	79	77	79	76	76
14	Maldives	15.4	15.6	14.0	15.9	16.6	0.7	78	78	78	76	76
15	Iraq	14.0	14.6	13.9	14.5	13.6	5.6	76	79	86	86	90
16	Egypt	12.1	13.1	10.7	13.2	10.5	16.1	76	76	70	65	64
17	Algeria	13.5	14.3	10.4	12.8	13.2	9.3	73	70	58	58	56
18	Uzbekistan	15.1	12.9	14.1	12.2	15.7	3.0	73	74	73	71	70
19	Myanmar	11.8	11.9	13.5	12.5	12.2	10.7	73	71	65	62	62
20	Laos	12.8	9.9	14.1	14.4	14.9	5.6	72	71	67	64	58
21	Vietnam	12.3	8.5	12.9	13.6	14.5	9.8	72	70	69	71	66
22	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.2	13.8	13.3	15.7	1.9	70	69	68	67	66
23	China	11.6	8.4	11.6	12.8	15.1	10.2	70	65	57	57	57
24	Mauritania	13.9	14.0	13.0	13.7	13.4	0.2	68	67	57	55	50
25	Central African Republic	10.1	9.1	13.1	9.8	10.2	15.6	68	70	61	58	59
26	Morocco	12.4	13.3	10.8	11.7	14.1	4.1	66	63	51	49	47
27	Qatar	13.6	13.4	10.8	12.2	14.1	2.2	66	62	63	66	65
28	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	10.2	9.4	11.8	15.6	66	48	-	-	-
29	Mali	9.2	8.2	12.8	10.0	11.7	13.7	66	68	59	59	55
30	Sri Lanka	11.5	9.0	11.0	10.9	9.6	13.1	65	58	57	55	53
31	Tajikistan	13.9	12.3	11.9	12.4	13.1	1.1	65	65	65	58	58
32	Nepal	12.4	10.8	9.9	12.1	12.2	7.0	64	64	64	53	53
33	Jordan	13.1	14.1	10.7	11.7	12.5	1.7	64	65	66	63	59
34	Tunisia	12.0	12.8	10.3	10.8	12.3	5.4	64	63	62	61	58

35	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.5	10.7	12.4	14.0	1.7	64	63	63	56	55
36	Turkey	12.6	11.8	10.7	13.3	11.3	3.7	63	66	62	57	55
37	Brunei	13.8	14.3	10.7	10.3	13.5	0.6	63	63	64	64	61
38	Bangladesh	11.1	9.9	12.7	11.1	8.9	9.3	63	58	58	63	57
39	Ethiopia	10.0	9.2	10.6	10.8	10.4	11.9	63	65	62	64	67
40	Malaysia	12.1	14.6	12.7	12.0	9.6	1.5	62	60	65	60	58
41	Colombia	8.9	7.8	11.9	9.8	8.9	15.0	62	58	56	53	55
42	Oman	12.7	13.1	10.0	11.5	12.7	2.0	62	59	57	53	53
43	Kuwait	13.2	13.1	9.9	11.5	13.4	0.7	62	60	61	57	56
44	Kenya	11.7	10.5	10.9	8.3	10.9	9.1	61	61	62	68	68
45	Bhutan	12.8	10.9	11.8	11.6	13.9	0.0	61	64	62	61	56
46	Russian Federation	12.2	8.3	10.7	10.4	12.1	6.9	60	60	51	46	48
47	United Arab Emirates	12.9	13.0	9.5	11.1	12.6	1.1	60	58	58	55	55
48	Cameroon	8.8	7.2	11.6	7.0	10.4	15.0	60	54	38	-	45
49	Indonesia	10.9	11.1	11.6	10.2	9.5	6.5	60	65	59	55	55
50	Niger	9.4	9.5	13.3	7.2	11.1	9.3	60	52	45	47	53
51	Palestinian Territories	12.2	13.0	9.2	10.2	11.9	3.1	60	57	60	64	62
52	Mexico	8.4	6.8	12.2	10.6	10.0	11.5	60	61	59	57	56
53	Azerbaijan	13.0	10.0	9.3	11.1	12.4	1.5	57	57	57	52	57
54	Comoros	11.7	11.5	9.1	9.9	13.9	0.9	57	56	56	56	56
55	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.3	11.1	9.4	11.9	1.1	57	56	54	48	46
56	Djibouti	12.3	12.3	10.3	10.0	11.2	0.2	56	56	56	57	58
57	Democratic Republic of the Congo	5.6	6.7	10.6	7.4	10.4	15.6	56	55	33	-	53
58	Chad	11.5	8.2	10.2	9.6	10.3	5.9	56	48	40	-	51
59	Bahrain	12.1	12.3	9.1	10.1	10.5	0.9	55	55	57	54	54
60	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	7.0	55	52	53	59	57
61	Cuba	9.6	5.6	9.5	11.8	12.0	3.5	52	49	49	47	42
62	Uganda	8.1	4.6	6.7	6.7	9.1	13.0	48	47	46	53	45
63	Burundi	5.1	5.8	9.7	9.2	9.6	8.7	48	43	-	-	-
64	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	7.0	8.1	3.7	45	46	-	-	-
65	South Sudan	5.7	1.5	7.0	6.3	7.8	15.6	44	44	-	-	-
66	Mozambique	6.9	4.6	7.1	5.2	8.0	11.7	43	43	-	-	-
67	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.7	8.3	8.8	1.1	43	43	-	-	-
68	Angola	6.4	3.6	7.0	8.7	10.4	6.7	43	42	-	-	-
69	Venezuela	3.8	4.4	10.6	9.3	9.5	4.8	42	41	34	-	-
70	Ivory Coast	9.8	8.6	8.2	5.5	6.6	3.5	42	43	-	-	-
71	Rwanda	5.3	4.4	6.7	7.8	10.1	7.2	42	41	-	-	-
72	Nicaragua	5.8	4.2	8.5	9.8	9.0	4.1	41	41	-	-	-
73	Togo	8.6	6.7	8.5	7.1	8.4	1.1	41	42	-	-	-

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Brief note on 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 2020 reporting period was 1 November 2018 - 31 October 2019.

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).

Second revision: 6 January 2020

WWL 2020: Persecution summary / Iran

Brief country details

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

Pop 2019	Christians	Chr%
Iran		
82,821,000	800,000	OD estimate

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2019).

World Watch List Iran	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2020	85	9
WWL 2019	85	9
WWL 2018	85	10
WWL 2017	85	8
WWL 2016	83	9

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2016-2020 reporting periods.

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

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

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

Brief description of persecution situation

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

Specific examples of persecution in the reporting period

- Over the WWL 2020 reporting period, there were at least 169 arrests, 114 of them made in one single week at the end of 2018. Many Christians (especially converts) have been prosecuted and sentenced to long terms in jail. Others are still awaiting trial. Their families face public humiliation during this time. See World Watch Monitor reports for [examples](#).
- Several house-churches were raided in the WWL 2020 reporting period, most of which can no longer function as a meeting place for Christians.
- The practice of courts setting very high amounts of bail amounts continues. Arrested Christians, who manage to raise such sums of money for conditional release on bail, forfeit that money if they then proceed to flee the country. See below under Persecution engines "Organized Corruption and crime" for further details. See also World Watch Monitor reports for [examples](#).
- There have been reports of the security services informing the parents of young women found attending house-church services, stating that the women were found mixing with men inappropriately. Shaming unmarried women is an effective way to stain their reputation and harm their social status, especially in conservative areas.

External Links - WWL 2020: Persecution summary / Iran

- Specific examples of persecution in the reporting period: examples - <http://https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/iran>
- Specific examples of persecution in the reporting period: examples - <http://https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/iran-crackdown-on-christians-continues-with-reports-of-beatings/>

WWL 2020: Keys to understanding / Iran

Introduction

Link for general background information

BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14541327>.

Recent history

In the Revolution of 1979, the Shah was removed and Iran was changed into an Islamic Republic. During his reign (1941-1979), the Shah had started a program of modernization and Western influences entered the country. At the same time, all dissidents were heavily oppressed. As a result, the Shah lost the support of powerful religious, political and popular forces, paving the way for a coup. Shia Islamic clerics took political control, banning all Western (or Christian, which is virtually the same in their view) influence from the country. Today, the most senior and influential cleric is the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

In July 2015 an agreement between Iran and six world powers aiming to restrict the Iranian nuclear program was made in exchange for the lifting of sanctions. President Rouhani, who is known as a moderate, struck this deal in his first term and was re-elected in May 2017. At the same time, moderates won in the elections to the Iranian Parliament in February 2016. This seemed to confirm the rise of moderate politics in Iran. However, in the elections for the head of the Iranian Assembly of Experts – the council responsible for selecting the Supreme Leader – an anti-Western hardliner was elected. In addition, hardliner Ebrahim Raisi [was appointed](#) as the head of the judiciary in March 2019. A clear reminder that in the end – in spite of what seems to be a democratic process - it is the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei who pulls the political strings in Iran.

The nuclear deal led to a richer and stronger Iran, whose influence in the region grew. However, in May 2018 the USA announced its withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – which is popularly known as "The Iran Deal". The USA also reinstated its sanctions against Iran. As a result the Rial currency fell in value. The moderates, including President Rouhani, are trying to uphold the deal with the other signatories (mainly the EU, Germany, France and the United Kingdom). However, increasing tensions between Iran and the USA, starting in May 2019 [with the deployment of an American aircraft-carrier in the Persian Gulf](#), have led to [Iran breaching the terms](#) of the agreement. If economic circumstances further deteriorate due to the sanctions, the hardliners will probably gain further political influence blaming the moderates for trusting the arch-enemy in the first place.

Ten years after the [Green Movement protests](#), the deteriorating economic circumstances and the overall oppression of dissidents, including [female activists](#), led to weeks of bloody protests in November 2019. At least [200 demonstrators have been killed](#), in what started as a protest against the rise of petrol prices.

Political and legal landscape

Iran (or Persia) is officially called the Islamic Republic of Iran and is classified by EIU as authoritarian. [Human Right Watch](#) reports: "President Hassan Rouhani secured a second four-year term in office in May 2017, in an election marked by debate over the state of civil and political rights in Iran. But despite harsh criticisms he made on the human rights situation during his campaign, he has done little to curtail the rampant violations of the security apparatus and the judiciary. Authorities responded to widespread protests expressing frustration against the government, including allegations of corruption and the lack of political and social freedoms, with mass arbitrary arrests and unfair trials."

[FSI reports](#) that factionalized elites and group grievances are increasing, leading to an increase in potential conflicts. [EIU](#) writes: "Tensions in the Gulf remain elevated, following most recently the seizure of a UK-flagged oil tanker by Iran in the Strait of Hormuz, keeping the risk of military confrontation high."

Within the current Iranian political spectrum there is a division between the Islamic left (Reformists) and the Islamic right (Principlists). The Reformists dominate the parliament, the Islamic Consultative Assembly. Re-elected President Rouhani can also be seen as a Reformist. However, the Principlists dominate the Guardian Council, which has the power to veto all legislation from the parliament. The appointments of the Guardian Council are controlled by the supreme leader of Iran (who has highest authority in the country) and is a Principlist himself. In this way, the more moderate parliament of Iran does not have much power to bring change. As long as the right wing sees Iran as an Islamic country for Shiite Muslims threatened by Western (Christian) countries and culture, Christians, especially converts, will be persecuted.

Local Christians report that ultimate power rests in the hands of the country's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and the unelected institutions under his control. These institutions, including the security forces and the judiciary, play a major role in the suppression of dissent and other restrictions on civil liberties. Only political parties and factions loyal to the establishment and to the state ideology are permitted to operate. Even Reformist parties have come under increased state repression, especially since 2009. The power struggle between Reformists and Principlists continues.

The marked improvement in relationships with the West in recent years is faltering and the country's supreme leader has ruled out any dealings with Washington due to the disagreements on the nuclear deal. The 2015 deal was originally struck after the USA and its allies were concerned that the nuclear program could be aimed at producing weapons, something which Iran denied. US President Donald Trump withdrew from the accord in 2018 and re-imposed sanctions.

Religious landscape

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

Interest in Christianity (and other non-Islamic religions) continues among a population predominantly disillusioned with Islam. Local Christians report an increase of agnosticism and nominal adherence Islam, especially in urban areas. Being a non-Muslim brings an unlimited number of limitations and unfair discrimination to one's private and public life in Iran. Religious and political leaders in Iran continue to speak out against Christianity and hardliners maintain their almost absolute power in domestic affairs, which affects human rights. It is therefore unsurprising that the Christian community experiences repression in various forms. The Iranian intelligence service (MOIS) closely monitors Christian activities and other religious minorities, together with the Revolutionary Guard (IRCG). They are responsible for raids on Christian gatherings in private homes, arresting all in attendance and confiscating personal property. Those arrested are subjected to intensive and often aggressive interrogation.

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

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

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

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

In the table below, the religious statistics follow WCD estimates. These have not been altered to take into account the Open Doors estimate for the number of Christians.

Religious Context: Iran	Numbers	%
Christians	800,000	(OD estimate)
Muslim	81,617,000	98.5
Hindu	37,100	0.0
Buddhist	480	0.0
Ethnoreligionist	4,800	0.0
Jewish	17,000	0.0
Bahai	224,000	0.3
Atheist	9,600	0.0
Agnostic	228,000	0.3
Other	84,200	0.1

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2019). OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.

Economic landscape

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

One of the major issues is that [Article 44](#) of the Iranian Constitution prescribes "that all major industries should be government owned". In May 2005, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei provided an important new interpretation of this article, allowing more privatization and a decrease of the state sector. Instead of private companies, the very conservative Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) used this opportunity to build its own in-state economic empire. As the IRGC is very well connected to the judiciary and other state branches, it has become almost impossible for moderate President Rouhani to carry out major reforms. This explains why the [Prime Advisory Networks](#) writes on Iran: "The private sector is largely marginalized by the restrictive regulatory environment and government inefficiency and mismanagement."

Local Christians report that economic uncertainty is very high. Iran's unemployment rate has been above 10% for the last decade. While the average unemployment rate was 12% in 2019, the unemployment rate among young Iranians reached 27%. The situation for university graduates is particularly difficult since they make up [40% of the unemployed](#). Iran's economy, which is reliant on government initiatives, has little growth as it is hardly capable of creating new jobs. One of the characteristics of the Iranian government is the discrimination it imposes on the job market. Individuals who at least pretend to be loyal to the Islamic Republic are in a better position for finding employment with government employers.

Social and cultural landscape

Iranian society and culture is conservative on the surface, but there is a significant underground culture dominated by the younger generation and dissenting artists. Life expectancy is rated at 76.2 with 14.2 years of expected schooling. Urbanization is rapidly increasing with vast numbers of people leaving rural areas to seek more opportunities and a better life in the cities. The urban population in Iran was reported at 74.4%, growing 2% annually ([World Bank 2018](#)).

Persian culture can be traced to origins long before the arrival of Islam and Iranians are proud of these pre-Islamic cultural roots. This also finds its expression in the Persian names given to children.

Iranians invest in education. Although no less than 2640 universities exist in the country, levels of education are poor on the whole. Education is often driven for ideological reasons rather than for increasing technical expertise ([Iran BTI 2018](#)). This is probably part of the reason why Iran scores #128 out of 141 countries on "critical thinking in education" and #92 in overall skills ([The Global Competitiveness Report 2019](#)).

According to the [Gender Inequality Index](#), gender inequality, although declining, is still high.

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

Technological landscape

Iranian internet use is rated at 53.2 %, but with a large difference between rural and urban communities. The government is known to limit access or even slow down the Internet in order to contain discontent and protests, while censoring all Internet content (source: [Iran Freedom on the Net 2018](#)). Mobile phones are widely used (74 million users), with constant monitoring of all calls and SMS texts.

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

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

According to [RSF](#), the freedom for journalists is decreasing: "Iran has been one of the world's most repressive countries for journalists for the past 40 years. State control of news and information is unrelenting and at least 860 journalists and citizen-journalists have been imprisoned or executed since 1979. The Islamic regime exercises extensive control over the media landscape and its harassment of independent journalists, citizen-journalists and independent media has not let up. They are constantly subjected to intimidation, arbitrary arrest and long jail sentences imposed by revolutionary courts at the end of unfair trials. The media that are still resisting increasingly lack the resources to report freely and independently."

Security situation

In November 2019, Iran saw some of the bloodiest protests in decades. At least [200 demonstrators were killed](#), in what started as a protest against rising petrol prices. It is possible that further protests will take place in the coming months. The Iranian police is well-trained, well-equipped and well-known for using violence against demonstrators. They are supported by a variety of intelligence services and Iran's secret service is also known for its operations abroad (even in the West), [executing opposing Iranians](#).

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

Iran faces growing **tensions** with "the West" in general, but the USA in particular. These growing tensions are due partly to allegations against Iran made by the US-president and partly due to violent activities in the Strait of Hormuz. Iran is being held responsible for so-called terrorist activities in Saudi Arabia and for confiscating foreign (oil)tankers.

The threat of attack by violent Islamic militants in Iran is **high**. This is a consequence of Iran's support in fighting the Sunni Islamic State group and a result of internal opposition. Both entities (Islamic State affiliates and minority opposition groups) are likely to increase the number of attacks on the regime in the coming months.

Iran is known for being an Islamic Republic, with the Shia branch as the state religion. Internally, Iran's **religious police** regulate adherence to Sharia-based law and it is common that this police force carries out arrests and issues fines for non-adherence.

Trends analysis

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

Conservative elements known as "Principlists" (such as the powerful military and security organization commissioned to protect the regime, Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps - IRGC) are not supportive of this agreement. Iranian leaders fear for their position and fear any violation of the values of the Islamic Revolution of 1979. It is likely that they will try to counter this development by blocking any attempts to implement social and political reform; the withdrawal of the USA helps them to blame the moderates and President Rouhani for concluding the deal with the arch-enemy in the first place.

Another way of getting the message across that the nuclear deal does not mean an end to the values of the Revolution, is the crackdown on media, human rights and political activists. Already, the suppression on Iranians holding dual nationality and dissidents (including religious minorities) has increased. These groups are considered a threat to the Islamic character of the republic: Those holding dual nationality are a threat because of their connections to foreign circles and businesses; and dissidents and religious minorities are seen as a threat because of their political or religious convictions. This suppression can be seen in the increased number of arrests but also in the smear campaigns targeting religious minorities, especially Christian converts and adherents of Bahai.

As more interaction with the wider world becomes possible for the general public, 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.

To a certain extent, it can be said that the nuclear deal has further escalated an internal political power-struggle in Iran, with the USA's withdrawal from the JCPOA putting the moderates between a rock and a hard place.

External Links - WWL 2020: Keys to understanding / Iran

- Link for general background information: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14541327>. - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14541327>
- Recent history: was appointed - <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-judiciary-raisi-newsmaker/hardline-iranian-cleric-consolidates-leadership-position-idUSKBN1QT1GO>
- Recent history: with the deployment of an American aircraft-carrier in the Persian Gulf - <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-48298517>
- Recent history: Iran breaching the terms - <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/iran-nuclear-weapon-deal-trump-enrichment-jpac-agreement-a9187526.html>
- Recent history: Green Movement protests - http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/8343494.stm
- Recent history: female activists - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-47531312>
- Recent history: 200 demonstrators have been killed, - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-50643445>
- Political and legal landscape: Human Right Watch - <https://www.hrw.org/middle-east/n-africa/iran>
- Political and legal landscape: FSI reports - <https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/>
- Political and legal landscape: EIU - <http://country.eiu.com/iran>
- Religious landscape: Freedom of Thought - <https://fot.humanists.international/countries/asia-southern-asia/iran/>
- Economic landscape: Article 44 - <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-larijani-slams-economic-performance/28637552.html>
- Economic landscape: Prime Advisory Networks - <https://www.primeadvisorynetwork.com/en/country-report-iran/>
- Economic landscape: 40% of the unemployed - <https://irannewswire.org/40-of-irans-unemployed-are-university-graduates/>
- Social and cultural landscape: World Bank 2018 - <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.URB.GROW?locations=IR>
- Social and cultural landscape: Iran BTI 2018 - <https://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-reports/detail/itc/IRN/>
- Social and cultural landscape: The Global Competitiveness Report 2019 - http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_TheGlobalCompetitivenessReport2019.pdf
- Social and cultural landscape: Gender Inequality Index, - <http://hdr.undp.org/en/indicators/68606>
- Social and cultural landscape: taking harsh measure against them - <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/actions/iran-women-jailed-viral-video-forced-veiling-hijab-law>
- Technological landscape: Iran Freedom on the Net 2018 - <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/iran>
- Technological landscape: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace - <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/01/04/iran-s-internal-targets-pub-75142>
- Technological landscape: RSF, - <https://rsf.org/en/iran>

- Security situation: 200 demonstrators were killed, - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-50643445>
- Security situation: executing opposing Iranians - <https://www.aivd.nl/actueel/nieuws/2019/01/08/iran-waarschijnlijk-betrokken-bij-liquidaties-in-nederland>
- Security situation: alliances - <https://www.crisisgroup.org/trigger-list/iran-us-trigger-list>
- Security situation: tensions - <https://www.crisisgroup.org/trigger-list/iran-us-trigger-list>
- Security situation: high - <https://www.france24.com/en/20180922-iran-civilians-killed-gunmen-attack-military-parade>
- Security situation: religious police - <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36101150>

WWL 2020: Church information / Iran

Christian origins

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

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

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

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

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

Protestant missions were established from the 19th century onwards, they were responsible for translating the New Testament into Persian for the first time in 1812. However, most Protestant church members came from a Nestorian background since mission-work among the Muslims remained difficult. The Anglican Church, which had the most Muslim converts, counted only 350 of them in 1936. Nevertheless, Christian influence in the 19th and 20th century was significant through church-run schools, hospitals and village clinics. Major restrictions followed the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Proselytizing became illegal, conversion punishable by death and building new churches became impossible. (For details, see: Bradley, M: "Iran and Christianity Historical Identity and Present Relevance", New York, 2008, pp. 137-158.)

Church spectrum today

The table below is based on WCD 2019 estimates and has not the OD-estimate. Nevertheless, it gives an indication of the size of church denominations active in Iran.

Church networks: Iran	Christians	%
Orthodox	188,000	31.4
Catholic	9,100	1.5
Protestant	30,900	5.2
Independent	351,000	58.7
Unaffiliated	18,900	3.2
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
Total	-----	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	83,800	14.0
Renewalist movement	292,000	48.8

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2019).

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: Believers who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). Unaffiliated Christians: Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. Doubly-affiliated Christians: Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. Evangelical movement: Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. Renewalist movement: Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

WWL 2020: Persecution Dynamics

Reporting period

1 November 2018 – 31 October 2019

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

With a score of 85 points, Iran ranked 9 in WWL 2020

Iran also scored 85 points in WWL 2019 and WWL 2018. The pressure on Christians remained at an extreme level in all spheres of life. The score for violence remained very high at 10.4 points despite there being many more arrests.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines: Iran	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Very strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Clan and ethnic antagonism	CEA	Weak
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Weak
Communist and post - Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Very weak
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Very strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Medium

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

Islamic oppression (Very strong):

Shia Islam is the official state religion and all laws must be consistent with the official interpretation of Sharia law. The Constitution bans parliament from passing laws contrary to Islam and states that there may be no amendment to its provisions related to the “Islamic character” of the political or legal system or to the specification of Shia Jafari Islam as the official religion. To safeguard Islamic ordinances and to ensure the compatibility with Islam of legislation passed by the parliament, a Guardian Council consisting of Shia scholars and clerics must review and approve all legislation.

The Guardian Council also reviews all candidates for the highest public appointments, like the presidency and the parliament. This explains why even the reformists within the government are conservative and why Christians and other religious minorities are barred from high office and other influential positions within the system.

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

Dictatorial paranoia (Very strong):

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

Organized corruption and crime (Medium):

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

Christian denominational protectionism (Weak):

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

Drivers of persecution

Drivers of Persecution: Iran	IO	RN	CEA	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	VERY STRONG			WEAK			VERY STRONG	MEDIUM
Government officials	Very strong						Very strong	Strong
Ethnic group leaders				Weak				
Non-Christian religious leaders	Very strong							
Religious leaders of other churches				Weak				
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Weak							
One's own (extended) family	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. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology.

Drivers of Islamic oppression:

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

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia:

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

Drivers of Organized corruption and crime:

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

Drivers of Christian denominational protectionism:

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

Geographical hotspots of persecution

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

Christian communities and how they are affected

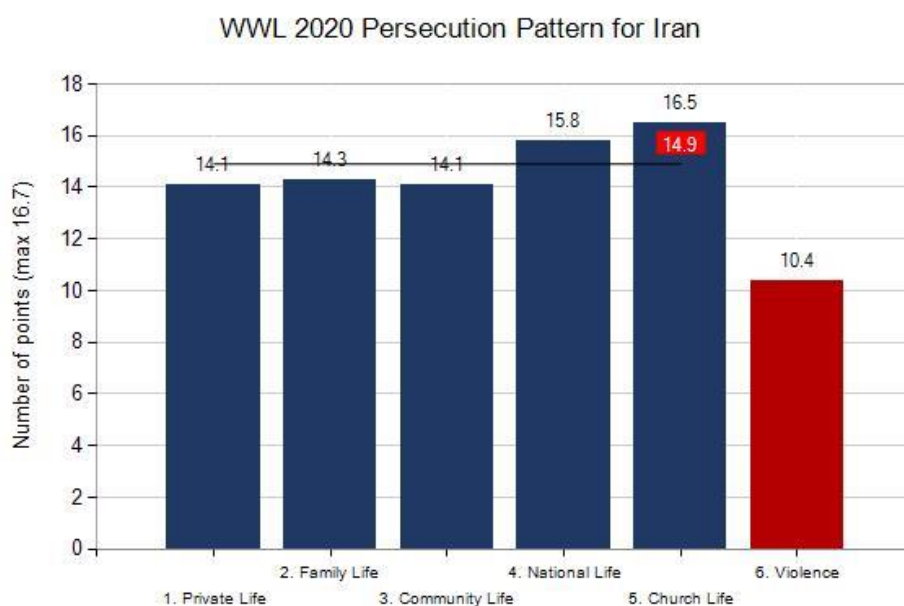
Communities of expatriate Christians: This group consists of Christian expatriates from the Far East (e.g. Philippines, South Korea) and the West, of whom many have a Catholic, Lutheran or Presbyterian background. Of the small number of churches, some expatriate churches have been forced to shut down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

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

Converts to Christianity: Converts from Islam to Christianity constitute the largest category in the country. They bear the brunt of persecution, especially 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 conversion to Christianity and thus as a denunciation of Islam and is therefore forbidden. Also, the majority of children born to converts are automatically registered as Muslims. It is especially the leaders of Christian convert groups who have been arrested, prosecuted and have received long prison terms for crimes against the national security, although since 2014 an increasing number of non-leaders have received similar charges too. Due to such high pressure, converts have to be very careful and many of them practice their faith isolated from other Christians. There is also a growing community of Iranian Christian converts worldwide, as over the years many converts have fled the country and other Iranians have become Christians abroad.

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

The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2020 Persecution pattern for Iran shows:

- The average pressure on Christians stayed at the same extremely high level (14.9 points) as in WWL 2019. The Iranian government is exerting pressure on Christians on a large scale.
- Although all *spheres of life* show extreme levels of pressure, pressure is highest in *Church* and *National life*. This reflects that the pressure is mainly coming from the government. All church life is very much restricted, even for the officially recognized ethnic Christians, who are not allowed to evangelize or even to speak in Persian during their church services.
- The score for violence remained at 10.4 points in WWL 2020, the same number of points as in WWL 2019.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, details from four of the highest scoring block questions have been selected (in most cases this will be questions which have scored 3.5 or above on a scale 0 – maximum 4 in the WWL questionnaire), with those items scoring highest listed first. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

Private sphere:

- ***It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (including expressions in blogs and Facebook etc.) (Block 1.4 / Score: 4 points):*** Security services in Iran monitor social media for Christian-related texts and record such posts as evidence prior to an arrest. Some church leaders have been confronted with private messages and posts during interrogation. Although this mostly concerns converts, there is also a risk for other types of Christian, as sharing Christian messages can be interpreted as acts of proselytization, especially when written in Persian.
- ***It been dangerous to privately own or keep Christian materials (Block 1.3 / Score: 3.75 points):*** For all types of Christianity, it can be dangerous to possess Christian materials in Farsi (Persian) – especially in significant quantities - as this would suggest they are for distribution to Muslim background Iranians. Christians from Historic Christian communities are allowed to possess Christian materials in their own language (Armenian or Assyrian).
- ***It has been risky for Christians to meet with other Christians (Block 1.9 / Score: 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.
- ***It has been risky for Christians to access Christian radio or TV, or Christian material on the Internet (Block 1.6 / Score: 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.

Converts from Islam to Christianity cannot openly practice their faith. Any hint that they may be Christians can have serious consequences. If they are the only Christians in their family, they have to be very careful in the way they worship.

Family sphere:

- ***Christian couples have been hindered in adopting children or serving as foster parents because of their faith (Block 2.6 / Score: 3.75 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.
- ***Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education (Block 2.8 / Score: 3.75 points):*** The children of converts are automatically registered as Muslim and have to go through the Islamic-based educational system, which has been further Islamized since the 1979 Revolution. Some converts have tried to oppose this, but this has led to court cases against them and threats against the children involved. Many choose not to engage in this legal dispute for the fear of more persecution. Furthermore, children of Armenian and Assyrian Christians are forced to take Quranic and Islamic classes at elementary school. Courses like “History of Islam”, “Quranic Teachings” and Arabic are mandatory for all post-secondary students regardless of their religion. University application forms require the applicants to indicate their religion. If a Muslim-born individual mentions his/her religion as Christianity, he/she will not be accepted at university. Thus, post-secondary education is practically not available to converts with an Islamic background (or they have to lie about their religion when they apply).
- ***Christian spouses and/or children of Christians have been subject to separation for prolonged periods of time by circumstances relating to persecution (Block 2.10 / Score: 3.5 points):*** Church leaders, and increasingly ordinary church members too, are often imprisoned for long periods and this frequently has a negative impact on their family members. Some children are severely traumatized by the absence of their father or mother. Sometimes imprisonment led to divorce and associated emotional pains for the family.
- ***Christians have lost their inheritance rights because of their conversion to Christianity or to another church denomination (if the person was already a Christian) (Block 2.13 / Score: 3.5 points):*** Inheritance laws are part of legalized discriminations in the Civil Code of Iran. For example, according to Article 881 of the Civil Code, a non-Muslim cannot inherit property from a Muslim. Even if only one of the heirs of a non-Muslim is Muslim, the latter (regardless of that person’s relationship with or the distance to the deceased) will receive the entire inheritance to the detriment of all other non-Muslim heirs. In practice, this law not only discriminates against religious minorities but also encourages conversion to Islam for material gain.

Community sphere:

- **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.) (Block 3.2 / Score: 4 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.
- **Christians have been interrogated or compelled to report to the local vigilante/police for faith-related reasons (Block 3.13 / Score: 4 points):** Converts and other Christians, especially those suspected of evangelism, are frequently summoned for interrogation or are interrogated upon arrest. Some of them have been summoned dozens of times. The aim of the interrogation in these cases is to intimidate the Christians without the bother of having to prosecute and imprison them. However, some of them are imprisoned and prosecuted after these interrogations, depending on the severity of the allegations and the available 'evidence'.
- **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.) (Block 3.1 / Score: 3.75 points):** All women in Iran have to cover their faces and wearing the hijab is mandatory. Christians have to be sensitive to survive without problems in their communities. Pressure is more intensely felt during certain times of the year, like Islamic religious festivals (Ramadan) or when Christmas and other Christian celebrations coincide with days of mourning for Shia Muslims. Especially converts, if known, can face daily harassment from neighbors, employers, colleagues and others.
- **Christians have been hindered in the operation of their businesses for faith-related reasons - e.g. access to loans, subsidies, government contracts, client boycotts (Block 3.11 / Score: 3.75):** The state controls more than 60% of the economy directly and doing business in Iran is very much affected by clientelism and cronyism. Historical Christians like the Armenians and Assyrians will face discrimination when doing business, while other types of Christians do not stand a chance of conducting business in Iran.

All Christians in Iran are more or less put under pressure to renounce their faith as a result of discrimination. Christians with a Muslim background are considered unclean especially in villages, rural areas and in conservative cities. Radical Islamic people will not shake hands with Christians, touch them or eat their food. All types of Christianity - and particularly converts (if their new faith is known) - can experience harassment and discrimination in their workplace, both by the state and by private sector employers.

National sphere:

- **Christians have been barred from public office or promotion has been hindered for faith-related reasons (Block 4.6 / Score: 4 points):** Minorities in Iran are severely discriminated against and higher positions in both government and society are only given to Shia Muslims. All Christians are banned from public offices, except for three seats reserved for Armenian/Assyrian Christians in parliament.

- ***Christians have been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public (Block 4.8 / Score: 4 points):*** There is no freedom of speech in Iran and criticizing the government can have severe consequences. Armenian and Assyrian Christians have to be careful not to criticize the government or to state anything that might be interpreted as an act of evangelism. Convert and other Christians already have to operate very carefully in private, let alone expressing their views in public.
- ***Media reporting has been incorrect or biased against Christians (Block 4.10 / Score: 4 points):*** National media in Iran is carefully controlled and does not allow alternative opinions or beliefs to be promoted. At various times state officials will speak up against Christians (typically referring to "Zionism" and house-churches) and this will initiate a wave of hate-speech against Christians. Hate-speech against Iranian Christians, especially Protestants, remained at a high level during the WWL 2020 reporting period in the form of multimedia material published by the government and anti-Christian rhetoric expressed by imams.
- ***Those who caused harm to Christians have deliberately been left unpunished (Block 4.14 / Score: 4 points):*** State officials often use violence against Christians during arrests and interrogations. (Sexual) harassment is very common and there has been no attempt to address such injustice, despite these activities being in violation of the Iranian penal code. In addition, family members can harm converts with impunity.

Church sphere:

- ***Church activities have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed (Block 5.1 / Score: 4 points):*** Many (if not all) public church services are monitored by the secret police. Armenians and Assyrians, while under surveillance, have not been hindered from gathering, as long as they conduct their services in their own languages and do not welcome Muslim-background Christians to their meetings and activities. The government has further intensified its campaign to remove Persian-speaking Christians from the country. During the past years, many churches have been shut down, confiscated or forced to cancel their church services in Persian. Their leaders were also often arrested. Officially, there are now virtually no Persian-speaking churches left in the country. Severe surveillance of house-churches leads to increasing fear among those attending.
- ***Churches have been hindered from openly integrating converts (Block 5.7 / Score: 4 points):*** All churches are forbidden to welcome Persians on a permanent basis. This began as a security strategy in 2008 - 2010. Churches were visited by security officials or church leaders were summoned to government offices. They were told to supply lists of attendees and refuse entry to ethnic Persians. The Persian language was forbidden for use in church services. Those leaders who refused to comply were put under great pressure and have been forced to leave the country. This policy has not changed and all remaining churches comply with it, knowing that integrating converts will not be accepted.

- **Christians have been hindered in training their own religious leaders (Block 5.10 / Score: 4 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 persecution of church leaders, either by imprisonment or forced emigration, has resulted in a lack of experienced teachers remaining in the country. Christian media and Internet outreach tries to address this deficiency, but the growth and discipleship of the church in Iran has undoubtedly been hindered through state oppression and interference.
- **Churches have been hindered in establishing, managing, maintaining and conducting schools, or charitable, humanitarian, medical, social or cultural organizations, institutions and associations (Block 5.18 / Score: 4 points):** Expatriate churches which had established schools, hospitals and other social and humanitarian institutions were forced to hand over their possessions to the Islamic government after the 1979 Revolution. Since then, they have not been allowed to carry out such activities. Protestant and non-traditional churches followed the same fate in 1990s. The only remaining church institutions and associations (which even receive financial subsidies from the state) belong to the historical Armenian Orthodox and Assyrian Chalcedonian churches. However, usually the heads of Arminian and Assyrian schools are Muslim.

Violence

The following 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.

Iran	Reporting period	Christians killed	Christians attacked	Christians arrested	Churches attacked	Christian-owned houses and shops attacked
WWL 2020	01 Nov 2018 - 31 Oct 2019	0	282	194	23	76
WWL 2019	01 Nov 2017 - 31 Oct 2018	0	104	67	20	41
WWL 2018	01 Nov 2016 - 31 Oct 2017	0	72	69	17	25

Christians killed refers to the number of Christians killed for faith-related reasons (including state-sanctioned executions). *Christians attacked* refers to the number of Christians abducted, raped or otherwise sexually harassed, forced into marriage to non-Christians or otherwise physically or mentally abused (including beatings and death-threats) for faith-related reasons. *Christians arrested* refers to the number of Christians detained without trial or sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment or similar things for faith-related reasons. *Churches attacked* refers to the number of churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons. *Christian-owned houses and shops attacked* refers to the number of houses of Christians or other property (including shops and businesses of Christians) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons.

In the WWL 2020 reporting period:

- **Christians killed:** The physical elimination of Christians is not something that the pragmatic government of Iran is willing to do or can politically afford. Gradual and silent elimination is their preferred choice.
- **Christians arrested:** The number of arrested Christians increased significantly compared to WWL 2019. 114 Christians were detained in one single wave of arrests at the end of 2018. Many of them are waiting for trial and sentences. Some of them are released conditionally after being forced to sign a commitment not to have contact with Christians.
- **Christians attacked:** Many Christians have been beaten, (sexually) harassed or been put under severe pressure during interrogations. These includes but are not limited to: 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:** This includes house-churches that have been raided by the security forces, as well as church properties that have deteriorated because of forced neglect (i.e. where Christians have not been allowed to make urgent repairs).
- **Christian homes/shops attacked:** Dozens of Christians have been forced to hand over their title deeds to pay the high bail amounts after arrest. Often Christians forfeit their title deeds when fleeing the country out of fear of otherwise receiving lengthy prison sentences. Other houses have been damaged during house raids.

5 Year trends

Chart 1:

The chart below gives an overview of the scores for average pressure and shows that the overall level of pressure on Christians has constantly been at an extreme level over the last five reporting periods and has stabilized between 14.8 and 15.0 points.

WWL 2016 - WWL 2020 Persecution Pattern history: Iran	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2020	14.9
2019	15.0
2018	15.0
2017	15.0
2016	14.8

Chart 2:

The chart below shows that the levels of pressure in all *spheres of life* have been at an extreme level in the last five reporting periods. Whereas the levels of pressure in the *private, family and community spheres of life* have been more or less stable, there have been increases in the pressure in the *national and church spheres of life* which correspond with the increased and now stable pressure coming from the government side. The election and re-election of 'moderate' President Rouhani has not brought any change to this situation.

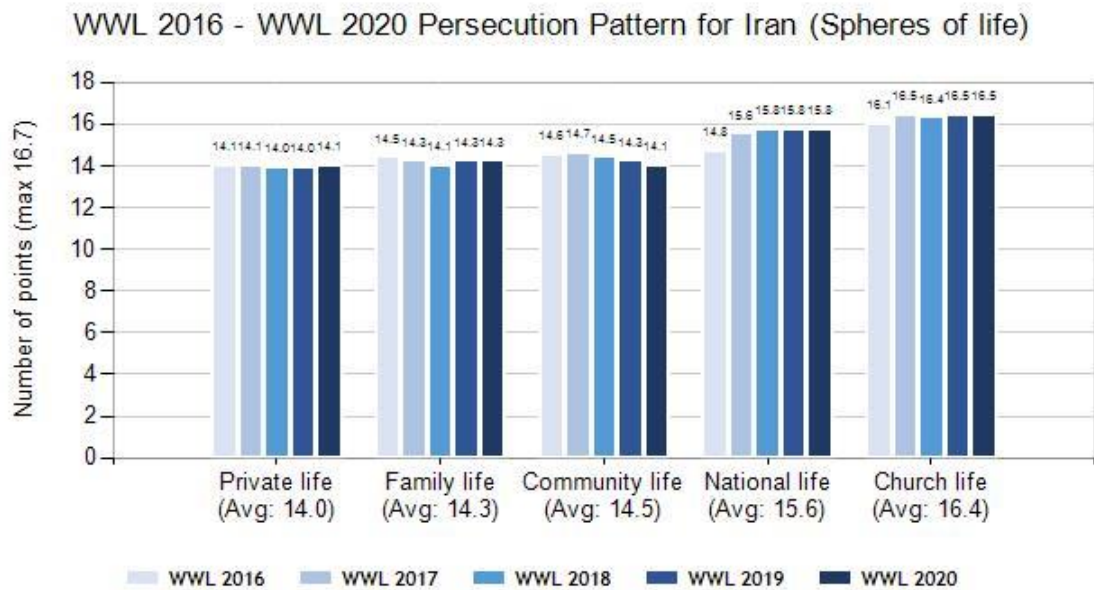
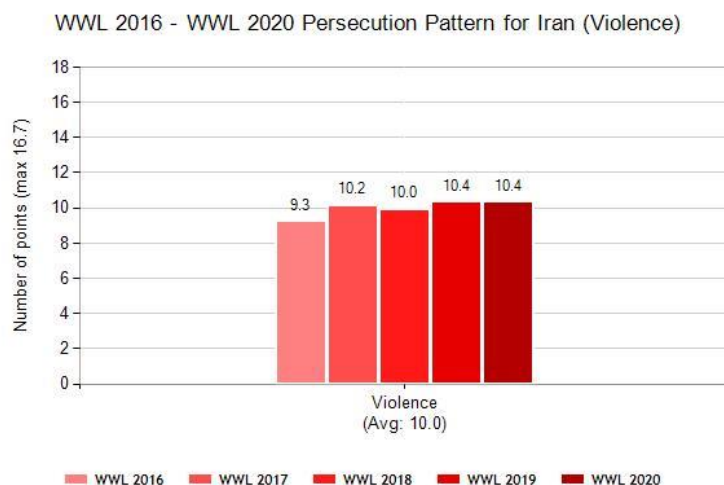


Chart 3:

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



Gender profile of persecution

Female Pressure points:

- ***Denied access to social community/networks***
- ***Denied custody of children***
- ***Discrimination/Harassment via education***
- ***Economic harassment via work/job/business***
- ***Enforced dress code***
- ***Forced divorce***
- ***Forced marriage;***
- ***Incarceration by government***
- ***Violence - physical***
- ***Violence - sexual***
- ***Violence - verbal***

In Iran, women have little legal protection, making the situation particularly precarious for Christian women detained for their faith. The number of female Christian converts arrested has risen ever since the state started targeting ordinary church members and not just leaders. According to some estimates, the majority of house-church members in Iran are women, as houses provide more opportunities for them to participate in ministry and leadership. However, this also makes them vulnerable. They risk being arrested by the authorities, including the possibility of sexual harassments by the security services. One woman reported: “The behavior of the security forces (when they raided our house-church) was very aggressive and violent. They treated us, especially women, as if they were treating a bunch of prostitutes. The worst for us, especially women, was the way they were looking at us. We felt as if we were naked and they were looking at us through our clothes.” One contextual factor for this treatment is that shaming women in this way is an effective way to stain their reputation and harm their social status.

There is little protection against sexual abuse and domestic violence. The law does not prohibit domestic violence; authorities considered abuse in the family a [private matter](#) and seldom discussed it publicly. While rape is illegal, a rape victim must present [four male eyewitnesses](#) and two female witnesses in order to prove the crime. This lack of legal protection from violence creates impunity for the violent religious persecution of Christian women in many situations, including domestic setting. Since Iranian women are not free to travel on their own, fleeing a dangerous situation becomes problematic, as well as finding sheltered accommodation.

A female convert may be forced to marry a Muslim husband, although this does not seem to happen often. The legal minimum age of marriage for girls is 13, but girls as young as nine years old may be married [with permission](#) from the court and their fathers. If a female convert is an already-married mother, it is highly likely that the custody of the children will be taken from her. There is an explicit [restriction](#) on a woman becoming the head of a household or the head of a family; there are legal barriers to inheritance which deprive women from accessing their share of freehold land ownership and there are [no equal inheritance rights](#). A single Christian woman seeking employment will face discrimination and be viewed with disfavor in the marketplace.

At a most basic level, Iranian law provides that a woman who appears in public without appropriate attire, such as a cloth scarf veil ('hijab') over the head and a long jacket ('manteau'), or a large full-length cloth covering ('chador'), may be [sentenced](#) to flogging and fined.

Male Pressure points:

- ***Economic harassment via work/job/business***
- ***False charges***
- ***Forced to flee town/country***
- ***Imprisonment by government***
- ***Violence - death***
- ***Violence - physical***
- ***Violence - psychological***

In 2019, more men were arrested, prosecuted and sentenced by the government than women. One reason for this is that men tend to have more leadership positions within the various (underground) churches, although sources say house-churches are sometimes led by women, too. Men are more often arrested in urban areas, whereas in rural areas they will be forced to flee the town.

Men are also often the primary breadwinners for their families, especially if they have young children. When converting to Christianity, they risk losing their jobs, particularly if they have been arrested. If they apply for a business registration or trade permit and the officer discovers their Christian faith, the application is likely to be turned down. This puts extra financial and psychological pressure on the families. The physical and mental abuse may include (but is not limited to) the following: Solitary confinement, sleep deprivation, prolonged interrogation, threats to bring harm to family members (including rape) and even death of the individuals involved or their family members.

When single Christian men are under acute stress through monitoring and harassment, they are likely to flee the country, which naturally impacts the family emotionally and financially.

In contrast to women, men are not seen as "misguided," but as willfully making wrong choices. Thus, their punishment is harsher, and they are more likely to suffer physical abuse and torture. They face long term imprisonment, and many are forced to migrate to the West, which weakens the Church, depriving it of experienced and mature male leaders.

Persecution of other religious minorities

Bahai, Sunni, Sufi (Dervish) Muslims and other religious minorities 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 suspicion and persecution from the government as well. Examples are:

- In October 2019, three young Bahai's were [sentenced to a total of 20 years](#) imprisonment.
- In September 2019, at least 16 Bahai's [were banned](#) from studying at the university.

- In August 2019, two men from the Ahwazi Arab minority **were executed** after being tortured, despite Amnesty International's **outcry** to spare them.
- In February 2019, the Bahai community **reported** that at least 97 of their members were imprisoned at that time.
- In June 2018, Amnesty International **reported** the execution of a Sufi Muslim bus driver belonging to the Dervish community. According to this report, he was accused of using his bus to run over three police officers. He insisted that he was not even near the scene of the incident at that time.

Future outlook for the church

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

- **Islamic oppression:** As long as the current Islamic regime keeps control of all government institutions and keeps a firm grip on the Iranian economy, it is unlikely things will really change in Iran. There is a positive development, in the sense that more and more Iranians do not trust the regime anymore and are openly calling for change. A move away from state religion towards a form of secularism might be an option - seeing as the influence of secularism is clearly growing - however, this influence is still too weak to expect any real change in the near future.
- **Dictatorial paranoia:** As more interaction with the wider world becomes possible (via the internet and also through contact with the thousands of Iranians abroad), the security services are likely to intensify their monitoring. As a result, religious minorities such as Christians (and adherents of Bahai) are likely to be more closely watched - especially those with contacts to Western co-religionists. Christian media and websites in Farsi are reported to be particularly closely watched.
- **Organized corruption and crime:** The Iranian government will probably continue with its practice of financially ruining arrested Christians by setting disproportionately high levels of bail. It is likely that the Iranian authorities are using persecution to enrich themselves.

External Links - WWL 2020: Persecution Dynamics

- Drivers of persecution: BTI 2018 Country Report - <https://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-reports/detail/itc/IRN/>
- Drivers of persecution: enrich - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2016/nov/28/iranian-judicial-authorities-attempt-arrest-of-mp-mahmoud-sadeghi>
- Drivers of persecution: depict - <http://www.ishtartv.com/en/viewarticle,38499.html%20>
- Drivers of persecution: praising - <http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13970626000424%20>
- Drivers of persecution: sentenced to lengthy prison sentences - <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/07/lengthy-sentences-for-iranian-pastor-and-two-converts/>
- Christian communities and how they are affected: undermine - <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2016/12/iran-church-retreat-centre-confiscated-for-being-funded-by-cia/>
- Gender profile of persecution: private matter - <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/IRAN-2018.pdf>

- Gender profile of persecution: four male eyewitnesses - <http://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/-/media/files/un%20women/vaw/country%20report/asia/iran%20islamic%20republic%20of%20the%20islamic%20republic%20of%20sravaw.pdf?vs=4541>
- Gender profile of persecution: with permission - <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/IRAN-2018.pdf>
- Gender profile of persecution: restriction - <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/926401524803880673/pdf/125804-PUB-REPLACEMENT-PUBLIC.pdf>
- Gender profile of persecution: no equal inheritance rights - https://www.ihrr.org/wp-content/uploads/ihrr/articles/2016/10//2990_women-en_a-look-at-violence-against-women-in-iran-2.pdf
- Gender profile of persecution: sentenced - https://www.ihrr.org/wp-content/uploads/ihrr/articles/2016/10//2990_women-en_a-look-at-violence-against-women-in-iran-2.pdf
- Persecution of other religious minorities: sentenced to a total of 20 years - <https://iran-hrm.com/index.php/2019/10/29/iran-sentences-three-bahais-to-20-years-for-their-religious-beliefs/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: were banned - <https://women.ncr-iran.org/2019/09/21/sixteen-female-bahai-students-banned-from-higher-education/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: were executed - <https://iran-hrm.com/index.php/2019/08/06/iran-executes-ahwazi-arab-men-tortured-to-confess/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: outcry - <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/resources/urgent-action-ahwazi-arab-men-risk-execution>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: reported - <https://www.bic.org/focus-areas/situation-iranian-bahais/current-situation>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: reported - <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/06/iran-sufi-bus-driver-executed/>

Additional reports and articles

WWR in-depth reports

A selection of in-depth reports is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/> (password: freedom).

At the time of publication there were no items specifically for Iran.

World Watch Monitor news articles

Articles are available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/iran>

Recent country developments

Up-to-date articles are available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Iran> (password: freedom).