

 *Open Doors*

 **WORLD
WATCH
LIST** 2024

**THE COST OF COLLAPSE AND
THE COST OF CONTROL**

KEY FINDINGS, TRENDS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Cover image: Pastor Zachariah from Nigeria. Read his story on page 7.

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THE TOP TEN

THE TEN MOST DANGEROUS COUNTRIES IN THE WORLD IN WHICH TO BE A CHRISTIAN IN 2024

- 1 North Korea** retains its spot at the top of the 2024 World Watch List. Pressure in all spheres of life for Christians remains at the maximum level. A widely reported arrest of a family of Christians in April 2023 illustrated the extremely high price of being a Christian in the country.
- 2 Somalia** remains at second place this year, and has seen a significant increase in violence, alongside extreme pressure for Christians in other spheres. Islamic militants have increasingly focused on identifying and eliminating Christian leaders. Even the suspicion of conversion from Islam to Christianity can lead to life-threatening danger.
- 3 Libya** has risen on the 2024 World Watch List due to an increase in pressure and violence. This follows a major incident in May 2023 in which several converts from Islam to Christianity and expatriate Christians were arrested. The absence of a single central government to impose law and order in the country has made the situation even more precarious for Christians.
- 4 In Eritrea**, pressure on Christians remained extreme, with a small increase in violence here too. There is no sphere of life where the pressure on Christians is not at an extreme level in the country, with persecution by the government being the strongest source of pressure.
- 5** Despite falling two places in the 2024 World Watch List, the situation in **Yemen** is mostly unchanged, with extreme pressure in all spheres of life. Yemeni Christians face violations of religious freedom from their family and from the authorities (both official authorities and Houthi rebels acting as local authorities in one third of the country) as well as from radical Islamic groups.
- 6 In Nigeria**, Christians and their communities continue to be attacked in many parts of the country by radical Islamic groups and different bandit groups, with the violence score at the maximum level possible. Although 2023 saw the installation of Bola Ahmed Tinubu as President, replacing Muhammadu Buhari, it is as yet unclear what this might mean for Freedom of Religion or Belief in Nigeria.
- 7** Similarly, violence against Christians in **Pakistan** has also remained at the maximum score, and the extremely high average pressure on Christians remained constant. The blasphemy laws' high potential to provoke violence was illustrated in the city of Jaranwala in August 2023, where up to 21 churches were burned or damaged and hundreds of Christians were forced to flee their homes. Despite such violence, the blasphemy laws have been made even stricter.
- 8 In Sudan**, Christian communities face various levels of persecution (especially Christian converts from Islam), and this year there has been a significant increase in violence. The eruption of civil war in April 2023 has left Christians vulnerable, as violent extremists have taken advantage of the chaos to harm Christians, seizing churches and Christian properties.
- 9 In Iran**, pressure has remained extreme in virtually all areas of life. There had been some hopeful court rulings in the first half of the 2024 World Watch List reporting period with Christians being released and sentences reduced, but then followed a major wave of arrests in July 2023.
- 10 Afghanistan** remains in the top 10. While pressure was at an extreme level in all spheres of life, reports of faith-related acts of violence against Christians were few. The Taliban seemed to be more interested in arresting and interrogating (suspected) Christians in order to identify networks rather than in direct punishment.

KEY FINDINGS AND TRENDS

VIOLENCE IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

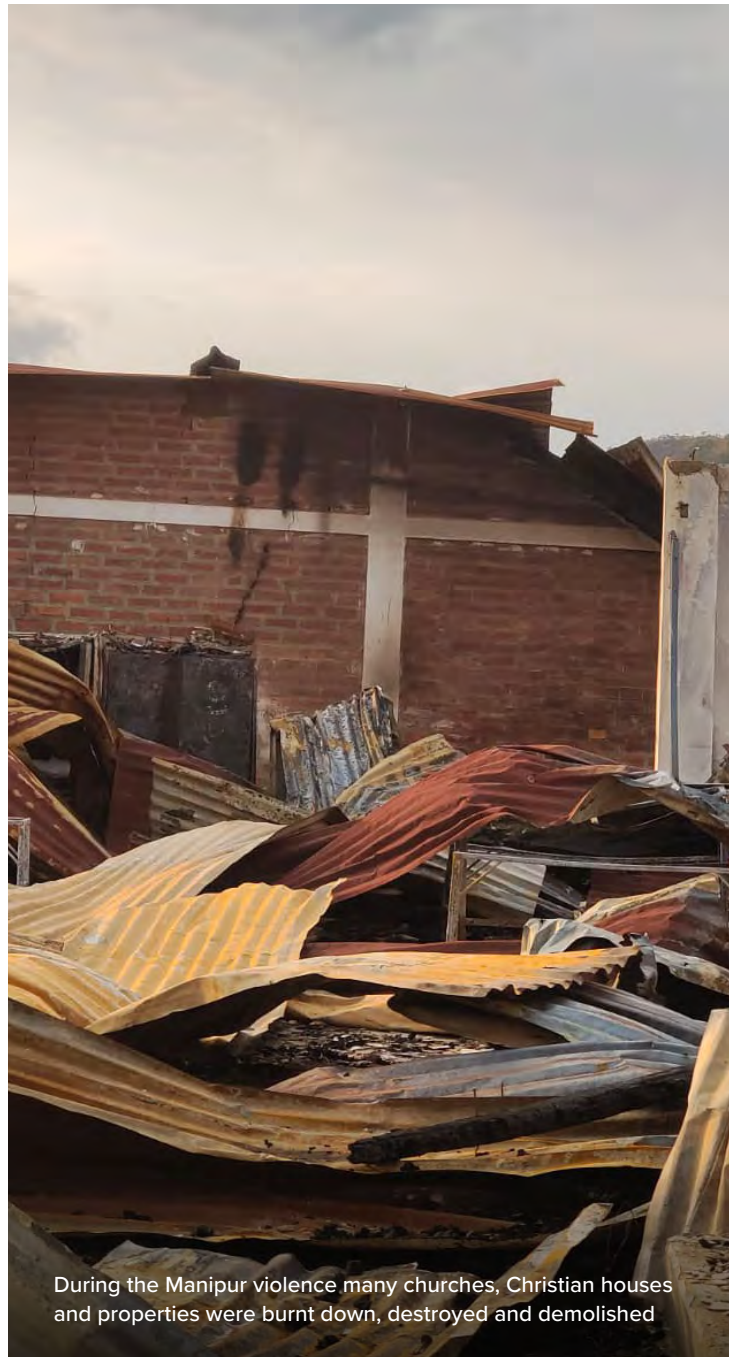
Violence targeting Christians has long been a key characteristic of persecution in sub-Saharan Africa. That has intensified during the World Watch List 2024 reporting period. Of the 26 sub-Saharan countries with overall scores at or above 'high' levels of persecution, 15 had 'extremely high' scores on 'violence' specifically. A year ago, the number of countries with scores in the 'extremely high' violence tier was 13, indicating the rapid spread of extreme violence across the whole region. In 18 of these 26 countries, 4,606 Christians were killed because of their faith during the 2024 reporting period.

This growing violence has caused a displacement crisis, as more and more Christians and others are forced to flee their homes. Data from Switzerland-based Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre and the UNHCR indicate that at the end of 2022, 34.5 million people were living as forcibly displaced persons (refugees and IDPs) in the sub-Saharan African countries¹ that have at least 'high' levels of persecution on the World Watch List. Of those 34.5 million, an estimated 16.2 million were Christians.

GROWING ATTACKS ON CHURCHES

The ten countries where the most churches were attacked in the 2024 World Watch List reporting period were **China, India, Nigeria, Nicaragua, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Sudan, Burkina Faso, Niger** and **Angola**. Together the number of churches or other public Christian properties attacked or closed down in these countries was an astonishing 14,129, but researchers believe there could be thousands more cases.

By far the largest number of churches closed down by government can be seen in the so-called 'house churches' in **China**. Meanwhile, the church attacks in **India** are perpetrated by aggressive mobs, such as in the context of the



During the Manipur violence many churches, Christian houses and properties were burnt down, destroyed and demolished

violence in Manipur State. In **Nigeria, Burkina Faso** and **Niger**, churches are typically attacked by predominantly Islamic insurgents who raid or invade Christian communities. And although further down the World Watch List, what has been going on in **Algeria** is just as devastating. Of the 46 churches affiliated with the Église Protestante d'Algérie (the Protestant umbrella organisation), more than 40 churches have remained closed in 2023. The freedom of Christians to assemble for worship, and the Church as an institution which may serve both Christians and the wider community, is increasingly a target for persecutors.

¹ [2023 Global Report on Internal Displacement | internal-displacement.org](https://www.internal-displacement.org/)

GROWING VIOLENCE AND RESTRICTIONS IN NORTH AFRICA

The overall score for **Algeria** has risen significantly this year. While growing government restrictions have been most prominent, cases of violence have also risen sharply. The increasing pressure has forced many Algerian Christians to relocate, both inside and outside the country.

Meanwhile, Christians in **Morocco** with a Muslim background continue to face discrimination and marginalisation. They are not recognized by the government, are closely monitored by the security services, and most often face hostility from (extended) family and society. As in Algeria, incidents of violence have increased in the 2024 World Watch List reporting period.

At the same time, in **Tunisia**, there were more church attacks than in the previous reporting period. After asserting emergency powers in 2021, President Kais Saied deposed the prime minister, dissolved parliament, sacked judges and launched investigations into political opponents. In 2023 Saied earned international rebuke with a speech, heavy with racial overtones, that accused sub-Saharan Africans of bringing 'criminality and violence' to Tunisia. The resulting popular fury fell heavily upon sub-Saharan African Christians in Tunisia, many of whom lost their jobs, while others fled the country.

STATE OPPRESSION IN LATIN AMERICA

Nicaragua continued to deteriorate in the 2024 World Watch List reporting period (rising from rank 50 to 30), across all spheres of life for Christians. The deterioration of the rule of law in the country has become more evident through the concentration of state power in the hands of President Ortega and through the manipulation of the legal system. This has made it possible to silence civil society actors who do not align with the ruling party's interests. The harassment of the church has become more direct, with church leaders prosecuted and imprisoned, and church life increasingly restricted. This comes in retaliation for Christian leaders advocating for the vulnerable and calling publicly for the rule of law to be respected.

Likewise, **Cuba** went up from rank 27 to 22 both due to violent attacks on church buildings and Christians' private property, and because of regime action to silence dissident voices. Church leaders and Christian activists who have highlighted government human rights abuses or supported protesters have been targeted.

VIOLENCE IN LAOS

In **Laos**, four Christians were killed during the 2024 World Watch List reporting period, though such killings had not occurred for many years. This, along with a rise in attacks on churches, Christians' homes and businesses and also in arrests of Christians, caused Laos to rise ten places on the 2024 World Watch List, from rank 31 to 21. Christians active in evangelism run the risk of deadly community opposition. This dramatic change has had a chilling effect on the wider Church (e.g., as Christian leaders decide not to travel alone for ministry engagements).



On 29 January 2023 in the south-central region of Laos, several believers' homes had been demolished by angry villagers

SURGING VIOLENCE IN WEST AFRICA

Countries in West Africa face a complex array of security challenges, from Islamic extremism to widespread criminality. In the face of such violence, fragile government institutions are at risk of collapse, unable to provide basic security. Increasing numbers are fleeing their homes as violent attacks happen with impunity. This has created a displacement crisis as many become Internally Displaced People (IDPs) or refugees.

So often Christians bear the cost of collapse and fragility in this region. Many of those who have been displaced are Christian, and they face additional discrimination and vulnerability once they have fled their homes, whether in official IDP and refugee camps or elsewhere. This instability has been accompanied by an increase in radical Islam in wider society, adding to the pressure on Christian communities, already vulnerable to violence.

Nigeria, the most populous country in West Africa, stands at number 6 on the 2024 World Watch List. The country has long been the place where Christians are in greatest danger of being killed or abducted for faith-related reasons. As in the previous year, Nigeria accounted for about nine out of every ten of those religiously motivated killings in Africa's World Watch List countries. The number of Christians killed in these countries is likely to be much higher because in conflict, and in the aftermath of conflict, it is difficult to get reliable reports on the impact of violence.

Nigeria currently faces multiple security threats. This includes Islamic extremists in the north of the country, with violence spreading further south. Thousands of members of the militant, though still active, Boko Haram group have laid down their weapons. The group is now by far overshadowed by ISWAP (Islamic State West African Province), which continues to menace Nigeria's north-east and many other parts of the country. Leah Sharibu remains in captivity even today, having been abducted by ISWAP in February 2018.² Insecurity is also driven by violence in central

Nigeria, which has grown into one of the country's most acute security crises. A decentralized armed group with ethnic ties to the pastoralist Fulani people, the Fulani Ethnic Militia (FEM), attack predominantly Christian villages, abducting, raping and killing people, destroying buildings and harvests or occupying farmlands. A variety of Fulani bandit groups and other bandit groups also carry out such attacks that spread all over the country in differing degrees.

While the violence in central Nigeria has complex root causes, it has clearly also intensified ethnic and religious divisions (see case study). A major cost of violence is malnutrition and the threat of famine due to a collapse in agriculture – in 2023 there was an estimated 47% rise in those going hungry, from 17-25 million people.³

The pressures affecting Nigeria can also be seen across the whole region. In **Burkina Faso** (number 20 on the 2024 World Watch List), levels of insecurity are particularly high in the north and north-east of the country, where extremist groups are active. There have been attacks on churches, killings and kidnappings of Christians, with many also being displaced.⁴ It is estimated that 50% of Burkina Faso's territory is no longer under governmental control.⁵ In addition, while ethnic conflicts are rare in Burkina Faso, the government stands accused of stoking tensions by re-framing the conflict from one based on violent and Islamic extremism to one arising from ethnically-based struggles.⁶

In **Mali**, the already deteriorating security situation was made more fragile when French troops departed in November 2022 and the UN mission closed in 2023, creating more room for jihadist aggression. However, it is worth noting that in June 2023, Malian voters approved a referendum on the adoption of a new constitution, a move seen as one that could pave the way for the return to civilian rule, and the holding of new elections in 2024. The military government pledged to work towards a return to civilian rule after the Economic Community

² [Leah Sharibu | uscifr.gov](https://www.uscifr.gov)

³ [Worsening food crisis in Nigeria as farmers face wave of attacks and kidnappings by armed groups | savethechildren.net](https://www.savethechildren.net)

⁴ [Burkina Faso bishop warns of 'elimination of Christians' in the country | thetablet.co.uk](https://www.thetablet.co.uk)

⁵ [An Elusive Search for Stability in Burkina Faso as France Takes a Big Step Back | fragilestatesindex.org](https://www.fragilestatesindex.org)

⁶ [If victims become perpetrators | reliefweb.int](https://www.reliefweb.int)

of West African States lifted a set of trade and financial sanctions. In the new constitution there remains clear recognition of religious minorities in the country.

The instability in West Africa has been displayed through coup d'états – since 2020 there have been six successful ones and two attempts. Coups took place during the 2024 World Watch List reporting period in **Niger** (26 July 2023) and Gabon (30 August 2023). The influencing factors include widespread domestic dissatisfaction, Islamist insurgency, the withdrawal of French military

involvement in West Africa, and the engagement of proxy private military companies, such as the Wagner group.

Military rule often makes it hard for rights to be enforced equally and flourish, and an illusion of stability often comes at the cost of suppressed civil liberties and the exacerbation of existing discrimination. Such authoritarian rule can also aggravate religious tensions and create fertile ground for radical ideologies to gain traction.

CASE STUDY - NIGERIA

In May 2023, suspected Fulani militants attacked two communities in the Mangu Local Government area of Plateau State in central Nigeria.

On the evening of 15 May, Fulani militants stormed Pastor Zachariah's village. "When I heard about what was happening, I tried calling people on the phone, but their lines weren't reachable." Zachariah fled, and when he finally made it back the next morning, he found people salvaging what they could from their homes and fleeing.

He was not prepared for the destruction he found. "I met those who were injured and saw the bodies of the victims of the attack on the road... all I could see were burnt houses around, including my house which was completely burnt down with everything inside. I searched to see if I could find my wife or children, but I could not find them, so I checked the rooms and went out, only to find their lifeless bodies in the kitchen [hut] outside. I felt devastated," he recalls.

While some continue to label these attacks as merely 'ethnic clashes', evidence shows that the violence is heavily and disproportionately affecting Christian farmers.⁷ According to Pastor Zachariah, "My own opinion of why I feel we were attacked is firstly because it was their wish for us to be converted to Islam. Secondly, they were thinking that by chasing us out of the community they will have a place to farm and feed their cows."



Pastor Zachariah, Nigeria

⁷ [Killings and Abductions in Nigeria | orfa.africa](https://www.orfa.africa)

VIOLENCE AND CONTROL IN EAST AFRICA

Jihadist activity in East Africa shows no sign of slowing down. In **Somalia** (now 2nd on the 2024 World Watch List), al-Shabaab suicide attacks have surged despite concerted efforts by Somali security forces and international partners to target their strongholds.⁸ Their aim is to cripple security in the country, and to eradicate Christianity from Somalia.⁹ In this context, Christians in the country find it almost impossible to meet.

In addition to the jihadist threat, Christians face oppression at the hands of the government. As is the case elsewhere, a threatening collapse breeds control as governments become increasingly authoritarian in efforts to hold on to power. **Sudan** now stands at number eight on the 2024 World Watch List. The country's civil war between the army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) continues to rage, with no end in sight. Christians have historically faced significant persecution in Sudan, and while there were signs of hope for a time, the military coup and subsequent civil war have put the Church in an increasingly dangerous situation.

Since the war started in April 2023, more than 12,000 have been killed,¹⁰ around 5.3 million people have been internally displaced, with around 1.3 million people crossing into neighbouring countries.¹¹ There have been reports of crimes against humanity,¹² such as snipers targeting civilians in West Darfur.¹³ As tensions continue, there is growing concern that Christians are being targeted or suffering as collateral damage in the broader violence. Churches may also find themselves entangled in internal conflicts, such as in **Ethiopia**, where the number of attacks on churches and public



Eritrean Christians praying in secret location

Christian properties such as schools grew sharply. Even if they remain neutral, churches may simply find themselves as collateral damage during the conflict – as is reported in the recent war in Tigray.

Because of the widespread conflicts, many in East Africa have fled the region. In October 2023, there were 49,713 refugees and asylum seekers in Libya registered with UNHCR. Of these, just over 50% were from Sudan, and 16.7% were from **Eritrea**.¹⁴ We know that Christians will be among those fleeing. As instability continues, these numbers are likely to grow even greater.

A 2016 report by Amnesty International highlights cases of religious discrimination taking place within immigration detention centres. A 26-year-old from Eritrea who was held in a detention centre in al-Zawiya (in Libya) is quoted as saying: “They hate Christians. If you’re a Christian, all I can say is God help you if they find out... If they see a cross or a [religious] tattoo they beat you a lot more.”¹⁵

⁸ [Somalia: Al-Shabaab Strikes Back at Local Administrators | acleddata.com](#)

⁹ [Motivations and Drivers of Al-Shabaab | academic.oup.com](#)

¹⁰ [Sudan: Unraveling the Conflict Dynamics in Darfur | acleddata.com](#)

¹¹ [Sudan Humanitarian Update \(7 December 2023\) | unocha.org](#)

¹² [Sudan conflict: Two videos expose rapes allegedly carried out by Rapid Support Forces | observers.france24.com](#)

¹³ [Fears of ethnic cleansing mount in Sudan's West Darfur | aljazeera.com](#)

¹⁴ [Libya, operational data portal | data.unhcr.org](#)

¹⁵ [EU risks fuelling horrific abuse of refugees and migrants in Libya | amnesty.nl](#)

THE COST OF COLLAPSE: Christians in failed and failing states

Persecution is a particular risk in fragile or failed states. The Index of Fragile States, published by the Fund for Peace, for example, highlights pressures that may weaken a state or even push it towards failure. Of the 30 countries that the 2023 index places in the high alert categories¹⁶, 18 are also represented in the 2024 World Watch List top 50 countries. When the rule of law fails, Christians often bear the cost of this collapse, as they easily become targets for violence.

YEMEN

The war in Yemen is complicated and many-sided. It started when a group of rebels called the Houthis began to fight against the ruling government of Yemen in 2014. The war grew worse as Iran began to support the Houthis, while Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates began to arm and support the government.

The resulting conflict has created chaos in Yemen, with the country split into various zones of control that are operated by the warring

parties. Jihadist groups have taken advantage of the instability— including al-Qaeda, which now controls parts of Yemen. This reality has led to increasing danger for Christians, particularly those who live in areas controlled by these groups.

At the same time, the war has created a humanitarian crisis for Yemeni citizens. Basic items like food and medicine are increasingly unaffordable, and the UN's World Food Programme estimates that more than half the country's population is food insecure. Christians with a Muslim background seeking emergency supplies are vulnerable to discrimination and mistreatment if their faith becomes known.¹⁷

The war may be entering a new phase as Saudi Arabia and Iran have normalised their diplomatic relations, and Saudi Arabia is showing signs that it may withdraw from Yemen. However, this could lead to increased instability in Yemen, as the departure of the regional partners may create a power vacuum that would provide an opening for increased jihadist control.

CASE STUDY – YEMEN

Saleh* is used to the risk of death for his faith. Because of his Christian ministry, the authorities have offered a reward to anyone who is able to hand him in. Being hunted was nothing new for Saleh. “The authorities have my photo and my name,” he explains.

Saleh has not always been on Yemen's most wanted list. He wasn't born into a Christian family. Saleh's interest in Christianity began when he was studying in a city away from his hometown. He was afraid of how his family would respond to his newfound curiosity. But when he mustered up the courage to talk about his interest in Christianity, he discovered his father was already a follower of Christ. His father had hidden his faith from his son, a common practice in the region, where parents can be endangered if their children disclose any faith outside of Islam. Later that year, Saleh became a Christian himself and a church leader.

Eventually, Saleh had to flee Yemen because of the civil war.

However, Yemen was always in Saleh's heart. He loved his native land—which was now known around the world as a place of profound sadness and despair. Saleh decided to start a house

¹⁶ [Fragile States Index Heat Map | fragilestatesindex.org](https://www.fragilestatesindex.org)

¹⁷ [Temporary truce in Yemen unlikely to benefit Christian minority | opendoorsuk.org](https://www.opendoorsuk.org)



Despite the immense risks, Saleh continues to secretly serve Christians in Yemen

church network in Yemen. About 70% of believers in Yemen do not (or cannot) meet regularly, either for security reasons or because they do not know of other Christians.

Saleh began travelling from his home to Yemen. However, soon he found himself in hiding, getting death threats on his phone. “Extremists make our ministry easier!” he says. “Because of them, people reject and are horrified by what is being done in the name of ‘religion.’”

Saleh adds that “the Church in Yemen is living in very harsh conditions but is growing nonetheless!” Saleh currently serves about 70 families in Yemen. With the help of Open Doors partners, he can provide meeting spaces for Christians, offer medical help and transportation, give out food packages, conduct baptisms, train leaders, and help set up other essential training programmes.

LIBYA

Christianity in Libya seems impossible. Authorities assert that Libya is a wholly Islamic nation where Islamic law governs how the nation is run and how problems are resolved. This means, in society's eyes, there can be no Christians in Libya – and that's what the authorities want the public to believe.

However, the truth is more complicated. Because most believers in Libya conceal their faith – sometimes for years – the exact number of Christians is not fully known. The biggest risk for a believer is if he or she expresses their faith publicly – particularly if they come from a Muslim background – that they will be attacked by their own family, and face threats from Islamic militants and the Libyan authorities.

Of the 7 million people who make up Libya's population, Open Doors estimates that around

35,000 are Christians. Most of these Christians are foreign migrants from places like Egypt or sub-Saharan Africa, and a few are Libyans who have converted from Islam. But every Christian here experiences intense pressure from his or her family, the state and society.

The perpetrator may have changed, but Christians have always faced persecution in Libya. Muammar Gaddafi, the former dictatorial strongman who ruled Libya from 1969 to 2011, persecuted Christians. But when Gaddafi was overthrown and his government ousted, he was simply replaced by others who persecuted Christians. These Islamic extremist militias and groups hunt anyone who fails to conform to their interpretation of Islam. Christians are one of those groups.



The biggest risk to a believer in Libya is if they express their faith publicly. For this reason, many Christians in Libya completely conceal their faith

© Alamy | Image is representative

THE CONSEQUENCES OF COLLAPSE: ten years after the Islamic State (IS)

In June 2014, the so-called Islamic State captured the city of Mosul from Iraqi authorities. Pictures soon emerged of houses painted with the Arabic letter Nun, identifying them as Christian properties, with further attack sure to follow. Later, in early August 2014, Islamic extremists captured Qaraqosh, which was then the largest Christian city in Iraq. Some of those displaced by IS still feel unable to return. As we approach the 10th anniversary of these horrific events, Christians in Iraq and Syria are still living with the consequences of persecution by groups such as IS and facing new threats.

In **Iraq**, even the meagre piece of political influence held by Christians is increasingly contested, particularly at the hands of a group called the Babylon Movement. Originally a paramilitary group that formed in 2014 to fight the IS invasion of northern Iraq, it has since morphed into a political movement that holds all five of the seats reserved

for Christians in Iraq's 329-seat parliament. The Babylon Movement is presented as a local Christian force but has in fact been recruited largely from the Shia Muslim community.

Meanwhile, Türkiye has continued its military incursions into northern Iraq, where most of Iraq's Christians live, to fight the Kurdistan Workers' Party. The fighting has prevented Christians, who had fled the violence, from returning to their villages. Christians in Iraqi Kurdistan also face other forms of pressure. For example, in March 2023, a Christian church leader from Dohuk faced legal action concerning remarks critical of Islam which were posted online. He and his family were forced to leave the country.¹⁸

In 2014, the new Iraqi Government, which formed to fight the rise of the so-called Islamic state, made pledges to establish an inclusive Iraq.¹⁹ Ten years on, the Christian community still suffers from the impact of IS, and from new threats to their security as well.

In **Syria**, over a decade of civil war has scattered and diminished the Christian presence in the country. The devastating earthquake in February 2023 made the precarious situation worse. Christians fleeing violence or seeking to live with the country's collapsed economy have been easy targets of violence and Islamist pressure to retreat from public life. Open Doors researchers now define the persecution situation in Syria as 'extreme'.

As a result of the earthquake, nine out of ten people who had



Refugees receiving food from Mar Elia Chaldean Catholic Church, having fled Mosul and the Nineveh Plains in Iraq, 2014

¹⁸ [Iraq: Bishop faces legal action for comments on social media | opendoors.org](#)

¹⁹ [PM Haider al-Abadi: A New Era in Iraq? | atlanticcouncil.org](#)



[LEFT] Earthquake destruction in Aleppo, Syria in February 2023

[BELOW] Earthquake survivors receiving food aid and shelter in Maronite Church, Latakia, Syria



already fled the war's violence to live in displacement camps were displaced yet again.²⁰ The earthquake "not only destroyed more homes, schools and places for children to play, they also shattered any sense of safety for so many of the most vulnerable children and families," according to the Executive Director of UNICEF.²¹ Christian children already had been particularly vulnerable to such a shock, as many Christian schools had been closed or damaged because of the war and children have had to

attend state-run Islamic schools. To make matters worse, elements of the Islamic State group and others launched attacks in the area just weeks after the earthquake, leaving Christians caught up in conflict once more.

²⁰ [No Place But Displacement: A report into multiple displacement of IDPs in Northwest Syria due to 12 years of conflict and February 6th's earthquakes | reliefweb.int](#)

²¹ [3.7 million children in earthquake-affected Syria face catastrophic combination of threats, warns UNICEF Executive Director, following two-day visit | unicef.org](#)

COLLAPSE in Manipur, India

For persecuted Christians, the cost of collapse is not confined to failed states. Even in apparently stable countries which nonetheless tolerate violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief, local instability and fragility can have catastrophic consequences for Christians and other religious minorities. A key recent example of this is the situation in Manipur, India.

According to the 2011 census,²² the Meitei are the largest community in Manipur (53%), while tribes such as the Kuki-Zomis account for almost 40% of the state population. While Meitei are mostly Hindus, the tribal groups are mainly Christians. Recently, the Meitei have been seeking official tribe status. This was met with opposition from the predominantly Christian Kuki, who argued that bestowing official status on the Meitei would empower the larger and mostly Hindu ethnic group to push into Kuki areas.

Around 70,000 Kuki tribal Christians and Meitei Christians have been forcibly displaced. They are living in terrible conditions but are afraid to return home.

Violence erupted on 3 May 2023,²³ after the All-Tribal Students Union of Manipur were publicly protesting the decision by the Manipur High Court to consider giving scheduled tribe status to the Meitei community. Aggressive clashes ensued between the Meitei and Kuki communities. According to Open Doors partners, rioting mobs have killed more than 148 Christians and injured hundreds more. In addition, nearly 400 churches have been attacked, and well over 5,000 other public or private Christian properties.

However, attacks have not been limited to one tribal group. More than half of the 400 churches attacked were those of Meitei Christians. According

to Open Doors' sources, Meitei Christian church leaders and their families were also attacked by Meitei Hindutva mobs. In many instances, Kuki Christian pastors provided shelter and protection to Meitei Christians. Around 70,000 Kuki tribal Christians and Meitei Christians have been forcibly displaced. They are living in terrible conditions but are afraid to return home.

While many have termed this violence as a purely ethnic conflict, the undercurrent of religious intolerance is clear. Particularly horrific has been the situation for Christian women in Manipur. On 19 July, a video of two Kuki women being assaulted went viral online. The incident occurred on 4 May, but only came to light after the partial lifting of an internet ban. A mob from a different tribe dragged the women from a police van before they were stripped, paraded and sexually assaulted. The younger woman's brother and father were killed trying to protect them. A UN statement noted the horror of "images of gender-based violence targeting hundreds of women and girls of all ages".²⁴

BEYOND MANIPUR

Manipur is not the only part of India where Christians suffer persecution. India is number 11 on the 2024 World Watch List, and mass violence against Christians and Muslims has been reported across the country – reports include physical assault and torture. In addition, misinformation about the conflict in Manipur is now being used by Hindu extremists to convince Hindus that Christians may attack and kill them. This has caused religious resentment and has led to ethnic tension. In 2021, Open Doors published a report in collaboration with researchers from LSE entitled *Destructive Lies*²⁵, noting the harmful consequences of such misinformation.

²² C-16: Population by mother tongue, Manipur - 2011 | censusindia.gov.in

²³ From Tribal Protest to 'Shoot At Sight' Order: A Brief Timeline of How Manipur Violence Unfolded | news18.com

²⁴ [India: UN experts alarmed by continuing abuses in Manipur | ohchr.org](https://www.ohchr.org/)

²⁵ [Destructive Lies | opendoorsuk.org](https://www.opendoorsuk.org/)



A pastor overlooking his destroyed church in Manipur, India



Hindu extremists stormed Pastor Chandra Kumar's* church. He was beaten and arrested on false charges before eventually being released some weeks later



Bibles burned during the violence in Manipur, India



Anti-Christian rally in Chhattisgarh, India

CHINA AND CONTROL: digital persecution

China stands at number 19 on the 2024 Open Doors World Watch List. Pressure on Christians in the country has increased due to new regulations limiting churches in their worship or other activities. From September 2023, all state-approved religious organisations have had to follow these stricter regulations, encouraging support for the CCP and the sinicisation of China's religions. This includes the insistence that sermons reflect socialist values. Churches have also been closed or told to remove crosses and put up Communist emblems and slogans.

The new regulations apply to state-approved religious organisations such as the Three Self Patriotic Movement, as non-registered religious groups remain illegal. Although such unregistered 'house churches' initially began as small house groups gathering for worship, many grew immensely, holding their meetings in public places like hotel facilities or rented office floors. These churches frequently had hundreds or even thousands of Christians attending every week. But that freedom is now over, due in part to the authorities taking advantage of measures enforced during the Covid-19 pandemic.

These photos are from leaked police files in Xinjiang. Images courtesy of the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation



Meanwhile, the use of new technology to enforce conformity in China is increasingly visible. Open Doors highlighted the growth of surveillance and censorship via emerging technology in their 2022 report on digital persecution.²⁶ According to recent research, a growing number of patent filings in China concern technology which helps to identify deviant or abnormal behaviour – and for the Chinese authorities, this would include participation in illegal Christian groups.²⁷ It is likely that in response to such demand from the authorities, companies will develop AI-assisted tools for identifying such behaviour.

CHINA AND NORTH KOREA

It is worth mentioning that China has close and warming connections to the North Korean regime. North Korea remains at number one on the 2024 World Watch List and therefore represents the most dangerous place to be a Christian. Last year, a new Chinese policy has involved stepping up efforts to prevent North Korean defectors from escaping to South Korea.²⁸ This is particularly concerning given reports that North Korean women in China are highly vulnerable to sexual abuse, human trafficking and modern slavery.²⁹ Governments have been calling for China to grant safe passage for North Korean defectors to South Korea. In November 2023, a group of North Korean defectors appealed to the UN against China's policy of widespread repatriation.³⁰

²⁶ [Digital Persecution | opendoorsuk.org](https://www.opendoorsuk.org)

²⁷ Wright J & Weber V & Walton G F: "Identifying potential emerging human rights implications in Chinese smart cities via machine-learning aided patent analysis", in: Internet Policy Review 12/3, 28 July 2023

²⁸ [Kunming steps up efforts to prevent defectors from heading to S. Korea | dailynk.com](https://www.dailynk.com)

²⁹ [North Korean girls exploited in China's 'Red Zone' – report | dw.com](https://www.dw.com)

³⁰ [North Korean defectors take on China over forced returns of fellow escapees | telegraph.co.uk](https://www.telegraph.co.uk)

STATE CONTROL for Christians in Algeria

Christians in Algeria are facing an existential threat due to violations of their right to meet for worship by an authoritarian government. More than 40 churches affiliated with the Église Protestante d'Algérie (the EPA) have remained closed in 2023. Several independent churches have also ceased meeting. This situation has emerged through the Algerian government stepping up its campaign of using a 2006 law to increase pressure on the Protestant church.

Pressure has increased to such an extent that the few remaining churches will have to consider ceasing all visible activities in 2024

Non-Muslim religions in Algeria are regulated by Ordinance 06-03 of 2006 requiring that all places of non-Muslim worship must be authorised by the National Commission for Non-Muslim Worship.

However, applications for permission to use buildings as churches and to build new churches have never been accepted by the Commission. Since the Ordinance was passed in 2006, none of the EPA-affiliated churches have received permission to use their premises as places of worship.

The EPA also faced a high level of legal and government pressure after new legislation came into force in 2012, requiring the re-registration of existing religious associations. The EPA had obtained official recognition as a religious association in 1974. However, the provisions introduced in the 2012 law required that national associations must have a minimum of 25 founding members from at least 12 different provinces.³¹ While the group was applying for re-registration, the Algerian authorities used the group's unregistered status as a pretext to close more EPA churches.

Algerian authorities have also been interrogating church leaders and charging them with "holding worship without permission" or similar offences. During these interrogations, some church leaders received verbal orders to close their churches – as opposed to official closure orders which could be challenged in court. At least 18 Christians, including vice-president of the EPA pastor Youssef Ourahmane, and other church leaders and members, have received (suspended) prison sentences.

As a result of this government action, pressure has increased to such an extent that the few remaining churches will have to consider ceasing all visible activities in 2024.



Local police closing the church of Boudjima, Algeria in May 2019

³¹ [2012 Law on Associations \(Law 12-06 of 2012\), article 6 | europa.eu](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2012/06/12/oj)

AUTHORITARIAN CONTROL in Nicaragua

While standing at number 50 on the 2023 World Watch List, persecution of Christians in the country has sharply increased, and the country is now at number 30 this year. This rapid rise in persecution is one of the fastest recorded among all countries on the World Watch List, indicating the seriousness of the situation.

Nicaragua's higher place on the World Watch List comes from the increasingly open hostility by the Ortega-Murillo regime towards the Church. This hostility fits with the regime's growing authoritarian control since its election in 2006, and especially following its crackdown on the pro-democracy movement in 2018. As in other cases around the world, Christians often pay a disproportionate price under authoritarian control.

In the 2024 reporting period, Christians have increasingly faced explicit legal restrictions on their religious liberty. Christian leaders have been arrested alongside other critics of the government – with some Roman Catholic priests and bishops

being accused of espionage, and with others having been denied citizenship and forced into exile. Christian institutions (such as universities) have also had their registration cancelled, and Christian media outlets or other property have been seized. Some Christian celebrations have also been prohibited in public spaces.

In the latter part of 2022, the Nicaraguan Government made several accusations against the Bishop of Matagalpa, Rolando Álvarez, who is a vocal defender of civic freedoms in Nicaragua. The bishop was stripped of his citizenship and, after refusing exile, was sentenced in February 2023 to more than 26 years in prison. The magistrate who read out the sentence on national TV said that the bishop was “considered a traitor to the country and guilty, as a co-perpetrator, of the crimes of undermining national integrity, propagation of false news through information and communication technologies, obstruction of functions, aggravated disobedience or contempt of authority, all committed in real competition and to the detriment of Nicaraguan society and the State of Nicaragua.”³²

Following the conviction and detention of Bishop Álvarez, the Nicaraguan Government was denounced by the European Union and US State Department, with the latter placing visa restrictions on complicit officials in Nicaragua.³³ In addition, in September 2023, the UN Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua issued a statement which identified the human rights violations in the country as crimes against humanity.³⁴

³² [Catholic Bishop Rolando Álvarez of Nicaragua is Sentenced to 26 Years in Prison by Ortega Regime | catholicnewsworld.com](https://catholicnewsworld.com)

³³ [Promoting Accountability for the Ortega-Murillo Regime for Restricting Freedoms | state.gov](https://state.gov)

³⁴ [Group of Experts on Nicaragua finds escalating persecution against dissent and crackdown on independent academic institutions | ohchr.org](https://ohchr.org)



An Open Doors training session in Nicaragua, May 2023

GENDER-SPECIFIC RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION

Open Doors' research reveals that persecution affects men and women in distinct ways around the world. In 2023, Open Doors published its sixth research report on gender-specific religious persecution. Entitled *A Web of Forces*, the report describes how multiple areas of persecution (or 'pressure points') may combine to constrict the lives of Christian men and women in contexts of persecution.

Sexual violence is a common form of persecution, with cases of sexual harassment and assault against Christian women recorded in almost all the countries in the region studied by Open Doors researchers.

This vulnerability and control are particularly evident in the digital sphere. As our report notes:

"In cultures where women and girls have little privacy and men hold ultimate authority in the home, the digital world is another sphere for domestic control and abuse...Female secret believers may encounter high levels of control of their digital lives via surveillance apps, such as those designed for husbands to track and monitor their wives, and weekly or daily checks of the phones of the female members of households... There have been reports that these invasive methods of monitoring have led to forms of self-censorship, with women choosing to limit or avoid Christian materials in the home out of fear of being discovered and the severe consequences that could follow."³⁵

If Christian materials are discovered through this surveillance, the consequences for women can be horrific. Our research cites the following example, among others:



Sahar from Iran was forced to leave her home and young family when her husband discovered her new Christian faith. She was later arrested and spent time in prison for church activities. On her release she was reunited with her husband and family, but had to leave Iran due to the persecution she faced

"On International Women's Day (8 March 2022), reports emerged of 20-year-old Maria from Iraqi-Kurdistan, who was killed by her uncle and brother. With tens of thousands of followers on social media, she had long been an advocate for women's rights and freedoms, having herself experienced forced marriage at the age of 12. The young woman was well known for her online activism, which together with her conversion to Christianity (and re-naming herself as Maria), is believed to have been a motivation for her killing."³⁶

This is one part of the vulnerability of women and girls in persecution. Most happens in context of attacks on Christians and their communities. This takes place all over the world. During such attacks, women and girls are raped, husbands and boys are killed. Women and girls in forced displacement are vulnerable to sexual assault, while men and boys are often killed or physically injured. This happens in many sub-Saharan African countries but also in the Middle East and in Asia, in particular, Myanmar.

Violations of the right to Freedom of Religion or Belief, increasing digital control, a proliferation of violent attacks by extremists and harmful gender norms all combine to restrict the lives of women and men from religious minorities. It is therefore vital that the additional vulnerability of religious minority status is recognised by governments and that policies are put in place to respond to it well.

³⁵ [A Web of Forces | opendoors.org](#)

³⁶ *Ibid.* page 17

RECOMMENDATIONS

This report demonstrates that Christian communities around the world are acutely vulnerable, whether as a result of their states collapsing under pressure or seeking to control the lives of all citizens. We urge international institutions and governments to act on the findings of this research. We put forward the following policy recommendations, some of which directly address the issues highlighted in this report, while others serve as principles and inspiration for action.

1. Commit or refresh resources to **building stability** in fragile states, ensuring that the needs and representation of vulnerable religious minorities and the importance of religious freedom are fully integrated into these efforts;
2. Ensure that recommendations for prosecution of those who violently target Christians and others, and protection of and reparations for the same communities are made in **Nigeria's** upcoming Universal Periodic Review at the UN Human Rights Council;
3. Promote and invest in educational programs and initiatives that nurture, preserve and reinforce unity amongst religious groups in **the Sahel region**, including **Burkina Faso** and **Mali**, to counter radical narratives and ensure social cohesion;
4. Work towards **abolition** of laws and practices that restrict one's Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) as defined by Article 18 ICCPR, including **provisions on blasphemy** and **apostasy**, to ensure adequate legal frameworks compliant to international FoRB standards;
5. Hold the **Iraqi** government accountable for its treatment of Christians and encourage building a society which promotes freedom of religion or belief in which all Iraqis can flourish.
6. Urge the Government of **India** as well as state governments and local government officials to proactively address the environment of intolerance, inciting speech and subsequent violence against religious minorities by condemning any act of violence and discrimination on the grounds of religion and by taking prompt legal action against perpetrators; this should be done to deter further violations of inherent rights and prevent impunity;
7. Acknowledge human rights concerns around **emerging technology**, taking the lead on developing international standards and ethical frameworks around the export and use of such technology around the world;
8. Urge the **Algerian** Government to withdraw all warnings, closure orders and court cases against churches and other places of worship; ensure the immediate re-opening of all closed churches; and grant permission to all EPA-affiliated churches to continue to use rented premises as places of worship;
9. Make the respect of the human rights of all religious minorities conditional to **any international aid** and/or **trade agreements**, establish monitoring mechanisms ensuring that such conditions are respected, commission studies that explore how trade can be used to promote human rights;
10. Promote and protect FoRB as a **leading priority** in foreign policy and diplomatic engagement both bilaterally and **multilaterally**, especially through the UN Security Council and Human Rights Council.

OPEN DOORS ADVOCACY

Open Doors is a global NGO, operating in over 70 countries for over 68 years with a call to “strengthen what remains.” Open Doors’ advocacy work supports Christians by protecting and promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) as defined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This covers both private belief and public practice.

Open Doors’ global advocacy teams operate in three main spheres:

- **Internationally:** at the United Nations and European Union, as well as engagement and partnership with other NGOs and international institutions,
- **Nationally:** in legislatures and with national governments worldwide,
- **Locally:** offering legal support and human rights training for persecuted Christians globally.

Open Doors’ advocacy team relies on our partners on the ground to give us the latest up-to-date information to ensure that we can speak up for the most persecuted in the public sphere. The World Watch List allows us to discern global trends, highlight new and emerging areas of concern, and identify where our work has made the most difference. World Watch List data remains a trusted and credible source of information about the persecution of Christians globally, and is frequently referred to in the media, as well as in parliamentary reports and debates.

If you are a government official, civil servant, NGO staff or journalist and would like to receive Open Doors’ briefing materials, or would like further information, please contact Open Doors International Advocacy team at advocacy@od.org.



Field workers, North Korea

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Open Doors is committed to the highest level of research and reporting. The World Watch List, produced annually, is the product of intensive year-round monitoring by the World Watch Research (WWR) department of Open Doors. We have worked diligently over the years to create a ranking system that accurately portrays Christian persecution globally, resulting in a rounded and nuanced ranking that remains trusted around the world. The reporting period for the World Watch List 2024 was 1 October 2022 – 30 September 2023.

Open Doors' WWR works with country researchers and their in-country networks to collect detailed data on the nature of the various pressures and violence faced by Christian communities worldwide. The contributions of external experts are used to cross-check the results. Due to the nature of persecution, many incidents, particularly in nations such as North Korea, China, Libya, and Myanmar, go unreported. This means that findings are likely to underrepresent the real scope of Christian persecution. However, Open Doors has consistently chosen to underestimate rather than over-estimate to ensure the highest levels of credibility and accuracy.

The data collected covers freedom of religion for Christians in their private, family, community and national spheres of life and freedom of religion of the Church. These five areas comprise what is referred to as the 'squeeze' (i.e., non-violent) component of persecution. Violence against Christians, what is referred to as the 'smash' element of persecution, is measured separately. While violence against Christians remains the most 'eye-catching' form of persecution, the 'squeeze' is the most defining form of persecution for Christians in many World Watch List countries. For each country surveyed, scores for the six categories are designated and then aggregated to determine a score out of a possible 100. These scores determine a country's ranking on the World Watch List.

In addition to primary research, secondary data collated from academic sources, reliable news outlets and NGOs are cross-referenced with primary research to ensure the widest survey of available data and the most reliable output.

Furthermore, academics and independent experts give input, as well. These methods have been independently audited by the International Institute of Religious Freedom to ensure the highest levels of accuracy, transparency, and consistency.

The definition of Christian used in this report is: "Anyone who self-identifies as a Christian and/or someone belonging to a Christian community as defined by the church's historic creeds."

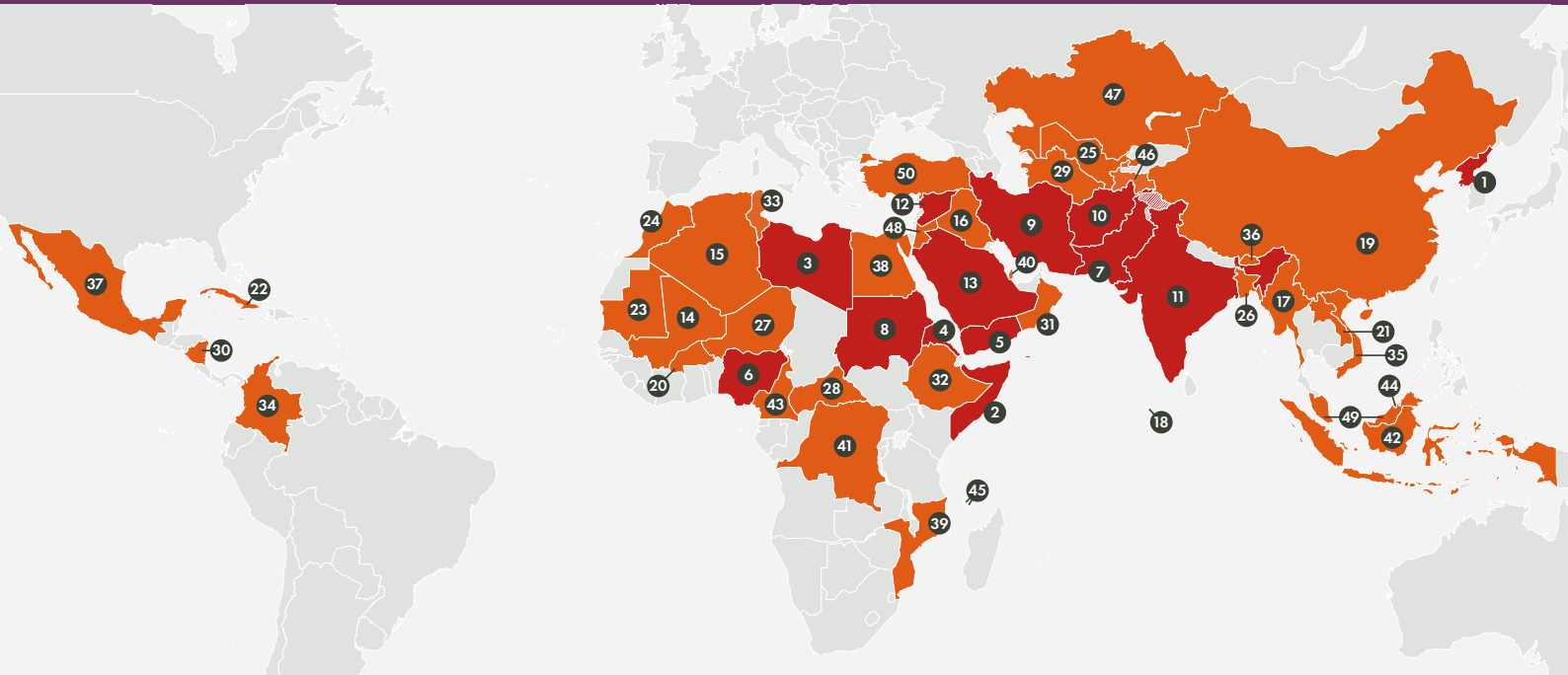
The definition of persecution used in World Watch List analysis is: "Any hostility experienced as a result of one's identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide." (Complete WWL Methodology, October 2023, p.7)

For more detailed insights into WWL Methodology, please see: [Complete-WWL-Methodology-update-October-2023.pdf](#) (opendoors.org); a [shorter version](#) is also available



According to a reliable source, jihadists came to a village in Niger near the Burkina Faso border on Saturday 10 June 2023 and gave the ultimatum that Christians should either leave within 72 hours or accept Islam as their new faith. At least 69 Christian families left the village, taking refuge in a town and living under the trees despite it being the rainy season.

THE 2024 OPEN DOORS WORLD WATCH LIST TOP 50



● EXTREME LEVELS OF PERSECUTION

● VERY HIGH LEVELS OF PERSECUTION

- | | | | | |
|-----------------------|------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 North Korea | 11 India | 21 Laos | 31 Oman | 41 Congo DR (DRC) |
| 2 Somalia | 12 Syria | 22 Cuba | 32 Ethiopia | 42 Indonesia |
| 3 Libya | 13 Saudi Arabia | 23 Mauritania | 33 Tunisia | 43 Cameroon |
| 4 Eritrea | 14 Mali | 24 Morocco | 34 Colombia | 44 Brunei |
| 5 Yemen | 15 Algeria | 25 Uzbekistan | 35 Vietnam | 45 Comoros |
| 6 Nigeria | 16 Iraq | 26 Bangladesh | 36 Bhutan | 46 Tajikistan |
| 7 Pakistan | 17 Myanmar | 27 Niger | 37 Mexico | 47 Kazakhstan |
| 8 Sudan | 18 Maldives | 28 Central African Republic | 38 Egypt | 48 Jordan |
| 9 Iran | 19 China | 29 Turkmenistan | 39 Mozambique | 49 Malaysia |
| 10 Afghanistan | 20 Burkina Faso | 30 Nicaragua | 40 Qatar | 50 Türkiye |



OpenDoors

SERVING PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS WORLDWIDE

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