

World Watch Research

# Morocco: Background Information

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

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

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## Map of country



Morocco: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
38,211,000	33,000	0.1

*Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024*

## Recent history

Morocco was a French protectorate from 1912 to 1956, when it gained independence. Upon independence, Morocco was able to take control of some of the territory from the Spanish protectorate, the so called "Western Sahara". However, Morocco's claim of sovereignty over other former Spanish controlled territories has been resisted by the "Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro" (POLISARIO) which proclaimed an independent state called Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic and managed to secure the recognition of some nations.

After the initial Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, Morocco was also touched by the wind of liberty and desire for economic change. Large numbers of young people, many of whom found themselves

unemployed even after getting university degrees, expressed their frustration by taking to the streets. Responding to the demonstrations and calls for change, the government organized a referendum on constitutional reforms which was held on 1 July 2011. In the elections held since these constitutional reforms were put in place, the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) won the largest number of seats in parliament enabling it to form coalition governments. Therefore, Morocco was able to avoid the political upheaval that engulfed much of North Africa. However, the Islamists were not able to deliver any real change and in the 2021 parliamentary elections, the PJD lost badly. The liberal-leaning, royalist National Rally of Independents (RNI) came out first and its billionaire leader, Aziz Akhannouch, was subsequently appointed as prime-minister by the king ([Institut Montaigne, 30 September 2021](#)).

However, grievances and discontent remain especially strong in the Rif region (in the northern part of the country) where the mainly ethnic Berber population feel marginalized and neglected by the government. In previous years, there were occasional demonstrations in this region. In 2018, some of the leading protesters [were given](#) lengthy prison sentences (The Washington Post, 27 June 2018). Protests re-emerged in February 2020 in Casablanca, but due to COVID-19 restrictions and internal divisions the demonstrations did not last long ([MEM, 24 February 2020](#); [Al-Araby, 23 April 2021](#)). However, in December 2022, another protest took place in the capital, Rabat, with demonstrators rallying against the high cost of living and corruption ([Al Arabiya, 4 December 2022](#)). These kind of protests have increased during 2024 due to the levels of inflation and corresponding increases in (food) prices ([MG, 10 June 2024](#)).

Moreover, a new trend has emerged in recent years in which the general public have directed criticism at the king himself, rather than at the ruling political class. This might well be due to the king's frequent absence from the country and his total lack of interviews with (local) media. It has strengthened rumors that Morocco is de facto more and more ruled by a "Security Alliance", comprising senior intelligence officers, politicians, high-ranking officials and businessmen ([Carnegie Endowment, 11 July 2023](#)).

The COVID-19 crisis affected Morocco significantly and the economy shrank for the first time in two decades. Both the tourist industry as well as companies depending on trade with Europe were heavily affected. However, the Moroccan government also used the pandemic to tighten its grip on society under the guise of introducing health measures. Popular protests were quelled, and voices critical of the government were targeted and arrests made ([Bloomberg, 24 July 2020](#)). Newspaper editors and journalists have received high prison sentences in recent years ([RSF, 5 March 2024](#)). In addition, it became clear that the Moroccan authorities were involved in hacking numerous journalists' phones using the infamous Pegasus spyware ([The New Arab, 19 July 2021](#)).

In September 2023, several provinces were hit by a significant earthquake, killing nearly 3,000 people. The earthquake caused widespread damage and the government has responded with an ambitious five-year reconstruction plan for the affected provinces ([Morocco World News, 7 May 2024](#)). However, there are great difficulties to overcome in reaching some of the affected villages due to their remote and mountainous locations ([Le Monde, 20 September 2023](#)).

In December 2020, Morocco became the fourth Arab country in 2020 to normalize ties with Israel ([The Guardian, 10 December 2020](#)). The deal was brokered by the USA and included important incentives for Morocco: In exchange, the USA recognized Morocco's claims on the Western Sahara and it secured

an important arms deal including US-made drones ([Al-Jazeera, 12 December 2020](#)). However, Islamist groups in the country denounced the deal, making it a potential stumbling block for the king's popular support among the Moroccan people ([The Guardian, 13 December 2020](#)). Since then, demonstrations by thousands of people have taken place in several cities ([The Cradle, 30 November 2021](#)). Despite the popular discontent, ties between Israel and Morocco were intensified in the last two years with the Israeli Chief of Staff visiting in July 2022 and through Israeli participation in combined army maneuvers in Morocco in June 2023 ([Peoples Dispatch, 25 July 2022](#), [The New Arab, 6 June 2023](#)). In addition, in a first-ever visit to an Arab country, the speaker of the Israeli parliament officially visited the Moroccan parliament in June 2023 ([Yvet News, 8 June 2023](#)). However, following the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war in October 2023, large demonstrations were held again, with the protesters demanding an end to all ties with Israel. The demonstrations were organized by leftist and Islamist groups ([Reuters, 24 December 2023](#)) and continued in major cities like Rabat and Casablanca in 2024 ([Morocco World News, 11 February 2024](#), [Al-Monitor, 6 April 2024](#)).

## Political and legal landscape

Morocco is a parliamentary monarchy in which the king is granted extensive executive powers and is both political and religious leader, being officially designated “Commander of the Faithful”. He presides over the Council of Ministers and appoints the prime minister following legislative elections from the winning party. On recommendations from the prime minister, he appoints the members of government. The Economist Intelligence Unit ([EIU 2023](#)) classifies Morocco as a 'hybrid' regime (in a ranking ranging from 'full democracy', 'flawed democracy', 'hybrid regime' and 'authoritarian state').

According to Humanists International's [Freedom of Thought report](#) (last updated 22 October 2020), which classifies the government as 'severely restricting':

- "Although Morocco signed and ratified few UN treaties and resolutions on civil rights and freedom of religion, conscience and thought, ... their primacy over national laws is compromised: ... Morocco commits itself 'To comply with the international conventions duly ratified by it 'subject to their compatibility with the constitution' and 'its immutable national identity'." This means that international civil rights, including the Freedom of Religion and Belief, are de facto subject to the cultural Islamic values of Morocco and its interpretation of Sharia law.
- "The constitution declares that 'Islam is the religion of the State' (Article 3), and that Morocco 'commits itself ... to deepen the bonds of togetherness with the Arabo-Islamic Ummah' (Preamble). It also refers to Islam, as well as monarchy, as one of the 'federative constants' of the Nation (Article 1). The king is considered as a direct descendant of the prophet of Islam, which gives the ruling Alaouite dynasty its legitimacy."

Although conversion from Islam to Christianity ("apostasy") is not prohibited, Middle East Concern ([MEC Morocco profile](#), accessed 24 June 2024) writes:

- "Legal provisions strictly prohibit blasphemy and defamation of religions, as well as non-Islamic proselytism. According to the Penal Code, anyone who attempts to prevent persons from the exercise of their religious beliefs, and anyone who offers incitements in order to 'shake the faith of a Muslim' or to convert a Muslim to another religion faces imprisonment and a fine. The Associations Law prohibits any association that seeks to undermine Islam, and the distribution of non-Islamic materials is restricted. Although Rabbinical authorities have jurisdiction over person-

al status issues for the small Jewish communities, there is no equivalent provision for Christians – those born into Muslim families are subject to Shari'a courts in matters of personal status. Women registered as Muslim are not permitted to marry non-Muslims".

As mentioned above (in: *Specific examples of positive developments*), During the visit of the Roman Catholic pope in 2019, the king emphasized that he is “the Commander of all believers ... [including] Moroccan Jews and Christians from other countries, who are living in Morocco.” Although the king included foreign Christians, the failure to include "Moroccan Christians" was a clear sign of the lack of recognition of indigenous Christians from a Muslim background ([Christianity Today, 8 January 2021](#)). In addition, despite the king's inclusion of foreign Christians, serious (legal) limitations regarding the Freedom of Religion or Belief remain. Hence, it is no wonder that Christians in Morocco, especially those from a Muslim background, are limited in their civil and religious rights in Morocco's restricted political and religious environment. Because Moroccan Christians are not officially recognized, they are forced to practice their faith away from the public eye.

### **Gender perspective**

According to Human Rights Watch ([HRW 2023 country chapter Morocco](#)) Morocco's Family Code (2004) discriminates against women in relation to divorce proceedings, marriage and inheritance. Whilst it sets 18 as the minimum age of marriage, judges can grant 'exemptions' to marry girls over the age of 15 at their family's request; 19,000 such exemptions were granted in 2021 ([Middle East Monitor, 24 January 2023](#)). Recent data suggests that 14% of girls are reportedly married by the age of 18 ([Girls Not Brides, last accessed 30 June 2023](#)). Morocco's 2018 Violence Against Women Law (which criminalized some forms of domestic violence and offered improved protections for victims) was welcomed as a positive step, although critics have argued it stops short at addressing all crimes, such as marital rape (HRW 2023 country chapter Morocco). These legal gaps can be utilized for the purpose of religious persecution, in particular making marriage a dangerous context for converts.

## Religious landscape

Morocco: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	33,000	0.1
Muslim	38,084,000	99.7
Hindu	0	0.0
Buddhist	0	0.0
Ethnic religionist	0	0.0
Jewish	2,200	0.0
Bahai	40,900	0.1
Atheist	290	0.0
Agnostic	51,700	0.1
Other	0	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Over 99% of the population is Muslim (majority Sunni), with the remainder being mostly agnostic, Bahai or Christian. Islam is the official state religion. The majority of expatriate Christians in Morocco are Roman Catholic. Non-Muslim foreign communities can practice their faith, but proselytization with the intent to convert Muslims from Islam to another religion is still considered illegal. Moroccan Christians with a Muslim background continue to face discrimination and marginalization. They are not recognized by the government, are closely monitored by the security services and most often face hostility from (extended) family and society.

[Middle East Concern/Morocco](#) (accessed 24 June 2024) reports:

- "Registered expatriate Christian communities enjoy considerable freedom in Morocco, provided that they avoid interaction with Muslims that could be construed as proselytism. In recent years (and particularly in 2010) the government has deported significant numbers of expatriate Christians on the grounds that they were contravening the Penal Code provisions relating to proselytism, or on even more vague grounds of 'threat to public order'. Moroccan Christians, who mainly meet in small house churches, are especially aware of close surveillance of their activities by the authorities. In early 2017 Morocco's highest religious authority issued a declaration regarding apostasy which it defined in narrow political terms. A broad ruling by the same authority in 2002 had urged that apostates be sentenced to death. The revised ruling has been widely welcomed, including by Christians in Morocco. Similarly, Christians welcomed a recent ruling that a Christian who offered a bible to a friend did not 'shake the faith' of that friend as the

- bible is a book that Muslims should read. However, there continues to be family and societal pressure against those who choose to leave Islam. Some who are considered apostates are referred to the courts (facing sanctions such as forcible divorce, loss of inheritance and removal of child custody), and in extreme cases they can face violent responses from family members."

## Economic landscape

According to the [World Factbook Morocco](#) (accessed 24 June 2024):

- **GDP per capita (PPP):** \$8,100 (2022 est.)
- **Unemployment:** 9.9% (2022 est.)
- **Youth unemployment:** 27.2%
- **Percentage of population below national poverty line:** 4.8% (2013 est.). However, a recent publication states that especially in rural areas the poverty rate increased to 10.6% ([Morocco World News, 20 February 2024](#)).

According to [World Bank Morocco Economic Monitor Fall 2023](#):

- **General situation:** "The Moroccan economy is recovering. Following a sharp deceleration in 2022 caused by various overlapping commodity and climatic shocks, economic growth increased to 2.9 percent in the first semester of 2023, driven primarily by services and net exports."
- **Economic growth:** "Growth is expected to further firm-up in the medium term. After expanding by 2.8 percent in 2023, real GDP growth is projected to reach 3.1 percent in 2024, 3.3 percent in 2025 and 3.5 percent in 2026, as domestic demand gradually recovers from recent shocks."
- **Economic resilience:** "Showcasing Morocco's external resilience, the country has managed to effectively respond to recent shocks. The Al Haouz earthquake of September 8th is the last of a series of shocks that have struck Morocco since the COVID-19 pandemic. The authorities have demonstrated a strong capacity to cope with these disturbances, another example of which has been the humanitarian response to the seism and the ambitious development plan put forward by the authorities to unlock the development potential of the most affected provinces. Other signs of Morocco's external resilience are: the solid (and growing) external demand for the country's goods and services despite the slowing of the international economy; ... the emergence of various modern industrial niches well connected to global value chains, and the sovereign's maintained access to international capital markets despite the ongoing tightening of global financial conditions."
- **Household crisis:** "But the domestic welfare impacts of these shocks remain pronounced. Households' confidence indicators continue to deteriorate and have reached an all-time low, with 87.3 percent of surveyed individuals declaring in the second quarter of 2023 that their quality of life has deteriorated over the past year. ... Aggregate statistics mask the fact that food inflation is disproportionately affecting the poor and vulnerable. ... Jobs continue to be lost in rural areas as agricultural activities suffer from the multi-year drought that began in 2019. The Al Haouz earthquake has also raised awareness about the pockets of poverty that persist in rural areas, many of which have barely participated in the profound economic transformations undergone elsewhere in Morocco over the past two decades."



Other sources report:

- World Bank's "[World by Income](#)" report (FY 2022) puts the Moroccan economy in the lower middle income category.
- The Fragile State Index ([FSI 2024 Morocco](#)) shows that the small but steady improvements in the economic indicators in the last years were disrupted by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, but continued to improve nonetheless. However, all three indicators, including 'Economic inequality' and 'Human flight and brain drain' show improvement for 2024, although the still high level of the latter remains a cause for concern.

Morocco's economy has important industrial sectors such as mining, agriculture, manufacturing and tourism. Moroccan companies are becoming increasingly active and investing in other African countries, especially in West Africa and this is helping foster economic growth. According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, Morocco is also the world's largest producer and exporter of cannabis. In 2021, production, export and import for "medical, cosmetic and industrial use" was legalized and as of April 2024, over 2,900 permits were issued for cannabis production ([Morocco World News, 25 April 2024](#)). The legalization aims in particular to take production away from criminal traffickers, while especially providing the economically disadvantaged northern Rif area with opportunities to develop ([ICBC, 18 March 2024](#)). Compared with most other countries in the region, Morocco's economy is relatively dynamic and robust.

### Gender perspective

Although Morocco had one of the largest relative drops in women's employment between 2016 and 2020, the female [labor force participation](#) rate increased from 20.7% in 2020 to 21.4% in 2022; compared to a slight drop from 69.8% to 69.7% for men (World Bank Gender Data Portal, 2023). Moroccan Christians, almost all of them from a Muslim background, often face discrimination in the job market. If their conversion becomes known, they can lose their employment. Finding another job is difficult, especially employment in government departments. As men are typically the primary breadwinners, this predominantly affects men.

### Social and cultural landscape

According to the [World Factbook Morocco](#) (accessed 24 June 2024):

- **Main ethnic groups:** The majority of the Moroccan population (99%) are from Arab-Berber decent.
- **Main languages:** The official language is Arabic, with French being widely spoken in business, government and diplomatic circles. Tamazight (official) and other Berber languages are spoken as well.
- **Population growth:** Morocco has a population growth rate of 0.88% (2023 est.)
- **Urban population:** In 2023, 65.1% of the population lived in urban areas, while the annual urbanization rate stands at 1.88%
- **Literacy rate:** 75.9% of the population can read and write; with a significant difference between men (84.8%) and women (67.4%) (2021).
- **Youth population:** The younger generation - up to 24 years of age - makes up almost 44% of the population, making it a country with a young population in need of (economic) opportunities.

- **Life expectancy:** 74.0 years on average; women (75.7 years), men (72.3 years) (2023).
- **Education:** Moroccan citizens enjoy 14 years of schooling on average (2021). The mean years of schooling for girls is 4.7, compared to 6.6 for boys.

According to the [UNDP Human Development Report Morocco](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **Human Development Index (HDI) score and ranking:** Morocco ranks #123 out of 191 countries. The combined ratio of life expectancy, education and per capita income gives a medium score of 0.683, making Morocco score lower than its North African neighbors.
- **Gender inequality:** With a Gender Development Index (GDI) score of 0.861, women are significantly disadvantaged in comparison to men. The GDI measures the differences in life expectancy, years of education and GNI per capita per gender.

Morocco is socially conservative and Muslim, but with the Moroccan elite emphasizing "Moroccan Islam", which tries to keep society away from extremist influences. There is also a strong Arab youth culture, and society is influenced by the large Moroccan population living in Europe. This influence can also be more radical though; the Moroccan population born abroad often tends to be more conservative than Moroccans living in Morocco.

In 2015, a Moroccan Christian convert [dedicated an episode](#) of his weekly show "Daring Questions" on the discrimination of non-Muslims encouraged by school textbooks (YouTube video, accessed 24 June 2024). He gave an example of the Islamic education's book for the 1st grade in primary school which stipulates: "I love those who love the prophet Muhammad (PBUH), and I am hostile to those who are hostile towards him". He also brought attention to a Baccaalaureat schoolbook which states that the punishment for apostasy is execution. However, a comparison with the new curricula found that "The old curricula ... make a clear distinction between what is lawful and unlawful from the perspective of Islamic jurisprudence, whereas the new textbooks confine themselves to what is commonly believed as right values and behaviors, such as honesty, peace, freedom, tolerance, etc." (Somaya Zine-Dine and Moulay Sadik Maliki, "[Religious Educational Reforms and the Shaping of Moroccan Identity](#): Islamic Education Textbooks as a Case Study," 52nd International Scientific Conference on Economic and Social Development – Porto, 16-17 April 2020, p.563).

According to FFP's Fragile State Index ([FSI 2024 Morocco](#)): 'Social indicators' showed continual improvement in previous years, but 'demographic pressures' significantly worsened for 2024. 'Cohesion indicators' showed that 'group grievances' improved, but remained alarmingly high.

### Gender perspective

Moroccan Christians remain side-lined and face discrimination by society. Once their conversion becomes known, family and society are likely to put pressure on them to recant their faith. Some of them face divorce by their spouses, while others are forced to marry a Muslim. Converts from Islam to Christianity are also likely to be excluded from family inheritance and lose custody rights in cases of divorce. Such measures affect both male and female converts; women and girls are more likely to be forced into a marriage whereas men are more likely to face discrimination in the workplace or be targeted by the authorities. Pressure mounted during the COVID-19 pandemic, due to economic uncertainty, which gave rise to an increase in domestic violence and a decrease in prosecutions of perpetrators ([HRW 2021 country chapter Morocco](#)).

## Technological landscape

According to [DataReportal Digital 2024 Morocco](#): (23 February 2024) / survey date – January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 90.7% penetration
- **Social media usage:** 55.7% of the total population
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 135.1% of the total population

There is a noticeable gender gap in regards to technology in Morocco: According to [Napoleon Cat](#), as of June 2024, 57.8% of Morocco's Facebook users were male, compared to 42.2% female users. High [illiteracy rates](#), especially among women, is cited as one of the main barriers to Internet access ([Freedom on the Net 2023 Morocco/A2](#)).

According to Freedom House's [Freedom on the Net 2023 Morocco](#) report, the country scored 53/100 and was classified as 'partly free':

- (Overview) "Internet freedom in Morocco remained tenuous during the coverage period. While internet access continues to expand overall, the government is believed to maintain sophisticated surveillance systems used to constrain online speech. The proliferation of progovernment outlets and state-sponsored propaganda drowns out critical voices online, while state-affiliated news sites publish false information about activists and journalists. Self-censorship around Western Sahara, the royal family, and religion remain pervasive, and numerous social media accounts are used to harass, defame, intimidate, and threaten activists who criticize the authorities."

Reporters without Borders ranked Morocco #129 out of 180 countries in its [World Press Freedom 2024](#) index, increasing 15 places from #144 in the 2023 Index. RSF states:

- "Independent journalists in Morocco are under constant pressure, and the authorities is trying to place the media at its command. The current government, led by influential businessman Aziz Akhannouch, has tightened control over the sector."
- "The diversity of the Moroccan media is only a facade, and the media do not reflect the diversity of political opinion in the country. Independent media and journalists face significant pressure, and the right to information is crushed by a powerful propaganda and disinformation machine serving the political agenda of the government and its close allies. Faced with this pressure, the last independent media outlet in Morocco, the daily *Akhbar Al Yaoum*, finally gave up and published its last issue in April 2021. Social media and news sites are the population's main source of information.."
- "For the past few years, the work of journalists has been hampered by the kingdom on many subjects, including the Western Sahara, the monarchy, corruption, Islam, security services, and the crackdown on demonstrations."
- "Although a new press law adopted in July 2016 abolished prison sentences for press offences, media content deemed critical can lead to legal proceedings based on the penal code. Journalists often resort to self-censorship because of the lack of legal safeguards for freedom of expression and of the press, the low level of judicial independence, and the frequency with which they are the targets of judicial proceedings."

- "Journalists are often subjected to arrests without warrants and prolonged pre-trial detentions. In recent years, fabricated morality cases, such as rape, human trafficking, adultery and illegal abortion, have been used against independent journalists. The ensuing trials have been accompanied by orchestrated smear campaigns in pro-government media."

One victim of such 'absurd' charges was investigative journalist Omar Radi, who received a 6 year prison sentence in July 2021 ([Committee to Protect Journalists](#), 19 July 2021). The Moroccan authorities used spyware from the Israeli NSO Group to hack Radi's telephone ([Amnesty International, 22 June 2020](#)). In March 2022, his conviction was upheld in appeal and he remains in jail ([HRW, 28 July 2022](#)).

Christians in Morocco, especially converts from a Muslim background, are careful in their social media postings. Criticizing Islam or the (religious authority of the) king can lead to arrest and detention, as well as social hatred. Exceptions aside, almost all Christians in Morocco use a pseudonym to post Christian material. On the positive side, those openly active on social media are usually able to post about Christianity without repercussions and with the rise of Internet access and social media, many converts to Christianity can now find fellowship online, despite being geographically isolated.

## Security situation

In August 2018, the king reinstated obligatory military service for men and women aged between 19 and 25 years old ([Reuters, 21 August 2018](#)). Critics say this was a way to quell protests ([Morocco World News, 10 April 2019](#)). Many soldiers are needed to protect the border-wall in occupied Western Sahara, which Morocco sees as its 'southern provinces'. The Western Sahara dispute started after Morocco annexed the former Spanish colony in 1975. The indigenous Western Sahara Sahrawi people resisted the annexation and - led by the POLISARIO Front - they established the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in 1976. After years of conflict, a truce was brokered by the UN upon promise of an independence referendum in 1991. This referendum has still not taken place, while Morocco has allowed thousands of its citizens to settle in the 75% of the area it controls. Meanwhile, the SADR controls a small area in the east of the country. According to [Reliefweb \(19 January 2022\)](#): "Over 173,000 Sahrawi refugees are estimated to live in five camps in Tindouf province, Algeria, on the border between Mauritania, Morocco and Western Sahara. Some have been displaced for more than 45 years."

In December 2020, the US government recognized Morocco's claim over Western Sahara in return for Morocco's normalization of ties with Israel ([Middle East Eye, 1 May 2021](#)). This move, followed by several other diplomatic incidents, led to the unilateral severing of ties by Algeria in August 2021 ([Al-Monitor, 25 August 2021](#)). Consequences remain at the moment limited to a closure of Algerian airspace for Moroccan planes and the discontinuation of the Maghreb-Europe Gas Pipeline, which transferred Algerian gas to Morocco ([Carnegie, 3 May 2022](#)). Furthermore, Algerian President Tebboune declared in March 2023 that the relationship between the two countries had reached "the point of no return" ([Al-Jazeera, 22 March 2023](#)). In addition, although of less importance, on several occasions Algeria has hindered Moroccan football teams from playing inside Algeria ([Al-Jazeera, 25 April 2024](#)).

Besides the Western Sahara issue, varying geopolitical approaches also come into play: Morocco is concentrating on a (security) partnership with the USA (and the EU), while Algeria keeps its ties with

Russia. However, it is unlikely that these tensions will result in a military conflict. Surprisingly, in December 2023, the Algerian foreign minister stated that the country could be “considered as [being] more inclined towards seeking [a] quick resolution” ([Morocco World News, 25 December 2023](#)). However, no further steps towards reconciliation appear to have been taken.

In December 2018, Morocco was shocked by the murder and beheading of two Scandinavian women by men who had sworn alliance to the Islamic State group (IS). This kind of violence had not happened before in Morocco and the killing was widely condemned. The main suspects received the death penalty, although Morocco has not executed any convicted criminals since 1993 ([BBC News, 18 July 2019](#)).

Morocco's security apparatus is known to be strong and intelligence agencies are well-informed. These capacities have also been used against Christians in Morocco, especially against converts from a Muslim background. The security services monitor all Christians and house churches extensively. This monitoring forces Christians to keep their gatherings small and out of the public sphere.

## Christian origins

Christianity arrived in Morocco when it was part of the Roman Empire and became very prominent in areas like Tangiers, Rabat and Fez. The first known Christian martyr in Morocco was Marcellus (298 AD) in Tangier. By the end of the 4th century, the Romanized areas of Morocco were solidly Christian and inroads had been made among the Amazigh (‘Berber’) tribes, who sometimes converted en masse. In that same 4th century, it was also one of the countries where Donatism and Arianism became a major theological issue. In the 5th century, German Vandals, coming via Spain, conquered Morocco and brought their Arian version of the Christian faith with them. In 533 AD, the Byzantine Empire [reconquered](#) Morocco to reinstate ‘Roman’ rule and to reinstall orthodox bishops and priests (Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed 29 September 2020).

According to Islamic tradition, Islam reached Morocco by the 7th century. Many Christians were forced to convert and the number of Christians decreased due to the policies of Islamization. In 1220, priests of the Franciscan Order made a brave attempt to re-introduce Christianity and a diocese was set up at Marrakesh in 1234 which was able to function until 1566.

Missionaries from North Africa brought the Protestant faith to Morocco in 1884. The Gospel Missionary Union and Emmanuel Mission Sahara came to the country in 1894 and 1926 respectively. Other churches and movements would follow, such as Anglicans, the Assemblies of God, the Christian Brethren and the Seventh-day Adventists.

Morocco's instability in the 19th century had resulted in European countries intervening to protect investments and to demand economic concessions. In 1912, Morocco became a French Protectorate, and Spain also assured itself of major parts of Morocco. Tens of thousands of French, Spanish and other colonists, entered Morocco and acquired large tracts of the rich agricultural land. During this colonial period, both Catholics and Protestants could freely worship in Morocco and the Reformed Church of France formed the Evangelical Church of Morocco. Churches, hospitals, schools and orphanages were built for the colonists and for mission work among the Muslim population.

When Morocco became independent in 1956, the country was home to 500,000 Europeans and the Roman Catholic Church was very visible. Since then, the Europeans and their churches have largely

departed. Today the expatriate Christian community (Roman Catholic and Protestant) consists of a few thousand members.

According to Jack Wald in "Christianity in North Africa and West Asia" (Edinburgh Companions to Global Christianity, Edinburgh University Press, 2018, pp.41-44), the indigenous Moroccan church began to emerge in the late 1960s, meeting in house-churches held in the homes of missionaries. In 1984 the community suffered a major setback when King Hassan II forced many Moroccan Christians to recant their faith, after suspecting them of plotting a coup. With the arrival of incumbent King Mohammed VI in 1999, a decade of relative freedom started which allowed house-churches, this time mostly led by Moroccans, to grow. However, in March 2010, around 150 foreign Christians from all over the country were suddenly deported. [Reportedly](#), the country wanted to take a tough line against proselytism (BBC News, 12 March 2010). Moroccan Christians were interrogated too and it became apparent that the police had inside informers; many house-churches disbanded as a result.

### Church spectrum today

Morocco: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	1,100	3.3
Catholic	17,900	54.2
Protestant	4,800	14.5
Independent	6,800	20.6
Unaffiliated	2,300	7.0
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>32,900</b>	<b>99.7</b>
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	4,200	12.7
Pentecostal-Charismatic	4,700	14.2

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

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

The majority of Christians in Morocco are expatriate Roman Catholics. Recognized churches for expatriates exist only in major cities. Denominations that existed prior to independence in 1956 include the Roman Catholic Church, the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Anglican Church and the French Protestant Church. Indigenous Moroccan Christians are not allowed to join these congregations.



## Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

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

## External Links

- Recent history: Institut Montaigne, 30 September 2021 - <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/blog/moroccan-elections-same-old-same-new>
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- Recent history: MEM, 24 February 2020 - <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200224-protests-in-morocco-demanding-improvement-of-social-and-human-rights-conditions/>
- Recent history: Al-Araby, 23 April 2021 - <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/imprisoned-leader-moroccan-rif-protest-movement-steps-down>
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- Recent history: Carnegie Endowment, 11 July 2023 - <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/90163>
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- Recent history: Morocco World News, 7 May 2024 - <https://www.morocroworldnews.com/2024/05/362503/al-haouz-province-suffered-over-half-the-economic-damage-from-2023-earthquake>
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- Recent history: Al-Jazeera, 12 December 2020 - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/12/trump-admin-moving-ahead-with-1bn-arms-sale-to-morocco-report>
- Recent history: The Guardian, 13 December 2020 - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/13/moroccan-islamist-groups-reject-normalising-ties-with-israel>
- Recent history: The Cradle, 30 November 2021 - <https://thecradle.co/Article/news/4156>
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