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Afghanistan: Country Dossier

November 2020



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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Introduction

World Watch List 2021

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

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

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Sources and definitions

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

Effect on data-gathering during COVID-19 pandemic

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

External Links - Introduction

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

WWL 2021 Short country profile / Afghanistan

Brief country details

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

Afghanistan: Population (2020 UN estimate)	Christians	Chr%
38,055,000	thousands	OD estimate

Afghanistan: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2021	94	2
WWL 2020	93	2
WWL 2019	94	2
WWL 2018	93	2
WWL 2017	89	3

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

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Afghanistan: Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Clan oppression	Violent religious groups, Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders, Government officials, Political parties, One's own (extended) family, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs
Ethno-religious hostility	Violent religious groups, Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders, Government officials, Political parties, One's own (extended) family, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs

Islamic oppression	Violent religious groups, Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders, Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups, Government officials, Political parties, One's own (extended) family, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs
Organized corruption and crime	Government officials, Violent religious groups, Organized crime cartels or networks, Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups

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

Brief description of the persecution situation

All Afghan Christians are converts from Islam and are not able to live their faith openly. Leaving Islam is considered shameful, punishable by death under the prevailing Islamic law and most Christian converts face dire consequences if exposed: Either they have to flee the country or they will be killed. The family, clan or tribe has to save its 'honor' by disposing of the Christian. Neither radical Islamic groups nor a convert's extended family show mercy in this respect. However, since converts are considered insane to leave Islam, some may end up in a psychiatric hospital.

Summary of international obligations and rights violations

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

1. [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR)
2. [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#) (ICESCR)
3. [Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment](#) (CAT)
4. [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) (CEDAW)
5. [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (CRC)

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

- Christian converts are killed on suspicion of their faith (ICCPR Art. 6)
- Women converts are forcibly married and forced to recant their beliefs (ICCPR Art. 23.3 and CEDAW Art. 16)
- Afghans are assumed to be Muslims and are not allowed to change their religion (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christians cannot display any religious images or symbols (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)
- Children of Christian converts are forced to adhere to Islamic religious precepts and receive Islamic teaching (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

No killings of international Christian humanitarian workers have been reported; most of them have left the country for security reasons anyway. The situation for the small Christian minority remained unchanged during the WWL 2021 reporting period: They cannot dare to become visible at all.

Specific examples of positive developments

The fact that Afghanistan has a new government after a long time of internal argument and negotiation is a positive development. Likewise - and with a lot of goodwill - the fact that the government and Taliban have started official talks in Doha could be considered a positive sign, although this has not yet translated into a reduction of violence. At the same time, the painstakingly slow progress in the peace-process is a strong reminder not to be too optimistic about the negotiations bearing much fruit.

External Links - Short country profile

- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cat.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Rights of the Child - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

WWL 2021: Keys to understanding / Afghanistan

Link for general background information

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

Recent history

Afghanistan has not known peace for more than forty years. In 1996 the Taliban seized control of Kabul and imposed radical Sharia law until 2001 when they were ousted from power by the US-led international military invasion. In 2004 Hamid Karzai won the first presidential elections and in 2005 the first parliamentary elections were held for more than 30 years. In 2014 NATO formally ended its combat mission in Afghanistan. However, international troops continue to be based in the country and, following an announcement by the USA in 2017, numbers have been increased. Talks between the US government and the Taliban collapsed in September 2019, but the USA [signed](#) an agreement with the Taliban on 29 February 2020 and withdrew almost one third of its remaining troops by end of June 2020 (The Guardian, 29 February 2020). It remains

open if and how intra-Afghan negotiations can bring peace to the country. Only time will tell, but the painfully slow start of the negotiations and the continued violence have not been encouraging signs.

Elections in 2014 led to a political stand-off, which could only be solved when the former foreign minister and ethnic Tajik, Abdullah Abdullah, acknowledged his defeat and accepted Ashraf Ghani as the new president. Abdullah was then announced CEO of the country, a position nowhere to be found in the Afghan Constitution. This compromise was called the "National Unity Government" and, although unstable and challenged in multiple ways, it managed to survive. Presidential elections were then held on 28 September 2019, but the outcome was inconclusive; the voter turnout was just 18.8% and Ashraf Ghani won with a very slim margin of 50.64%. There have again been many allegations of fraud and manipulation. In May 2020, both protagonists finally reached an [agreement on power sharing](#), however the nomination of the cabinet has been very slow (BBC News, 17 May 2020).

Due to the volatility of the situation in the country and an ever worsening security situation, the small groups of Christians in the country remain deeply hidden. They are affected by the insecurity, especially when they are living in Taliban-controlled areas, and the difficult economic situation (worsened by the COVID-19 crisis) which affects them as well. And even if peace-talks with the Taliban do prove successful, it is highly unlikely that freedom of religion will play a role in any agreement, let alone the protection of religious minorities.

Political and legal landscape

Competing factions of radical Islamic groups as well as a weak and divided government (despite its name "National Unity Government") do not bode well for the future of the country. Divisions in the government became obvious after the September 2019 presidential elections when both candidates held parallel inauguration ceremonies as president in March 2020. As already stated, in May 2020 an agreement of power sharing was finally reached. However, the swift changes in leadership of several radical Islamic groups (due to targeted killings) has not reduced their ability to execute attacks and harm the government, national army and citizens.

It is quite clear that the Taliban have no real intention of prioritizing issues such as [human and women's rights](#) if they were to return to power (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty - RFE/RL, 6 February 2019), as can be seen from [their "Constitution"](#) (RFE/RL, 26 April 2020). Neither would they have any real interest in protecting religious minorities such as Christians, who, according to the government, are anyway not present in the country. The fact that as chief negotiator, the Taliban have chosen one of their top clerics, "reputed to be a [hardliner](#) dedicated to sustaining the jihad until an Islamic emirate can be re-established in Afghanistan" shows that agreements will be tough to reach (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 10 September 2020). The fact that the Afghan government only grudgingly accepted the US promise of a release of 5000 Taliban prisoners illustrates the continued friction between the various parties. A confidential report has surfaced indicating that a high percentage of the released Taliban prisoners have already [returned to the battlefield](#), despite all promises to the contrary (Foreign Policy, 3 September 2020).

The small Christian community faces a difficult future. Observers see little chance of a negotiated peace materializing. Even if it did, it is far from clear how disgruntled Taliban fighters, other insurgents and regional warlords could be prevented from continuing to fight. The Taliban's ranks are being boosted by a steady stream of [new recruits](#), mainly from rural Afghanistan (Foreign Policy, 24 September 2020). The peace negotiations seem to be stuck in procedural questions at the time of writing, but if earlier talks are anything to go by, human rights will be taking a backseat and any hope of freedom for religious minorities is still far off. This could be seen in the [very passionate](#) nature of earlier debates; one of the most heated exchanges concerned the question of who has the right and duty to interpret Islam (New York Times - NYT, 7 August 2019).

The challenges facing Afghan democracy were clearly shown by the fact that it needed a seven month delay (i.e. not until May 2019) before the Independent Election Commission was in a position to finally publish the [results of the October 2018 parliamentary elections](#) for all but one province (Afghanistan Analysts Network - AAN, 17 May 2019). No elections could be held in Ghazni Province due to security issues. The Afghan election process saw several noteworthy [improvements](#) (International Crisis Group - ICG, 2 October 2019); however, the low voter turnout for the presidential elections posed serious questions about how representative the results really are and served as a good excuse for the Taliban not to accept the government in Kabul as being representative of the people.

The new government is still trying to find its voice and it is not clear what the new position of Dr. Abdullah as head of the "[High Council for National Reconciliation](#)" is and in how far he will indeed be responsible for the peace process (AAN, 5 August 2020). Such questions, as well as pending nominations for government posts, [will be defined along the way](#) (AAN, 20 May 2020) and it is hard to see how the new government will be able to create stability, let alone bring any solutions to the multitude of problems the country is facing, given the political stand-off between the various factions and ethnic groups. Almost all parties and factions have a place at the table, but precious few 'heavyweights' are present and right up to the start of the talks, the Afghan government presented itself as [split and fractionized](#) (AAN, 11 September 2020). An additional unforeseen problem with massive consequences emerged in the WWL 2021 reporting period as well: [The COVID-19 virus](#) has been spreading fast (ICG, 6 May 2020). Afghanistan's neighbors, Iran and Pakistan, have been strongly affected by the pandemic and the country's health system is ill-equipped to deal with the scale of this challenge.

Afghanistan ranks 166th out of 167 countries studied in [Georgetown's](#) Women, Peace and Security Index (2019/20), reflecting the particular pressures facing women and girls. While Afghanistan ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 2003, a 2020 UN [periodic report](#) highlighted concerns about insufficient legislation protecting victims from violence against women, a lack of legislative justice for female victims and impunity for perpetrators (CEDAW, 2020, "Concluding observations on the third periodic report of Afghanistan").

In particular, marriage is a place where violent repression of women takes place, especially of female converts. Whilst child marriage is illegal ([Civil Code, 1977, Art 71](#)) and the [2009 Law](#) on Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) and the [1976](#) Penal Code (section 517) both dictate that both parties must consent to a marriage, early and forced marriages are widespread, particularly in rural areas. According to [Girls Not Brides](#) (accessed 24 November 2020), 35% of girls are married by the age of 18 and 9% by the age of 15. Within marriages, women reportedly experience high levels of domestic abuse. According to UN reporting, physical and sexual intimate partner violence affects [51% of women](#) (UN Women, Global Database on Violence against Women). Escaping these marriages is also problematic; under both the 1977 Civil Law as well as Islamic law a man has the right to divorce his wife without giving a reason, whereas a woman must file for divorce through the courts, which is [hard to achieve](#) and will likely result in her losing custody of her children (OECD, 2019, “Social Institutions and Gender Index”).

Activists are fighting for greater female representation within the Afghan government; whilst [27.8%](#) of positions were filled by women in 2019 (Index mundi, accessed 24 November 2020), [reports](#) suggest women are excluded from high-level discussion (The Guardian, 22 May 2020) and experience weak representation at the negotiation table in Doha. A recent, albeit small victory for activists is that mothers’ names will [soon be printed](#) alongside fathers’ names on national identification cards (The New York Times, 2 Sep 2020).

Religious landscape

The Open Doors estimate for the number of Christians in Afghanistan is "thousands". According to WCD February 2020 statistics, more than 99% of the population is Muslim and there also are small groups of Hindus, Bahai, Buddhists and Christians (among others). For security reasons no WCD breakdown is shown here.

Officially there are no Christians apart from some international military staff, diplomats and NGO workers. Indigenous Christians (mostly those with a Muslim background) are in hiding as much as possible. 90% of Muslims in Afghanistan follow Sunni Islam, while approximately 9.7% adhere to Shiite Islam. The Hazara tribe is predominantly Shiite, while the main ethnic group, the Pashtu, are Sunni. They dominate the political landscape, but are in need of such minorities as the Uzbeks and Tajiks to exercise power.

The small numbers of Sikh, Hindu and Bahai followers in the country hardly have more freedom than Christians do, their advantage being that they are not perceived as being Western and alien. This does not mean, however, that they are not targeted for attack. In July 2018, the only Sikh candidate for parliamentary elections was killed in a [bomb attack](#) (NYT, 2 July 2018). Attacks against the Shiite Hazara have become much more common [since 2018](#) (RFE/RL, 16 November 2018). Another [bloody attack](#) against the Sikh minority was carried out on 25 March 2020 (AP News, 25 March 2020).

Against this religious backdrop, daily life is challenging for both Christian men and women and many live out their faith in secret. Conversion from Islam to Christianity is [unacceptable](#) under Islamic Law (BBC News, 14 Jan 2014). Female converts may be forcibly married to a Muslim or confined to the walls of their home. They may also be sold into slavery or prostitution, be deprived of food and water and healthcare, locked into rooms, beaten severely, burned or sexually mishandled. Men face verbal abuse, imprisonment, torture, sexual abuse and even the threat of death. Family members of converts may also be persecuted, as are suspect by association.

Economic landscape

According to [UNDP 2019 report](#) (page 300 onwards):

- **Gross National Income (GNI) per capita:** 1,746 USD (in 2011 PPP)
- **Poverty:** 24.9% of the population are in severe multi-dimensional poverty and a further 18.1% are vulnerable to it. 54.5% of the population are living below the national poverty line.

According to [World Bank's April 2020 update](#):

- **Birth rate:** The birth rate has been declining over the decades, but still stands at 4.5 in 2018.
- **Education:** While the completion rate for primary school is 86%, the enrolment for secondary school is 55% and the service delivery has been unequal and gender-biased (see Social landscape below).
- **GDP growth:** The annual GDP growth rate is declining and stood at an estimated 1.8% for 2018.
- In its country categorization, the World Bank rated Afghanistan as being a low-income economy.

Afghanistan is a land-locked country and faces multiple challenges in its economy. Maybe the most obvious is that due to decades of civil war, the country has suffered widespread destruction. Its infrastructure is in poor condition and limited in capacity; it also has a very challenging geography with high mountains and harsh weather conditions. The country cannot currently take advantage of its rich mineral resources (most likely including oil and gas as well) as these commodities need foreign investment and safe transportation, which in turn require stability. Even China, which is commodity-hungry and willing to take more risks than most other investors, remains cautious, despite Beijing's desire to see the Belt and Road Initiative make further progress. All efforts to re-establish Afghanistan's former role of being the main [connection between Central and South Asia](#) have a long way to go (Chatham House, 8 July 2019).

Afghanistan is classified as a "rent-seeking" economy, meaning that wider parts of its income does not come from the country's own economic efforts, but from international donors. According to an AAN Special Report published in May 2020, [48% of the current government budget](#) is funded by international aid. But those are just the official figures: The report estimates the actual percentage to be nearer to 75% - and in former years this probably even reached 90%. One big question in the future will be what the country does when these international funds decline or even dry up completely with the withdrawal of international troops.

It is very possible that farmers and other citizens will rely more heavily on illicit drugs like opium as a source of income, especially since they are much more lucrative than virtually any other crop. Compared to wheat, farmers can earn three times the amount of money with poppy production. Even when a considerable share has to be paid to Taliban networks, it is still highly profitable. Afghanistan's [opium production](#) remained constant in 2019, the latest numbers available, roughly at the same level as in 2018 (AAN, 25 June 2020). It should be noted that previously, the UNODC had published a special 'Opium Survey' in cooperation with Afghan authorities in November each year. In 2020, however, the data was published as part of the UNODC's worldwide drug report. This would seem to indicate that either the Afghan government considered the lack of progress in fighting opium production too embarrassing to be highlighted in a separate report, or a growing resignation and lack of interest has set in on the part of the government. A more recent challenge has been the surge in production of chemical drugs like methamphetamine, as has been detailed in a [report](#) by the European Monitoring Center for Drugs and Drug Addiction in November 2020.

According to a report, the Taliban earned 1.6 billion USD in their last financial year which ended in March 2020. The main source for such earnings were drugs, precious stones, ores and other commodities. This financial basis should give the Taliban enough stability to continue fighting and - since they are close to achieving [financial independence](#) - it might also encourage them not to bother honoring any agreement made with the Afghan government (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 16 September 2020).

The [spread of the COVID-19 virus](#) is increasingly taking its toll (ICG, 6 May 2020). The virus had 29 of the nation's 34 provinces in its grip, as of May 2020, and it is very likely that all [numbers](#) of infections are seriously under-reported (AAN, 24 September 2020). Thus, even the fighting has been overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the UN and other humanitarian actors are raising the alarm about the diminishing access to food and income. Action needs to be taken to avoid a catastrophic food crisis and possible widespread starvation. Health infrastructure is scarce even in cities and Afghanistan is especially vulnerable because Iran and Pakistan (which have been seriously affected by COVID-19) are close neighbors, where hundreds of thousands of Afghans live (see *Social and cultural landscape* below).

Christians are sharing the lot of their fellow countrymen. As their exposure as Christians would certainly mean discrimination, the lose of livelihood and possibly even their very life, they are careful to hide their faith. Due to their Christian convictions, they will not actively participate in the opium production and trade, but it is difficult for them to stand up against it as well, as everyone even mildly opposing it will be targeted - more so as the Taliban gains significant revenue from it for funding their activities.

Women are among the most economically vulnerable in Afghanistan, in part due to low education rates. Afghanistan's education system has suffered from decades of sustained conflict. Enrolment levels are particularly low in the rural areas of the country, and for girls. According to [UNICEF](#), 60% of the 37.7 million children out-of-school are girls. Factors behind this disparity include: a lack of female teachers; poor sanitation facilities; socio-cultural beliefs about gender roles; and early marriage rates among girls.

Women and girls regularly lose their inheritance rights, too. Under Sharia rules of inheritance, daughters inherit half that of a son. In addition to reduced shares, women and girls also face obstacles in accessing their due inheritance. [Family members](#) are usually the primary barriers (UN Women, 2011 Report, “Women: Right to Heritage and Property”). Widows have reportedly been [forcibly married](#) to another male in the family, in an attempt to keep the wealth within the family (OECD, 2019, “Social Institutions and Gender Index”).

In light of these economic vulnerabilities, women are reliant on men as the breadwinners. If a male convert is killed, female family members may be forced to find work that exposes them to abuse. Some male converts change jobs, in order to avoid being exposed by not participating in Islamic religious practices at the workplace.

Social and cultural landscape

According to the [UNDP 2019 report](#) (page 300) and [Word Fact Book](#) (October 2019):

- **Main ethnic groups:** The largest ethnolinguistic groups are Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Aimak, Turkmen, Baloch and others. The Afghan Constitution mentions 14 different ethnic groups
- **Main languages:** The two main languages are Pashtu and Dari (a Farsi dialect)
- **Urban population:** While it is difficult to come across reliable data, according to a 2016 World Bank report, 54% of the urban population in Afghanistan lived in Kabul and its urbanization rate is one of the highest of the world
- **Literacy rate:** For adults (15 years and older) this is 31,7%
- **Health:** Afghanistan has 2.8 doctors and 5 hospital beds per 10,000 people

According to [World Bank’s April 2020 update](#):

- **Population/age:** The population under the age of 14 is 42.5%; the population above 65 is 2.6%
- **Education:** The mean years of schooling are 3.9 and on average, one teacher is available for 44 pupils at primary school level
- **Unemployment:** 11.1%, the rate of vulnerable employment is 79.7%
- **IDPs/Refugees:** According to the UN's International Organization for Migration ([IOM](#), accessed 16 July 2020), as of December 2019, there were over 4.35 million people living internally displaced. The World Bank adds in its [overview](#): the number of conflict-induced IDPs increased from 369,700 in 2018 to more than 400,000 in 2019. An additional 505,000 refugees returned to Afghanistan, mainly from Iran, during 2019.

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

- Human Development Index (HDI): With a score of 0.496, Afghanistan ranks 170th of 189 listed countries, dropping three places in ranking since 2013 and seeing a slowing HDI growth in the last decade.
- Life expectancy at birth: 64.5 years, the median age is 18.4
- Gender Inequality Index: With a score of 0.575, Afghanistan ranks 143th of 162 listed countries

- Unemployment: The unemployment rate is 1.5%, the youth (between 15 and 24) unemployment rate 2.6%, the rate of vulnerable employed 89.4%.

Afghanistan faces a multitude of challenges besides the long-term war with the Taliban and - more recently - the Islamic State group (IS). The country is also split up into a variety of ethnic groups which are strong in different parts of the country. It seems that all are aiming to secure their own position and are not interested in the well-being of Afghanistan as a whole. The Pashtuns are often regarded as being most dominant, but even within the Pashtun community, divisions occur along Pashtun tribal lines as well; President Ghani has been accused of favoring his own Ghilzai tribe, while side-lining the influential Durrani tribe of former President Karzai, who still wields considerable influence. A well-known Afghani saying states: "First my tribe, then my people and then the country". Political cooperation is constantly affected by mistrust and the new government is very slow in [appointing](#) posts, reflecting the mistrust and making all agreements with the Taliban even harder to achieve (AAN, 13 June 2020).

The term "civil society" is virtually unknown in Afghanistan, so pressure groups caring for social development and/or issues concerning women, minorities or human rights can do little to influence the country's political development and can even become a target for attacks. Groups supporting the rule of law, participation in the political process or government accountability are quickly suspected of being agents of the international community, furthering the agenda of the West. These accusations come from both the government and society in general. This mindset makes it easy for insurgents to mobilize a large segment of the population to oppose "foreign occupiers" who are labelled as "non-believers". This would seem to apply also to Western NGOs working in the country, including the few Christian ones. This attitude within society is echoed in the [US State Department's IRF 2019 Country Report](#), when it states on page 19: "NGOs reported Muslim residents remained suspicious of development assistance projects, which they often viewed as surreptitious efforts to advance Christianity or engage in proselytization." Attacks against Christian aid workers largely ceased in the WWL 2021 reporting period, but mostly because almost all have left the country.

A [UNICEF country report](#) published in May 2018 showed what the dire situation means for civilians, especially for children: 44% of all children in the age between 7 and 17 are not attending school, 60% of whom are girls. The out-of-school rate has increased for the first time since 2002. It is hard to see how the next generation will have any perspective without education. In areas which are ruled by the Taliban, schools are often still open and in some regions, girls are allowed to attend them up to a certain age, but many schools buildings are dilapidated and damaged by the war and the Taliban do nothing to repair or renovate them, as a [report](#) from April 2020 showed (USIP, 30 April 2020).

According to the report by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction ([SIGAR](#)) published on 12 July 2019, the number of opium consumers within Afghanistan rose to 2.9-3.6 million in 2015, which is one of the world's highest per capita rates. This also shows that many people, especially the younger generation, lack any real future perspectives.

One of the biggest challenges in the WWL 2021 reporting period (not directly related to the ongoing conflict) has been the COVID-19 crisis. Afghanistan borders Pakistan and Iran, two countries where the outbreak was particularly widespread. Both countries hold about 3.6 million Afghan nationals and have sped up the repatriation of Afghan [migrant workers and refugees](#) (AAN, 27 March 2020), while others have left voluntarily for fear of being infected. It is therefore no surprise that the first large outbreak of the pandemic was reported from the Western city of Herat. Given the poor state of the health system in terms of quality and quantity, the [COVID-19 pandemic](#) could have devastating consequences (AAN, 19 June 2020). Besides the economic consequences, it has also pushed more Afghans into [poverty](#), so that the numbers given above will be seriously under-estimated (AAN, 14 October 2020). It should also be noted that without migrant workers, families will also lack funds for living provided by remittances. The question of what to do about the hundreds of thousands of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) within Afghanistan remains an urgent issue, too.

Christians are affected by these circumstances like the wider public. While social distancing measures may give converts a little bit more freedom for their own personal worship, being locked in with the wider family, who may not be Christians, could also put them in additional danger.

Afghanistan is a deeply patriarchal society which is heavily dominated by the Islamic religious landscape. Conversion from Islam to another religion is unacceptable in all areas and women are viewed as second-class citizens.

Technological landscape

According to [World Internet Stats](#) (accessed 1 April 2020):

- **Internet usage:** 19.7% of the population - survey date: 31 March 2019
- **Facebook usage:** 8.6% of the population – survey date: 31 December 2018

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

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 59.1 per 100 people.

Due to country instability, Afghanistan was not listed in [Freedom House's Freedom on the Net Report](#) 2020. However, in November 2017 VOA News reported that the authorities do at times [block social media services](#) temporarily to prevent insurgency groups using WhatsApp, Telegram, Twitter and Facebook to spread propaganda. According to Reporters Without Borders' [2020 World Press Freedom Index](#): "Concern is growing that basic freedoms, including press freedom, could be sacrificed in the course of the international efforts to restore peace in Afghanistan."

As the number of internet users increases, it is likely that citizens (converts from Islam in particular) will have more access to online Christian resources (especially resources in Farsi, which is related to the Dari language). As long as government intervention remains low, this is likely to strengthen the small Christian community, which is often made up of isolated converts. However, internet access is more available in urban areas, especially Kabul, which alone makes up more than half of the country's urbanization.

As Afghanistan Analysts Network showed in a series of reports, [access to telecom services](#) (AAN, 13 June 2019) is limited by insurgents, particularly by Taliban control. The Taliban also enforce [cellphone checks](#) in the regions they control in order to make people follow their strict rules (Gandhara-RFE/RL, 30 October 2020). This applies predominantly to rural areas, while it should be noted that the World Bank claims that the [urbanization rate](#) of Afghanistan is the highest in South Asia (World Bank, accessed 16 July 2020), only topped by smaller countries such as the Maldives and Bhutan. So the gap between cities and rural areas is growing. Overall, the country's technological development is slow and strongly affected by the dire security situation.

A 2015 Broadcasting Board of Governors report indicates that [81.1%](#) of Afghans have access to a mobile phone. Reflecting the gender gap in relation to technology access, a [Georgetown](#) report reveals that just 46.2% of women use a mobile phone (Georgetown, 2019, "Women Peace and Security Index").

Security situation

Warlords representing ethnic factions influence the political scene. Even occasional peace accords with warlords – such as the one with the infamous Hekmatyar in September 2016, who is known for his very outspoken hostility towards Christians - have changed nothing for the country's security. The same goes for the brief ceasefire periods between the government and Taliban. Afghanistan is still the country with the most landmines in the world, the level of crime is increasing, criminal gangs are active in various regions and kidnappings occur frequently. How much former warlords are still needed and courted was on display when former Vice-President Abdul Rashid Dostum, a member of the ethnic Uzbek group, was [awarded](#) Afghanistan's highest military rank (RFE/RL, 15 July 2020).

The Taliban remain an increasing threat to stability. The brief capture of the northern city of Kunduz, at the end of September 2015, was a major blow to the government as it was the first provincial capital to be re-conquered by the Taliban since 2001. It showed that the Taliban are not just powerful in their strongholds in the southern province of Helmand. Again, the Taliban shocked both the Afghan government and the international community by [taking control of another provincial capital](#), Ghazni, for a few days in August 2018, showing their military power (Asia News, 14 August 2018).

Violent attacks across the country increased over the reporting period and civilians are paying the price for it, especially after the signing of the peace deal with the USA on 29 February 2020. [More than 500 civilians](#) have been killed in the first quarter of 2020 (UNAMA, 27 April 2020) and, in the 45 days from signing the pact until end of April, [4500 attacks](#) by the Taliban were recorded (Reuters, 1 May 2020). If calculated on a daily basis, the number of victims as published by UNAMA [did not decrease significantly at all](#) compared to 2019 (AAN, 16 August 2020). Meanwhile, the USA reduced its number of troops to 8600 at the end of June 2020. Further reductions are due in [January 2021](#) (CNN, 17 November 2020).

Insurgents have control of an increasing number of districts all over the country, despite the fact that the USA and international partners built up their numbers of troops throughout 2018. It seems most likely that Afghanistan is going to see continued attacks and bloodshed. After the deadly and shocking attack against a maternity ward in the Dasht-e-Barkhi district in Kabul in May 2020, Doctors Without Borders (MSF) announced its [withdrawal from the hospital](#) on 15 June 2020, which is a clear and very worrying sign, given that MSF is used to working in very difficult circumstances. An update on who controls which districts can be found in the [Long War Journal](#) project.

The intra-Afghan [peace talks](#) between the Afghan government and the Taliban finally kicked off in Doha, Qatar, on 10 September 2020 (ICG, 11 September 2020), but the security situation continued to deteriorate. The radical Islamic Taliban are increasing in strength and their fighting units are present in more regions than in the last few years. It is time to shelve the myth that the Taliban is [tired of fighting](#) and is now willing to compromise (Long War Journal, 19 September 2020). Al-Qaeda is also present and active in the country, even though the Taliban claim otherwise; the Islamic State group (IS) had also made inroads into the country, boosted by an influx of foreign Sunni militants, many calling themselves "Islamic State of the Khorasan Province" (ISKP) and formed largely out of splinter groups of former Taliban fighters. They have mainly been targeting Hazara and other Shiites in an effort to sow further sectarian discord. However, [IS has suffered serious setbacks](#), especially at the end of 2019 (FDD's Long War Journal, 4 May 2020). Nangarhar Province has been a stronghold for IS, but according to a monitoring team set up by the UN Security Council, its diminished numbers [have withdrawn](#) into remote areas of neighboring Kunar Province (UN Security Council, 27 May 2020). However, IS remains a challenge for national and international security forces and carries out its attacks with great brutality. It is also likely to continue serving as a gathering-point for groups from the Taliban, al-Qaeda and other dismantled militia, who oppose the peace negotiations.

The most recent ["Global Terrorism Index"](#) 2019 featured Afghanistan as the country most affected by terrorism worldwide and the Taliban as the deadliest terror group. As far as can be seen, the Consultative Peace Loya Jirga, held in April 2019 with some 3,000 delegates, did not help in finding peace. Likewise, no peace or the badly needed healing of the torn country can be expected from investigations by the International Criminal Court (ICC). In February 2020, the Appeals Chamber of the ICC granted the prosecutor's right to [investigate potential war crimes](#) in Afghanistan committed not just by the Taliban, but also by Afghan and US forces over the last two decades (Human Rights Watch, 5 March 2020). This will, however, not change the situation on the ground and has already caused the USA to threaten ICC staff with prosecution.

The small Christian minority lives in government-controlled and Taliban-controlled areas and faces even more challenges when they are in rural areas, especially in places under Taliban control or in contested areas. In rural locations, the social control is much higher, not just by families, but also by society at large.

Against this backdrop of decade-long conflict and instability, life is immensely challenging for all Christians. Women in particular fear a resurgence of Taliban power, observing carefully the progress of the ongoing peace negotiations.

Trends analysis

1. Violence looks set to continue for the foreseeable future, despite "peace talks"

A particularly brutal attack in May 2020 targeted a hospital in Kabul, where a [maternity ward](#) was stormed by gunmen reportedly dressed as police officers, killing 24 people including two newborn babies (BBC News, 12 May 2020). Although no-one claimed responsibility, the attack serves as an illustration of what Afghanistan can expect in the future. This is also underlined by the uptick in the number of attacks, despite the intra-Afghan talks. Although it is not yet confirmed, it has been reported that the new leader of IS in Afghanistan is an [Arab](#) and not an Afghan (Lawfare, 2 September 2020). This would facilitate the switching of allegiances by disgruntled Taliban fighters who do not agree with peace talks at all or the direction peace talks may take. The security situation is unlikely to improve: With international troops being withdrawn and [local militias being demobilized](#) (AAN, 1 July 2020), the official Afghan forces continue to suffer from a high attrition rate. A series of attacks in Kabul also raised suspicion that there [may be rifts](#) between the Taliban and the Haqqani network, making any peace perspective even more elusive (Gandhara-RFE/RL, 7 November 2020). This all adds to destabilization. In such a situation, families, clans and society in general will increasingly look for stability inside, which is likely to increase the pressure on Christian converts to conform with religious duties and keep their faith hidden, unnoticed by anyone.

2. Society in general lacks future perspectives

Life for most Afghans is a constant balancing act with little hope for improvement and an ever increasing level of insecurity. Even though Kabul is regarded as the most stable zone, attacks there make life unpredictable as well. The Islamic State group (IS) claimed an attack at [Kabul University](#) on 2 November 2020, killing at least 22 people, in another illustration of the level of violence people in Afghanistan have to endure (Reuters, 2 November 2020). Besides the security situation, the socio-economic outlook is worrying as well. More than 50% of the population is younger than 20 years old and the high population growth (combined with the return of refugees and migrant workers) only exacerbates the problem. Unemployment, poverty and inflation rates remain very high. The outbreak of COVID-19 highlighted these problems and increased them. Due to a lack of future perspectives, many young people get involved in drug-trafficking or join militant groups; for the time-being, going abroad is not an option anymore. Christians are affected by these challenges as well.

3. The lack of government legitimation remains a serious problem

The talks with the Taliban are at an early stage and the government is struggling with a lack of legitimation due to the low voter turnout. At the same time, the negotiations with the Taliban may be the only chance of bringing peace to the country for a long time to come. However, the government will struggle to boost its legitimacy by good governance or big spending since foreign aid will not sustain improvement as long as the problem of rampant corruption is not solved and may even start to dry up quickly when international military and development engagement is slowed down altogether. Remittances from migrant workers have dried up and

COVID-19 is putting a strain on the government budget and administration. Much of the population long for peace and are fed-up with the violence coming from insurgent groups like the Taliban or IS and do not trust them. However, accommodating them might be the only option available. For minorities, even more so for religious minorities, this perspective promises only to bring more years spent keeping as low a profile as possible and remaining in hiding.

External Links - Keys to understanding

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WWL 2021: Church information / Afghanistan

Christian origins

Christianity may have reached Afghanistan by the 2nd century AD. According to traditions passed on by Eusebius of Caesarea (260-339 AD), the apostles Thomas and Bartholomew brought the Christian message to Parthia and Bactria, which includes today's north-western Afghanistan. The congregations which grew up developed into the Nestorian Church and Afghan cities like Herat, Kandahar and Balkh became bishopric seats. In the 13th century a Christian ruler converted to Islam and became Sultan, leading to a decline in the number of followers of Christianity, which was nearly completely extinguished by the reign of Timur in 1405.

In the 17th century, Armenian merchants came to Kabul and in time a small Christian community developed, but this Armenian community was forced to leave the country by 1871. Attempts at building a Protestant church in Kabul came to an end in 1973. Today, Christianity has been pushed underground completely. It is claimed that in the basement of the Italian embassy, there is still a legally recognized church, the only one in the country. But it is not publicly accessible and therefore only serves expatriate Christians.

Church spectrum today

For security reasons no WCD breakdown is shown here. Most Christians are converts from other religions, but no details can be published.

WWL 2021: Persecution Dynamics / Afghanistan

Reporting period

01 October 2019 - 30 September 2020

Position on the World Watch List

Afghanistan: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2021	94	2
WWL 2020	93	2
WWL 2019	94	2
WWL 2018	93	2
WWL 2017	89	3

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

Christians in Afghanistan are enduring the same extreme levels of pressure as in North Korea, although by different means and actors. In terms of scoring, Afghanistan and North Korea only differ through a slightly lower score for violence in Afghanistan, resulting in a score which is only 0.9 points less than North Korea (when unrounded scores are viewed). Nevertheless, the very high score for violence reflects the increase in insurgency: The Taliban controls an increasing amount of the country's territory and, although the Islamic State group (IS) lost ground despite continued suicide attacks, IS is also a violent Islamic player in Afghanistan. A second reason for the very high score is that the run-up to the intra-Afghan peace talks provided ample grounds for cementing territorial wins and emphasizing strength. At the same time, the continuing slight decrease in the violence score compared to WWL 2020 reflects the fact that it is getting more difficult to get detailed reports about the Christian presence in insurgency-ruled areas and does not necessarily mean less violence against Christians has taken place.

Persecution engines

Afghanistan: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Very strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Very strong

Clan oppression	CO	Very strong
Christian Denominational protectionism	CDP	Not at all
Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Weak
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Strong

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

Islamic oppression (Very strong):

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan neither allows any Afghan citizens to become Christians nor recognizes converts as such. Conversion is seen as apostasy and brings shame on the family and the Islamic community. Therefore, converts hide their new-won faith as far as possible. The Taliban increased its control over parts of the country; according to a report in June 2018 by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, insurgents control or are fighting for control [across 12 provinces](#) (Jamestown, 2 June 2018) and, out of 407 districts, 178 are either fully under Taliban control (59) or are contested (119). These numbers tend to vary over time, although the tendency is clearly an increasing influence for the Taliban. This is also shown by the high number of attacks and battles with government forces struggling for supremacy in various provinces.

The leadership of the Taliban, which is more inclined to radical Islamic views, has stepped up its campaign to control areas. Also, the extreme violence used by groups related to IS (e.g. Islamic State in the Khorasan Province/ISKP) has translated into an even higher number of people being killed in attacks or displaced as discussed above under the heading 'Security Situation'.

Christians of Afghan nationality are all converts with a Muslim background. If they are discovered, they face discrimination and hostility (including death) at the hands of family, friends and community. Muslim religious leaders will most likely be the instigators and the local authorities can be involved, too. According to a survey published in November 2019, Afghan people display the [highest levels of confidence](#) in their religious leaders and in the media - far ahead of their trust in any politicians. More than 57% of respondents said they would welcome religious leaders being more involved in politics, but some provinces saw percentages of up to 98.5%.

Ethno-religious hostility, blended with Clan oppression (Very strong):

A country expert stated: "Ethno-religious norms and traditional belief systems are dominant. Society is very traditional and slow to change. Pashtuns in particular have a strong codex, but other tribes also adhere to their traditions." The concept of nation is alien to the Afghan way of

thinking. One’s own family comes first, followed by the clan and then the tribe – and all of these are much more important than the country as a whole. People are deeply entrenched in caring for their families, villages and tribes. If someone dares to turn from his tribe to embrace something new and maybe even foreign, this results in high pressure being exerted to make that person return to traditional norms. If this does not happen, such a person will be looked upon as a traitor of the community and hence excluded. This applies to all 'deviations' but even more if someone turns to Christianity. The Christian religion is considered to be Western and hostile to Afghan culture, society and Islam and leaving Islam is seen as treason. As already mentioned above, the US State Department's 2019 IRF report states on page 19 that "Muslim residents remained suspicious of development assistance projects, which they often viewed as surreptitious efforts to advance Christianity or engage in proselytization."

Organized corruption and crime (Strong):

The lack of exportable goods has led to a huge trade imbalance, causing the country to be in constant financial debt. A stunning 80% of the GDP comes from the informal sector and so corruption and crime are omnipresent. This also affects Christians because they belong to the low-income majority of society. One of the main economic problems Afghanistan faces is that growing illicit drugs such as opium is much more lucrative than virtually any other crop; details are to be found in the [UN report](#) published in November 2018. As already said above, the Taliban are heavily involved in drug production; estimations are that 70-80% of all drug trafficking profit is channeled into funding Taliban activities. The income from poppy cultivation not only funds armed militant groups, it also fuels corruption. The [UNODC](#) 2018 opium survey, published in July 2019, shows that i) opium is becoming increasingly available on the open market, alongside licit crops; ii) opium sells at much higher prices than any other crop, and alternatives are hard to find. Anyone who gets in the way of the drug lords will simply be pushed aside, a practice which has intensified. It may be telling that the UNODC decided to cease its publication of a dedicated report since then.

Drivers of persecution

Afghanistan:									
Drivers of Persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	VERY STRONG	-	VERY STRONG	VERY STRONG	-	-	-	WEAK	STRONG
Government officials	Very strong	-	Very strong	Very strong	-	-	-	-	Very strong
Ethnic group leaders	Very strong	-	Very strong	Very strong	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Very strong	-	Very strong	Very strong	-	-	-	-	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Violent religious groups	Very strong	-	Very strong	Very strong	-	-	-	-	Strong
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Very strong	-	Strong	Strong	-	-	-	-	-
One's own (extended) family	Very strong	-	Strong	Strong	-	-	-	-	-
Political parties	Very strong	-	Very strong	Very strong	-	-	-	-	-
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Very strong	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Strong
Organized crime cartels or networks	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Strong
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

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

Drivers of Islamic oppression:

- **Government officials and Political parties (Very strong/Strong):** As Afghanistan is per Constitution an Islamic state, all other religions are seen as alien to the country and consequently government parties and officials are hostile towards all signs of Christianity. The withdrawal of the international troops will also mean a decrease in outsiders watching.
- **Ethnic group leaders, Islamic leaders, violent religious groups and revolutionaries or paramilitary groups (Very strong):** As explained above, ethnic and religious leaders are stronger and more powerful than government officials. The continuing Taliban insurgency, in combination with the smaller, but still very violent IS influence, puts additional pressure on the already hidden group of Christians. If discovered - and there are reports that Taliban are actively searching - they face almost certain death or immediate expulsion.
- **Families (Very strong):** Although this depends on the family's general ethos, for most families a conversion brings shame, and the family will do much - in some cases everything necessary - to bring the convert back to Islam and to atone for the shame.
- **Normal citizens (Very strong):** What has been said for families can be said about the wider community (neighbors and friends) as well. Control within society is very strong and leaving Islam is seen as a rejection of Afghan culture and society which needs to be stopped.

Drivers of Ethno-religious hostility, blended with Clan oppression:

- **Government officials and Political parties (Very strong/Strong):** As Afghanistan is organized first and foremost along ethnic lines, affiliation to an ethnicity and tribe is the highest priority and needs to be protected and defended above all else, not just on the national, but even more so on the provincial and district level.
- **Ethnic group leaders, Islamic leaders and violent religious groups (Very strong):** Ethnicity, often backed by religious affiliation, defines a person's being and consequently, ethnic leaders wield a strong influence over people. The very same dynamics described for *Islamic oppression* are active in this respect as well.

- **Normal citizens and (extended) Family (Strong):** Everyone leaving his or her given community, for example by changing his or her religion to Christianity, is seen as committing treason and in need of being brought back. The very same drivers already mentioned under *Islamic oppression* are active here as well, since in Afghan culture, ethnic and religious identity are regarded as being one and the same.

Drivers of Organized corruption and crime:

- **Government officials (Very strong):** The government is weak and its officials, especially on the local level, will do everything to capitalize on the (limited) power and authority they hold. When Christians are exposed or simply oppose illicit practices, they are in a weak position and no-one will protect them. They can even become a high value hostage to barter over and to strike deals for. Many government officials benefit from receiving bribes for looking the other way.
- **Violent religious groups and revolutionaries or paramilitary groups (Strong):** It is a well-known fact that opium cultivation and trade is particularly intense in the southern province of Kandahar, a Taliban stronghold. The revenue from the drug trade is an important source for financing the insurgency and anyone seen as endangering this business (or is simply in its way) is driven away by all means necessary.
- **Organized crime cartels or networks (Strong):** The drug lords - of any affiliation - will protect their business and transportation routes at all costs. Christians, who are deeply hidden in society anyway, will have no protection against them at all if discovered.

Map of country



Areas where Christians face most difficulties

- **Main areas for Islamic oppression:** When looking at a [district map](#) of Afghanistan showing the government- and Taliban-controlled as well as the contested areas, it is difficult to recognize a clear pattern (Long War Journal, accessed 6 November 2020). However, it seems safe to say that the south of the country as well as the east and the northwest are more under control of (or are contested by) radical Islamic groups. At the same time, it should be kept in mind that the whole country is strictly Islamic, so Christians are facing difficulties wherever they are in the country. As a general rule, control and supervision in rural areas is stricter than in most cities.
- **Main areas for Clan oppression:** Family and clan affiliation is strong across the country and even extends into cases where (predominantly) young men migrate to the cities. Filial piety and clan loyalty is expected and given in such cases as well.
- **Main areas for Organized corruption and crime:** Whereas criminal activities and corruption occur countrywide, drug production and distribution is particularly dominant in the south. But again, it is hard to identify a pattern.

According to the estimation of the Long War Journal mentioned above, of Afghanistan's 398 districts, only 133 are under government control. In terms of population, this means that more people are living in contested or Taliban-controlled areas than outside of it (17.7 million and 15.1 million respectively). Given the current trend towards a swift withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan, there is scant hope that this ratio will improve (from the Christian community's point of view) in the near future.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians:

These are not included as a separate WWL category as they are so few, so protected and so isolated that they are hardly impacted by the country's situation.

Historical Christian communities:

These do not exist in Afghanistan.

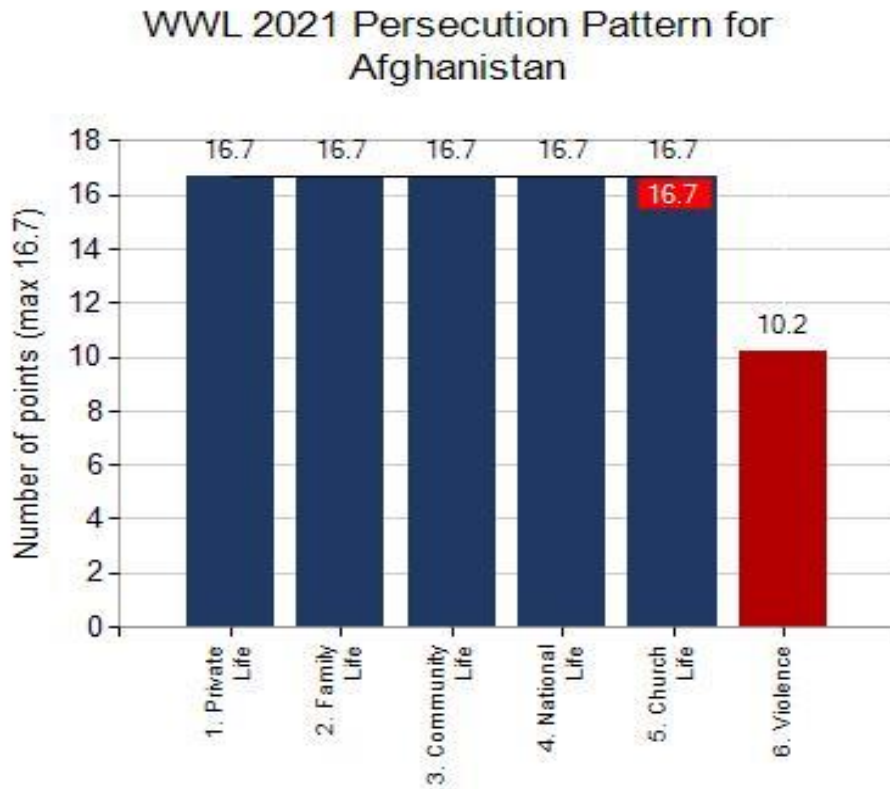
Converts to Christianity:

Christians from a Muslim background try their utmost not to be discovered by family, friends, neighbors or the wider community. Depending on the family, they may even have to fear for their lives. For them, living openly as a Christian is simply not possible - even the suspicion of being a Christian can bring severe persecution.

Non-traditional Christian communities:

These do not exist in Afghanistan.

The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2021 Persecution pattern for Afghanistan shows:

- The pressure on Christians in Afghanistan remained at the maximum level of 16.7 for all spheres of life, reflecting the fact that it is impossible to live as a Christian publicly there. The country is increasingly challenged by Islamic militants, with the Taliban controlling or contesting more and more areas and with the Islamic State group (although allegedly weakened) targeting minorities.
- While maximum scores for pressure in the *Family*, *Private* and *Community spheres* is typical for strictly Islamic countries, the pressure in the *National* and *Church spheres* points to a government relying on strictly interpreted Islamic rules and a basically tribal society (despite all promises to international bodies about making attempts to live up to human rights standards).
- The violence score of 10.2 points is largely unchanged compared to recent years. However, the reporting of incidents has become more difficult on account of the volatile security situation and large parts of the country have not been accessible. Violence against Christians remains at a very high level, but the measures taken against converts depends on the family involved.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

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

Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

Block 1.1: Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another. (4.00 points)

Afghanistan is an Islamic nation and any deviation from Islam is forbidden by law and tradition, and conversion is punishable. The government’s position (as well as that of the average Afghan in the street) is that Afghans cannot be Christian and that it is illegal to have any other faith than Islam. However, as the government has learned that openly punishing converts leads to unwanted international attention and diplomatic problems, converts are dealt with "swiftly and silently", as stated by one country expert. As the society is tightly-knit, social control is high and privacy difficult to keep and converts run a high risk of being discovered, depending on the circumstances.

Block 1.3: It has been dangerous to privately own or keep Christian materials. (4.00 points)

Any Christian material will attract attention as it points to the interests of its owner and is therefore carefully avoided. Christians will try to keep as little Christian material in their homes or in their private belongings as possible since there is always the danger of searches, especially in regions ruled by the Taliban. Even the use of material on communication devices or via the Internet (which is not available in all regions) is done with the utmost caution. According to a recent report, the Taliban also enforce [cellphone checks](#) in the regions they control in order to make people follow their strict rules (Gandhara-RFE/RL, 30 October 2020).

Block 1.5: It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols. (4.00 points)

No one will reveal symbols or any other signs of Christianity in Afghanistan, as this will lead to a public outcry and harsh consequences. Even members of the expatriate community in Kabul - who are not included in WWL analysis for Afghanistan - avoid showing any hint of their Christian faith, thus illustrating the levels of pressure experienced. And even just showing interest in any other faith or identity runs the risk of being strongly opposed.

Block 1.7: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with immediate family members. (4.00 points)

Converts always have to be very cautious as even the suspicion of having converted can lead to severe consequences like arrest and the destruction of homes. Families often hide their faith from their own children. As they can never know which members of their clan have been

recruited by the Taliban, they are intensely cautious about whom they trust in regard to their faith, for even when their names are not given to the Taliban, there will be consequences if their faith is known. Social control is high and it is difficult to hide newly won Christian faith over a long period of time, especially if the convert has children. Additionally, converts are in a catch-22 situation as they do not want to send their children to a madrassa but cannot share about the new faith to their children either, because that would be too dangerous.

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

Block 2.1: Babies and children of Christians have automatically been registered under the state or majority religion. (4.00 points)

In Afghanistan, Islam is the only religion under which citizens can be officially registered; as a result, every Afghan is registered as Muslim. Anything else is unacceptable and unthinkable.

Block 2.7: Parents have been hindered in raising their children according to their Christian beliefs. (4.00 points)

Parents who teach their children Christian faith risk exposure. When it is noticed, that such children have a different opinion from the majority or simply speak out carelessly and innocently about their belief, the Christian family will need to leave the region for its own safety. Therefore it is a question of whether parents are willing to take such a risk. In any case, communicating with and training of children is done in a very cautious way, having these consequences in mind.

Block 2.11: Spouses of converts have been put under pressure (successfully or unsuccessfully) by others to divorce. (4.00 points)

There is pressure on spouses to divorce or - as divorce is uncommon - nullify a marriage in the case of a Christian spouse. The strongest pressure is put on any woman whose husbands have accepted the Christian faith. Her parents will try to achieve a divorce and cause great trouble in the family. Converts are sometimes sent to a mental hospital, since families believe that no sane person would ever leave Islam. This reasoning makes it also easier to nullify a marriage.

Block 2.12: Christian spouses of non-Christians have been excluded from the right or opportunity to claim custody of the children in divorce cases. (4.00 points)

Christian spouses not only face the loss of custody of their children, since Afghan culture requires them to be brought up as Muslims, they will also lose inheritance rights.

Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

Block 3.1: Christians have been harassed, threatened or obstructed in their daily lives for faith-related reasons (e.g. for not meeting majority religion or traditional dress codes, beard codes etc.). (4.00 points)

If a Christian woman chooses not to wear a head-covering she will draw unwanted attention and locals will try to manipulate her into wearing one. Such pressure by society is not limited to questions of dress code, but also includes the failure to attend the mosque or indeed to grow a

beard (this pressure is strong in some Taliban-controlled areas). While in a few cities people may get away with some deviating behavior, the pressure is very high on converts not to be discovered, too.

Block 3.5: Christians have been put under pressure to take part in non-Christian religious ceremonies or community events. (4.00 points)

Whether an Afghan is known as a Christian (e.g. in a more tolerant family) or unknown, participation in such Islamic activities as Namaz (prayer), mosque visits, fasting, Eid celebrations, funerals, births, weddings, sacrifices etc. is expected. Converts are also pressured into attending mosque prayers, especially on Fridays. Whereas people in Kabul may get away with a less conservative life-style to a limited extent, this is impossible in areas outside the main cities.

Block 3.9: Christians have faced disadvantages in their education at any level for faith-related reasons (e.g. restrictions of access to education). (4.00 points)

Christian parents fear sending their children to school because they want to protect them from Islamic indoctrination and from revealing their hidden Christian identity. If they are discovered and are not immediately exposed, they will be pressured into leaving school without being given the necessary documents to continue school elsewhere. Of course, Christian students have to follow the general curriculum, which puts a strong emphasis on Islam. In Taliban-controlled districts, schools are not always running, but where they are, any Christian child would need to be extra-cautious.

Block 3.13: Christians have been interrogated or compelled to report to the local vigilante/police for faith-related reasons. (4.00 points)

If Christian converts are discovered, they will certainly be taken away for investigation and interrogation. These interrogations are intense, regardless of whether they are carried out by government authorities, the Taliban or IS. The police are additionally interested in extracting money or confessions. For reaching this goal, suspected converts are put in prison.

Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

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

The Constitution guarantees that adherents of other religions are free to exercise their faith. However, Article 3 of the Constitution, which states that no law shall contravene the tenets and provisions of Islam, leads to restrictions in many areas. Although the wording is flexible and it is not stated what may be deemed as inappropriate and against Islam, in practice accusations of conversion are equated with blasphemy and neither Christians nor other religious minorities (including non-Sunni Muslims) enjoy freedom of religion.

Block 4.4: Christians have been hindered in travelling for faith-related reasons. (4.00 points)

All travel by anyone suspected of being a Christian (or of having interest in the 'Christian West') is monitored and often hindered if it is suspected that a journey is being conducted for faith-

based reasons (e.g. to attend a conference). Because of the notoriously strict and frequent searches at Taliban checkpoints, Christians do not dare to take Christian materials with them; even cell-phones may be checked for hours, sometimes with modern software programs.

Block 4.10: Media reporting has been incorrect or biased against Christians. (4.00 points)

Christians are seldom the topic of media reporting, but if they are, the reporting is always distorted and stirs up anti-Christian sentiment. The current conflict - and particularly operations carried out by the US-led military alliance - are often portrayed as having a Christian motivation or of being linked with Christian faith in some way. Whether this narrative will change with the withdrawal of international troops remains to be seen.

Block 4.13: Christians have been accused of blasphemy or insulting the majority religion, either by state authorities or by pressure groups. (4.00 points)

The punishment for blasphemy is not so much a rights issue as it is a societal one, and it will be carried out swiftly by the local religious authorities or jihadist groups. In many cases, blasphemy charges are reportedly brought before the authorities (or taken into people's own hands) for reasons of personal enmity or envy. Even just a suspicion or allegation can end in immediate death or the individual fleeing.

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

Block 5.1: Church activities have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed. (4.00 points)

There is no publicly accessible church in Afghanistan. The only functioning chapel is placed in the basement of the Italian embassy in Kabul and only open for the small number of expatriates still working in the city - mainly diplomatic and military staff. Any form of meeting noted by the Taliban or monitoring agencies receives high attention. Christian groups (no matter how small they are) have to be cautious about how they meet. (Even expatriates - although not scored in WWL analysis for the reasons already stated above - take precautions and split into very small groups when meeting.) Often they are watched and followed undetected until they meet in a bigger group or engage in some activity.

Block 5.4: Churches have been hindered from organizing Christian activities inside their place of worship. (4.00 points)

Convert fellowships can only gather with the utmost caution and only when it is clear that the members know and trust each other. Precautionary measures such as changing locations etc. make it very difficult to meet as church. Teaching and worship can only be carried out in private premises under extreme caution.

Block 5.11: Pastors or other Christian leaders (or their family members) have been special targets of harassment for faith-related reasons. (4.00 points)

Leaders of Christian groups are not known in public. As one country expert stated, if the radical groups or Muslim society in general knew who was a Christian leader, they would kill him, in

order to intimidate Christians in his network and seek to destroy the group.

Block 5.14: Openly selling or distributing Bibles (or other Christian materials) has been hindered. (4.00 points)

There is no possibility for distributing or selling Bibles and other Christian materials; even sharing electronically can have life-threatening consequences if traced. Due to their scarceness, Christians in Afghanistan consistently seek access to materials, but they have to practice extreme caution as many who are discovered face dire consequences.

Violence

No details can be published for security reasons. Violence is at a very high level. In the WWL 2021 reporting period there were reports of Afghan Christians being killed for their faith, of Afghans being killed just on suspicion of being Christian, and of family members being killed in order to make others revoke their conversion.

5 Year trends

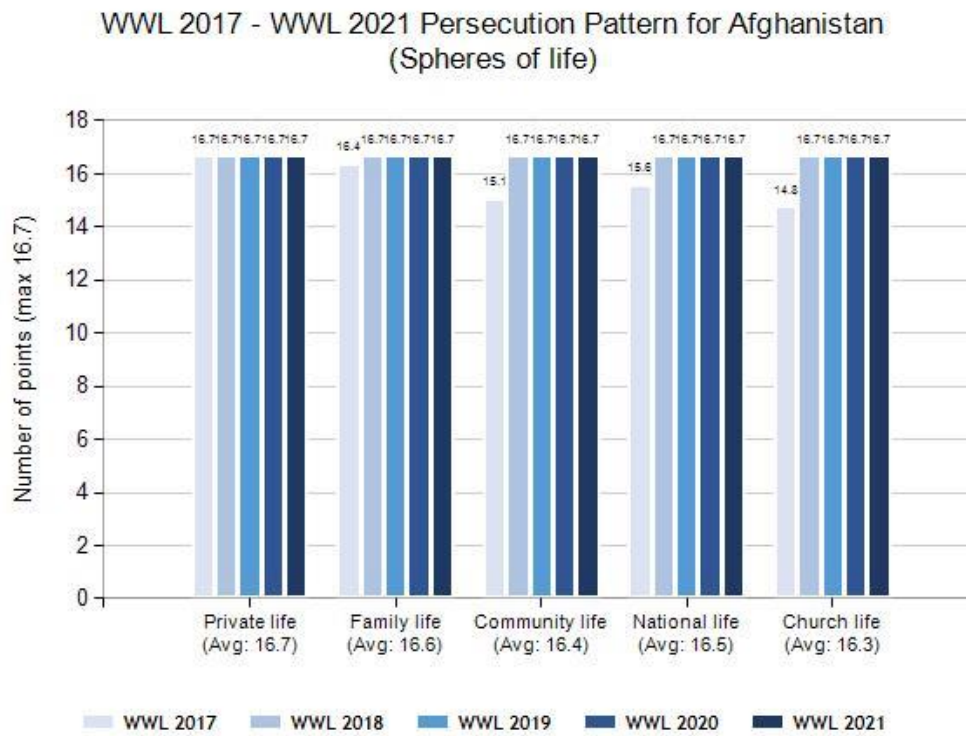
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

5 Year trends: Average pressure

Afghanistan: WWL 2017 - WWL 2021 Persecution Pattern history	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2021	16.7
2020	16.7
2019	16.7
2018	16.7
2017	15.7

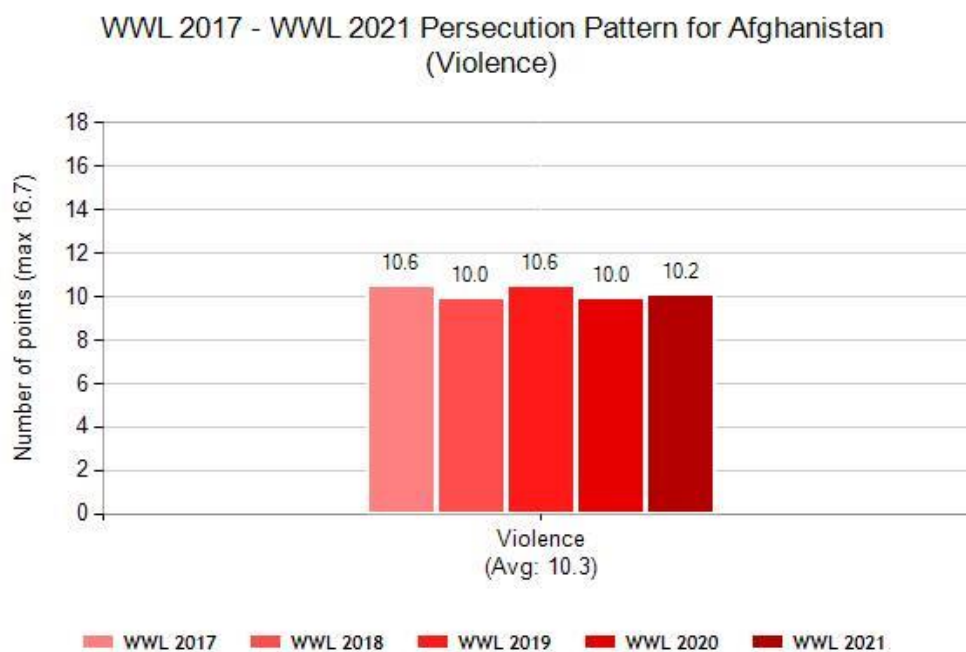
At the beginning of the five year period, there were still some expatriate Christians working for NGOs in the country, which kept the scores for all the spheres of life slightly lower, even though it was already getting difficult for expatriates to live openly as a Christian. Most of them have left now (except for diplomatic and military staff) and therefore this category has no longer been included in the scoring since WWL 2018. This caused the the average pressure to rise.

5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life



The average score in each *sphere of life* is at an extreme level and is highest in the *Private* and *Family* spheres.

5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



A Christian in Afghanistan is understood to be a convert, and a well-hidden one at that. For the last five reporting periods the level of violence against Christians has more or less stabilized at a very high level (between 10.0 and 10.6 points). It is very difficult to get verifiable information out of the country, particularly from the increasing number of areas where the Taliban and other Islamic militant groups are fighting for control.

Gender-specific religious persecution Female

Female Pressure Points
Abduction
Denied access to social community/networks
Forced divorce
Forced marriage
Incarceration by family (house arrest)
Travel bans/restrictions on movement
Violence – death
Violence – physical
Violence – psychological
Violence – sexual
Violence – Verbal

Although conversions usually happen together as a family unit in Afghanistan, when a woman decides to convert to Christianity on her own, she is likely to keep it a secret. The religious persecution of Christian women in Afghanistan is facilitated by the very weak role women play in Afghan society and their few rights to social protection. Reflecting this, Afghanistan ranks 166th out of 167 countries studied in [Georgetown’s Women, Peace and Security Index \(2019/20\)](#). Women in Afghanistan in general are highly vulnerable to all forms of physical abuse and have very little financial social or financial autonomy.

In light of their lower social status, women who convert to the Christian faith are prone to even more pressure and harassment than men. Incarceration by family/house arrest is an invisible

and acceptable means of putting a Christian woman under pressure, as is the threat to divorce her. Women can be sold into slavery or prostitution, beaten severely, or sexually mishandled. Due to Afghanistan’s honor-shame culture, women are unlikely to report instances of rape or sexual abuse due to both the stigma attached, and the lack of legislative justice.

According to a country expert, forced marriages are commonplace in Afghanistan and “all marriages face an element of forced marriage”. Forced marriages and rape are used as tools for forced (re-)conversion, particularly against women and girls from a Muslim background. A young female Christian convert can be forced to marry a non-Christian (often older) with relative ease.

It is widely accepted that a husband may beat his wife; according to a UN report, [51%](#) of women are affected by lifetime physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence (UN Women, Global Database on Violence against Women). Another [UN report](#) states that the murder of women is the second most prevalent form of violence against women in Afghanistan (UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, “Injustice and Impunity, Mediation of Criminal Offences of Violence against Women”, May 2018). There were 280 cases of murder and “honor killings” of women recorded from January 2016 to December 2017, including Christian female converts.

On the other hand, as conversions are kept as secret as possible and women are kept from social interaction as much as possible, women who do not fall prey to the abuse described above are more likely to be able to live their new-found faith out of view and even pass their faith on to husband and family members.

Gender-specific religious persecution Male

Male Pressure Points
Denied access to social community/networks
Economic harassment via business/job/work access
Imprisonment by government
Violence – death
Violence – physical
Violence – psychological
Violence – Verbal

Hardly anything is hidden in communal life; many men and boys face severe pressure and violence from their own families if their Christian faith is discovered. If one family member gets persecuted, it affects the others as well, as they are suspect by association with the convert.

Christian men face ridicule, imprisonment, torture leading to disabilities, threats, sexual abuse by peers and potentially death because of their faith. There is a tradition of abusing young boys in Afghanistan. Men and boys also become targets for militias seeking to coerce them into joining their fighter groups.

Male converts must often find alternative sources of income in order to avoid being exposed by not taking part in religious practices in the marketplace. If discovered, they will experience harsh discrimination from employment authorities. Since men are the economic providers in their household, families rely on them financially. If male converts are killed, female family members are forced to find work which can lead to abuse.

Persecution of other religious minorities

According to the [US State Department's IRF 2019 report](#) (page 140):

“The ongoing operation of terrorist groups, such as the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP), threaten the country's overall security but particularly endanger the nation's Shi'a Muslim population who have faced increased attacks in recent years. ... Also, during the reporting period, non-Muslim groups like Hindus, Christians, and Sikhs remained endangered minorities—many fled the country and many of their community leaders who remained were killed in a largescale July 2018 terrorist attack. In general, religious minorities in Afghanistan have endured severe human rights violations since the 1990s under the Taliban's rule and subsequently have suffered ongoing attacks by extremist groups. Sikhs and Hindus have been driven underground without the ability to publicly practice their religious traditions for fear of reprisal by terrorist groups or society at large.”

Further information:

As reported by the Associated Press on 25 March 2020: “A lone Islamic State gunman rampaged through a [Sikh house of worship](#) in the heart of the Afghan capital on Wednesday, killing 25 worshippers and wounding eight, Afghanistan's Interior Ministry said. The gunman held many worshippers hostage for several hours while Afghan special forces, helped by international troops, tried to clear the building. ... The SITE Intelligence Group, which tracks militant postings and groups, said IS claimed responsibility for the attack on the group's Aamaq media arm. The communique identified the gunman as Indian national Abu Khalid al-Hindi, who carried out the attack to avenge the plight of Muslims living under severe restrictions in Indian-ruled Kashmir, Hindu India's only Muslim dominated state.” The attack, at least killing 26 people, deliberately targeted the Sikh minority, in a [continuation of a strategy](#) of the so-called Islamic State to raise sectarian tensions (AAN, 1 April 2020). Unsurprisingly, many members of the Sikh and Hindu minority are [leaving Afghanistan](#), not just because of the attacks, but also because of institutionalized discrimination and marginalization (AP News, 27 September 2020).

Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

Islamic oppression, blended with Clan oppression:

What the “peace talks” between the Afghan government and the Taliban might bring, or – more precisely – what kind of rule the Taliban are envisioning is a hard question to answer, since the Taliban is far from being a monolithic block. However, according to a thought-provoking [article](#) the most likely model would follow the Iranian model, but naturally in a Sunni version (RFE/RL, 2 October 2020). Just like in Iran, political rule would most likely be submitted to a council of religious rulers, but it would be a different system to the Islamic Emirate they ruled from 1996 to 2001; that was a model, the Taliban have already admitted, they could not and did not want to revive. But even then, any system with a layer of dominating theocracy would mean no space for religious minorities including Christians – and arguably even less space than they have now. Clan identity may become even more important in a torn and increasingly Taliban-ruled country. As one country expert said: "The writing is on the wall; the withdrawal of the US and the rise of the Taliban and others may bring more suffering and persecution for the underground church in the country."

Organized corruption and crime:

As long as opium cultivation and trade make up a significant part of the insurgent groups' budget and also fill the coffers of power-brokers and politicians, organized crime will flourish. The same goes for the illicit trade of precious stones, ores and timber promises riches. Anyone perceived as obstructing these 'industries' (including Christians) will face violent opposition, starting from simply being pushed away.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines description: across 12 provinces - <https://jamestown.org/program/taliban-demonstrates-resilience-with-afghan-spring-offensive/>
- Persecution engines description: highest levels of confidence - https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/2019_Afghan_Survey_Full-Report.pdf
- Persecution engines description: UN report - <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/a-drop-from-peak-opium-cultivation-the-2018-afghanistan-survey/>
- Persecution engines description: UNODC - https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Afghanistan_opium_survey_2018_socioeconomic_report.pdf
- Areas where Christians face most difficulties: district map - <https://www.longwarjournal.org/mapping-taliban-control-in-afghanistan>
- Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere: cellphone checks - <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/taliban-mines-afghan-phone-data-in-bid-for-control/30919738.html>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: Georgetown's - <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/WPS-Index-2019-20-Report.pdf>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: 51% - <https://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/en/countries/asia/afghanistan>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: UN report - https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_ohchr_evaw_report_2018_injustice_and_impunity_29_may_2018.pdf
- Persecution of other religious minorities: US State Department's IRF 2019 report - <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2019USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>

- Persecution of other religious minorities: Sikh house of worship - <https://apnews.com/f941eaaeeb5f87c85a4154e4a473371b>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: continuation of a strategy - <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/blood-in-the-abode-of-peace-the-attack-on-kabuls-sikhs/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: leaving Afghanistan - <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-discrimination-islamic-state-group-kabul-archive-b310aecece22454cc5918756e245810c>
- Future outlook: article - <https://www.rferl.org/a/is-the-taliban-seeking-a-sunni-afghan-version-of-iran-/30870998.html>

Further useful reports

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

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