

World
Watch
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Turkmenistan: Country Dossier

December 2020



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

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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 / Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan: Population (2020 UN estimate)	Christians	Chr%
6,031,000	68,000	1.1

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlò G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed February 2020)

Turkmenistan: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2021	70	23
WWL 2020	70	22
WWL 2019	69	23
WWL 2018	68	19
WWL 2017	67	19

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

Turkmenistan: Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials, Political parties, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs
Islamic oppression	One's own (extended) family, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders, Government officials

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

Brief description of the persecution situation

Even Russian Orthodox and Armenian Apostolic churches may experience Sunday services being monitored. The printing or importing of Christian materials is restricted. Christians from a Muslim background bear the brunt of the rights violations both at the hands of the state and from family, friends and community. Where churches have not been registered, Christians suffer repeatedly from police raids, threats, arrests and fines.

Summary of international obligations and rights violations

Turkmenistan 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)

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

- Non-registered churches are raided, its members arrested, threatened and fined (ICCPR Arts. 9 and 18)
- Christians and their activities are closely monitored by the authorities (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Christian converts experience pressure and violence from their family and community to renounce their faith (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Access to religious literature is severely restricted and subject to official screening and approval (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)
- Female converts face physical beatings, house arrest, verbal and physical abuse, threats and rejection from their own family because of their faith (ICCPR Arts. 9, 12 and 18)

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

This year saw no reports of violent incidents in the media. Other sources provided information, but due to security reasons no specifics can be given.

- In December 2019, police broke into a house where women were meeting for a Christmas celebration. All were questioned, threatened and arrested.
- There were three raids on Protestant houses: One was in the Lebap region on December 2019, another one was in the Ahal region, again in late 2019. And one in February 2020, where the police raided two homes in the Dashoguz region.

Specific examples of positive developments

- The Roman Catholic Church has begun to adopt the Turkmen (instead of Russian) language in its work. (Source: [Fides, 25 October 2019](#))

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>
- Specific examples of positive developments: Fides, 25 October 2019 - http://www.fides.org/en/news/66848-ASIA_TURKMENISTAN_Extraordinary_Missionary_Month_towards_a_new_era_with_the_mission_in_Turkmen_language

WWL 2021: Keys to understanding / Turkmenistan

Links for general background information

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

Recent history

After 69 years as part of the Soviet Union, Turkmenistan declared its independence on 27 October 1991. Until the death of former President Saparmurat Niyazov in 2006, the country had been in the tight grip of his quasi-religious personality cult, based on his book called “Ruhnama”. The philosophy embedded in this “book of the Turkmen soul” dominated public life and was taught in schools and universities. Perhaps the climax of this reverence was the construction of a huge tower in the capital Ashgabat which was topped by a golden, rotating statue of the president. The statue was always facing the sun. The official explanation was that the sun followed the statue, not the other way round. It is hardly surprising that observers used to refer to the country as the North Korea of Central Asia.

Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov took office after President Niyazov’s death in December 2006 and cancelled some of his decisions, e.g. to re-name months and days according to Turkmen heroes, but he had to move carefully in deposing his predecessor who had been revered almost like a god. The compulsory teaching of Ruhnama in the country’s education system was gradually reduced. The golden statue was moved to the outskirts of Ashgabat.

It did not take long before Berdymukhamedov developed his own personality cult around the honorary title “Arkadag” (Protector). After Berdymukhamedov’s re-election in 2012, an “Era of Supreme Happiness” was announced. The regime decided to tear down thousands of homes and rebuild the capital Ashgabat as a white marbled city. On 25 May 2015 the authorities in Turkmenistan unveiled a giant statue of President Berdymukhamedov on horseback, holding a dove - everything covered with a layer of 24-carat gold. In September 2016 constitutional amendments were made to allow the president to run in future presidential elections regardless of his age.

In July 2019 there was a lot of commotion in Turkmenistan when the rumor spread that President Berdymukhamedov was [dead](#), (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty - RFE/RL, 29 July 2019) after not being seen in public for a number of weeks. However, he re-appeared later in August 2019 at the [opening of a conference](#) (RFE/RL, 12 August 2019). No explanation was ever given for his absence, but it shows how central the president is to the life of the nation.

When the COVID-19 crisis began in early 2020, President Berdymukhamedov denied that the virus had reached the country. The claim of there being no infections was accepted by a [WHO delegation](#) visiting in July 2020 (UN Press briefing, 15 July 2020). In November 2020, the Turkmen government still [claimed](#) the absence of COVID-19 infections and deaths, but measures including mask-wearing and travel restrictions had meanwhile been imposed (VOA news, 30 November 2020).

Political and legal landscape

Turkmenistan is a presidential republic, whereby the President of Turkmenistan is both head of state and head of government. No true opposition parties are allowed. Power is concentrated in the presidency; the judiciary is wholly subservient to the government, with all judges appointed for five-year terms by the president without legislative review.

The 1992 [Constitution](#) (amended in 2008) provides for freedom of religion and worship and for the right of individuals to choose their religion, express and disseminate their religious beliefs, and participate in religious observances and ceremonies. The Constitution separates the roles of government and religion, stipulating religious organizations are prohibited from “interference” in state affairs or carrying out state functions. The Constitution states public education shall be secular in nature. It provides for the equality of citizens before the law regardless of their religious preference. The law requires all religious organizations, including those that had registered previously, to reregister with the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) every three years in order to operate legally within the country. The law permits only the registration of “religious organizations,” which must have a minimum of 50 resident members above the age of 18. The law defines a religious organization as a voluntary association of citizens affiliated with a religion, organized to conduct religious services and other rites and ceremonies, as well as to provide religious education, and registered in accordance with the country’s legislation. (Source: [IRF 2019](#))

The law requires religious groups to register all foreign assistance with the authorities and provide interim and final reports on the use of funds. The administrative code provides a detailed schedule of fines – up to 10,000 manat (\$2,900) – for both unregistered and registered religious groups for accepting unapproved funds from foreign sources. Unregistered religious organizations and unregistered subsidiary congregations of registered religious organizations may not legally conduct religious activities, establish places of worship, gather for religious services (including in private residences), produce or disseminate religious materials, or proselytize. Any such activity is punishable as an administrative offense by fines ranging from 100 to 1,000 manat (\$29-\$290), with higher fines for religious leaders and lower fines for lay members. (Source: [IRF 2019](#))

In 2019, religious freedom conditions in Turkmenistan remained among the worst in the world and showed no signs of improvement. Turkmenistan is an extremely closed society, described as an informational “black hole” with an abysmal record on freedom of the press. Thus it is difficult to record the actual extent of religious freedom abuses in the country, which are certainly more extensive than the limited number of reports indicate. Nevertheless, the available information presents a bleak picture. The government continued to be suspicious of

all independent religious activity and maintained a large surveillance apparatus that monitors Christians at home and abroad.

Turkmenistani law requires religious groups to register under intrusive criteria, strictly controls registered groups' activities, and bans and punishes religious activities by unregistered groups. Persons accused of criminal religious offenses may be tried in closed courts where sentences remain secret. Prisoners often seem to disappear in the state's prison system and are held without contact with the outside world. Many religious prisoners are believed to be held at the notorious Ovadan-Depe Prison, located in the remote desert, 50 miles north of the capital city of Ashgabat. Ovadan-Depe was built to house high-level political dissidents and enemies of the state, and its prisoners routinely die from harsh conditions that include torture and starvation. The government also continued its practice of imprisoning conscientious objectors refusing to take up military service, and it intensified punishment for them in 2019, arresting seven conscientious objectors during the year and imposing the harshest prison sentence known to date. (Source: [USCIRF 2020](#))

Religious landscape

Turkmenistan: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	68,000	1.1
Muslim	5,829,000	96.7
Hindu	0	0.0
Buddhist	790	0.0
Ethno-religionist	910	0.0
Jewish	500	0.0
Bahai	1,200	0.0
Atheist	25,000	0.4
Agnostic	105,000	1.7
Other	700	0.0

OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed February 2020)

Although Turkmenistan's main religion is Islam – predominantly Sunni - it would be wrong to call Turkmenistan a Muslim country. 70 years of atheism during the Soviet era have left a deep influence. The government (the heirs of the atheist Soviets) is staunchly secular and has Islam firmly under control. Muslim citizens follow basic Islamic culture rather than strict Muslim teachings.

According to WCD, the next largest religious categories are agnostics and atheists, found particularly in the capital Ashgabat and other major cities. This is the result of 70 years of forced atheism by the government of the USSR from 1917 to 1991 and by the Turkmen regimes of Presidents Niyazov and Berdymukhamedov since then.

Christians are a very small group making up 1.1% of the population. The small Christian minority is weak due to much division and little cooperation between the various denominations. There are but few exceptions to this and it plays into the hands of the government.

There is no freedom of religion in Turkmenistan despite the claims to the contrary in the country's Constitution. The dictatorial government of Turkmenistan uses a huge body of state agents (police, secret services, local imams) to closely monitor all religious activities. It has imposed so many restrictions on religious freedom that one can say that it simply does not exist in Turkmenistan. This is the case for all religions, not only for the Christian faith.

Economic landscape

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

- **GDP (current US\$) (billions):** 40.76 (in 2018)
- **GDP growth (annual %):** 6.2 - Turkmenistan's GDP growth has been declining since 2010.

Turkmenistan is very rich in oil and natural gas and has been a major exporter of both for decades, mainly to Russia and China. In [April 2019](#), after settling its commercial dispute with Turkmenistan, Russia's Gazprom resumed gas imports (halted in 2016) from this Central Asian state (Jamestown Foundation, 2 October 2019). To date, most of Turkmenistan's gas goes to China, via the Central Asia-China pipeline. This west-east pipeline also pumps gas from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, restricting Ashgabat's options to augment the volumes it sends to China. Until the fourth string of this pipeline is completed, Turkmenistan needs an alternative export route, weakening Ashgabat's position in negotiations with Moscow. Moreover, Turkmenistan is repaying Chinese loans for the construction of the Central Asia-China pipeline through subsidized or even free gas exports. Falling oil prices further affected Turkmenistan's gas contracts with China since their negotiated prices were indexed to international crude oil prices.

The unemployment and the poverty rate remain at a very high level. The considerable growth of GDP – per capita as well as in percentage – has not improved the living conditions of all citizens on an equal basis. The huge drop in the oil price since 2014 has had a negative effect on Turkmenistan's economy, causing the planned reconstruction of the capital Ashgabat to be delayed.

The government of President Berdymukhamedov is known for gross [mismanagement](#) of the economy and scant regard for the welfare of his own people (RFE/RL, 7 December 2019). Food shortages and price surges in [Turkmenistan](#) first appeared in late 2016, although the authorities have never publicly acknowledged or addressed them (RFE/RL, 27 September 2019). Despite the country's potential wealth due to enormous amounts of natural gas and other commodities, only a very small elite benefits from it. Turkmenistan does not have [billions](#) of dollars available to spend defending its currency and the government has rejected advice for years that it should devalue the manat (RFE/RL, 23 April 2020). According to reports, "another sign the Central Asian energy-rich nation may be cash-strapped" is that cash [withdrawals](#) via ATM have been restricted for individuals (RFE/RL, 6 April 2020).

Christians in Turkmenistan are under great state pressure. Additionally, they suffer like the rest of the population from the deteriorating economy. For instance: Although the COVID-19 virus has never officially reached Turkmenistan, in [March 2020](#), food prices reached record levels in the Turkmen capital as the government restricted entry into Ashgabat amid apparent government efforts to prevent any spread of the coronavirus (RFE/RL, 25 March 2020).

Social and cultural landscape

According to the [UNDP 2019 report](#) (page 300) and the [Word Factbook](#) (December 2019):

- **Main ethnic groups:** Turkmen 85%, Uzbek 5%, Russian 4%, other 6% (2003)
- **Main languages:** Turkmen (official) 72%, Russian 12%, Uzbek 9%, other 7%
- **Urban population:** 52% of total population (2019)
- **Literacy rate:** 99.7% (2015)

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

- **HDI score and ranking:** 0.710, ranking 108
- **Total population:** 5.9 million
- **Life expectancy at birth:** 68.1 years
- **Expected years of schooling:** 10.9 years
- **Employment to population ratio (% ages 15 years and older):** 62.7
- **Population in multidimensional poverty, headcount (%):** data not available
- **Gender inequality index:** data not available

Corruption is endemic on all levels of administration and government. The power groups within the regime have no interest in losing their opportunity of making money.

Thanks to the former Soviet system of education, practically every citizen in Turkmenistan is literate. This means that people who are interested in the Christian message can read materials in their own language. The restrictions imposed by the government (all materials must be approved and only registered groups may be active) mean that most distribution etc. must be done unofficially.

Turkmenistan has a bad reputation as far as human rights are concerned and its prisons and labor camps are constantly overpopulated. Literally thousands of people are held in appalling conditions. The best known of these is the Seydi labor camp in the desert some 40 kilometers (25 miles) north-west of the city of Turkmenabad near the Amu Darya River and Uzbek border. Every year there are amnesty days when hundreds or prisoners are released.

Due to the threat of COVID-19 (although no infections have been officially reported in 2020), on [19 March 2020](#) Turkmenistan sealed off its capital, Ashgabat, ostensibly as a measure to combat any potential spreading of the virus. This occurred without any public announcement by the authorities or state media (RFE/RL, 20 March 2020). Traffic between the country's provinces was also restricted, with checkpoints set up on highways. In May 2020, desperate to buy food and medicine, some [residents](#) of eastern Turkmenistan resorted to selling their cars, jewelry, livestock, and household items to survive (RFE/RL, 21 May 2020).

In general, Christians experience the same problems as all other people in the country and are not especially targeted economically or socially. The only exception to this is the pressure from the social environment (family, local imams, villagers) on Christians with a Muslim background.

Technological landscape

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

- **Internet usage:** 20.9% penetration - survey date: December 2018
- **Facebook usage:** 0.3% penetration – survey date: December 2018

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

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 162.9 per 100 people

According to [BuddeComm Research](#) (updated April 2020):

- Slow growth in telecom services in this predominantly rural country can be attributed to a large extent to the slow development of the private sector and state control over most economic activities.
- Turkmen Telecom has been the primary provider of telecommunication services, and through a subsidiary, TM-Cell, it has been operating a GSM mobile network in competition with a private mobile operator, MTS Turkmenistan.
- In 2019 Russia-based Mobile TeleSystems (MTS) is said to have begun the process of dismantling its equipment in Turkmenistan with a view to fully withdrawing from the country, leaving the country with only one public mobile operator left, and no private national or international operator.
- Turkmenistan's mobile market has experienced extraordinarily strong growth over 2007 to 2012 period. Over the 2013 to 2019 the mobile market increased at a much slower pace, as the market has moved closer to a saturation phase there has been an inevitable slowing in the growth rate. Also, TM-Cell's monopoly since MTS licence has been revoked in 2017, does not create an optimal situation for strong growth. Slow growth is predicted over the next five years to 2024.

- Turkmenistan has experienced a number of problems relating to communications technology. Despite efforts to upgrade the country's telecom infrastructure, the telephone network remained poorly developed and many villages have been left without telephone services. Fixed line penetration over the past four years has been increasing slowly from a relatively small base.
- Fixed broadband penetration in Turkmenistan remains limited in scale and nature and extremely low mainly due to a limited number of fixed lines as well as the dominance of the mobile platform. Over the next five years to 2024 growth is expected to continue but overall market penetration will remain extremely low.
- Turkmenistan has seen a strong increase in mobile broadband penetration over the past four years however the mobile broadband market is still at an early stage of development and penetration remains relatively low compared to other Asian nations. Strong growth is predicted over the next five years to 2024.

Turkmenistan is not included in Freedom House's [Freedom on the Net Report 2019](#). However, Turkmenistan is one of the most closed countries when it comes to the Internet. There are several Internet cafés in the capital Ashgabat, but access to most international websites is blocked. The government has a monopoly on Internet access, and uses computer programs to search emails for coded words and block suspicious messages. Foreign Christian sites are blocked. Low connection speeds do not allow the downloading of content from the few websites that are available.

Security situation

All borders are guarded by police, secret services and the army, especially the borders with Iran and Afghanistan. There are checkpoints along all major routes. Media are monitored, and public rooms and also hotel rooms are likely to be tapped.

According to [World Scientific](#) (accessed 25 June 2020): "Despite being an immediate neighbour of Afghanistan, Turkmenistan (formerly known as Turkmenia), remains largely unaffected by terrorism. According to the Global Terrorism Index (GTI), published by the Institute for Economics and Peace the risk of a terrorist attack in Turkmenistan remains low. Nevertheless, Turkmenistan, like other countries bordering Afghanistan, is concerned about the implications of the US military drawdown from Afghanistan. The presence of the Taliban, al-Qaeda and its affiliated Central Asian militant groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan pose a potential threat to Turkmenistan. Furthermore, transnational crime such as drug production and smuggling in Afghanistan have exacerbated in recent years. There have also been reports that the citizens of Turkmenistan are fighting among rebel forces against the Syrian government. The Turkmen fighters returning to home from Syria is another legitimate security concern for the Turkmen government."

Christians in Turkmenistan need to be extremely careful. State agents (e.g. police and secret services) constantly monitor their activities. It is very difficult for foreign Christians to visit Turkmenistan either as a tourist or in any other role. Only a very limited number of foreigners visit the country. It is practically impossible to get a religious visa to visit the churches. Only

short-term visits (5 days) will be allowed in rare cases. All visitors are monitored by the government. Citizens are also hindered from visiting Christians in other countries. Exit visas are required and are often denied.

Trends analysis

1) Politics: No major changes ahead

The keyword is stability. Over the past decades there have been hardly any changes at all in Turkmenistan. The dictatorial government has not faced any serious challenges from any form of opposition (including demonstrations of any kind) and it has consistently imposed severe surveillance in almost every aspect of life. Thousands of people are sent to prison or labor camps every year. Turkmenistan has been called the 'North Korea' of Central Asia.

2) Economy: Hard times have arrived

The days when Turkmenistan could rely on steady income from oil and natural gas are over. This has brought lots of uncertainties for the Turkmen population, especially since they do not get any help or protection from the government. The regime has continued to claim that there are no COVID-19 infections in the country.

3) Religion: Christians face difficult future

Due to the pressure from the government, churches in Turkmenistan are already in a very difficult situation. Life for Christians is unlikely to improve in the foreseeable future.

External Links - Keys to understanding

- Links for general background information: Turkmenistan country profile - BBC News - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-16094646>
- Recent history: dead - <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmen-celebs-try-to-debunk-rumors-of-president-s-death/30082030.html>
- Recent history: opening of a conference - <https://www.rferl.org/a/gurbanguly-berdymukhammedov-turkmenistan-/30105422.html>
- Recent history: WHO delegation - <https://turkmenistan.un.org/en/53288-press-briefing-who-europe-experts-preliminary-outcomes-their-covid-19-mission-turkmenistan>
- Recent history: claimed - <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/turkmenistan-clamps-down-covid-19-criticism>
- Political and legal landscape: Constitution - <https://www.legislationline.org/download/id/2960/file/Constitution%20of%20Turkmenistan-final-edited.pdf>
- Political and legal landscape: IRF 2019 - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/turkmenistan/>
- Political and legal landscape: USCIRF 2020 - https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Turkmenistan_0.pdf
- Economic landscape: World Bank's April 2020 update - <https://data.worldbank.org/country/turkmenistan?view=chart>
- Economic landscape: April 2019 - <https://jamestown.org/program/turkmenistans-gas-exports-hampered-by-geopolitical-realities/>
- Economic landscape: mismanagement - <https://www.rferl.org/a/qishloq-ovozi-turkmenistan-health-risk-berdymukhammedov-animal-diseases-herbal-remedies/30313192.html>
- Economic landscape: Turkmenistan - <https://www.rferl.org/a/food-shortages-ashgabat-turkmenistan/30187280.html>
- Economic landscape: billions - <https://www.rferl.org/a/qishloq-ovozi-plunging-oil-prices-kazakhstan-turkmenistan-economic-problems/30572905.html>

- Economic landscape: withdrawals - <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmen-district-further-restricts-daily-atm-cash-withdrawals-card-payments/30535309.html>
- Economic landscape: March 2020 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmenistan-coronavirus-food-prices-skyrocket-special-measures/30508897.html?lflags=mailer>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNDP 2019 report - <http://www.hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2019.pdf>
- Social and cultural landscape: Word Factbook - <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/attachments/summaries/TX-summary.pdf>
- Social and cultural landscape: UN Global Human Development Indicators - <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/TKM>
- Social and cultural landscape: 19 March 2020 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmenistan-restricts-traffic-between-regions-but-doesn-t-mention-coronavirus/30499454.html>
- Social and cultural landscape: residents - <https://www.rferl.org/a/impoverished-turkmen-selling-jewelry-cars-to-buy-food-and-pay-bills/30626235.html>
- Technological landscape: World Internet Stats - <https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#tm>
- Technological landscape: BuddeComm Research - <https://www.budde.com.au/Research/Turkmenistan-Telecoms-Mobile-and-Broadband-Statistics-and-Analyses>
- Technological landscape: Freedom on the Net Report 2019. - https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/11042019_Report_FH_FOTN_2019_final_Public_Download.pdf
- Security situation: World Scientific - https://www.worldscientific.com/doi/pdf/10.1142/9781783269969_0022

WWL 2021: Church information / Turkmenistan

Christian origins

The first Christians to enter Central Asia (including Turkmenistan) were Nestorian missionaries in the 4th century. From the 5th century onwards there were great movements of peoples in Asia and Europe and for Turkmenistan this meant the arrival of a Turkic tribe from eastern Asia named Oghuz (the ethnic ancestors of the Turkmen). In the 8th century Islam entered the region, following the tracks of the Silk Road trade route, and Christians disappeared from the country.

In the 16th century Turkmenistan became part of the Uzbek khanates of Khiva and Bukhara which deeply influenced the country's culture and religion.

The current presence of Christians in Turkmenistan dates from the 19th century. In 1867 the Russian Empire expanded its territory into Central Asia during a number of military campaigns, conquering the khanates of Khiva and Bukhara. The regime brought in ethnic Russians, who mostly belonged to the Russian Orthodox Church. During the Second World War, Joseph Stalin ordered the deportation of large numbers of ethnic Germans, Ukrainians, Poles and Koreans to Central Asia. With them, other Christian denominations found their way into Turkmenistan.

Church spectrum today

Turkmenistan: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	53,000	77.9
Catholic	200	0.3
Protestant	2,400	3.5
Independent	9,700	14.3
Unaffiliated	2,700	4.0
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
Total	68,000	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	600	0.9
Renewalist movement	3,800	5.6

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed February 2020)

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

Church spectrum today - additional information

According to the World Christian Database data of February 2020 the largest official church denominations in Turkmenistan are:

- Russian Orthodox Church
- Armenian Apostolic Church
- Ukrainian Orthodox Church

The biggest church is the Russian Orthodox Church and its members are practically all ethnic Russians. As in many other countries in Central Asia the Christian community is having to face the emigration of many Russians. Members of the Armenian Apostolic Church are predom-

antly ethnic Armenians. The members of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church are mostly ethnic Ukrainians.

There is little trust and cooperation between the various denominations, a fact which the government utilizes to its advantage.

WWL 2021: Persecution Dynamics / Turkmenistan

Reporting period

1 October 2019 - 30 September 2020

Position on the World Watch List

Turkmenistan: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2021	70	23
WWL 2020	70	22
WWL 2019	69	23
WWL 2018	68	19
WWL 2017	67	19

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

The (rounded) score for Turkmenistan in WWL 2021 remains at 70 points, the same as in WWL 2020. The situation is one of stability, with only minor changes in some areas of pressure and violence in the country. The pressure is highest in the *Private* and *Church spheres of life*, which reflects the influence of the two main Persecution engines in Turkmenistan: *Islamic oppression* in the *Private sphere of life* and *Dictatorial paranoia* in the *Church sphere of life*. Muslim families, friends and villagers exert pressure especially on converts, while the government imposes many restrictions on the functioning of Christian churches.

Persecution engines

Turkmenistan: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all

Turkmenistan: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Not at all
Clan oppression	CO	Not at all
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	Very strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Not at all

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.

Dictatorial paranoia (Very strong):

No religious activities beyond state-run and state-controlled institutions are allowed. Protestants are frequently branded "extremists" due to their religious activities outside state-sanctioned structures. Members of Protestant churches are often regarded as followers of an alien sect that has only one goal, namely to spy on and destroy the current political system. From this perspective they need to be not only controlled, but if necessary, even eradicated.

Islamic oppression (Strong):

If indigenous citizens (who are Muslim) convert to Christianity, they are likely to experience pressure and occasionally physical violence from their families, friends and local community to force them to return to their former faith. Some converts are locked up by their families for long periods, beaten and may eventually be expelled from their communities. Local mullahs preach against them, so adding pressure. As a result, converts will do their best to hide their faith – they become so-called secret believers.

Drivers of persecution

Turkmenistan: Drivers of persecution per engine	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	STRONG	-	-	-	-	-	-	VERY STRONG	-
Government officials	Medium	-	-	-	-	-	-	Very strong	-
Ethnic group leaders	Strong	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Turkmenistan:										
Drivers of persecution per engine	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC	
	STRONG	-	-	-	-	-	-	VERY STRONG	-	
Non-Christian religious leaders	Strong	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Strong	-	-	-	-	-	-	Medium	-	-
One's own (extended) family	Very strong	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Political parties	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Strong	-	-
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Organized crime cartels or networks	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
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 Dictatorial paranoia:

- **Government officials (Very strong):** Officials at all levels are very hostile towards religious groups. All religious activity is closely monitored to see if government rules are being followed. If not, raids, detentions, confiscations and fines are likely. Such measures are very common in Turkmenistan.
- **Political parties (Strong):** Although few political parties are allowed in Turkmenistan, the ruling party which controls the government of President Berdymukhamedov by definition participates in the violation of rights of Christians insofar as much of the pressure and violence directed at Christians is government-sanctioned.
- **Normal citizens (Medium):** Especially at the local level, citizens will monitor any religious activities they see and report to the authorities.

Drivers of Islamic oppression:

- **Extended family (Very strong):** Especially in the countryside, Muslim family members will exert high pressure on converts to Christianity. This can lead to threats, beatings, house arrest or ostracism.

- **Ethnic leaders (Strong):** With the support of the authorities, Turkmen ethnic leaders encourage all the forms of persecution mentioned above. Mahalla community groupings ("Mahalla" refers to a self-governing administrative unit of residents) have been provided with authority by the government to carry out official action against Christians and prohibit missionary activity.
- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Strong):** Muslim clerics are open in their hostility towards non-Orthodox Christians and particularly against converts from Islam.
- **Normal citizens (Strong):** At the community level these people will exert additional pressure on converts to return to Islam. In the case of conversion, converts are persecuted severely by the local community and religious leaders.
- **Government officials (Medium):** At the community level there is a link between local government and Muslim pressure. Often, active Muslims and local officials know each other. This is why the pressure on converts is stronger at the community level than at the state level, where officials claim that they are secular.

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

Rights violations targeting all Christian communities and carried out by government officials can occur all over the country. Pressure from family, friends and community on converts is stronger outside the urban areas.

Christian communities and how they are affected

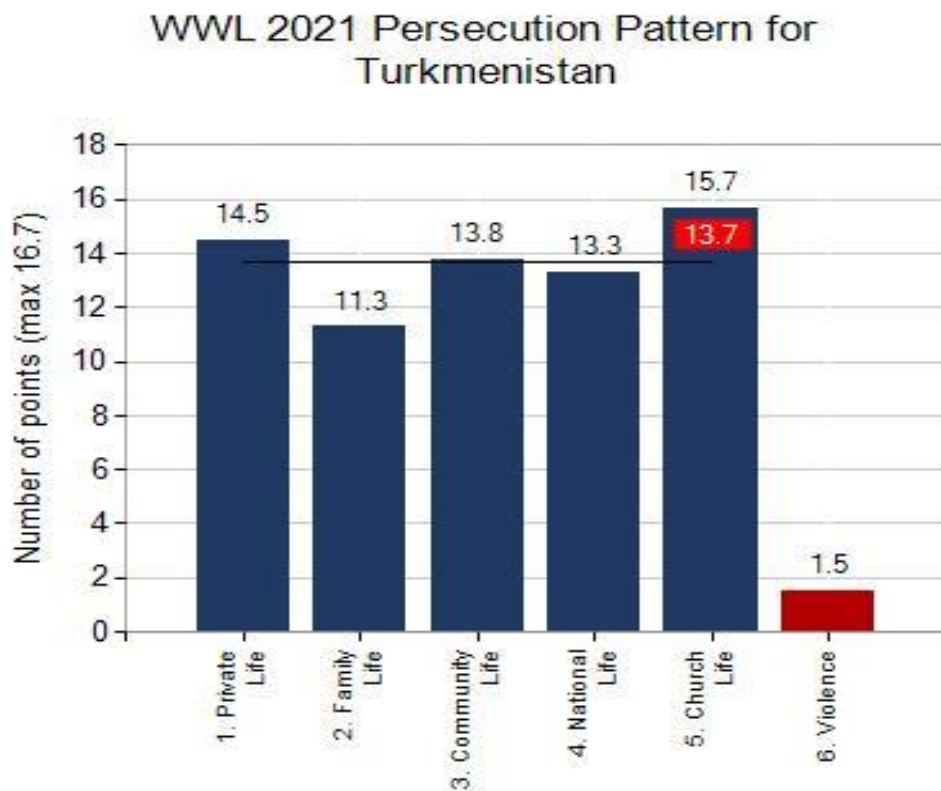
Communities of expatriate Christians: These do not exist according to Open Doors sources and were therefore not counted as a separate category in the WWL analysis.

Historical Christian communities: The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has accustomed itself to the limitations provided by the government and is therefore left more or less undisturbed. Sunday services may be monitored, but they are conducted unhindered and members can meet. Printing or importing Christian materials is restricted.

Converts to Christianity: Christian converts from a Muslim background bear the brunt of persecution in Turkmenistan. Apart from the state, they are also under strong pressure from family, friends and community. The latter pressure is by far the more powerful because it dominates their everyday life.

Non-traditional Christian communities: After converts, this category of Christians experiences the most rights violations for their faith, especially when their churches have not been registered. Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal groups suffer from raids, threats, arrests and fines.

The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2021 Persecution pattern for Turkmenistan shows:

- The average pressure on Christians is at a very high level (13.7 points), the same as WWL 2020. Pressure increased in the *Family* and *National spheres of life*, and it remained the same in the *Private*, *Community* and *Church spheres of life*.
- The scores for pressure are extremely high in *Church life* (15.7), *Private life* (14.5) and *Community life* (13.8). The fact that the highest score is in the *Church sphere of life* is a reflection of the many restrictions on Christians imposed by the state.
- The score for violence is low, decreasing from 1.9 in WWL 2020 to 1.5 in WWL 2021; very few violent incidents were reported.

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 1.3: It has been dangerous to privately own or keep Christian materials. (3.75 points)

In the case of converts, the rights violations come from their family or community if Christian materials are discovered. Christian materials are considered as hard evidence for conversion. When such materials are found they will be destroyed and the convert will be dealt with harshly. The government has a strict requirement for all religious literature (whether imported or produced in the country) to be screened by the state authorities. Otherwise it is illegal and banned. Houses and churches are regularly raided by police in search of illegal religious materials. One church leader said: "All electronic devices, computers, mobile phones, androids etc. will be confiscated and checked for content".

Block 1.5: It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols. (3.75 points)

Converts know that displaying a cross or other Christian symbols will draw unwanted attention from their family and community. (Non-convert) Protestants are also at risk because the Muslim community are likely to accuse them of attempting to evangelize. Converts and Protestant Christians will also draw unwanted attention from state agents if they openly wear Christian symbols.

Block 1.6: It has been risky for Christians to access Christian radio or TV, or Christian material on the Internet. (3.75 points)

Converts need to be very careful in accessing Christian broadcasts and websites in their homes, since discovery by their family will lead to harsh reactions. Accessing foreign Christian media is difficult for all Christians in Turkmenistan. Internet access goes via state ISPs and is therefore under surveillance.

Block 1.1: Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another. (3.50 points)

Conversion is viewed as betrayal of the family and culture, as well as Islam. This could lead to physical violence too. Officially, there is no hindrance to conversion since the laws are secular. However, the government disapproves of anything that is likely to lead to tension among the population.

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

Block 2.4: Christian baptisms have been hindered. (3.50 points)

For the family, friends and community of converts baptism is regarded as the final farewell to the faith of the fathers and will therefore be opposed. Baptisms in unregistered churches are not allowed and if the state knows about it, the meeting will be raided and all Christians present are likely to be interrogated and fined.

Block 2.7: Parents have been hindered in raising their children according to their Christian beliefs. (3.50 points)

The surrounding family will try to keep the children of converts to Christianity within Islam and raise them according to traditional customs. There is no official religious education in public schools; private religious education is restricted by the government.

Block 2.8: Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education. (3.50 points)

The Muslim environment (family, friends, community) will pressurize children of converts in particular into receiving Islamic teaching – sometimes even against the wishes of their parents. It is compulsory for students to participate in all activities organized by schools or other educational institutions.

Block 2.9: Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith. (3.50 points)

Children of converts and Protestants are usually isolated from having fellowship with other children. They are often humiliated and slandered at schools in front of all other children.

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.). (3.75 points)

Converts are threatened by family, friends and community (including local Islamic leaders) in an effort to make them give up their Christian faith. Local Muslim communities will also harass Protestants whom they accuse of evangelism. (Unregistered) Protestants face harassment, threats, discrimination, obstruction etc. from the authorities.

Block 3.2: Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (this includes reporting to police, being shadowed, telephone lines listened to, emails read/censored, etc.). (3.75 points)

Converts will be monitored by members of their family and community. Protestants will also be monitored by the Muslim community as they are constantly suspected of carrying out evangelism. The state is constantly monitoring all religious activities, even by installing informers in religious communities.

Block 3.12: Christians have been fined for faith-related reasons (e.g. jizya tax, community tax, protection money). (3.75 points)

Levying Muslim taxes (*jizya*) is not allowed in Turkmenistan. However, fines are very often issued by state agents. Christians are fined for offences such as meeting illegally, possession of religious literature, having Christian songs on their smartphones, etc.

Block 3.13: Christians have been interrogated or compelled to report to the local vigilante/police for faith-related reasons. (3.75 points)

Known converts will be harassed and interrogated harshly by their family and community. The state regularly raids Christian meetings, even those of registered groups. All those present will be interrogated, many will be detained, many will be fined, and all materials found will be confiscated.

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 Law on Religion (2016) contains many restrictions on religious freedom including a ban on unregistered religious organizations (even though it is practically impossible for a church to obtain official registration), a ban on private religious education, the requirement for religious literature to be screened by the authorities etc..

Block 4.3: Christians have been forced by law or in practice to act against their conscience, e.g. regarding military service or in certain professions. (4.00 points)

Military service is compulsory and Christians cannot refuse to serve in the army on grounds of conscience.

Block 4.8: Christians have been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public. (4.00 points)

The media are all state-controlled and are inaccessible for Christians to make their opinions public. Internet access is also controlled, and Christian opinions are blocked. Muslims consider Christian preaching and evangelism undesirable and will obstruct this with all means available.

Block 4.9: Christian civil society organizations or political parties have been hindered in their functioning or forbidden because of their Christian convictions. (4.00 points)

The state will not allow Christian organizations or political parties. Muslims would also regard Christian organizations as an attempt to convert people to Christianity and would oppose them.

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

Block 5.2: It has been difficult to get registration or legal status for churches at any level of government. (4.00 points)

In 2016 a new law on religion was introduced which increased the number of Christians needed to register a church from 5 to 50. However, even before that, it was practically impossible to obtain registration. At the same time non-registered churches and home groups are forbidden. All registered churches have to go through the process of re-registration under the new law. Re-registration is not easy for the registered churches and one major hindrance is the lack of buildings. The churches need to provide confirmation that they either own or rent a place of worship. It is practically impossible to find places to rent, especially since the owners of potential

buildings are warned by the state not to rent to Protestants. Russian Orthodox congregations and other traditional churches also have to re-register.

Block 5.6: Work among youth in particular has been restricted. (4.00 points)

Only registered churches can carry out youth work and only then if they have the written permission of both parents of the children involved. However, all meetings where children and youth are present (especially summer camps) are regularly monitored and raided. Local Muslims oppose Christian activities aimed at youth and are known to block youth events and summer camps.

Block 5.10: Christians have been hindered in training their own religious leaders. (4.00 points)

Officially, the training of religious leaders should be conducted in special religious institutions that possess a license from the state and which only use educational resources screened by the authorities. However, not a single Christian education institution exists in Turkmenistan - even the Russian Orthodox Church does not run a seminary. Private religious education is also forbidden.

Block 5.13: Churches have been hindered in importing Christian materials from abroad. (4.00 points)

All imported religious materials must pass the official screening. In most cases the items are confiscated and destroyed. For that reason, Protestants do not try to bring printed materials into Turkmenistan. Muslims will report to the authorities if they discover Christians are importing religious materials illegally.

Violence

Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers below must be understood as being minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100 or 1000) is given. (A symbolic number of 10 could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100 could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1000 could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain.) In cases where it is clear that (many) more Christians are affected, but a concrete number could be given according to the number of incidents reported, the number given has to be understood as being an absolutely minimum figure. The symbol "x" denotes a known number which cannot be published due to security considerations.

Turkmenistan: Violence Block question	WWL 2021	WWL 2020
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	0	0
6.2 How many churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	31	10
6.4 How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	0	0
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	0	0
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	47	30
6.9 How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	3	3
6.10 How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	0	6

For the WWL 2021 reporting period:

- **Christians attacked:** Sources reported that at least 47 Christians had been abused and beaten. Most of the affected Christians were women.
- **Christians detained:** Sources reported that at least 31 Christians were detained. This occurred in December 2019 when police broke into the house where women were holding a secret Christmas gathering. (See "*Specific Examples of violations of rights in the reporting*")

period" above.)

- **Christian houses and properties damaged:** Three raids on Protestant houses were reported. (See "Specific Examples of violations of rights in the reporting period" above.)

5 Year trends

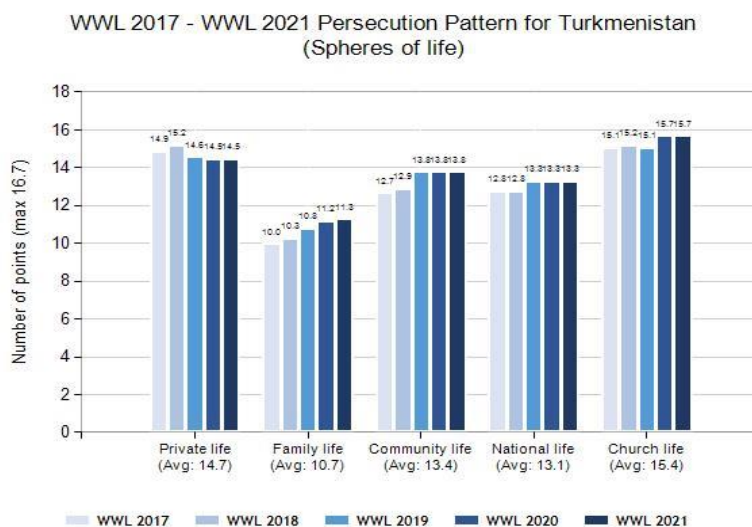
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

5 Year trends: Average pressure

Turkmenistan: WWL 2017 - WWL 2021 Persecution Pattern history	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2021	13.7
2020	13.7
2019	13.5
2018	13.3
2017	13.1

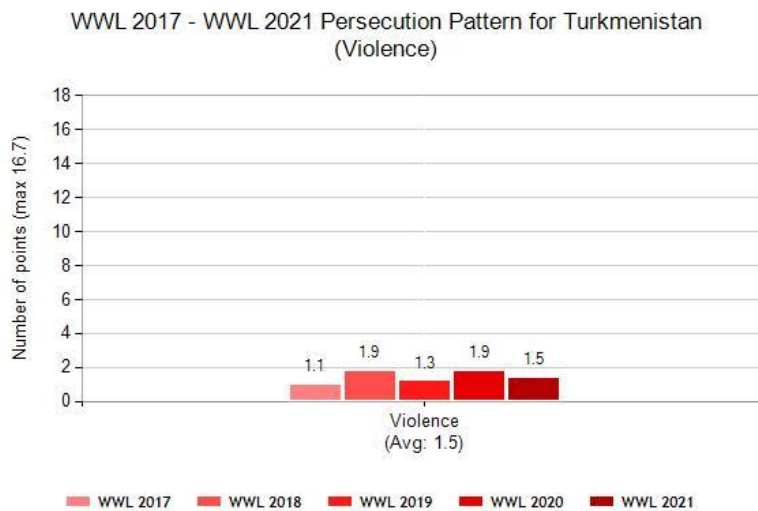
As can be seen from the table above, the average pressure over the 5 spheres of life in Turkmenistan has increased over the years, but not dramatically and always within the range of 13.1 - 13.7 points. This is a clear indication of how little the situation for Christians in the country has changed over the past 5 years: Pressure remains at a very high level.

5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life



Over the past five years the scores in the five spheres of life have not changed dramatically and have levelled off in the last two reporting periods. This means that the situation for Christians in Turkmenistan has been quite stable, with few changes occurring. Pressure is highest - and indeed at an extreme level - in the *Private* and *Church spheres of life*. This reflects the influence of the two dominant Persecution engines, *Islamic oppression* and *Dictatorial paranoia*.

5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



Another stable element in Turkmenistan is the low score of violent incidents over the past five WWL reporting periods. Never has the score reached 2 points - it has always moved between 1.1 points at the lowest and 1.9 points at the highest. The main reason for this low score is the fact that very few incidents have been recorded and many Christians in Turkmenistan are very reluctant to talk about incidents that have occurred. But the lack of incidents can also be explained by the effective surveillance and control by the state that ensure that Christians become very wary and only hold religious activities in secret.

Gender-specific religious persecution Female

Female Pressure Points
Abduction
Forced marriage
Incarceration by family (house arrest)
Violence – physical

Violence – psychological
Violence – sexual
Violence – Verbal

Gaps remain regarding women’s legal protection in Turkmenistan, including against domestic violence and sexual harassment. In Georgetown's 2019 “Women, Peace and Security index”, it is noted that Turkmenistan lags behind the regional average score, due to “patriarchal norms and policies” ([Georgetown, 2019/20 report, p.43](#)). The prevalence of Islamic culture places women in a subordinate position to men. Total submission is expected, both to their husbands as well as to their parents.

Female converts therefore, who by turning away from Islam challenge the existing accepted social order, are particularly vulnerable to persecution. They face physical beatings, house arrest, verbal abuse, threats and rejection. Female converts in conservative regions also run the risk of being kidnapped and married off to a Muslim, as a corrective measure. Converts may also be forced into marriages not due to kidnappings, but due to the obligation to follow pre-marital arrangements made by her parents prior to conversion.

Women and girls remain vulnerable to sexual harassment and rape, although they [rarely](#) report such instances due to the attached stigma and shame, and impunity regularly granted to perpetrators. Cases of crimes against women are rarely seen in Turkmen courts (OECD, Social and Gender Index 2019, Turkmenistan).

Converts are safest if other family members convert too. In a case in the WWL 2021 reporting period, a Turkmen female convert was severely beaten almost every day by her husband. “He even tried to kill her several times,” a country researcher reported. “Later he got very ill and asked her Russian pastor to pray for him and became a believer. Now her husband is a pastor, and they serve God together.” This story, whilst hopeful, is not representative of the norm; many women choose to live as secret believers upon their conversion out of fear.

More broadly, abusing women is used as an instrument to intimidate and cause distress for their husbands and family members, thereby pressuring the wider Christian community and fostering fear and feelings of helplessness across the Turkmen Church.

Gender-specific religious persecution Male

Male Pressure Points
Denied access to Christian religious materials
Discrimination/harassment via education
Economic harassment via business/job/work access
Economic harassment via fines
Imprisonment by government
Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
Travel bans/restrictions on movement
Violence – physical
Violence – psychological
Violence – Verbal

Men in Turkmenistan normally hold leadership roles within the family, as heads of the family and financial providers, and within the Church. Pressure and violence directed against them affects entire families and congregations, causing fear, anger and financial hardship. Christians feel that state agents look for any excuse to issue fines to Christian men, for instance for holding illegal gatherings, for the possession of religious literature, even for downloading Christian songs. Pressure also comes from the community on a local level; Muslims obstruct business activities of converts and Protestants (whom they view as a sect), forcing many Christian business owners to keep their faith a secret.

Church leaders in Turkmenistan are especially targeted for persecution. Muslims consider them primarily responsible for leading people away from Islam and attack those they deem to be most active evangelistically. The State regard them as primary targets to control Christian activities; they expect a certain level of cooperation from those in leadership to inform them of anybody with radical or 'extremist' views. With this in mind, it comes as no surprise that the authorities also influence the choice of who assumes leadership positions. Church leaders also face challenges in obtaining religious training; many have been denied exit visas when going to Christian conferences and seminars. Tight restrictions exist over religious education and institutions in Turkmenistan; training can only be conducted in special, state-licensed religious institutions. There are, however, no such institutions in Turkmenistan.

Christian men also face discrimination, intolerance and persecution within the context of the armed forces; military service remains mandatory in Turkmenistan, and objection on grounds of conscience is not permitted. Additionally, male converts face harassment and interrogation by their families and local communities. They may also experience threats, disinheritance, shaming and beatings.

Persecution of other religious minorities

According to the [US State Department's IRF 2019 report](#) (pages 116-122):

- Government security forces continued to surveil religious organizations and ban the importation of religious literature, and it remained difficult to obtain places of worship. According to Jehovah's Witnesses, as of the end of the year, 10 Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors were imprisoned for refusing military service, including several new cases of Witnesses sentenced during the year, to terms from one year to four years. The government continued not to offer civilian service alternatives for conscientious objectors. Forum 18 reported that police in Ashgabat and Lebap Province forced men under 40 to shave their beards and mustaches. The government did not register any previously unregistered religious groups during the year.

The government does not focus on any specific religious group - Muslims, Christians, Jews, Bahais etc. all experience a high level of state surveillance and oppression.

- On 29 October 2019, Ashgabat City Court rejected appeals of two 18-year-old Jehovah's Witnesses against their one-year jail terms for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of conscience. (Source: [Forum 18, 6 November 2019](#))
- In early December 2019, the authorities particularly in Mary Region east of Ashgabat stepped up their campaign against women wearing the hijab headscarf. Almost no women were seen on the streets or in the markets wearing a hijab. (Source: [Forum 18, 16 January 2020](#))
- On 3 September 2020, a court in Mary Region jailed another 18-year-old adherent of Jehovah's Witnesses for one year, the 24th Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector to military service to be imprisoned since January 2018. Eight of the eleven currently in prison have been sent to the harsh Seydi Labour Camp, where a former prisoner of conscience described conditions as "inhuman". All 24 young men offered to do an alternative civilian service, but none exists. (Source: [Forum 18, 11 September 2020](#))

Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

Dictatorial paranoia:

Turkmenistan is known as the North Korea of Central Asia. The current government exerts a very high level of control over the country and its position is very stable. No opposition to the regime of President Berdymukhammedov is visible. Government officials at all levels are the strongest violators of rights of Christians in Turkmenistan. They have imposed all kinds of legal restrictions,

monitor all religious activities, raid meetings and block the use of religious materials. The chances that this situation will change are very slim indeed.

Islamic oppression:

Islam is not the state religion and is treated by the authorities in the same manner as other religions. However, Islam is the traditional religion of most of the population and the Muslim pressure on Christians in Turkmenistan comes from the far-reaching influence of family, friends and community on converts, but also on those Christians active in evangelistic activities. Since this is a matter of culture, it is highly unlikely that this situation will change.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: Georgetown, 2019/20 report, p.43 - <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/WPS-Index-2019-20-Report.pdf>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: rarely report - <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/TM.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: Forum 18, 6 November 2019 - http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2519
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Forum 18, 16 January 2020 - http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2534
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Forum 18, 11 September 2020 - http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2600

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=Turkmenistan>
- <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/Turkmenistan>