



# WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

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A photograph of a man with a serious expression, wearing a yellow patterned shirt, standing in front of a brick wall. The background shows a construction site with wooden beams and a clear sky.

## THE PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS GLOBALLY

KEY FACTS, TRENDS AND

RECOMMENDATIONS

**Cover image:**

Two of Pastor Ayuba's daughters were kidnapped by Boko Haram from Chibok, Nigeria. One of his daughters has since been returned but his other daughter remains in captivity.

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# INTRODUCTION

This year marks the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Open Doors' research into the countries where Christians face the most persecution. Last September we also mourned the loss of Brother Andrew. He founded Open Doors when he felt called by God to smuggle Bibles behind the Iron Curtain to strengthen the church in countries where Communist regimes were determined to stamp it out.

Since the late 1950s when Brother Andrew began this work, we have seen Communist regimes come and go. This year's *Open Doors World Watch List* research shows that authoritarianism is rising again across the globe with the smash and squeeze of persecution for Christians intensifying in countries such as China, Myanmar and Turkey. North Korea returns to the top of the *Open Doors World Watch List* and scores the highest number of points we have ever recorded.

Today more than 360 million Christians experience high and extreme levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith. In 1993 when the *Open Doors World Watch List* started, Christians faced high, very high or extreme levels of faith in only 40 countries; 30 years on that number has nearly doubled to 76 countries. That means that worldwide 1 in 7 Christians now experience at least 'high' levels of persecution and discrimination.

Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) is Article 18 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights. Open Doors is heartened by the work the UK Government is doing to uphold human rights globally, and particularly to uphold Article 18, upon which so many other rights depend. Progress against recommendations in the Independent Review of UK Support for Persecuted Christians (the 'Truro Report') was reviewed last year. Recommendation 2 from the Truro Report called for the UK to be "the global leader in championing FoRB, ensuring it is given due priority in the UK's engagement in multilateral institutions." In July 2022 the UK established this leadership and influence by hosting the International Ministerial on FoRB in London. Later in the year the long awaited PSVI (Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict) conference also took place. As our research shows, sexual violence is a key weapon used against Christian women and girls globally, and we continue to press the UK government to recognise faith as an additional vulnerability in all conflicts.

While overall numbers have not dramatically increased again this year, we are seeing sustained pressure on the church in 76 countries and this has a cumulative effect. Life is becoming more difficult for Christians in many countries. This is particularly true for those who convert from other religions and then face at best antagonism and at worst violence and even execution at the hands of governments, family members and neighbours. Jesus was very clear that if he faced persecution, those who follow him will as well. It is worth noting that Jesus himself was executed having been falsely convicted under blasphemy laws. More than 2,000 years later we see history repeating itself and a proliferation of anti-blasphemy and anti-conversion laws in both Hindu and Muslim majority nations.

We also see the Christian church continuing to grow and Christians continuing to be a force for good around the world. There is always reason to hope and this report contains some good news as well as bad.

Thank you for reading this report and for all you do to support the persecuted church and uphold freedom of religion or belief. Please keep going. You will find our recommendations for further action on page 33.



**Henrietta Blyth**  
Open Doors UK & Ireland CEO

# THE TOP TEN

## THE TEN MOST DANGEROUS COUNTRIES IN THE WORLD IN WHICH TO BE A CHRISTIAN IN 2023

### 1 NORTH KOREA

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea is unique because there is not even an appearance of religious freedom. As the regime cracks down on what it sees as foreign influences, if Christians are discovered, they and their families are deported to labour camps as political prisoners or executed. For Christians, gathering together is almost impossible and is only attempted in absolute secrecy with minimal numbers.

### 2 SOMALIA

Christians in Somalia face extreme persecution. They are explicitly targeted by the terrorist Islamist group al-Shabaab and are frequently killed immediately upon discovery. Even being suspected of having converted to Christianity can greatly endanger one's life. Anyone found in possession of any Christian materials, including the Bible, is executed, often with the blessing of their family and community.

### 3 YEMEN

In the midst of war and strife, Christians in Yemen are increasingly facing violent attacks and lengthy incarceration. Converts to Christianity especially, are even more vulnerable to physical and mental abuse, sexual assault, rape, forced 'marriage', and honour killings.

### 4 ERITREA

The Eritrean authorities only recognise the Eritrean Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran churches, along with Sunni Islam. As a result, non-traditional Protestant churches are frequently subjected to raids and members imprisoned for long periods of time. Members of these churches are regarded as unpatriotic foreign agents. The lifting of UN sanctions has not corresponded to any alleviation in pressure for Christians.

### 5 LIBYA

Libya has no functioning government and is primarily run by Islamist terrorist organisations, organised crime groups and drug cartels. Christians are targeted for kidnap, rape, slavery and extra-judicial killings. These crimes are perpetrated with complete impunity. Christians who convert from Islam are

routinely killed by their own families as a matter of honour.

### 6 NIGERIA

Nigerian Christians face violence from Fulani Militants in the Middle Belt, Boko Haram and ISWAP in the north and bandits throughout the border regions. This year, terrorist attacks happened as far south as Ondo State, with 41 Christians murdered in one church on Pentecost Sunday.

### 7 PAKISTAN

Apart from Nigeria, Pakistan is the only country awarded the maximum violence score by the *Open Doors World Watch List*. Christian women and girls are still regularly targeted for abduction, rape and forced conversion. The country's infamous blasphemy laws remain a constant threat to Pakistan's beleaguered Christian community. All Christians suffer institutional discrimination.

### 8 IRAN

Violent attacks and abductions targeted at Iranian Christians have increased this year. Converts face extreme hostility from their families and communities, and pastors are regularly arrested, prosecuted and given lengthy prison sentences for 'crimes against national security'.

### 9 AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan remains a brutal place for Christians to live. It has dropped significantly in the *Open Doors World Watch List* due to the fact that many Christians were forced to flee in the wake of the Taliban's takeover last year. Christian converts remain in grave danger in Afghanistan and exist in deep hiding.

### 10 SUDAN

Last year, Sudan dropped in the *Open Doors World Watch List* after the fall of the al-Bashir government. However, with churches now being forced to close and pastors being arrested, it is clear that extremist rule has returned. In addition, the integration of local community police forces and the continued presence of armed militia and terrorist groups mean that Christians remain under the constant threat of violence.




A Christian girl who spends her entire day bent over, making bricks. This is the only life she has ever known. Her entire family are bonded brick kiln labourers. Thousands of Christians across Pakistan are destined to lives like this.

# KEY FINDINGS



- **Over the 30 years of the *Open Doors World Watch List* reporting, the global phenomenon of Christian persecution has grown exponentially.** Today, more than 360 million Christians suffer high levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith. In 1993, Christians faced high to extreme levels of persecution in 40 countries. This number has nearly doubled to 76 countries in 2023. In the top 50 alone, 312 million Christians now face very high or extreme levels. Worldwide, 1 in 7 Christians now experience at least 'high' levels of persecution or discrimination; with 1 in 5 in Africa, 2 in 5 in Asia, and 1 in 15 in Latin America.
- **In North Korea, which recorded its highest ever score for the *Open Doors World Watch List*, the conditions for Christians are worsening.** Oppressed through pervasive state surveillance, if Christians are discovered they can expect to be arrested, sent to 'labour' camps, tortured or even executed. The introduction of the new 'Anti-Reactionary Thought' law in 2020 which formally criminalised any published materials of foreign origin in North Korea, along with the Bible, has heightened the brutal persecution of Christians.
- **The violence against Christians in Nigeria continues to rise, and is being replicated across sub-Saharan Africa, with the potential to destabilise the whole continent.** Of the 5,621 Christians killed for their faith during the reporting period for the *Open Doors World Watch List*, 5,014 or 89 per cent were killed in Nigeria (rising from 4,650 or 79 per cent in 2022). The total recorded number of Christians being abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context) has risen from 3,829 to 5,259, a 27 per cent rise. Of these abductions, 4,726 or 89 per cent were in Nigeria. Church leaders, women and girls are often targeted for abduction. Of the 276 abducted Chibok schoolgirls kidnapped in 2014, 98 remain in Boko Haram captivity, along with Leah Sharibu who after being kidnapped in 2018 refused an offer of freedom if she recanted her Christian faith. Violent jihadism is spreading across many parts of Africa, with similar patterns of murder, kidnap, rape and intimidation being used to drive people from their homes and lands. The increase in violence can be seen in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Central African Republic and Mozambique.
- **Through digital persecution, China is intensifying the persecution of Christians and other religious minorities.** The Chinese Communist Party is extending its repression of Christians via surveillance, censorship and disinformation, using technology to control and coerce behaviour through its Social Credit System. Through economic and political influence, China is also becoming an incubator and legitimiser of persecution around the world, and as China exports its invasive technology, it is de facto exporting its authoritarian ideology.
- **The rise in authoritarian governments is exacerbating religious persecution.** Amid efforts by countries such as China, Russia and India to reinterpret and redefine human rights, the authoritarian trend can be seen in countries as diverse as Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Malaysia, and in Central Asian states such as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. In the Middle East and North Africa, rights are diminishing in Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt and Iran. In Turkey, those loyal to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan now control the government and most of the media, judiciary and academia. Sub-Saharan Africa, Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda and Cameroon are growing increasingly authoritarian. In Nigeria, the security apparatus has become largely under federal control during President Muhammadu Buhari's presidency. In Latin America, Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua are increasing human rights violations.



Shafika (name changed for her security) is part of a secret house group of Afghan believers living in Central Asia

## KEY CHANGES

- **North Korea** has resumed its ranking on the *Open Doors World Watch List* as the most dangerous country in the world in which to be a Christian.
- **Afghanistan** has dropped from first place last year to be ranked at No. 9. Sadly, this dramatic fall does not represent an improvement in conditions. In reality, very little has changed for converts to Christianity, and persecution remains at an extreme level. Rather, the fall from No. 1 to No. 9 on the *Open Doors World Watch List* is the result of many Christians fleeing the country, and for the surviving converts who remain needing to be deeply hidden. Fewer Christians were killed for their faith in 2022.
- The rise of **Nigeria** on the *Open Doors World Watch List* continues. Now in sixth place, Christians are experiencing appalling forms of brutality for their faith. If the number of recorded deaths and violent incidents were the only measure for the research, Nigeria would be No. 1. With this most populous country in Africa set to double its population by 2050, and with little appetite among Western governments to acknowledge jihadism as the core driver for the spiralling violence, the resulting lack of pressure on the Nigerian authorities to prioritise security means that we can expect persecution to continue to rise with the potential for it to evolve into a vast humanitarian disaster.
- **Sudan** has returned to the top ten – from 13<sup>th</sup> last year to now being ranked at No. 8. After the military coup on 25 October 2021, the human rights situation in the country has seriously deteriorated again, including for Christians and their right to believe and practise their faith in freedom. The reversal of commitments on apostasy law has seen Christians charged and detained, often accompanied by inhumane treatment and violence.
- In Latin America, continued persecution of Christians in **Cuba** has seen it rise ten places, from 37 to 27. Alongside the targeting of Christian leaders, there is increased discrimination in all spheres of life, including arrests, abductions, arbitrary fines, close surveillance, denials of licenses and religious visas, and physical or mental abuse. **Nicaragua** entered the top 50 this year. Amid widespread government repression, Christian leaders have been arbitrarily detained or expelled from the country. Church buildings have been attacked, and Christian colleges and universities, Christian radio and TV stations, and Christian NGOs have been shut down. **Colombia** ranks No. 22 on the 2023 list, up from No. 30 a year earlier, and **Mexico** rose 5 places to No. 38. Alongside political extremism, factors such as crime, corruption and ethnic violence are contributing to the rise in persecution.

# NORTH KOREA – UNIQUELY UNFREE

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea is a unique state in the world, in that its society is utterly devoid of Freedom of Religion or Belief. For 19 of the last 20 years of the *Open Doors World Watch List*, it has been ranked as the most dangerous country in the world in which to be a Christian. Members of the Kim family are worshipped as gods, and Kim Il-sung is still generally regarded as the head of state despite being dead since 1994.

The Kim family dominates every area of life. Every home has pictures of the Kims, to which each family is expected to pay homage. Every city and town is adorned with dominating portraits and statues. Propaganda messages resound daily via speakers at rail and bus stations and in places of work. With children taught to think that their lives are intimately connected to the lives of the Kims, the Kim regime deems worship of anything other than themselves to be a threat to their power.

While the exact number of Christians in North Korea is unclear, Open Doors estimates that there are around 400,000 in underground churches. These are small groups of believers, usually no more than six or seven – with no connection to the wider church, to make them harder to track. However, the North Korean state employs spies whose sole job is to infiltrate these groups and identify as many believers as possible. If someone is caught with a Bible, in prayer, reading Christian literature or singing hymns, they can expect to be arrested, sent to 'labour' camps, tortured and even executed.

Although things have never been good for Christians, they have worsened considerably in the last two years. In response to the increasing Westernisation of North Korean teenagers, in 2020 Kim Jong-un passed a new 'Anti-Reactionary Thought' law, which criminalised any published materials of foreign origin in North Korea, along with the Bible.



An education event in North Korea | © Unsplash

Christians, who are already deemed as 'foreign agents' by the Kim administration, have been at the forefront of those arrested, charged and imprisoned. As North Korean escapee Timothy Cho says, "Whenever there is new legislation, they first attack religious groups."

After months of denying the presence of any COVID-19 infections in the country, in May 2022, Kim Jong-un finally admitted that the COVID-19 pandemic had arrived in North Korea. The impact of the pandemic on the country's fragile health institutions is likely to have been severe. This goes hand in hand with a serious risk of food shortages, which has led to fears of a similar crisis to the famine in the 1990's, when hundreds of thousands of North Koreans crossed the border to China to find food. However, now that most diplomats and staff of international organizations have left the country, an accurate assessment is impossible. Christians in the country will be suffering from these acute crises, in addition to more targeted attacks on their faith.



## REBECCA'S STORY

Rebecca\* is an Open Doors field worker in China who leads a women's ministry for North Koreans who escaped the country and now live in China. Not only are these women often the victims of human traffickers who sell them into illegal marriages, but if they are discovered, they will, in violation of international law, be forcibly repatriated to North Korea, where they will face either imprisonment in a concentration camp or execution.

Whenever Rebecca leads the groups, she knows that she must avoid the ever-watchful eye of the state. She pays illegal drivers to take her alone on obscure routes to remote venues, putting herself in danger in the process. If she uses the same driver or the same route, she knows she may be found out. But Rebecca is not afraid. "God goes with me," she says, "He prepares a way for me." Rebecca says that often these women begin by being resistant to the gospel; they are just unable to accept that anyone could love them as she tells them that Jesus does. "But over time," she tells us, "they go from laughing at the gospel to being transformed by it."

Rebecca remembers one woman in a group that she led. She knew this woman was a spy. And yet, this spy never turned them in. Rebecca does not know whether or not the spy encountered God in those meetings, but she does know that prayer, the prayer of the global body of Christ, is at the centre of all that she does. She is not the only one who knows this. Brother Simon\*, another Open Doors field worker in the region, tells us that North Korean believers know that they are not alone, that it is through the prayer of the global church that 'they are strengthened to keep their faith and feel the love of Christ'.

Rebecca knows that what she does is dangerous. She knows that if she is caught, she will herself be returned to North Korea and face 'horrors beyond our imagining.' And yet, she will always make this perilous journey to teach the Bible; even for one, she would continue her work, even just for the spy.

*\*Names changed to protect their identities*



Rebecca\* an Open Doors field worker in China

While the situation for Christian believers in North Korea appears impossible and unchanging, there are steps which the UK Government and Parliament can take to ensure they are not forgotten. For example, we welcome the 2021 report by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on North Korea, which noted evidence of North Korean officials being

involved in crimes against humanity, including the treatment of Christians and other groups. With this in mind, we urge the Government to use its position on the UN Human Rights Council and UN Security Council to foster more international dialogue around the situation in North Korea.

# RIISING VIOLENCE IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

In the 30 years that the *Open Doors World Watch List* has been monitoring the persecution of Christians, the accelerating expansion of violence against Christians in sub-Saharan Africa represents a most concerning regional trend. Among the 26 sub-Saharan countries monitored by our research from 2021 to late 2022, the combined violence score increased by more than 8 per cent. Half of the countries now have violence scores in the 'extremely high' range.

Sadly, across sub-Saharan Africa the context and conditions are increasingly apposite for violence. Against a general background of persistent political instability and economic hardship, acute crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic and global food and energy insecurity have compounded the persecution of Christians. Most notably, such challenges to state capacity have greatly assisted the expansion of violent Islamist extremist groups, such as Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), and al-Shaabab, Ansar al-Sunna and the Islamic State East Africa, whose common aim is to drive Christians from their lands in order to establish a caliphate. Alongside (and often connected to) Islamic extremism, violence in sub-Saharan Africa is also driven by organised crime. Western Africa is an important route for drug-trafficking from Latin America to Europe, alongside the widespread trafficking of humans and protected wildlife. According to the charity PSJ UK, human trafficking is now the third most common crime in Nigeria, and there are at least 1,500 irregular routes out of the country, which can be used by criminal groups.<sup>1</sup> Persecuted Christians are particularly vulnerable in such violent, chaotic situations.

The overlap between Islamic extremism and global organised crime is deeply concerning. The two spheres share organising principles of smaller, networked groups operating within a larger cartel structure. They also share the same opportunism, each thriving amid societal disruption and dysfunction. This is fueling more direct collaboration against weak or deteriorating state capacity. For example, in the Sahel region, in order to raise funds for terrorism, jihadist groups have facilitated the route for traffickers

in humans, wildlife and drugs. In the face of this ever-expanding violence, more and more Christians are being strategically displaced (see pages 13-15).

The situation in **Mali** is deteriorating rapidly and the country has seen two coups in less than a year – one in August 2020 and one in May 2021. These coups happened at a time when the authorities were struggling to contain the expansion of jihadist activities in the country. Today, it seems that the government is only in control in major cities, with other areas being in the hands (directly or indirectly) of jihadists who provide social services and entice young people into joining their ranks. Extremist groups have been exploiting the security vacuum left by the government, which has been unable to maintain a well-organised army. On this last point, the growing influence of proxy Private Military Companies such as Russia's Wagner Group is exacerbating the suffering of civilians in Mali, as well as elsewhere.

**'In the face of this ever-expanding violence, more and more Christians are being strategically displaced.'**

In **Burkina Faso**, on 24 January 2022, amid a deepening security crisis in the country, a military coup overthrew President Kaboré. That coup was followed by another in October 2022. In this chaotic context, jihadist groups have been gaining strength and expanding their control over large areas of land. As this pattern of terror unfolds, the targeted killing of Christians has created an environment of fear, with many being too scared to attend church services or send their children to school. As with other places across sub-Saharan Africa, jihadist groups have also been replacing the government in areas that they are controlling, and have been providing social services.

In **Cameroon**, Boko Haram continues to target Christians in the northern part of the country. As radicalisation spreads, life has become more perilous for those who convert to Christianity, with female

<sup>1</sup> PSJ UK (2022) *On-the-brink* – addressing Nigeria's security crisis

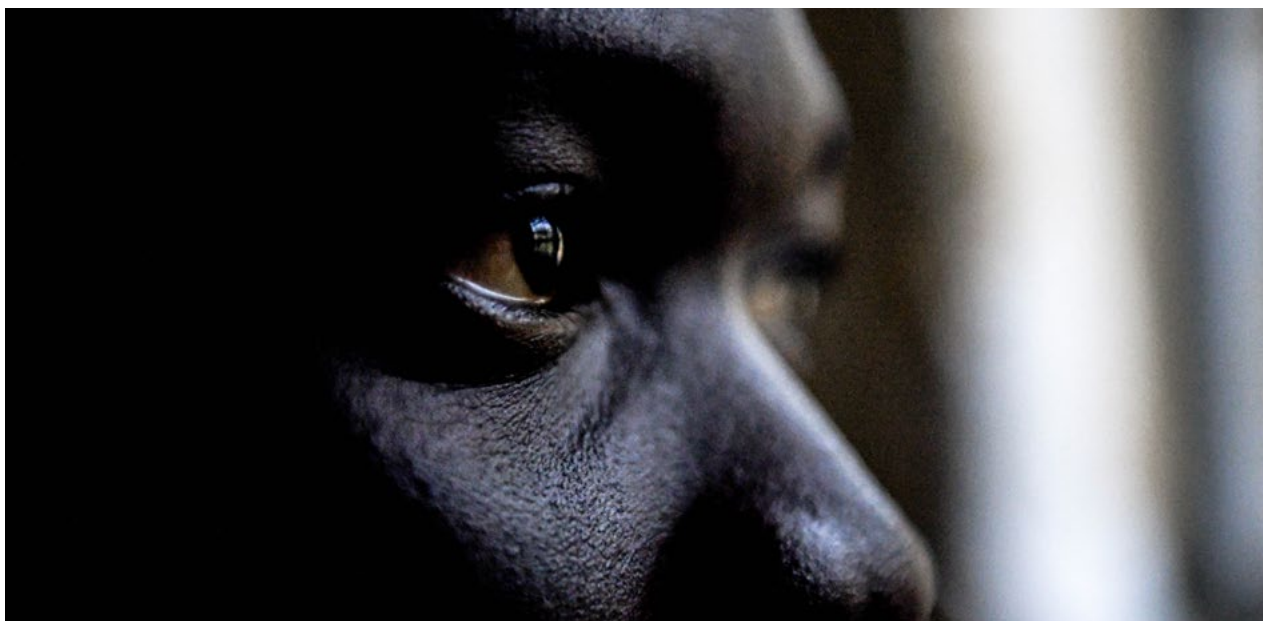
converts often coerced into marriage with non-Christians or abducted. Due to the displacement of people, churches have not been able to function normally in those parts of the country.

**Nigeria** has risen once more on *Open Doors' World Watch List* and is now at No. 6. Once again, it is noteworthy that, if the *Open Doors World Watch List* only registered the number of recorded deaths and violent incidents, Nigeria would be at the top of the list. Most violence in Nigeria against civilians, especially Christians, has occurred in the north and the Middle Belt and is perpetrated by Fulani militants, Boko Haram, the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) and other armed 'bandits'. As the agendas of these groups overlap and converge, the violence has now also spread to the south of the country.

In 2019, the APPG on International Freedom of Religion or Belief published a report: *Nigeria: Unfolding Genocide?*<sup>2</sup> This report covered the escalating violence against Christians in Nigeria, with attacks by armed groups of Islamist Fulani men resulting in the killing, maiming, dispossession and eviction of countless thousands. These factors are

compounded by the Nigerian Government's failure to respond adequately to the violence, to protect Christian communities or to bring perpetrators of violence to justice. The report urged the Government of Nigeria and the international community to act decisively to help save the lives of Nigerian Christians and to improve their security and welfare.

The rapidly deteriorating situation in Nigeria has also drawn more recent parliamentary attention. The 2022 Foreign Affairs Committee report: *Lagos Calling: Nigeria and the Integrated Review*<sup>3</sup> recognises that the security threats Nigeria faces from many sources are 'existential'. Noting the dangers caused by violent groups and endemic corruption, the report also affirms that the fate of Nigeria will determine the direction of Africa as a whole. Expert commentators suggest the trajectory is clear. If the extremism challenges are not dealt with, in the face of multiple pressures, the Nigerian state could collapse.<sup>4</sup> With the population of Nigeria set to double by 2050 to over 416 million, this would lead to many millions being displaced, with catastrophic humanitarian implications for Nigeria, the wider region, and Europe.



Ayuba's\* father was killed by Islamic extremists. After the attack he was filled with rage and a desire for revenge. His name then appeared on a list created by Boko Haram, identifying those they wanted to kill. Ayuba has spent time at the Open Doors Trauma Centre in Nigeria, there his desire to avenge his father's death changed - he found peace, encouragement and hope. \*Name changed to protect his identity

<sup>2</sup> APPG for International Freedom of Religion or Belief (2020) [Nigeria: Unfolding Genocide?](#)

<sup>3</sup> House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee (Seventh Report of Session 2021–22) [Lagos calling: Nigeria and the Integrated Review](#)

<sup>4</sup> Emily Estelle (19 April 2021) Foreign Policy. [Why Experts Ignore Terrorism in Africa](#)

# INDIA – THE ILLUSION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM



Sitara\* at the age of 21 is both a mother and father to her two younger siblings, 8-year-old sister and a 15-year-old brother. Orphaned at the age of 15, she has faced a lot of challenges in life because of her Christian faith. \*Name changed to protect her identity

Already the world's largest democracy, India remains on course to eclipse China and become the world's most populous nation. Following independence 75 years ago, India succeeded in creating a constitution that enshrined Mahatma Gandhi's vision of a harmonious country – a nation where Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians were treated equally. The constitution cites religious freedom as a fundamental right, providing for "freedom of conscience and the right of all individuals to freely profess, practise, and propagate religion; mandating a secular state; requiring the state to treat all religions impartially; and prohibiting discrimination based on religion."

To a large degree India's constitution can be seen as a success story, unifying religious, tribal and political differences into a core national identity. With strong historic and cultural ties to the UK, India represents an obvious mass consumer market for UK exports, and an important military partner to counter Chinese aggression in Asia.

However, since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power in 2014, the country has seen a rise in Hindutva ideology – the idea that to be Indian is to be Hindu. In states, such as Karnataka, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand, where there is strong support for the BJP and for the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh – a Hindutva paramilitary force), violence against religious minorities has risen dramatically. For Christians, persecution can take the form of violent assault, harassment, wrongful arrest, rape and murder. There are also numerous reports of state complicity in extrajudicial killings, custodial torture, denial of fair trial, denial of assembly, curfews, vigilantism and mob lynching – often incited and orchestrated via social media.<sup>5</sup>

Christians make up 4.9 per cent of India's 1.4 billion people, while Hindus constitute some 72.5 per cent. On the *Open Doors World Watch List*, it is ranked as the 11th most dangerous country in which to be a Christian. Yet the church continues to grow in India, with conversions especially strong among the lowest Dalit or 'untouchable' caste and the Adivasi rural communities. Anti-conversion laws were purportedly brought in to address religious coercion, despite there being no data about forced conversions taking place. The anti-conversion laws are manipulated to enable Hindutva sympathisers to persecute Christian minorities with impunity. Consequently, despite the constitutional guarantee of religious freedom, with 11 states having enacted anti-conversion laws, any claims by India to respect religious freedom are illusory.

While in June 2022, the Indian Supreme Court did agree to investigate the claims of persecuted Christians, it is yet to publish the findings. In coalition with other faith groups, Open Doors continues to call for an international commission of inquiry to establish what is happening to religious minorities in India – a call that was recently backed by Dr Fernand de Varennes, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues (see page 26). As religious nationalists in India continue to deny and degrade human rights, it is vital that diplomatic, trade and military ties continue to be scrutinised.

<sup>5</sup> Open Doors (2021) *Destructive Lies: Disinformation, speech that incites violence and discrimination against religious minorities in India*

# THE **DISPLACEMENT** AND MOVEMENT OF CHRISTIANS

Across the world, as the persecution of Christians rises, growing numbers are being forced to flee the violence. This means that Christians are increasingly represented among internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees. In **Afghanistan**, for example, the Taliban takeover prompted many Christians to flee the country, and many are still seeking safety beyond its borders – often in countries with hostile Islamic regimes.

In **Iraq**, where some estimates now place the Christian population as low as 164,000, persecution by a range of groups (most notably ISIS) has changed the makeup of the country. The overt attempt by ISIS to rid Iraq of Christianity caused tens of thousands to flee, often with little or no warning. Some fled to comparatively safer regions of Iraq, while thousands fled the country altogether to neighbours such as Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. Nearly ten years on from the rise of ISIS to

global notoriety, many Christians are still reluctant to return due to ongoing hostility from local authorities, the fracturing of intercommunal relationships, and challenging economic conditions.

In **Myanmar**, the situation for Christians has continued to deteriorate following the military taking control in February 2021. Fighting has increased across the country, and the Christian minority is bearing the brunt of these attacks – especially in Christian-majority states such as Karen, Kachin and Shan. As a result, more Christians than ever have become IDPs or refugees, and are living in camps or churches without adequate food and healthcare. Many have fled to live in the jungle.

As violence against Christians in **Nigeria** continues to expand through strategic targeting by multiple groups of violent extremists (see above), the country has



One of many IDP camps that are expanding across Nigeria

accrued the highest number of IDPs in the region (3.2 million at the end of 2021).<sup>6</sup> It also has a burgeoning refugee population in neighbouring countries.

Extremist groups in Nigeria and neighbouring countries not only use physical and sexual attacks, but target property, land and livestock to force Christians away from their homes. Conditions in many IDP and refugee camps are dreadful, and often Christians who have been forced to flee to them are not safe. In order to intimidate Christians and deter them from attempting to return to their homes, the camps remain strategic targets for terrorists.

### “They don’t just attack. They attack to uproot.”

With Christians forming an increasing proportion of the world’s IDPs and refugees, last year, Open Doors published a report entitled *Church on the Run*,<sup>7</sup> which examined the distinct vulnerabilities faced by Christians who are forced to become IDPs or refugees. It found that there are cases of Christians being forcibly displaced from their homes in most *Open Doors World Watch List* countries, and that their religious identity was either a sole or contributory factor.

The report also concluded that many Christians have been displaced as part of a deliberate strategy to drive Christians from their homes or communities – not simply as an unintentional by-product of persecution. This strategy may be overt and public, or covert and informal. According to a regional expert on Boko Haram in Nigeria: “They don’t just attack, they attack in order to uproot.” Furthermore, as noted in a report by Minority Rights Group International that examines migration and displacement, “... even in cases where violence or conflict have triggered mass displacement, this has usually been preceded by a long process of exclusion.”<sup>8</sup>

Whether or not Christians have been displaced for religious reasons, when Christians are in the minority, they are additionally vulnerable at all stages of the displacement journey. According to a Nigerian aid worker: “[Christian IDPs in Nigerian camps] end up

with double persecution; from the people who attacked you in the first place, then your own government. The government hasn’t been able to demonstrate that they care equally.” Similarly, Christians who fled their homes in Iraq faced new challenges once displaced, feeling unsafe both in Iraqi IDP camps and in refugee camps in Jordan.

The Open Doors report also analysed how displacement isolates Christian individuals and families from their support networks, cutting at the root of their identity and resilience, which in turn affects their ability to respond to further persecution. While all Christians are less able to access spiritual support as IDPs and refugees, the division of families is a tragedy with particularly acute consequences for children and young people. The report concludes that the analysis of religious persecution around the world will be incomplete if it is restricted to country-by-country analysis of the static church. Instead, such analysis must also cover the growing phenomenon of Christians on the move.

The UK has taken steps to acknowledge the plight of refugees fleeing persecution on grounds of faith or belief. For example, the Government worked with the All-Party Parliamentary Group on International Freedom of Religion or Belief following its 2016 report on those fleeing such persecution and seeking asylum in the UK.<sup>9</sup> The UK has also committed to include religious minorities in the Afghan Citizens’ Resettlement Scheme.

However, as more people are forced to flee terrible violence perpetrated because of their religious identity, more informed and targeted support will be needed around the world. The Open Doors *Church on the Run* report recommends that religion be covered explicitly as a source of vulnerability in programmes to assist IDPs and refugees, and that governments ensure meaningful participation by refugees who have fled religious persecution in designing, assessment and implementation of such targeted programmes.

<sup>6</sup> UNHCR (2022) [No End in Sight](#)

<sup>7</sup> Open Doors (2022) [Church on the Run](#)

<sup>8</sup> Minority Rights Group International (2018) [Minority and Indigenous Trends](#)

<sup>9</sup> International FoRB APPG & Asylum Advocacy Group (2016) [Fleeing Persecution Asylum Claims in the UK on Religious Freedom Grounds](#)

## HAMID'S STORY

Hamid experienced first-hand the difficulties associated with being a Christian and a refugee, when he fled Afghanistan. Hamid spent time in two countries that he perceived as safe while living as a refugee, during which time he became a Christian.

With the zeal of a new convert, he quickly began to share his faith. His wife left him and took their children. Even when she did eventually return, they were unable to continue as husband and wife. Hamid was attacked for his evangelism. He suffered beatings and knife attacks, his children were threatened with kidnap, murder and rape. Upon appeal to the police in this 'safe' country, he was told that he had brought this mistreatment upon himself as a result of his conversion.

Christians throughout refugee and IDP camps find that they are not granted the same support as others in the camps. Many like Hamid convert to Christianity and find that they are never able to return home. According to one Afghan refugee, Nilufar "The Christian [in Afghanistan] is a 'kafir' ['sinner' or 'infidel']. If [it's discovered] that some man is a Christian, they would kill [him] immediately. And not only the person, but also the whole family." Their faith in Jesus prevents them from ever being able to leave these hostile camps and see their families again.



Illustrative image of an Afghan refugee reading the Bible in Farsi

# CHINA AND DIGITAL PERSECUTION

In 2022, as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) celebrated its 20<sup>th</sup> national congress, President Xi Jinping secured an unprecedented third term in office. However, against a backdrop of increasing economic challenges and harsh Covid-19 restrictions, protests and unrest have spread across the People's Republic of China – a country that has risen to No.16 on the *Open Doors World Watch List* (compared with No. 43 in 2018).

As the state strives to retain control, China's religious and ethnic minorities still bear the brunt of the CCP's quest for uniformity among its populace. New and emerging technologies are the key tools in this quest. In this past year, Open Doors UK & Ireland have worked with the universities of Roehampton and Birmingham to explore this new frontier for human rights by holding an academic conference on digital persecution. This was followed by a report launched at the International Ministerial on Freedom of Religion or Belief.<sup>10</sup>

The Open Doors report identifies three key areas of concern: surveillance, censorship and disinformation. As the CCP pursues its programme of brutal oppression of the ethnic Uighur population in the province of Xinjiang, it has created a test-bed for digital persecution. The integrated technologies being

deployed include CCTV cameras that can recognise faces, emotional states and ethnic groups. These new forms of surveillance are now being rolled out across China, accompanied by device listening and spyware for social network monitoring, with digital platforms now sensing the frequent use of terms like 'God', 'Jesus' and 'pray' etc, to enhance surveillance or disconnect meetings when these terms are detected. Proximity and location applications are now ubiquitous, and the tracking apps that collected data to stay ahead of the coronavirus were not phased out in 2022 but redeployed. And there is also large scale data harvesting, including of genetic data. With the extension of China's much-publicised 'Social Credit System', self-censorship for social compliance is a key aim. Now augmented by apps to report 'bad citizenship', the CCP's near-blanket surveillance of large swathes of its country has had the desired effect of most people assuming they are being watched and modifying their behaviour accordingly.

In March 2022, the CCP introduced sweeping new laws on the use of the internet<sup>11</sup>, effectively criminalising the storage or communication of religious material. Using ongoing Covid-19 restrictions as a pretext, these laws have greatly extended CCP control of religious groups.

The new laws have also made Bible access in China far more difficult. With the complicity of the big-tech corporations, Bible apps have been removed from Apple and Google's app stores. The authorities have also stepped up their efforts to control social media<sup>12</sup> by holding tech companies responsible for all comments.<sup>13</sup> This tightening of freedom online is arguably tighter for Christians, as they are often portrayed by the authorities as being allied with Western influences.

Perhaps most concerning, alongside the CCPs drive to use technologies to suppress dissent at home<sup>14</sup>, China is



<sup>10</sup> Open Doors parliamentary report (July 2022) *Digital Persecution: the new frontier for freedom of religion or belief*

<sup>11</sup> China Source (8 Feb 2022) *Preparing for the New Internet Religious Information Measures*

<sup>12</sup> Jennifer Pan (1 June 2022) China leadership. *Controlling China's Digital Ecosystem: Observations on Chinese Social Media*

<sup>13</sup> Zeyi Yang (18 June 2022) MIT Technology Review. *Now China wants to censor all social media comments*

<sup>14</sup> Oliver Young (23 Sept 2022) China Digital Times. *Interview: Josh Chin on China's Surveillance State*



becoming an incubator and legitimiser of persecution in the region and around the world. There are now more than a hundred countries in what we can call the Chinese 'techno-sphere', according to an Open Technology Fund report from 2019.<sup>15</sup> These countries not only buy Chinese technology for surveillance, censorship and disinformation, but may also have their officials trained in its use in China. As China exports its invasive technology, it is de facto exporting its oppressive ideology. And as authoritarian governments become more reliant on Chinese technology, there are concerns that Christians and church leaders will see their religious liberty diminish further in the name of 'stability' and 'security'.

China is at the forefront of what has been called the 'rights-free movement', which seeks to move international human rights discourse way from universal to more localised standards. This can be seen in the inaugural speech of its foreign minister,

who stressed not classical notions of inalienable rights but the rights to development and happiness.<sup>16</sup> As such, Open Doors research findings reinforce the observations made by other commentators who see China as seeking to redefine both the task of international institutions such as the United Nations, and the legitimacy of those who speak about human rights globally.<sup>17</sup>

With religious freedom being so foundational for many other human rights, Open Doors sees the expansion of digital persecution of religious minorities as a significant strategic challenge to human rights in general. We are committed to raising the profile of this rapidly expanding new frontier for persecution and to working with all partners (the UK Government, international organisations and corporations alike) in developing ethical standards and rights-based frameworks with which to protect and promote Freedom of Religion and Belief.



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

<sup>15</sup> Valentin Weber (17 Sept 2019) Open Technology Fund. *Examining The Expanding Web of Chinese and Russian Information Controls*

<sup>16</sup> Shannon Tiezzi (23 Feb 2021) The Diplomat. *Can China Change the Definition of Human Rights?*

<sup>17</sup> Rosemary Foot (1 October 2021) The Diplomat. *Beijing and the UN, 50 Years On*

# 30 YEARS OF THE OPEN DOORS WORLD WATCH LIST

## 30 YEARS OF RESEARCH INTO THE PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS

Based on research into almost 100 countries, Open Doors' annual *World Watch List* ranks the countries where Christians face the most intense persecution, and provides insight into the trends and dynamics of this persecution. This year's report is the 30<sup>th</sup> since the research began in 1992 (for the 1993 report), and it illustrates the scale and intensity of Christian persecution and discrimination over that period. Reviewing the continuing and rising patterns of violence, it maps emerging forms of persecution and the growing challenges to religious freedom and human rights. The report affirms why the global phenomenon of Christian persecution needs to be an urgent policy priority for countries committed to free and plural societies.

Of particular concern is the rise in recorded violence against Christians in Sub-Saharan Africa which this image below illustrates.

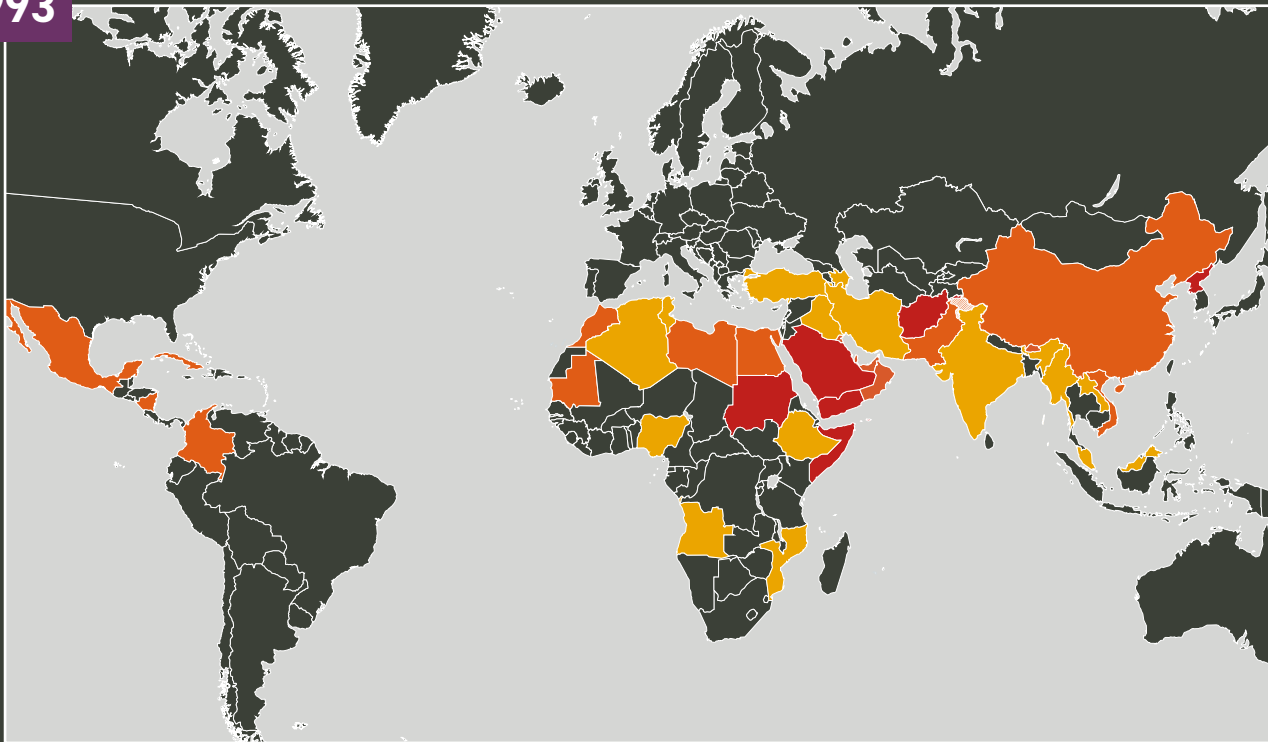
### KEY

- EXTREME LEVELS OF PERSECUTION
- VERY HIGH LEVELS OF PERSECUTION
- HIGH LEVELS OF PERSECUTION

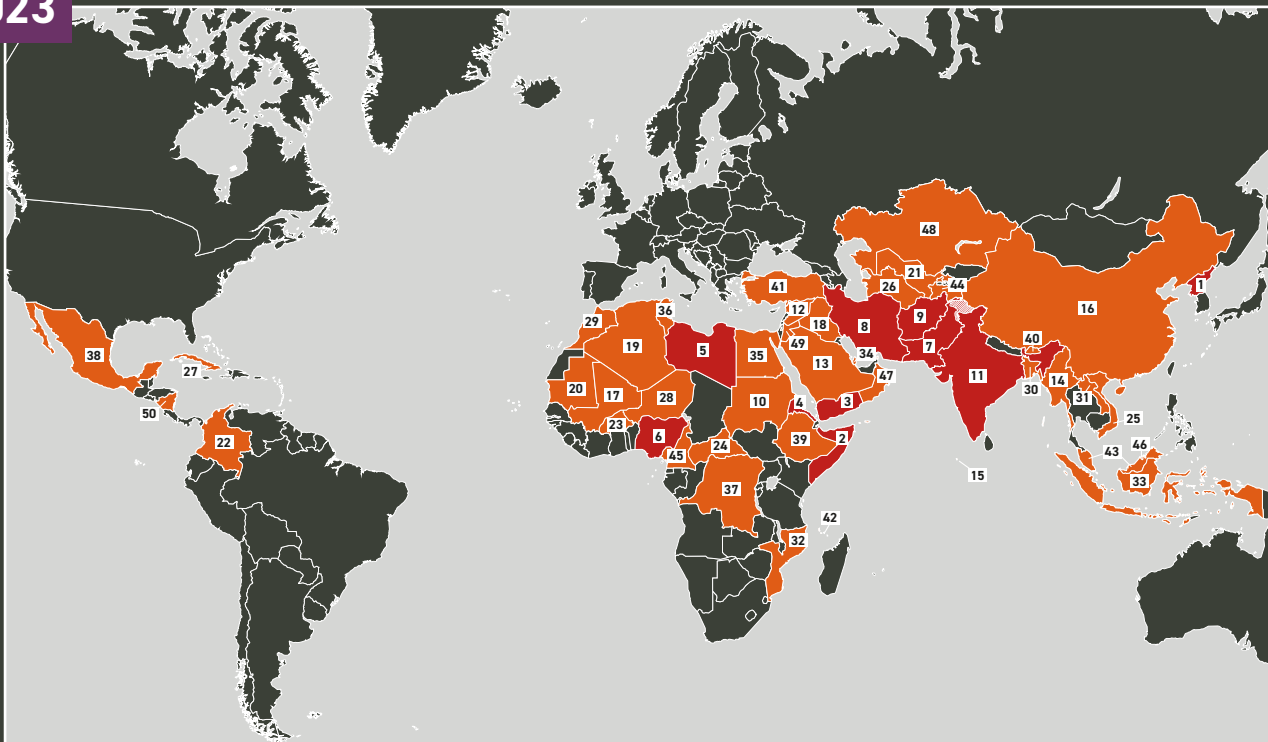
### TOP 10 VIOLENCE 2023



1993



2023



- |               |                 |                             |                   |               |
|---------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|-------------------|---------------|
| 1 NORTH KOREA | 11 INDIA        | 21 UZBEKISTAN               | 31 LAOS           | 41 TURKEY     |
| 2 SOMALIA     | 12 SYRIA        | 22 COLOMBIA                 | 32 MOZAMBIQUE     | 42 COMOROS    |
| 3 YEMEN       | 13 SAUDI ARABIA | 23 BURKINA FASO             | 33 INDONESIA      | 43 MALAYSIA   |
| 4 ERITREA     | 14 MYANMAR      | 24 CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC | 34 QATAR          | 44 TAJIKISTAN |
| 5 LIBYA       | 15 MALDIVES     | 25 VIETNAM                  | 35 EGYPT          | 45 CAMEROON   |
| 6 NIGERIA     | 16 CHINA        | 26 TURKMENISTAN             | 36 TUNISIA        | 46 BRUNEI     |
| 7 PAKISTAN    | 17 MALI         | 27 CUBA                     | 37 CONGO DR (DRC) | 47 OMAN       |
| 8 IRAN        | 18 IRAQ         | 28 NIGER                    | 38 MEXICO         | 48 KAZAKHSTAN |
| 9 AFGHANISTAN | 19 ALGERIA      | 29 MOROCCO                  | 39 ETHIOPIA       | 49 JORDAN     |
| 10 SUDAN      | 20 MAURITANIA   | 30 BANGLADESH               | 40 BHUTAN         | 50 NICARAGUA  |

# PRAYING FOR FREEDOM IN IRAN

In recent years, despite great oppression, the Islamic Republic of Iran has seen phenomenal growth in its underground church movement.<sup>18</sup> It has also seen growing protests against the policies of the hard-line theocratic regime. Following the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini on 16 September 2022, while detained by Iran's Morality Police for infringing hijab rules, protests have grown against the systematic oppression of women, and widespread violations of human rights in the country, under the rallying cry of "Woman, Life, Freedom." Iran is one of just six UN states not to have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and in December 2022 was expelled from the UN Women's Rights Commission. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has called for a UN Inquiry on Iran, noting that Iran's laws against 'improper' hijab wearing are themselves a violation of religious freedom. The response by the Iranian government and security forces to such protests has been brutal, leading to international condemnation, including by the UN General Assembly. At the time of writing, the outcome of these protests is unknown.

be closed. Converts from Islam to Christianity bear the brunt of religious freedom violations, carried out by the government in particular, which sees these Iranian Christians as an attempt by western countries to undermine the Islamic regime. Leaders of Christian convert groups, as well as members of other denominational backgrounds who support them, have been arrested, prosecuted and received long prison sentences for 'crimes against national security'.

For example, in 2022, four Christians were sentenced for the crime of being members of house churches. Two Christians of Armenian origin (Mr. Anooshavan Avedian and Mr. Joseph Shahbazian) have been sentenced to ten years in prison and two women who converted to Christianity (Ms. Malihe Nazari and Ms. Mina Khajavi) have been given six-year prison sentences. Sadly, many Christians in Iran live in fear of arrest, interrogation and imprisonment simply for meeting together in their own homes for worship.<sup>19</sup> Supported by Open Doors, the #Place2Worship campaign aims to expose and challenge these injustices.<sup>20</sup>

**'Many Christians in Iran live in fear of arrest, interrogation and imprisonment simply for meeting together in their own homes for worship.'**

Iran now stands at No.8 on the *Open Doors World Watch List*, climbing one place since last year, even in the context of rising persecution across the world. Restrictions on religious freedom affect Christians in Iran in many ways. Alongside the enforcement of conservative Islamic dress code and behaviour to which Iranian women in particular are subjected, there are harsh limitations on places of worship. Christian gatherings in private homes have been denounced as 'illegal groups' and acts 'against national security', while many churches continue to

<sup>18</sup> Sarah Eekhoff-Zylstra (8 February 2021) TGC. [Meet the World's Fastest-Growing Evangelical Movement](#)

<sup>19</sup> Article 18 case studies: [Anooshavan Avedian](#); [Malihe Nazari](#), [Joseph Shahbazian](#) and [Mina Khajavi](#)

<sup>20</sup> [articleeighteen.com/place2worship](https://articleeighteen.com/place2worship)



Ms. Malihe Nazari, Mr. Joseph Shahbazian and Ms. Mina Khajavi have been sent to prison in Iran for their faith



# THE IMPACT OF **ECONOMIC CRISES** ON CHRISTIAN MINORITIES

Christian minorities across the world often experience systematic discrimination and economic vulnerability. Made poorer by restricted access to employment, education and justice, this discrimination occurs even when violence may be absent. However, where violent persecution exists, injustice and discrimination worsen the wound by making it harder for Christians to recover from violent attack, or to seek redress.

**'In many poor countries, Christian minorities are often among the most impoverished.'**

In 2020, Open Doors published a briefing entitled *Last in Line* on how the Covid-19 pandemic had disproportionately affected Christians and other religious minorities who were already vulnerable to persecution.<sup>21</sup> It set out how Christians suffered discrimination in aid distribution, and how they could even be denied vital medical aid because of their faith. In some cases, Christians were even blamed by hostile authorities for the pandemic itself.

In particular, Open Doors research demonstrated how some of the effects of Covid-19 worsened cases of horrific violence against Christians. For example, lockdowns made Christian communities more vulnerable to attacks from Fulani militants in Nigeria, and the challenges of the pandemic further hindered state capacity to provide security in many vulnerable contexts.

Presently, global economic crises are exacerbating conditions in the world's poorest countries. Still recovering from the impact of the pandemic, low-income countries are now experiencing soaring inflation. Amplified by the war in Ukraine, food and fuel shortages are eroding real incomes. According to the World Bank, today 345 million people are in hunger crisis, including some 50 million people in 45 countries who are in hunger emergencies. These

people are a step away from famine. This worsening of extreme poverty is bringing social unrest, especially in countries already suffering from high levels of insecurity and violence.

In many poor countries, Christian minorities are often among the most impoverished. With most families relying on day-labouring work to survive, the economic turmoil has made life precarious, and persecution and discrimination have worsened. In war-torn Yemen, Christians do not receive aid during the famine. In Sri Lanka, already impoverished Christian minorities in isolated rural areas are now struggling to provide food for their families. This scenario, accompanied by the need to queue for hours – sometimes days – for fuel, is now becoming widespread across Asia and Africa.



Christians serving drinks to local community amid the crisis in Sri Lanka

<sup>21</sup> Open Doors (2020) *The Last in Line: coronavirus and persecution – an additional vulnerability*



### ZAKIA'S STORY

Zakia is just over 20 years old but already a widow. These days she lives in Yaloke, a small town in the mid-west of the Central African Republic – a country ravaged by longstanding civil unrest. In the area where Zakia lives, Christians are often targeted by Muslim gangs, whom they believe are after their land and the riches below it.

“My husband earned some extra money as a motorbike taxi driver. One Sunday after the church service, he picked up some clients to take them to the neighbouring village. Armed Fulani men stopped him and shot him. Christians are their preferred targets.”

The ripple-effect of the war in Ukraine is causing Christians like Zakia to be hungrier than before because scarcity of resources has left the church struggling to meet the many needs of persecuted Christians around them.

The baby on Zakia's lap looks much skinnier than his twin brother. “Since my husband's death, it is a serious problem to find enough food. The children are often sick. I have no means to ensure their health. I don't know what to do without some help to take care of them.”

The UK itself is expected to face challenging economic times in the months and years ahead. However, our hope is that the UK Government will not neglect the global impact of food and fuel shortages, particularly the disproportionate challenges faced by religious minorities who are already vulnerable to persecution.

In particular, we urge the UK to have due regard to human rights as it strikes trade deals with new partners, and to ensure that religion is recognised as a distinct source of vulnerability to those already suffering in situations of crisis.

# COUNTRIES OF CONCERN

## SOMALIA (2)

Somalia is now No. 2 on the *Open Doors World Watch List*. Persecution remains at an extreme level, with an increase in violence in the 2023 reporting period. Christians in the country risk being killed by Islamic militants and clan leaders if their faith is discovered, and suspected converts are monitored by elders and family members. The country is mired in ceaseless civil war, social fragmentation, tribalism and violent Islamic militancy. Even though the presidential election could finally be held in May 2023 and power was transferred peacefully, Somalia remains on shaky ground. The government is unable to protect the citizens of the country even in the capital city, Mogadishu; this became clear when al-Shabaab conducted multiple attacks that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of civilians and injury to hundreds more.

## ERITREA (4)

Eritrea has risen from No. 6 to No. 4 in the *Open Doors World Watch List*, reflecting an increased level of violence in the country, on top of extreme pressure for Christians in other spheres of life. Eritrea's re-integration into the international community after the lifting of the UN sanctions did nothing to

help persecuted Christians or even the general public in terms of freedom. As in previous reporting periods, government security forces conducted many raids and hundreds of Christians were taken to detention centres. In addition, the government utilises surveillance by the community by accusing some Christian groups (especially non-traditional Protestants) of being unpatriotic. Those who are released are often only released for a temporary period and are forced to live under severe restrictions. Many of those imprisoned have endured harsh conditions for over ten years. The Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Tigray have provided a pretext for the government to be even more oppressive.

## SUDAN (10)

Sudan has re-entered the top 10 this year. In the 2023 reporting period, pressure on Christians in Sudan was extreme, and churches in the country have been facing enormous challenges. Christians do not enjoy equality in the communities where they live and are suffering high levels of violence. Power has been firmly held in the hands of the army leaders after the October 2021 coup that ended the power-sharing agreement with the civilian members of the transitional government.



Former Imam now Pastor from Nuba Mountains, Sudan





A church service in Cuba

### ALGERIA (19)

Algeria rose three places on the *Open Doors World Watch List*, which reflects growing government restrictions on churches in the country. Four new churches received orders to close and ceased activities during the 2023 reporting period, in addition to the 16 churches closed previously. This comes in a context of increasing difficulties for churches and national church organisations seeking to register with the government. Furthermore, more than 15 Christians were arrested and prosecuted on charges ranging from 'proselytism' to 'practising worship without prior approval' to 'shaking the faith of a Muslim' to 'poisoning the minds of youths'. Many pastors remain in prison.

### CUBA (27)

Cuba has risen ten places on the *Open Doors World Watch List*, from 37 to 27. This is due to a higher level of violence against Christians, along with increased discrimination in all spheres of life. After the widespread demonstrations which occurred in July and November 2021, the dictatorial regime intensified its repressive tactics against all Christian leaders and activists opposing Communist principles. Government measures included arrests, abductions, arbitrary fines, close surveillance, denials of licenses and religious visas, and physical or mental abuse.

### NICARAGUA (50)

Nicaragua's score rose sharply in the 2023 reporting period, and it is now in the top 50 countries. This reflects government repression which has escalated since the April 2018 protests. During the 2023 reporting period, President Ortega and his wife have tried to silence any dissenting voices. The church has been a particular target because of the reputation of authority and legitimacy it has in the country. Political reprisals against the church included:

- damage to churches
- the closure of Christian colleges and universities, church radio and TV stations, and Christian NGOs
- arbitrary detention
- the expulsion of religious leaders from the country.

Christians from different denominations, but especially those linked to the Roman Catholic Church, have faced monitoring, discrimination, defamation and other forms of hostility. The goal of these politically motivated religious freedom violations is to silence Christians, and to discredit the church and its leaders among the population.

# STORIES OF HOPE

## GROWING INTERNATIONAL ATTENTION ON INDIA

In October 2022, the UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Rights, Fernand de Varennes, urged the UN Security Council and Human Rights Council to investigate claims of the persecution of religious minorities and other human rights violations in India. Drawing on the findings of the 2021 report *Destructive Lies*, conducted by researchers at the London School of Economics and commissioned by Open Doors,<sup>22</sup> this was a key recommendation of the 2022 *Open Doors World Watch List* report.

De Varennes argued for an 'international investigative mechanism' comparable to investigations conducted in Syria, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Ethiopia, and condemned the violent rhetoric of Hindu extremists against religious minorities in India, as well as the Indian government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi for legislation such as the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, which, in his view, threatened the citizenship of millions from religious minorities.

The new UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Dr Nazila Ghanea, also noted in the same meeting that India had failed to respond to a series of UN communications on human rights for religious minorities in the country. Since 2017, there have been 23 such communications sent to India, compared to just one between 2012 and 2016. We are grateful to both UN Special Rapporteurs for their comments, and welcome Dr Ghanea to her new role.

The comments were made in the context of a webinar organised by Open Doors International, the World Evangelical Alliance, International Commission for Dalit Rights, Hindus for Human Rights, Indian American Muslim Council, and Justice for All. Subsequently, in India's Universal Periodic Review this year, many countries made significant recommendations on the rights of religious minorities in India, including the repeal of laws restricting freedom of religion or belief (e.g. anti-conversion laws), and urging action on discrimination against minorities.



The webinar organised by Open Doors International, the World Evangelical Alliance, International Commission for Dalit Rights, Hindus for Human Rights, Indian American Muslim Council, and Justice for All.

<sup>22</sup> Open Doors (2021) *Destructive Lies: Disinformation, speech that incites violence and discrimination against religious minorities in India*

Domestically, too, there are some opportunities arising for India to make improvements to the rights of minorities in the country. For example, following a preliminary hearing on 1 September 2022, on 6 December India's Supreme Court began considering evidence of the growing persecution of Christians in India.

In addition, India's Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment has asked a commission to investigate whether the Scheduled Caste benefit and government support can be extended to members of minority religions, including Christianity. The country's Constitution currently stipulates that no person who professes a religion different from Hinduism, Sikhism or Buddhism can be a member of a Scheduled Caste. This leaves a large number of India's poorest vulnerable to further hardship should they convert to Christianity.

At Open Doors, we welcome the steps that have been taken to investigate the persecution of Christians and other religious minorities in India, both within the country itself and at an international level. We continue to call for an international commission of inquiry so that these growing concerns can be addressed.

## THE PROMOTION OF TOLERANCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Following the signing of the Abraham Accords,<sup>23</sup> there has been a promotion of greater religious tolerance in Gulf States such as Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, where authorities are looking for ways to respond to the call for more religious freedom within a moderate Islamic framework.

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<sup>23</sup> United States Department of State – [The Abraham Accords](#)

The greater promotion of tolerance in these countries, alongside the narrative of 'national unity' in Egypt, helps to counter Islamic extremist currents and to create an environment that is more friendly towards Christians. This may prompt the states involved to take action against violent rhetoric directed at Christians – particularly historic or expatriate Christian communities.

However, radical elements in these countries remain, and it is too early to say whether greater tolerance will be long lasting, or whether it will lead to broader freedoms for the Christian community. Nonetheless, it is our hope that these are the tentative first steps in the direction of greater tolerance for Christians and other religious minorities.

## HOPE FOR THE MIDDLE EAST

Though Open Doors *Hope for the Middle East* campaign, 126 Centres of Hope have been established in Iraq – and there are plans for more. These Centres of Hope are places (often church buildings) where the local church can support their community – both Christians and others – practically and spiritually. The activities and provision differ depending on the context, but often include vital food and medical aid, Bible study and discipleship, training, income-generating projects and trauma care. While the numbers of Christians are greatly reduced in the Middle East, it's hard to overstate the impact that the Centres are having on bringing reconciliation and restoring hope for the future.

# THE PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIAN WOMEN AND GIRLS

Open Doors' research has continued to show that the persecution of Christians takes different forms for men and women, and when persecution leads to displacement, it exposes further gender-specific vulnerabilities.

Last year, we published a report entitled *Invisible*, which explored how persecutors exploit socio-cultural norms and values, often embedded within or facilitated by a legal system, to pressurise Christian men and women and, ultimately weaken the Christian community.<sup>24</sup> It highlighted numerous forms of persecution specific to men and women, and how drug-related gender-based violence, economic inequality and global crises have intensified persecution.

**'Persecutors see Christian women and girls as sexual objects and vehicles of shame.'**

Conflict-related sexual violence is one example of gender-specific religious persecution. Persecutors strategically target Christian women and girls to strike at the roots of an entire religious community. Persecutors see Christian women and girls as sexual objects and vehicles of shame. Specific attacks on Christian women can jeopardise the future of the community itself, because women are often targeted as those who bring up the next generation, with the explicit purpose of stemming the growth of the Christian population.

Women's bodies are also used as vehicles for imparting shame on the Christian community – particularly where the sexual purity of women is bound up with ideas of family honour and of virtue. Where honour and shame are part of the culture, survivors' families and communities may struggle to overcome the stigma attached to the abuse of women and girls. Women and girls who have endured

sexual abuse may return traumatised, but also be stigmatised, seen as a symbolic reminder of the power of perpetrators – especially if they return home pregnant or with young children. Sexual violence and forced marriage have consistently ranked as the top two vulnerabilities for Christian women and girls.

Along with other faith-based organisations and their leaders, Open Doors signed the Declaration of Humanity, which aims to mobilise religious leaders in opposition to stigmatising victims of conflict-related sexual violence. Following the International Ministerial Conference on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict held in London last November, we look forward to hearing how the UK Government intends to develop this work with religious leaders and local faith actors alike. As Jacqueline Isaac, one of the authors of the Declaration notes: "The UK's continuous commitment to dialogue between freedom of religion or belief and PSVI has shown an unmatched leadership in this space."<sup>25</sup>

**'Where honour and shame are part of the culture, survivors families and communities may struggle to overcome the stigma attached to the abuse of women and girls.'**

Contexts of violence also specifically harm men and boys, who are subject to high levels of violence, and may also be conscripted into violent groups, be they Islamist extremists or drug-related gangs. High levels of state oppression may also have a serious impact on men. Open Doors research has found, for example, that men in North Korea are under even further heightened surveillance, making it difficult for them to flee the country.

<sup>24</sup> Open Doors (1 March 2022) [The Gender Report: Invisible](#)

<sup>25</sup> Open Doors (30 Nov 2020) [See Change: Interview with Jacqueline Isaac](#), architect of the Declaration of Humanity

## FATEMA, MEERA & PREETHA

Life was never easy for Fatema. After she converted to Christianity, she discovered that her husband had married another woman in secret. She took her children and returned to live with her parents. While she was fortunate as a single mother to be accepted by her family, the wider community were less forgiving and saw her as a 'failed' woman.

Despite the hostility, Fatema did everything she could to provide for her family. On the way back from one of her adult literacy classes she was attacked. Her former brother-in-law took a large bamboo stick to her, breaking her legs. He has openly despised her since her conversion to Christianity and believes that he can get away with beating this single mother.

Unfortunately, ritual beatings and honour killings are not uncommon for women who convert to Christianity from Islam. As men are often seen as being the natural provider in these cultures, it is not uncommon for abuse against women to be used to punish men or shame entire communities. In India, for example, after one man was accused of cattle trading, a mob of 100 people attacked his village.

Meera describes the moment that a large group of vigilantes came to attack the village. They beat the men and dragged the women out of their houses. The women were publicly sexually 'harassed', with the large group chanting that the entire community needed to be punished for the actions of this man. Again, it is unfortunately not uncommon for women to be a conduit through which the wider community is punished.



Preetha [name changed for her security] was beaten for her faith by an extremist Hindu mob, then refused hospital treatment because she's a Christian



## BROTHER ANDREW – A LIFE OF COURAGEOUS AND CONTAGIOUS FAITH

On 22 September 2022 the founder of Open Doors, Andrew Van de Bijl, died aged 94. In 1955 'Brother Andrew' travelled to Poland. The trip was to change his life. Behind the Iron Curtain, he discovered churches desperately in need of Bibles, support and prayer. Above all, he found a group of Christians who felt isolated and alone and who thought the rest of the world had forgotten them.

And so began his work to strengthen and support the persecuted church. Made famous by his best-selling book *God's Smuggler*, he inspired many with stories of his daring missionary adventures. Often slipping past border guards with Bibles hidden in his blue Volkswagen Beetle, he occasionally had his car meticulously searched but with no Bibles being found, despite boxes of Bibles lying open on the back seat. Selling more than 10 million copies, the book has now been translated into 35 languages. It continues to inspire missionary work and religious freedom across the world.

Both prayerfully and practically, the work that Brother Andrew began is also credited with playing a part in securing freedom in Eastern Europe, which began with the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia. The spark for the initial protests which would eventually

sweep across the Soviet Bloc was generated by the underground (literally) Christian publication Samizdat – which was made possible by Open Doors operatives smuggling each part of a printing machine into a secret location beneath a house in Bratislava. The rest is history.

**“If I could live my life over again, I would be a lot more radical.”**

Born in the Netherlands in 1928, as the son of a poor blacksmith and a disabled mother, Andrew's experiences growing up under the Nazi occupation of Holland undoubtedly influenced his passion for freedom, which would crystallise when he became a Christian in 1950 aged 22. It was while studying theology in Glasgow that he first felt called to support the church in the Soviet Bloc countries. “I promised God that as often as I could lay my hands on a Bible, I would bring it to these children of His behind the wall that men built,” he recalled, “to every ... country where God opened the door long enough for me to slip through.”

From these beginnings, Brother Andrew helped to found Open Doors and extended the work to support persecuted Christians in the Middle East, Latin

America, Africa and South Asia. Much of this work involved building relationships with leaders from other faiths in order to secure peace. He travelled extensively in the Muslim-majority world, talking to the leaders of Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Hezbollah. Alongside this reconciliation work, he also helped to break Christian religious barriers by preaching in Catholic and Coptic Orthodox churches.

**“Every door is open to proclaim Christ, as long as you are willing to go and not worried about coming back.”**

Today, Open Doors operates in more than 70 countries. As a non-denominational mission supporting persecuted Christians, we work with local partners to distribute Bibles and Christian literature, give discipleship training and provide practical support, such as emergency relief aid and trauma care.



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Importantly, we remain focussed on Brother Andrew’s core mission to support both the visible church, which is experiencing persecution and discrimination, and also the underground church – the millions of Christians who are forced to meet in secret.

The influence of Brother Andrew endures today in the UK. It could be seen in the origins of the Bishop of Truro’s Independent Review for the UK Foreign Secretary of Foreign and Commonwealth Office Support for Persecuted Christians in 2018. The then-Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt wrote to Brother Andrew, saying, “I would like to express my personal thanks for the extraordinary and courageous support you have provided to the persecuted church throughout the years. Having read *God’s Smuggler* as a child, I know that your story has inspired millions of people around the world to speak out on behalf of the voiceless and suffering.”

During his extraordinary life, Brother Andrew received many honours and awards. He was knighted by Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands and, in 1997, he received the World Evangelical Fellowship’s Religious Liberty Award, in recognition of his lifetime service to the persecuted church. But the recognition that pleased him most was found in the copies of the KGB reports which he obtained after the fall of the Iron Curtain. These contained more than 150 pages about him, detailing his work in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. They illustrated how, despite having lots of information about Brother Andrew, they were not able to stop his work.

He is often recalled saying, “Our very mission is called ‘Open Doors’ because we believe that any door is open, anytime and anywhere. I literally believe that. Every door is open to go in and proclaim Christ, as long as you are willing to go and are not worried about coming back.” When asked if he had any regrets about his life’s work, Brother Andrew said, “If I could live my life over again, I would be a lot more radical.”

# THE CHALLENGE TO THE **UK GOVERNMENT**

This report has shown how Christians are subjected to daily discrimination and varying levels of targeted violence around the world. In the face of such violence, many Christians are forced to flee, or find themselves more vulnerable to global crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic. We can see the results when such violence has run its course: from Taliban-ruled Afghanistan to the desolation left by ISIS in Iraq to the vast displacements occurring in Nigeria. What's more, this violence impacts Christians who are already vulnerable: due to poverty, gender-specific reasons or a denial of access to justice. The Church is a force for good in the world, and the depletion or eradication of Christianity leaves countries infinitely worse off.

Now is the time for decisive action to address this persecution, and to avert the humanitarian crises on the horizon. We urge the UK Government to build on the commitment it has shown already to Freedom of Religion or Belief, seen for example in its hosting of last year's FoRB Ministerial. We also welcome the progress that has been made on implementing the recommendations of the Bishop of Truro's Review of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Support for Persecuted Christians, and hope that the FCDO will continue to be guided by its recommendations. This is an encouraging beginning.

Nonetheless, as a fundamental human right, Freedom of Religion or Belief cannot be dealt with by one review or conference alone. To face new challenges and changing conditions, the protection and promotion of religious freedom and other human rights requires an unwavering focus and concrete action. We hope that the UK will take seriously the recommendations which follow, as part of its work on such new challenges: from responding to digital persecution to forming new trade relationships. Even as the UK faces its own diplomatic dilemmas amidst challenging economic times, it is our hope and prayer that the Government will not forget the unimaginable violence faced by Christians around the world – and that it will be bold in taking opportunities to address it, while such opportunities remain available.





# RECOMMENDATIONS

## We urge the UK government to act on the findings of this research and to:

- Promote and protect Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) as a leading priority in foreign policy and diplomatic engagement, both at a bilateral level, and through the UK's role at the UN Security Council and Human Rights Council.
- Build on the progress made through the Truro Review and the International Ministerial on FoRB by establishing the role of Prime Minister's Special Envoy on FoRB permanently in statute, and by giving this role substantive departmental resourcing.
- Work with partners in international institutions to raise the persecution of Christians with other governments around the world (for example, by promoting an international commission of inquiry on the rights of religious minorities in India, following concerns expressed during that country's Universal Periodic Review).<sup>26</sup>
- Use the opportunities presented by trade negotiations in the coming years to promote human rights and FoRB around the world, and demonstrate commitment to this by publishing a trade strategy which sets out explicitly how trade deals may promote human rights.
- Ensure that UK support for those who have fled persecution as refugees or IDPs on grounds of religion or belief addresses the specific vulnerabilities of these religious minorities, and take proactive steps to support persecuted Christians in accessing support for refugees (including the Afghan Citizens' Resettlement Scheme).
- Increase engagement with governments in West Africa and with Nigeria in particular as a matter of urgency, strengthening cooperation to ensure that security for Christians is prioritised in order to address the disastrous regional deterioration.

- Recognise the gender-specific nature of the persecution of women and girls from religious minorities, including in the area of conflict-related sexual violence. We recommend that the UK include targeted programming and aid for these survivors, with faith clearly recognised as a factor of vulnerability.
- Acknowledge human rights concerns around emerging technology (e.g. by including explicit references to digital persecution in the Integrated Review, and in the International Technology Strategy), taking the lead on developing international standards and ethical frameworks around the export and use of such technology around the world.

## We urge Parliamentarians to take steps to support Christians facing persecution by:

- Using oral and written questions to encourage the government to maintain its commitment to FoRB.
- Joining the All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief.
- Speaking out publicly and contributing to debates about Christian persecution wherever possible.
- Accessing Open Doors briefing materials to keep informed about specific countries and persecution issues.

<sup>26</sup> Religion News Service (11 October 2022) [UN experts call on India to repeal legislation discriminating against religious minorities](#)

# OPEN DOORS **ADVOCACY**

Open Doors UK & Ireland is part of a global NGO, operating in over 70 countries for more than 65 years with a call to 'strengthen what remains.' Open Doors' advocacy work supports Christians by protecting and promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) as defined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This covers both private belief and public practice.

As Open Doors' advocacy team, we operate in three main spheres:

- Internationally: at the United Nations and European Union, as well as engagement with other NGOs and international institutions.
- Nationally: in legislatures worldwide, including the UK Parliament.
- Locally: offering legal support and human rights training for persecuted Christians globally.
- Open Doors has continued to highlight the plight of persecuted Christians to MPs and Ministers, with our research gaining more attention this year than ever before. We play an active role in the All-Party Parliamentary Group on International Freedom of Religion or Belief as a stakeholder, and we also continue to be a stakeholder in the UK FoRB Forum.

This year, in addition to our regular parliamentary and policy work, Open Doors has played a vital role in the International Ministerial Conference on FoRB, attended by representatives from over 100 governments. During this conference, our CEO, Henrietta Blyth, took part in a panel discussion, and Open Doors representatives were able to meet then-Foreign Secretary, Liz Truss, and Minister for Human Rights, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon. Additionally, Open Doors ran, or co-ran, fringe events – one in Liverpool Cathedral, two in Parliament and one at the conference itself, where we launched our new parliamentary report, *Digital Persecution: The New Frontier for Freedom of Religion or Belief*. These Ministerial events were accompanied by art installations highlighting the persecution of Christian women and girls.

Internationally, Open Doors has been involved in advocacy at the United Nations as a contributor to India's Universal Periodic Review process, highlighting persecution of religious minorities and the rise of religious nationalism.

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

If you are a parliamentarian, civil servant, third-sector worker or journalist and would like to receive Open Doors briefing materials, or would like further information, please contact Open Doors UK & Ireland's Advocacy team at [advocacy@opendoorsuk.org](mailto:advocacy@opendoorsuk.org)

# RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Open Doors is committed to the highest level of research and reporting. The *Open Doors World Watch List*, produced annually, is the product of intensive year-round monitoring in collaboration with the World Watch Research Unit (WWRU). We have worked diligently over the years to create a ranking system that accurately portrays Christian persecution globally, resulting in a rounded and nuanced ranking that remains trusted around the world. The reporting period for the *Open Doors World Watch List 2023* was 1<sup>st</sup> October 2021 – 30<sup>th</sup> September 2022.

Open Doors works with in-country networks and partners in order to collect detailed data on the nature of the various pressures faced by Christian communities worldwide. These datasets are then meticulously verified and analysed by external experts before their use. Due to the nature of persecution, many reports, particularly in nations such as North Korea, China, Libya and Myanmar, remain unverifiable. As such, these reports go unrecorded, meaning that findings are likely to underrepresent the real scope of Christian persecution. However, Open Doors has consistently chosen to under-estimate rather than over-estimate in order to ensure the highest levels of credibility and accuracy.

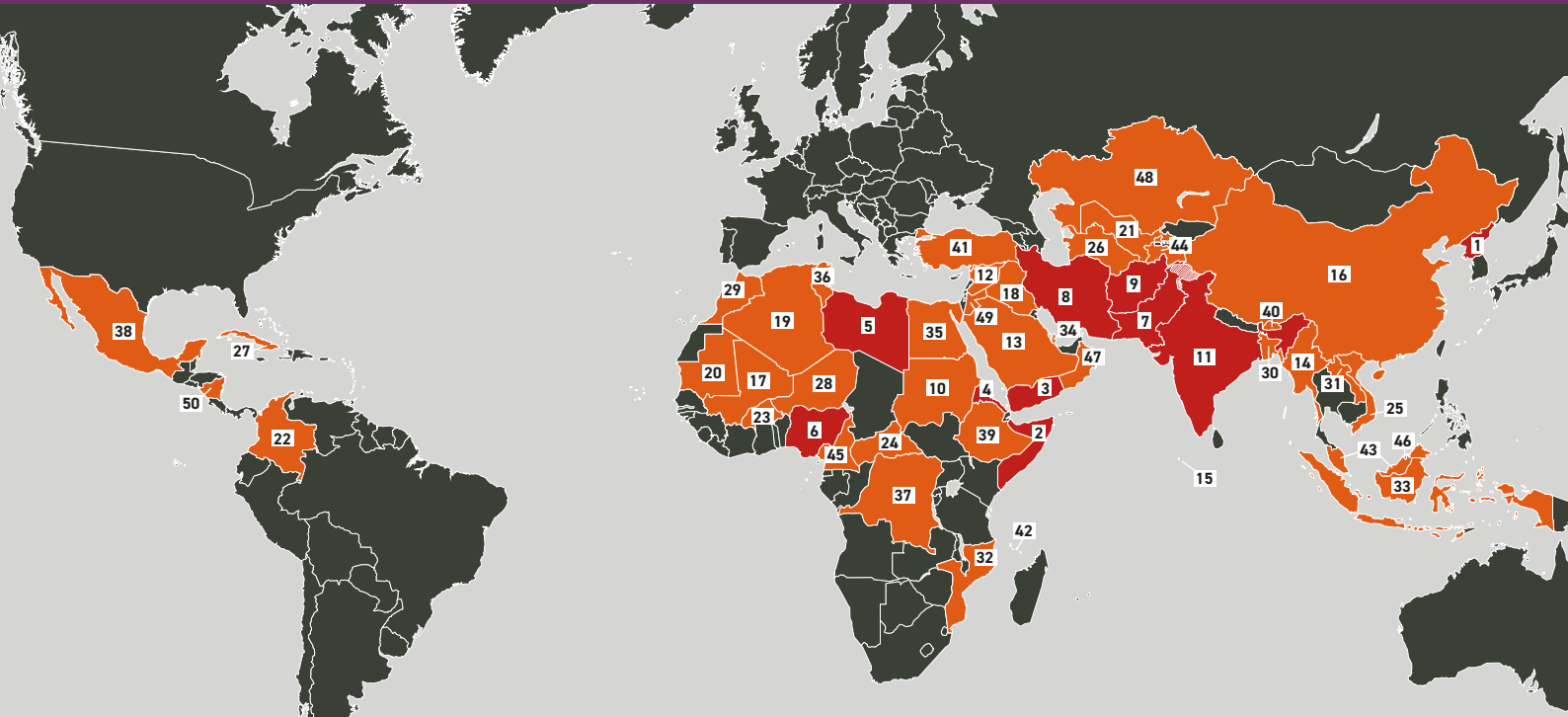
The data collected covers freedom of religion for Christians in five areas of life: private, family, community, national and church. These five areas comprise what we refer to as the ‘squeeze’ (i.e. non-violent) component of persecution – daily pressures faced by Christians in their homes, churches and civil participation. Violence against Christians, what we refer to as the ‘smash’ element of persecution, is measured separately. While violence against Christians remains the most ‘eye-catching’ form of persecution, it is, thankfully, rare that the ‘smash’ outweighs the ‘squeeze’ in World Watch List Countries (with notable exceptions, e.g. Nigeria). For each country surveyed, scores for the six categories are designated and then aggregated in order to determine a score out of a possible hundred. These scores determine a country’s ranking on the *Open Doors World Watch List*.

In addition to primary research, secondary data collated from academic sources, reliable news outlets and NGOs are cross-referenced with primary research in order to ensure the widest survey of available data and the most reliable output. Furthermore, academics and independent experts input on findings presented by the WWRU. These methods have been independently audited by the International Institute of Religious Freedom to ensure the highest levels of accuracy, transparency and consistency.

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

Persecution is defined as “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians... [including, but not limited to] restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalisation, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.”

# THE 2023 OPEN DOORS WORLD WATCH LIST TOP 50



- |               |                 |                             |                   |               |
|---------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|-------------------|---------------|
| 1 NORTH KOREA | 11 INDIA        | 21 UZBEKISTAN               | 31 LAOS           | 41 TURKEY     |
| 2 SOMALIA     | 12 SYRIA        | 22 COLOMBIA                 | 32 MOZAMBIQUE     | 42 COMOROS    |
| 3 YEMEN       | 13 SAUDI ARABIA | 23 BURKINA FASO             | 33 INDONESIA      | 43 MALAYSIA   |
| 4 ERITREA     | 14 MYANMAR      | 24 CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC | 34 QATAR          | 44 TAJIKISTAN |
| 5 LIBYA       | 15 MALDIVES     | 25 VIETNAM                  | 35 EGYPT          | 45 CAMEROON   |
| 6 NIGERIA     | 16 CHINA        | 26 TURKMENISTAN             | 36 TUNISIA        | 46 BRUNEI     |
| 7 PAKISTAN    | 17 MALI         | 27 CUBA                     | 37 CONGO DR (DRC) | 47 OMAN       |
| 8 IRAN        | 18 IRAQ         | 28 NIGER                    | 38 MEXICO         | 48 KAZAKHSTAN |
| 9 AFGHANISTAN | 19 ALGERIA      | 29 MOROCCO                  | 39 ETHIOPIA       | 49 JORDAN     |
| 10 SUDAN      | 20 MAURITANIA   | 30 BANGLADESH               | 40 BHUTAN         | 50 NICARAGUA  |

■ EXTREME LEVELS OF PERSECUTION
 ■ VERY HIGH LEVELS OF PERSECUTION



SERVING PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS WORLDWIDE

[opendoorsuk.org](https://opendoorsuk.org) | [advocacy@opendoorsuk.org](mailto:advocacy@opendoorsuk.org)

Open Doors UK & I, PO Box 6, Witney, OX29 6WG

