

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2024

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

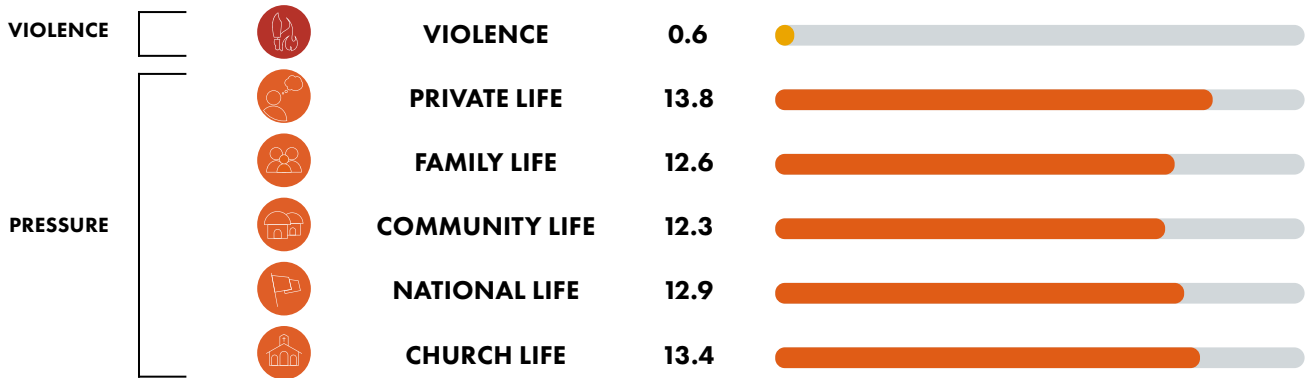
WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**46**

## TAJIKISTAN



©Alamy

### LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).

### Key findings

The government puts pressure on all “deviating” groups by tightening existing laws and enforcing them strictly. Indigenous Christians with a Muslim background bear the brunt of rights violations, both at the hands of the State and from family and the community. Russian Orthodox churches experience the fewest problems from the government, as they do not usually attempt to make contact with the Tajik population. The youth law has left Christians (and other religious minorities) in legal limbo, as it is not clear what is still allowed.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

President Emomali Rahmon

### POPULATION

10,162,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

63,100<sup>1</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Islam

### GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



## Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	63,100	0.6
Muslims	9,966,000	98.1
Atheists	15,700	0.2
Agnostics	97,100	1.0

Source<sup>2</sup>

Tajikistan has the highest percentage of Muslims in Central Asia, but it would be wrong to call Tajikistan a Muslim country. Seventy years of atheism during the Soviet era have left their mark, and the secular government keeps Islam firmly under control. Most citizens follow Islamic culture rather than strict teachings. Most Christians are Russian Orthodox (ethnic Russians); around 3,000 are Tajik converts to Christianity. No religious activities beyond state-run and controlled institutions are allowed and Protestants in particular (who are seen as extremists, unlike Orthodox Christians) experience significant violations. Tajikistan shares a long border with Afghanistan, which brings concerns of infiltration by radical Islamic groups, as well as trafficking of opium. IS activity has been the cause of some killings, as listed by [UK Government travel advice/terrorism](#) (accessed on 7 January 2023).

A new law regulating religious affairs was implemented in August 2011. It prohibits all religious youth work with citizens under 18 years of age. This had a huge impact on church activities since it is estimated that about 50% of all Christians are in this age category. In January 2018, [amendments to the law on religion](#) came into force, which included allowing the state to increase religious organizations' requirements to report all their activities and seek state approval for the appointment of all imams. On 6 October 2021, Tajikistan introduced new punitive measures against the "underground" religious education of children. Amendments were made to the penal code, according to which deprivation of liberty for up to three years is foreseen in the case of illegal religious education, including lessons given via the internet.

Most Christians belong to ethnic minorities - Russian and Ukrainian. The number of Christians decreased sharply in the 1990s due to the wave of Russian and Ukrainian emigration from Tajikistan in the early independence period.

## How the situation varies by region

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

<sup>1</sup> Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

<sup>2</sup> Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

## Who is affected?

### Communities of expatriate Christians

These are not involuntarily isolated groups, and so have not been counted as a separate category in WWL analysis.

### Historical Christian communities

Historical Christians include the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). They are not involved in evangelism among Tajiks so they can function without much interference since the Tajik regime does not consider them a threat. Also, the Tajik government does not wish to provoke Russia by attacking the ROC.

### Converts to Christianity

Christian converts with a Muslim background are under strong pressure from family and community as conversion is seen as an ethnic, national and religious betrayal, which brings shame upon the family.

### Non-traditional Christian communities

After converts, this category experiences the second most violations (raids, threats, arrests and fines) due to active evangelism. Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal groups suffer from many raids, threats, arrests and fines by the authorities.

## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### Dictatorial paranoia

Only state-controlled institutions are allowed. Pressure from the authorities has increased since 2015, causing a rise in the number of raids on meetings, Christian materials confiscated and an increase in Christians being fined and interrogated. Protestants are regarded as dangerous followers of an alien sect with the aim of destroying the current political system.

### Islamic oppression blended with clan oppression

If indigenous citizens (who are Muslim) convert to Christianity, they experience pressure and occasionally physical violence from their families and communities to force them to return to their former faith, especially in rural areas. Some converts are put in domestic incarceration or expelled from their homes. Many choose to keep their faith a secret.



©Alamy

## How are men and women differently affected?

### Women

Men and women are equal under law, but traditional culture puts women in a subservient position to men and domestic violence is widespread. Female converts from Islam are particularly vulnerable to intolerance, discrimination and violence, as women do not have the independence or freedom to choose their own religion. Women risk house arrest, beatings, rejection, harassment and forced marriage. If already married, domestic violence and forced divorce is likely. The state also prohibits religious clothes or symbols, including those worn by female Christians.

#### Female typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family (house arrest)
- Violence – physical
- Violence – verbal

### Men

Like much of Central Asia, men in Tajikistan normally hold leadership roles within families and churches, and are therefore targeted in this capacity. They are pressured by the police via interrogation, fines and the disruption of meetings. State violations also include searches, detention, interrogation, confiscation, fines and imprisonment. When detained, men suffer verbal and physical abuse, threats, beatings and pressure to inform. Known converts can lose jobs and suffer beatings, discrimination and ostracization at the hands of their communities and families. Mandatory military service also exposes Christians to persecution.

#### Male typical pressure points:

- Denied access to social community/networks
- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Economic harassment via work/job/business
- Economic harassment via fines
- Imprisonment by government
- Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
- Travel bans/restrictions on movement
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – verbal

## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2024	46	66
2023	44	66
2022	45	65
2021	33	66
2020	31	65

*The score for Tajikistan in WWL 2024 was the same as in WWL 2023: 66 points. The government imposes many restrictions on church activities. One church was shut down, and the Youth Law in particular has left Christians (and other religious minorities) in legal limbo, as it is not clear what is still allowed.*



## Examples of violence in the reporting period

No violent incidents were reported during the WWL 2024 reporting period. However, as noted by the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Tajikistan): “Individuals outside government continued to state they were reluctant to discuss issues such as societal respect for religious diversity, including abuses or discrimination based on religious belief, due to fear of government harassment. Civil society representatives said discussion of religion in general, especially relations among different religious groups, remained a subject they avoided.”

According to USCIRF 2023 Tajikistan CPC: “In May [2022], government officials told Protestant Christian leaders that the government would not register any new churches.”

WWL Year	Christians physically or mentally abused
2024	45
2023	37

*This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - for full results see the violence section of the Full Country Dossier. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10\*, 100\* or 1000\*) is given which in reality could be significantly higher.*

### Private life

Conversion is officially allowed, but it is viewed as a betrayal of family and culture. It can lead to violence and pressure, as community members try to make converts recant. Many converts choose to keep their faith secret.

### Family life

When a parent converts to Christianity, family members will try to take custody of the children to raise them according to Islamic principles. The law does not permit under 18s to take part in activities linked to a church or mosque. Christian children experience slander from community members, and Muslim children are often kept from having contact with them. All children are required to study “History of Religions” at high school, which is taught from a Sunni Muslim perspective.

### Community life

Non-Orthodox Christians are monitored by members of their community and local state officials by methods including phone-tapping. They can be harassed, interrogated and threatened. This is particularly true for known converts.

### National life

The Constitution protects religious freedom. However, the Religion Law of 2009/2011 (with its amendments in January 2018) requires compulsory registration of all religious organizations. Any church activities

by non-registered groups are illegal. There is a ban on unlicensed religious education and censorship of any religious materials. The law on parents’ responsibilities prohibits young people under 18 from participating in the activities of religious organizations.

### Church life

The August 2011 laws prohibit any church youth work. The government must approve the production, importation, sale and distribution of religious materials by registered religious groups, which in effect is a ban on all religious materials used by unregistered religious groups. There are restrictions on foreign Christians visiting Tajikistan. They need a special visa, which is very difficult to obtain



# International obligations & rights violated

Tajikistan has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights under 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)

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

- Christian converts are ostracized and faced with opposition and violence by their families and communities (ICCPR Art.18)
- Christian children are not allowed to participate in church activities (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)
- Ownership of religious literature is severely restricted beyond international permitted limitations (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)
- Christian female converts are forced to marry non-Christian men and pressured to renounce their faith (ICCPR Art. 23; CEDAW Art. 16 and ICESCR Art.10)

## Situation of other religious minorities

Tajikistan has a record of violating freedom of religion or belief and related human rights such as freedom of expression and association. There is no focus on any specific religious group – all (Muslims, Christians, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Jews, Bahais etc.) suffer under a high level of state surveillance and oppression. According to USCIRF 2023 Tajikistan CPC: “The Tajik government continued to severely repress the country’s Muslim majority. Children under the age of 18 are barred from visiting mosques and all other public religious activities except funerals. Private religious education is banned, and children are only allowed to receive religious instruction from their parents at home. Since 2014, the government has appointed all imams, required them to wear state-issued religious garments, and strictly dictated their sermons. People under the age of 35 are not allowed to perform the Hajj.”



## Open Doors in Tajikistan

Open Doors provides immediate aid to Central Asian Christians when they are imprisoned, excluded from families and communities, and deprived of livelihood and employment because of their faith in Christ. Open Doors also strengthens the persecuted church in Central Asia primarily through:

- Literature distribution
- Prayer support
- Biblical training
- Children/youth training
- Women ministry
- Presence ministry
- Social and medical ministry
- Vocational training and microcredit
- Social-economic development projects, like rehabilitation centers for children, men, and women



### About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the Full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2024 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 01 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- All brief country profiles can be accessed under 'Advocacy resources' on the research pages of the Open Doors International website, along with the more detailed Full Country Dossiers and the latest update of [WWL Methodology](#). These are also available at the [Open Doors Analytical](#) website (password: freedom).

*All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.*

---