

Introducing *World Watch List 2018*

World Watch Research Team, Open Doors¹

The *World Watch List* is Open Doors' annual ranking of the 50 countries where Christians experience the most extreme persecution. Published every January, it is a unique, in-depth record of the places where faith in Jesus costs the most, helping to demonstrate the enormous scale of the persecution being faced by Christians around the world.

Measuring the scale and severity of persecution is a complex task. It is not always clear if and to what extent pressure felt by Christians, or even violence against them, is directly related to them being Christian. Sometimes, just living in a chaotic world creates substantial amounts of suffering for Christians and others alike.

The *World Watch List 2018* figures are from the reporting period 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017. Research methods and results have been independently audited by the International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF).²

This global survey is based on a comprehensive scoring system that measures the degree of freedom Christians have, to live out their faith in five spheres of life – private, family, community, national and church life – plus a sixth sphere measuring levels of violence.

The methodology provides 'persecution points' for each sphere. Because of the *World Watch List* process, each country gets a specific final score and is ranked accordingly.³

What is Christian persecution?

Open Doors understands persecution as 'any hostility experienced as a result of

one's identification with Christ'.

Hostility, of course, takes many forms, from insults and abuse, to discrimination in education and the workplace, to outright violence. Open Doors researchers characterize the different types as 'smash' and 'squeeze'. When it comes to killing off people's faith, we might say it's the difference between being beaten to death and being suffocated.

Christians are 'smashed' through violence or aggression – rapes, kidnappings, forcible evictions, killings and church burnings. This kind of persecution is most visible to the outside world.

But the majority of persecuted Christians are being 'squeezed' to death. They live in societies where everything is against them: – the law, the government, the media, and even their own families.

Measuring persecution

The *World Watch List* measures the degree of freedom Christians have in five key areas of life – private, family, community, national and church life. These are then added to the amount of violence they experience to provide a final score.

Private life. How free is a Christian to simply 'believe'? Is conversion to Christianity allowed? Can they worship privately and possess religious materials? Do they have freedom of conscience and thought?

Family life. How free are Christians to express their faith within their family? Will they be thrown out? Is it possible to live as a Christian family, to celebrate Christian marriages and funerals?

Community life. Can Christians live without harassment and discrimination in their local communities? How does their faith affect their education or employment? Will they be driven out of their village?

National life. Are national institutions – such as the government, legal system and media – opposed to Christianity? Is it illegal for Christians to express their faith? Can they call themselves Christian on their ID or passport? Will the police or security forces come calling?

Church life. Are Christians allowed to meet? Can they build churches? And if they can, are they heavily monitored? Can Christian leaders be trained? Are Bibles freely available?

Violence. Are Christians attacked mentally or physically? Are they arrested, abducted, tortured, imprisoned, or even killed? Do they face sexual harassment?

WHY ARE CHRISTIANS PERSECUTED?

Why are Christians persecuted, though? What is it that drives persecution? Open Doors has identified eight main 'engines' of persecution that describe why Christians are persecuted in a particular area or setting:

- *Islamic extremism* – attempts to bring the country or the world under the 'House of Islam' through violent or non-violent actions.

- *Religious nationalism* – attempts to conquer the nation for one's religion. Mainly Hinduism and Buddhism, but also Orthodox Judaism or other religions.

- *Ethnic antagonism* – attempts to force the continuing influence of age-old norms and values shaped in 'tribal' context. Often comes in the form of traditional religion or something similar.

- *Denominational protectionism* – attempts to maintain one's Christian denomination as the only legitimate or dominant expression of Christianity in the country. In most cases this Christian denomination is the majority Christian denomination.

- *Communist and post-Communist oppression* – attempts to maintain Communism as a prescriptive ideology and / or controls the church through a system of registration and oversight that has come from Communism.

- *Secular intolerance* – attempts to eradicate religion from the public and private domain, and to impose an atheistic form of secularism as a new governing ideology.

- *Organized corruption and crime* – attempts to create a climate of impunity, anarchy, and corruption as a means for self-enrichment.

- *Dictatorial paranoia* – does anything to maintain power; not specifically focused on realizing a vision.

GLOBAL TRENDS

There are also some key global trends:

- More than 200 million believers in the 50 countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian experience high levels of persecution because of their faith.

- Over 3,000 Christians have been killed for their faith in the 2018 reporting period, more than twice as many as in the previous reporting period.

- Each of the top 11 *World Watch List* countries are now classified as places of extreme persecution – this is more countries than ever before in the 26 years of the *World Watch List*.

- Libya has returned to the top ten.
- Eritrea has moved up from ten to six.
- India has risen from 15 to 11
- Egypt has moved from 21 to 17

North Korea is number one again, but only just. For the 17th consecutive year, North Korea is the most dangerous place in the world to be a Christian. But, tragically, other countries are catching up: only three persecution points separate the top three countries – North Korea, Afghanistan, and Somalia.

Hindu and Buddhist Nationalism is sweeping across Asia. The rise in Hindu nationalism in India has spilled over into Nepal, which has leapt into the list at number 25. Buddhist nationalism drives much of the persecution in Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and Myanmar.

Islamic State is moving home. As it is driven from Syria and Iraq, the so-called Islamic State (IS) has sought new homes. In the Middle East IS fighters have sought refuge in Turkey, Egypt and Libya. But IS support is also rising in Bangladesh. In the Philippines an IS-inspired group took over the city of Marawi, especially targeting the Christians.

Radical Islam is taking root in Africa. While violent jihadists continue to attack Christians in places like Egypt, Kenya and Nigeria, many Muslim majority countries are legitimizing more radical models of Islam. The result is that believers in places like Sudan, Somalia and Tunisia have virtually no space to express their faith.

Women are easy targets. Gender-based violence continues to be a weapon of choice among Christian persecutors. Rape, abduction and forced marriage are frighteningly common in places like Pakistan, Egypt, Nigeria, CAR and even Kenya and India.

Christians are caught in the crossfire of the Sunni-Shia conflict. The under-reported conflict between Sunni and Shia Muslims is driving the fighting in places like Yemen and Iraq. But where Sunnis and

Shias are fighting each other, the Christians suffer. They are easy targets, hated by both sides.

Good news

Despite all this, there is good news. In some countries, like Tanzania, the situation has improved to the point that they are no longer in the top 50. In Syria and Iraq, some areas have been recaptured from IS and other militants, meaning that Christians can return to their homes.

Perhaps the best news is that more and more people are waking up to the reality of extreme persecution. The *World Watch List* is more than just a list – it will help you not only to pray for the persecuted church, but also to speak up for those whose voice is being silenced, and to take action to help those in need of love and support.

The truth is that the persecuted church is not merely surviving, it is active and alive. In these 50 countries – and many more – Christians are daring to demonstrate the life-changing reality of the Kingdom of God.

Open Doors' secret network

But the challenges faced by these believers are increasing day by day – and they need the support of the wider body of Christ to help them stand firm and be a light to their nations.

In over 50 countries around the world, Open Doors' underground networks are providing these believers with Bibles and Christian literature, theological training, emergency relief, trauma care, livelihood training and advocacy support.

Will you consider joining the global secret network that delivers hope and strength to persecuted Christians worldwide? Your regular prayers and gifts could make a real difference to Christians

who are facing extreme persecution, enabling Open Doors to be there to support them for as long as they need us.

Appendix:

Diagram 1: Persecution engines acting as vehicles for the different elementary human impulses seeking exclusive, absolute power⁴

Diagram 2: Eight Persecution engines and their corresponding societal Power dynamics⁵

Notes

1. This summary was provided by Stig Magne Heitmann (Open Doors Norway), with material from <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/> and <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/>.
2. See further <https://www.iirf.eu/>.
3. For the ranking and the detailed country analysis, see <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/>.
4. See <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/about-the-ranking/>.
5. See <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/about-the-ranking/>.