

# CHRISTIANITY TODAY

## The 50 Countries Where It's Most Dangerous to Follow Jesus in 2021

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*Latest report on Christian persecution finds 3 in 4 martyrs are in Nigeria, ranked among 10 worst persecutors for first time.*

Every day, 13 Christians worldwide are killed because of their faith.

Every day, 12 churches or Christian buildings are attacked.

And every day, 12 Christians are unjustly arrested or imprisoned, and another 5 are abducted.

So reports the 2021 World Watch List (WWL), the latest annual accounting from Open Doors of the top 50 countries where Christians are the most persecuted for following Jesus.

"You might think the [list] is all about oppression. ... But the [list] is really all about resilience," stated David Curry, president and CEO of Open Doors USA, introducing the [report](#) released today.

"The numbers of God's people who are suffering should mean the Church is dying—that Christians are keeping quiet, losing their faith, and turning away from one another," he stated. "But that's not what's happening. Instead, in living color, we see the words of God recorded in the prophet Isaiah: 'I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert'" (Isa. 43:19, ESV).

The listed nations contain 309 million Christians living in places with very high or extreme levels of persecution, up from 260 million in last year's list.

Another 31 million could be added from the 24 nations that fall just outside the top 50—such as Cuba, Sri Lanka, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—for a ratio of 1 in 8 Christians worldwide facing persecution. This includes 1 in 6 believers in Africa and 2 out of 5 in Asia.

Last year, 45 nations scored high enough to register "very high" persecution levels on Open Doors's 84-question matrix. This year, for the first time in 29 years of tracking, all 50 qualified—as did 4 more nations that fell just outside the cutoff.

Open Doors identified three main trends driving last year's increase:

- "COVID-19 acted as a catalyst for religious persecution through relief discrimination, forced conversion, and as justification for increasing surveillance and censorship."
- "Extremist attacks opportunistically spread further throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, from Nigeria and Cameroon to Burkina Faso, Mali, and beyond."
- "Chinese censorship systems continue to propagate and spread to emerging surveillance states."

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Open Doors has monitored Christian persecution worldwide since 1992. North Korea has ranked No. 1 for 20 years, since 2002 when the watch list began.

The 2021 version tracks the time period from November 1, 2019 to October 31, 2020, and is compiled from grassroots reports by Open Doors workers in more than 60 countries.

The purpose of the annual WWL rankings—which have chronicled how [North Korea now has competition](#) as persecution [gets worse and worse](#)—is to guide prayers and to [aim for more effective anger](#) while showing persecuted believers that [they are not forgotten](#).

### **Where are Christians most persecuted today?**

This year the top 10 worst persecutors are relatively unchanged. After North Korea is Afghanistan, followed by Somalia, Libya, Pakistan, Eritrea, Yemen, Iran, Nigeria, and India.

Nigeria entered the top 10 for the first time, after maxing out Open Doors's metric for violence. The nation, with Africa's largest Christian population, ranks No. 9 overall but is second behind only Pakistan in terms of violence, and ranks No. 1 in the number of Christians killed for reasons related to their faith.

Sudan left the top 10 for the first time in six years, after abolishing the death penalty for apostasy and guaranteeing—on paper at least—freedom of religion in its new constitution after three decades of Islamic law. Yet it remains No. 13 on the list, as Open Doors researchers noted Christians from Muslim backgrounds still face attacks, ostracization, and discrimination from their families and communities, while Christian women face sexual violence.

### **Where It's Hardest to Follow Jesus:**

1. North Korea
2. Afghanistan
3. Somalia
4. Libya
5. Pakistan
6. Eritrea
7. Yemen
8. Iran
9. Nigeria
10. India

India remains in the top 10 for the third year in a row because it “continues to see an increase in violence against religious minorities due to government-sanctioned Hindu extremism.”

Meanwhile, China joined the top 20 for the first time in a decade, due to “ongoing and increasing surveillance and censorship of Christians and other religious minorities.”

Of the top 50 nations:

- 12 have “extreme” levels of persecution and 38 have “very high” levels. Another 4 nations outside the top 50 also qualify as “very high”: Cuba, Sri Lanka, United Arab Emirates, and Niger.

- 19 are in Africa (6 in North Africa), 14 are in Asia, 10 are in the Middle East, 5 are in Central Asia, and 2 are in Latin America.
- 34 have Islam as a main religion, 4 have Buddhism, 2 have Hinduism, 1 has atheism, 1 has agnosticism—and 10 have Christianity.

The 2021 list added four new countries: Mexico (No. 37), Democratic Republic of Congo (No. 40), Mozambique (No. 45), and Comoros (No. 50).

Mozambique rose 21 spots (up from No. 66) “due to extremist Islamic violence in the northern province of Cabo Delgado.” The Democratic Republic of Congo rose 17 spots (up from No. 57) “mainly due to attacks on Christians by the Islamist group ADF.” Mexico rose 15 spots (up from No. 52) due to rising violence and discrimination against Christians from drug traffickers, gangs, and indigenous communities.

Four countries dropped off the list: Sri Lanka (formerly No. 30), Russia (formerly No. 46), United Arab Emirates (formerly No. 47), and Niger (formerly No. 50).

### **Where Christians Face the Most Violence:**

1. Pakistan
2. Nigeria
3. Democratic Republic of Congo
4. Mozambique
5. Cameroon
6. Central African Republic
7. India
8. Mali
9. South Sudan
10. Ethiopia

Open Doors reporting period: November 2019 to October 2020

Other big changes in rankings: Colombia rose 11 spots from No. 41 to No. 30 due to violence from guerrillas, criminal groups, and indigenous communities and growing secular intolerance. Turkey rose 11 spots from No. 36 to No. 25 due to an increase in violence against Christians. And Bangladesh rose seven spots from No. 38 to No. 31 due to attacks on Christian converts among its Rohingya refugees.

However, other types of persecution can outweigh violence [as explained below]. For example, the Central African Republic fell 10 spots from No. 25 to No. 35, yet violence against Christians there remains extreme. And Kenya fell six spots from No. 43 to No. 49 though attacks there “increased significantly.”

Meanwhile, South Sudan ranks among the top 10 most violent nations tracked by Open Doors (at No. 9), yet doesn’t even make the top 50 watch list (at No. 69).

For the list’s 25th anniversary in 2017, Open Doors released an analysis of persecution trends over the past quarter-century. The top 10 nations over the 25-year span were: North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Somalia, Afghanistan, Maldives, Yemen, Sudan, Vietnam, and China.

Five countries appear on both the 25-year and 2021 top 10 lists—a concerning sign of the stability of persecution, noted Open Doors.

### **How are Christians persecuted in these countries?**

Open Doors tracks persecution across six categories—including both social and governmental pressure on individuals, families, and congregations—and has a special focus on women.

But when violence is isolated as a category, the top 10 persecutors shift dramatically—only Pakistan, Nigeria, and India remain. In fact, 20 nations are now deadlier for Christians than North Korea.

Worldwide registered martyrdoms rose to 4,761 in the 2021 report, up 60 percent from the 2,983 tallied the year before and surpassing the 4,305 deaths noted in the 2019 report. (Open Doors is known for favoring a more conservative estimate than other groups, who often tally martyrdoms at 100,000 a year.)

### **Where Christians Were Martyred Most:**

1. Nigeria: 3,530
2. Democratic Republic of Congo: 460
3. Pakistan: 307
4. Mozambique: 100\*
5. Cameroon: 53
6. Burkina Faso: 38
7. [name withheld]: 36
8. Central African Republic: 35
9. Mali: 33
10. [name withheld]: 20

\*Estimate | Open Doors reporting period: November 2019 to October 2020

Nine in 10 Christians killed for their faith were in Africa, the rest in Asia. Nigeria led the world with 3,530 martyrs confirmed by Open Doors for its 2021 list.

Abduction of Christians rose to 1,710, up 63 percent from the 1,052 tallied the year before, the first time the category was tracked by Open Doors. Nigeria tops the list, with 990.

Pakistan led the world in forced marriages, a new category tracked last year, with about 1,000 Christians married to non-Christians against their will. Asia accounted for 72 percent of the forced marriages tallied by Open Doors, with Africa—led by Nigeria—the remaining 28 percent.

### **Where Churches Were Attacked or Closed Most:**

1. China: 3,088
2. Nigeria: 270
3. Angola: 100\*
4. Democratic Republic of Congo: 100\*
5. Ethiopia: 100\*

6. Rwanda: 100\*
7. Bangladesh: 90
8. India: 76
9. Pakistan: 68
10. Mexico: 61

\*Estimate | Open Doors reporting period: November 2019 to October 2020

China arrested, jailed, or detained without charge 1,147 Christians for faith-related reasons, out of a total of 4,277 worldwide. This tally by Open Doors rose from 3,711 last year and 3,150 in 2019.

Meanwhile, attacks and forced closures of churches numbered 4,488 worldwide, with the vast majority recorded in China, followed by Nigeria. In last year's report, the tally had skyrocketed from 1,847 to 9,488, with China accounting for 5,576 alone.

Open Doors cautioned that in several nations, the above violations are very difficult to document precisely. In these cases, round numbers are presented, always leaning towards conservative estimates.

Its research is certified and audited by the International Institute for Religious Freedom, a World Evangelical Alliance-backed network based in Germany.

### **Why are Christians persecuted in these countries?**

The main motivation varies by country, and better understanding the differences can help Christians in other nations pray and advocate more effectively for their beleaguered brothers and sisters in Christ.

For example, though Afghanistan is the world's No. 2 worst persecutor and an officially Muslim nation, the main motivation of persecution there—according to Open Doors research—is not Islamic extremism but ethnic antagonism, or what the report calls “clan oppression.”

Open Doors categorizes the primary sources of Christian persecution into eight groups:

**Islamic oppression** (29 countries): This is the main source of persecution that Christians face in more than half of the watchlist countries, including 5 of the 12 where Christians face “extreme” levels: Libya (No. 4), Pakistan (No. 5), Yemen (No. 7), Iran (No. 8), and Syria (No. 12). Most of the 30 are officially Muslim nations or have Muslim majorities; however, 7 actually have Christian majorities: Nigeria (No. 9), Central African Republic (No. 35), Ethiopia (No. 36), Democratic Republic of Congo (No. 40), Cameroon (No. 42), Mozambique (No. 45), and Kenya (No. 49).

**Clan oppression** (7 countries): This is the main source of persecution that Christians face in Afghanistan (No. 2), Somalia (No. 3), Laos (No. 22), Qatar (No. 29), Colombia (No. 30), Nepal (No. 34), and Oman (No. 44).

**Dictatorial paranoia** (5 countries): This is the main source of persecution that Christians face in five countries, mostly in Central Asia with Muslim majorities: Uzbekistan (No. 21), Turkmenistan (No. 23), Tajikistan (No. 33), Brunei (No. 39), and Kazakhstan (No. 41).

**Religious nationalism** (3 countries): This is the main source of persecution that Christians face in three Asian nations. Christians are primarily targeted by Hindu nationalists in India (No. 10), and by Buddhist nationalists in Myanmar (No. 18) and Bhutan (No. 43).

**Communist and post-communist oppression** (3 countries): This is the main source of persecution that Christians face in three countries, all in Asia: North Korea (No. 1), China (No. 17), and Vietnam (No. 19).

**Christian denominational protectionism** (2 countries): This is the main source of persecution that Christians face in Eritrea (No. 6) and Ethiopia (No. 36).

**Organized crime and corruption** (1 countries): This is the main source of persecution that Christians face in Mexico (No. 37).

**Secular intolerance** (0 countries): Open Doors tracks this source of persecution faced by Christians, but it is not the main source in any of the 50 countries studied.

### **What are the main trends in the persecution of Christians?**

Open Doors identified four new or continuing trends in why and how Christians were persecuted for their faith last year.

First, the pandemic offered a new avenue for persecution, as Open Doors documented discrimination against Christians receiving COVID-19 relief in Ethiopia, Malaysia, Nigeria, Vietnam, and the Middle East.

In India, where more than 100,000 Christians received aid from Open Doors partners, 80 percent reported being previously “dismissed from food distribution points. Some walked miles and hid their Christian identity to get food elsewhere,” noted researchers. Open Doors also collected reports of “Christians in rural areas being denied aid” in Myanmar, Nepal, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Central Asia, Malaysia, North Africa, Yemen, and Sudan. “Sometimes, this denial was at the hands of government officials, but more often, it was from village heads, committees or other local leaders.”

Open Doors noted:

“The global pandemic made persecution more obvious than ever—simply because so many people needed help. The clear discrimination and oppression suffered by Christians in 2020 must not be forgotten, even after the COVID-19 crisis fades into our collective memory.”

Public health lockdowns also increased the vulnerability of many believers. “Christians who abandon a majority faith to follow Christ know they risk losing all support from spouses, families, tribes, and communities, as well as local and national authorities,” noted researchers. “If they lose income due to COVID-19, they can’t fall back on customary networks for survival.” Meanwhile, church leaders from Egypt to Latin America told Open Doors that bans on church services caused donations to drop by about 40 percent, reducing their own income and the ability of their congregations to offer assistance to the wider community.

Open Doors noted:

“Most converts from majority faiths said confinement due to a COVID-19 quarantine locked them in with those most antagonistic to their faith in Jesus. This especially affected minority women and children. For millions of Christians, work, education, and other outside interests provide a brief time of calm from regular persecution. So when the lockdowns occurred, it meant this respite was no longer available.”

“We have also received reports that the kidnapping, forcible conversion, and forced marriage of women and girls increased during the pandemic because of increased vulnerability. Additionally, places in Latin America that are vulnerable to drug gangs have become even more dangerous for Christians, since the pandemic has decreased the presence of official authorities who try to maintain order.”

Second, increasing video and digital surveillance of religious groups and improvements in and proliferation of surveillance technology was another key trend.

“China maintains it moved decisively to contain COVID-19 after the virus took flight in Wuhan,” noted Open Doors researchers. “But for its 97 million Christians, the cost in heavy restrictions—as surveillance reached into their homes, online and off-line interactions were tracked, and their faces were scanned into the Public Security database—is high.”

According to the report:

“Reports from counties in Henan and Jiangxi provinces say cameras with facial recognition software are now in all state-approved religious venues. Many of these cameras are reported to be installed next to standard CCTV cameras, but they link to the Public Security Bureau, meaning artificial intelligence can instantly connect with other government databases. The facial recognition software is linked to the ‘Social Credit System’ in China, which monitors the loyalty of citizens with regards to the tenets of communism.”

Likewise in India, Open Doors researchers noted, “religious minorities fear contact-tracing apps will have ‘function creep’ and will be used to keep an eye on them and their movements.”

Third, the trend of “citizenship tied to faith” continued to spread. “In countries like India and Turkey, religious identity is increasingly tied to national identity—meaning, to be a ‘real’ Indian or a good Turk, you must be a Hindu or a Muslim, respectively,” noted researchers. “This is often implicitly—if not explicitly— encouraged by the ruling government.”

Open Doors noted:

“Amidst a surge of Hindu nationalism, Indian Christians are constantly pressured by strident propaganda. The message ‘to be Indian, you must be Hindu’ means mobs continue to attack and harass Christians, as well as Muslims. The belief that Christians are not truly Indian means widespread discrimination and persecution is often conducted with impunity. India also continues to block the flow of foreign funds to many Christian-run hospitals, schools and church organizations, all under the guise of protecting the Indian national identity.”

“In Turkey, the Turkish government has also assumed the role of nationalist protector of Islam. The Hagia Sophia was originally a cathedral and then a mosque, until modern Turkey decided it

should be a museum. But in July 2020, the Turkish president persuaded a court to make it a mosque again, strengthening Turkish nationalism. ... Turkish influence and nationalist aims extend beyond its borders, most notably in its backing of Azerbaijan in its conflict with Armenia.”

Fourth, attacks by mostly Muslim extremists increased despite lockdowns to contain the coronavirus. “In much of the world, violence against Christians actually decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic,” noted researchers, but Christians in sub-Saharan Africa “faced up to 30 percent higher levels of violence than the previous year.”

Open Doors noted:

“Several hundred mostly Christian villages in Nigeria were either occupied or ransacked by armed Hausa-Fulani Muslim militant herdsman; sometimes, fields and crops were destroyed as well. Boko Haram—and splinter group Islamic State of West Africa Province, an ISIS affiliate—continue to plague Nigeria and northern Cameroon.”

“In the Sahel region just south of the Sahara Desert, Islamic extremism is fuelled by injustice and poverty. These extremist groups exploit governmental failures, and armed jihadists spread propaganda, push recruitment and conduct regular attacks. This year, some groups pledged to wage war against ‘infidels’ like Christians—they claim ‘Allah punishes us all’ with the pandemic because of the infidels.”

“In Burkina Faso, until recently known for its inter-religious harmony between Muslims and Christians, 1 million people—1 in 20 of the population—are displaced (and millions more are hungry) as a result of drought and violence. Last year, Burkina Faso dramatically entered the [WWL] for the first time. This year, Islamic extremists continue to target churches (14 killed in one attack, 24 in another).”

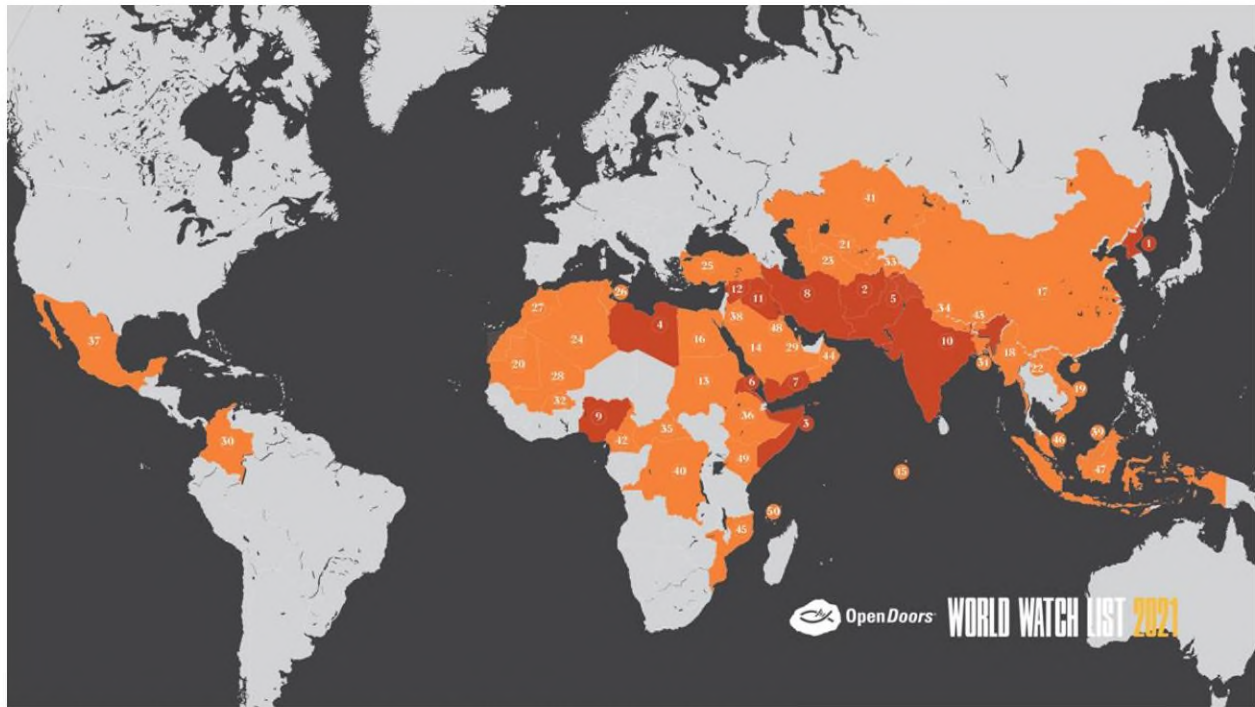
### **How does the WWL compare to other top reports on religious persecution?**

Open Doors believes it is reasonable to call Christianity the world’s most severely persecuted religion. At the same time, it notes there is no comparable documentation for the world’s Muslim population.

Other assessments of religious freedom worldwide corroborate many of Open Doors’s findings. For example, the latest Pew Research Center analysis of governmental and societal hostilities toward religion found that Christians were harassed in 145 countries in 2018, more than any other religious group. Muslims were harassed in 139 countries, followed by Jews in 88 countries.

When examining only hostility by governments, Muslims were harassed in 126 countries and Christians in 124 countries, according to Pew. When examining only hostility within society, Christians were harassed in 104 countries and Muslims in 103 countries.

All nations of the world are monitored by Open Doors researchers and field staff, but in-depth attention is given to 100 nations and special focus on the 74 which record “high” levels of persecution (scores of more than 40 on Open Doors’s 100-point scale).



Map of the 50 countries where persecution of Christians is worst.

*The 2021 World Watch List rankings:*

Rank	Country
1	North Korea
2	Afghanistan
3	Somalia
4	Libya
5	Pakistan
6	Eritrea
7	Yemen
8	Iran
9	Nigeria
10	India
11	Iraq

<b>12</b>	<b>Syria</b>
<b>13</b>	<b>Sudan</b>
<b>14</b>	<b>Saudi Arabia</b>
<b>15</b>	<b>Maldives</b>
<b>16</b>	<b>Egypt</b>
<b>17</b>	<b>China</b>
<b>18</b>	<b>Myanmar</b>
<b>19</b>	<b>Vietnam</b>
<b>20</b>	<b>Mauritania</b>
<b>21</b>	<b>Uzbekistan</b>
<b>22</b>	<b>Laos</b>
<b>23</b>	<b>Turkmenistan</b>
<b>24</b>	<b>Algeria</b>
<b>25</b>	<b>Turkey</b>
<b>26</b>	<b>Tunisia</b>
<b>27</b>	<b>Morocco</b>
<b>28</b>	<b>Mali</b>
<b>29</b>	<b>Qatar</b>
<b>30</b>	<b>Colombia</b>
<b>31</b>	<b>Bangladesh</b>
<b>32</b>	<b>Burkina Faso</b>
<b>33</b>	<b>Tajikistan</b>

<b>34</b>	<b>Nepal</b>
<b>35</b>	<b>Central African Republic</b>
<b>36</b>	<b>Ethiopia</b>
<b>37</b>	<b>Mexico</b>
<b>38</b>	<b>Jordan</b>
<b>39</b>	<b>Brunei</b>
<b>40</b>	<b>Congo DR (DRC)</b>
<b>41</b>	<b>Kazakhstan</b>
<b>42</b>	<b>Cameroon</b>
<b>43</b>	<b>Bhutan</b>
<b>44</b>	<b>Oman</b>
<b>45</b>	<b>Mozambique</b>
<b>46</b>	<b>Malaysia</b>
<b>47</b>	<b>Indonesia</b>
<b>48</b>	<b>Kuwait</b>
<b>49</b>	<b>Kenya</b>
<b>50</b>	<b>Comoros</b>

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