

OpenDoors
WORLD
WATCH
REPORT 2017

**THE PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS
AND GLOBAL DISPLACEMENT**



OpenDoors

60 years of serving persecuted Christians

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For over 60 years Open Doors has served Christians persecuted for their belief in Christ. It was founded by Brother Andrew (LEFT), a Dutch missionary who began his ministry by smuggling Bibles behind the Iron Curtain. Today Open Doors links support bases in 23 countries, making spiritual and material provision for Christians under pressure in more than 60 countries across the world.

This report was written by Stephen Rand, Open Doors Advocacy Consultant, on the basis of the research material produced by the Open Doors International World Watch Research Unit.

Cover picture: Christian families who have fled to informal Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps or are hosted by families in Maiduguri in Nigeria's war-ravaged north-east have received life-saving food aid from Open Doors. Since October 2016 Open Doors has distributed relief packages to 3,000 families, some 15,000 individuals, who have been facing hunger as a humanitarian crisis unfolds.

Introduction

The Open Doors World Watch List stems from a global annual survey which measures the scale and trends of Christian persecution around the world. The research identifies and examines the 50 most difficult countries in which to live as a Christian, creating a global picture of the suffering which Christians face. It's thorough, it's independently audited, and it's worrying.



The headline-grabbing activities of Daesh – so-called Islamic State – have precipitated a major migration crisis impacting Europe, as well as the countries where Daesh operates with impunity, as never before. This report highlights that religious persecution is a significant driver of forced global migration – and that this impacts many families in remote towns and villages around the world, most of whom never make the headlines. Around the world, 53 per cent of refugees come from Somalia, Afghanistan and Syria – numbers two, three and six on our World Watch List. In each of these countries, being a Christian compounds the pressure they are under from other more obvious drivers of displacement – and often the trouble for Christians does not end when they reach the refugee camps.

In last year's report we highlighted that despite the horrors unfolding in Iraq and Syria, persecution of Christians was growing most rapidly across sub-Saharan Africa thanks to the likes of al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and their many imitators. This year, Asia has leap-frogged sub-Saharan Africa as the region of the world where persecution of Christians is rising most rapidly. This is a global phenomenon. And it's significantly driven by the disturbing rise of religio-ethnic nationalism – the practice of effectively conflating national and religious or ideological identity – making anyone who does not follow the state-sanctioned religion or ideology a target for oppression, expulsion or worse.

The suffering of Christians simply because of their faith is taking place on a staggering scale. But it is not only Christians who suffer. Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, atheists and many others suffer persecution too. And in speaking up for the rights of Christians we wherever possible speak up for the rights of all people from every faith and none to practice what they believe, as enshrined in Article 18 of the United Nations (UN) Declaration of Human Rights. Freedom of Religion or Belief cannot remain the Cinderella of human rights.

Open Doors works in over 60 countries to provide practical support, assistance and encouragement to men, women and children as real as you and me. We speak up for them because they have asked us to. We are funded entirely by donations.

Thank you for taking the time to read this report. If it is in your hands that is probably because you have the capacity to influence the situation in some way for the better. Please read the recommendations on page 27 carefully – and do all that you can.

Thank you.

Lisa Pearce

CEO, Open Doors UK and Ireland

January 2017

“Freedom of Religion or Belief cannot remain the Cinderella of human rights”

Open Doors firmly believes that every human being has the right to full freedom of religion or belief as defined by Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As an organisation dedicated to supporting and strengthening Christians facing persecution, it recognises that positive action in support of Article 18 on a global, international and national level would have a dramatic impact on the life and wellbeing of millions of Christians, as well as those of other faiths or none.

Key findings

The **key findings** in this report are:

- Christians are forced to leave their homes: religious persecution is a significant factor in the global phenomenon of displacement
- Religious nationalism in Asia is a significant and accelerating source of persecution
- Islamic radicalisation in sub-Saharan Africa is increasingly mainstream
- Islamic extremism is the main engine of persecution in 14 out of the most hostile 20 countries in the World Watch List, and 35 of the top 50
- In the Middle East Christians face pressure under both radical and autocratic regimes
- Christians are being killed for their faith in more countries than ever before; the global persecution of Christians is still increasing
- Over 200 million Christians in the 50 countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian experience high levels of persecution because of their faith
- Somalia, Sudan, Mali and Mauritania are countries of special concern
- North Korea is still the most difficult place in the world to be a Christian.

The **key changes** in this year's World Watch List are:

- Somalia has become the second most dangerous place to be a Christian – only one point behind North Korea
- Yemen has moved into the top ten on the list
- Afghanistan (3), Pakistan (4), Sudan (5), and Iran (8) each rose in the rankings among the top ten
- Increasing negative changes in Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, the Palestinian Territories, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates have made a significant contribution to the rise in global persecution
- Kenya is the largest Christian-majority country in the World Watch List top 20.

Running for their lives – persecution and displacement

Conflict produces refugees. Persecution produces refugees. Conflict and persecution together combine to produce even more refugees. Never before have so many Christians been on the move.

Nearly 34,000 people are forcibly displaced every day as a result of conflict or persecution. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that there is currently an unprecedented 65.3 million people around the world who have been forced from their homes – that's one out of every 113 people. Among them are nearly 21.3 million refugees, people who have left their homes for a new country, over half of whom are under the age of 18.

It is impossible to accurately state how many of these refugees and displaced people are Christians. It is equally difficult to untangle the multi-faceted strands of pressure – political, environmental, communal, religious, economic – and define how many have been displaced by persecution. However, it is impossible not to conclude that religious persecution is both a major – and dangerously underestimated – factor in making the fraught and dangerous decision to leave home.

Across the world, 53 per cent of refugees come from Somalia, Afghanistan and Syria – two, three and six on the World Watch List. Overall, 8 out of the top 10 refugee producing countries listed by the UNHCR feature in the WWL. In all of these countries, being a Christian compounds the pressure they are under from other, more obvious, drivers of displacement.

A person is only defined as a refugee if they are forced to flee their country, but refugees account for just one third of displaced people, many of whom are internally displaced within their own country. In states such as Syria, Iraq and Nigeria, internal displacement is happening on a large scale and hitting the headlines. However it is also happening elsewhere in the world, unseen and on a smaller scale, with reports of people being

thrown out of their homes and villages in India and Mexico for converting to Christianity. This village-level displacement is no less part of the global displacement crisis.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, endorsed by the UN, General Assembly resolutions, underlines that: "State fragility and the failure of governance commonly lead to intermittent conflict, inter-communal violence, endemic insecurity, poverty and repeated population movements, often over decades ... Displacement can also be a symptom of pre-existing patterns of social exclusion, inequality and discrimination, affecting the poor and marginalised."

In some countries Christians are displaced as a direct result of government action; in others it is weak governance – a refusal or an inability to protect minorities – that both drives and triggers displacement.

In Yemen, a Christian believer from a Muslim background said: "As Christians we feel like strangers in our own country."

"Never before have so many Christians been on the move"

Case Study 1: Syria

With 6.6 million Syrians displaced worldwide, the conflict in Syria has created the largest displacement crisis in the world. At the outset of the violence, approximately 10 per cent of the Syrian population were Christians. There is clear evidence that as the conflict has continued Christians are disproportionately vulnerable, and persecution at the hands of Daesh, other Islamist rebel groups and the Syrian Government has been a significant driver of displacement. We estimate that about 50 per cent of Syria's Christians have left the country.

Before the war, Aleppo contained one of the largest populations of Christians in Syria – about 250,000. Around 90 per cent of them have fled because the war made it impossible to stay. One Syrian church leader, Pastor Samuel, had stayed in Aleppo throughout the war, determined to continue to serve in the face of danger, but in 2016 he left. Daesh was purposefully targeting Christian leaders in the city. He says, “I had survived being kidnapped, I had survived five years of war, but this was it. I had to leave.”



Pastor Samuel was forced to flee Aleppo after Daesh purposefully targeted church leaders.

Case Study 2: Nigeria

While many Nigerian Christians have fled the country, many are internally displaced within its borders. Last year the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre estimated the total number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Nigeria as more than 2.1 million. Violence from Boko Haram and the Hausa-Fulani herdsmen are the key triggers of displacement in Nigeria, but religious identity is clearly a significant component.

In northern Nigeria droughts are worsening, and the fertile Middle Belt region offers attractive grazing grounds to beleaguered herdsmen from the north. The Hausa-Fulani herdsmen, predominantly Muslims, have gradually moved into the Middle Belt region and there is a growing number of well-documented instances of violence against indigenous, predominantly Christian farmers. These

in-comers are burning farms, raping women and attacking houses and churches. This is more than inter-tribal socio-economic conflict. There is a clear political strategy informed by Islamic radicalism: the migrants are determined not only to keep their own traditions and culture, but to make them dominant.

In Taraba State, Hausa-Fulani attacks on Christian communities have caused mass internal displacement. Thousands of indigenous farmers have scrambled to the state capital of Jalingo for safety. As the rural communities flee, so Muslims, some of whom are not even Nigerians, take over the land. Similar reports were received from other Middle Belt States.

Thus many of the displaced are Christians: 178 of the kidnapped Chibok schoolgirls are members of the Church of the Brethren, or Ekkiziyar Yan'uwa a Nigeria (EYN), which has over a million members and has seen about 700,000 of them displaced and scattered in places like Jos, Abuja, Kaduna and Yola. Some 15,000 others have sought refuge in neighbouring Cameroon.

The experience of the IDPs is desperate. Some walk hundreds of miles, crossing the border into neighbouring Chad, Niger or Cameroon. The majority remain in Nigeria, reliant on the kindness of friends or extended family to get by, or crowded into schools converted into unsanitary camps.

Many Christian IDPs are gathering in informal camps as a result of the discrimination they have faced in official camps. Bishop William Naga of Borno says, “When the care of the camps was handed over to other organisations, the discrimination started. They will give food to the refugees, but if you are a Christian they will not give you food. They will even openly tell you that the relief is not for Christians. There is an open discrimination.”

“They will give food to the refugees, but if you are a Christian they will not give you food”

Case Study 3: Libya

The rise of armed groups that have pledged allegiance to Daesh has further exacerbated risks faced by religious minorities in Libya. Evidence gathered in Amnesty International's 2015 report "Libya is full of cruelty" suggests that Christian migrants and refugees from Nigeria, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Egypt are often subjected to abductions, torture, theft and physical assaults by criminal gangs and people smugglers, as well as Daesh. Those who are held in immigration detention centres under the control of the Department for Combating Irregular Migration, part of the Ministry of Interior, also face torture and ill-treatment on account of their religion.

Charles, a 30-year-old Nigerian, told Amnesty International that he decided to board a boat to Europe in early March 2015 after being abducted and physically assaulted a number of times by members of a criminal gang in the coastal city in Zuwara. Charles says, "I can't complain to the police about the Christian issue because they don't like us. Four men kidnapped me. They were driving in their car. They kidnapped me because they saw that I was carrying a Bible in my pocket. They wanted my family to send them money for my release. For two days they were torturing me, beating me. I managed to escape at night, through the window."

Loveth, an 18-year-old Nigerian woman who was detained in an immigration detention centre in Sabratah, told Amnesty International that guards ill-treated Christian migrants solely for practising their religion. She explained, "The guards, they are Muslim. We are Christian. Whenever we would start to pray, they would come to tell us that we should sleep... that we make too much noise. They would come with hoses and would threaten us with beatings if we don't stop praying. Sometimes they would beat us."

Case Study 4: Mexico

When Lauro Pérez Núñez and his family moved from Nezahualcoyotl to Chachalaca, they were given strict instructions that they must only practice the local 'traditional' faith. But Lauro had chosen to follow an evangelical faith, and was thus imprisoned for 48 hours for refusing to give this up. He was imprisoned again; his wife could no longer buy food, and their children were denied schooling.

The courts granted him legal protection, but when Lauro returned to his village in March 2016, he was told that if he didn't leave the local authorities would throw him out. "As soon as they saw me, they told me I had an hour to leave," he said. "I showed them the judge's decision, but that made things worse. I started to receive death threats and I was told that I only had 15 minutes to leave." They detained him violently, smashing windows and cutting off the electricity and water from his mother's house where he was staying. "I was told that if I did not drop the appeal to the district judge, they would take my mother's house away." Lauro and his family fled with nothing.



Evangelical Christians in Mexico face fierce local opposition: Mexican Christian, Lauro, was imprisoned by local authorities for his faith.

There are just over 287,000 displaced people in Mexico. The Mexican Commission for the Defence and Promotion of Human Rights had registered 380 people who have been displaced within Mexico because of religious intolerance in 2016. However, such displacement is often only registered when large groups of people are displaced at once; when the displacement involves just one family — as it did with Lauro — the case often goes unrecorded, meaning the real figure is likely to be much higher.

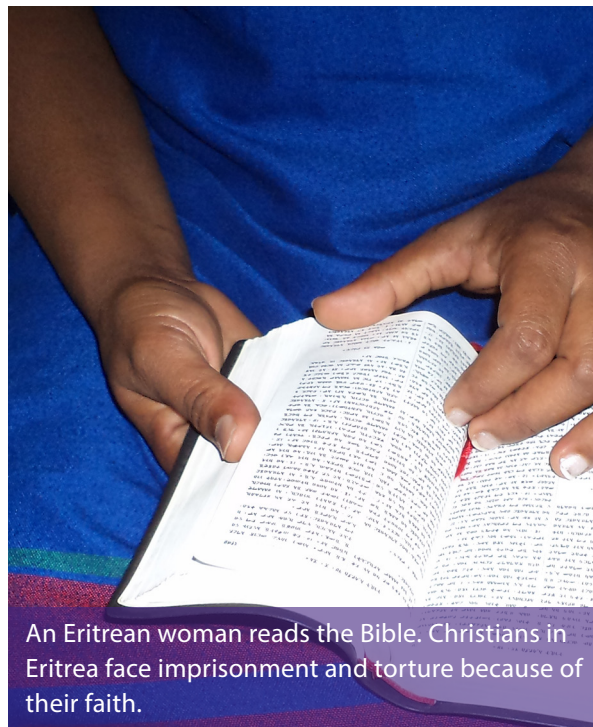
Case Study 5: Eritrea

In 2015, Eritrea, which has a population of only around 5.5 million, was the source of 25 per cent of the migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Europe, more than any other country. In 2011, 659 Eritreans made the journey; in 2015, the number was 38,791.

A lack of religious freedom has regularly been cited as a factor in this escalation. Only four religious denominations are permitted to function to some degree under state surveillance in Eritrea: Eritrean Orthodox, Catholic, the Lutheran church and Sunni Islam. All other denominations are strictly prohibited. While the Eritrean government claims that religious freedom 'is guaranteed by law', the UN has highlighted 'Eritrea's persistent discrimination against persons belonging to unrecognized religious groups' and notes that many acts of discrimination 'constitute the crime against humanity of persecution'.

One Eritrean Christian gave this account: "On 29 March 2014, 11 of us refused to renounce our faith so we were transferred to an underground prison. On 12 November 2015, while working in the garden, I managed to escape. I left Eritrea on 20 January 2016 because I was not able to practise my religion freely."

"I left because I was not able to practise my religion freely"



An Eritrean woman reads the Bible. Christians in Eritrea face imprisonment and torture because of their faith.

Case Study 6: Pakistan

Persecution has led to about 10,000 Pakistani Christians seeking refuge in Thailand. They are badly treated and are refused refugee status by the government, so they are not allowed to work and are subject to police intimidation and forced to rely on handouts and sporadic work. Once an asylum seeker's brief tourist visa runs out, the individual is guilty of illegal immigration as Thailand has not signed international agreements concerning refugees.

Pastor Joshua, a Christian from Lahore, had to flee to Thailand and still fears the people in Pakistan who punished him for converting from Islam to Christianity: "My bone was broken – the one right above the heart. And they tried to cut my arm off," he says. "My sister was murdered, she was burned alive, just because she spoke the word 'God'." Earlier in 2016 it was noted that the UK

Home Office's Country Information and Guidance Report on Pakistani Christians and Christian converts stated that such individuals are not at 'a real risk of persecution', and was being used to justify unduly prolonging granting asylum to Christians fleeing Pakistan.

Case Study 7: India

In 2008 the murder of a Hindu leader in the state of Odisha provoked riots directed against Christians which saw around 100 Christians killed, 300 churches and 6,000 Christian homes damaged, and 56,000 people displaced – many have still not returned to their homes. More than 10,000 children had their education severely disrupted. In one trial that followed, the jury accused police of complicity, which "was not an aberration of a few individual policemen, but evidence of an institutional bias against the targeted Christian community." They concluded that public officials had colluded in the destruction of evidence, and expressed concern over the lack of mechanisms to protect victims 'who have dared to lodge complaints and witnesses who have courageously given evidence in court', as they are unable to return to their homes'.



Pastor Vijay Sagaria and his family had been threatened by fellow villagers because of their faith. In November 2016 their house was burned down.

Bollywood lyricist Javed Akhtar, who was part of the investigating tribunal, said that such incidents continued to happen with 'alarming frequency' in India. "As citizens of this democracy, we should hang our heads in shame." Some Christians have returned to their villages only to be told by their Hindu neighbours that they should convert, leave or face the consequences. Open Doors researchers have recorded over 15 violent attacks on Christians every week in 2016. This is a conservative figure as many victims are too scared to report attacks.

A report from the Evangelical Fellowship of India's Religious Liberty Commission identified 134 attacks on Christians or their churches in the first half of 2016 – already almost as many as the annual totals for both 2014 and 2015. Such attacks trigger displacement for individual families or small groups of Christians on a village level – but the impact is devastating for those concerned.

In a world where governments are giving the greatest attention to issues of security, migration and displacement, it is vital that they are fully alert to the need to promote observance of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and also to protect vulnerable minorities.



Displaced in India

This young woman is part of four Christian families – 29 people – who were attacked and chased out of Katholi Village, Chhattisgarh, on 25 April 2016. Men, women and children were beaten and their homes destroyed. The families fled to a church leader's house some 13km away where Open Doors provided initial support.

The authorities urged the families to return to their village. When they did so, on 28 April, the villagers surrounded them again and threatened to kill them. They fled. Thanks to the generosity of supporters, Open Doors was able to provide medical and humanitarian aid and arrange for new accommodation away from the village.

A 'foreign' faith: religious nationalism in Asia

Waves of religious and ethnic nationalism swirled around the world in 2016. This took an anti-establishment form in the West, powered partly by fears over inequality, migration, globalisation and slowing growth. In Asia, however, it took an anti-minorities form, and was fuelled more dramatically by religious nationalism and government insecurity. Through 2016 persecution of Christians saw the biggest rise in Asia.

The forceful attempt to define ethnic and national identity, even citizenship, in terms of one religion or ideology inevitably leaves minorities marginalised and vulnerable. Those who are part of the ethnic and religious majority who opt to become Christians are seen as apostates, unpatriotic, even traitors. Government propaganda and educational materials all too often define Christianity as a foreign Western import.

“Through 2016 persecution of Christians saw the biggest rise in Asia”

This was a significant trend in 2016 in Asia. Pakistan rose to fourth position in the 2017 WWL with levels of violence that exceeded even northern Nigeria. India climbed to its highest ever rank in the WWL (15) as Hindu nationalists battered the churches. With the exception of war-torn Yemen, the countries adding most points to the WWL 2017 came from Asia: the situation for Christians deteriorated in Laos, Bangladesh, Vietnam and tiny Bhutan, where the government does not view Christians as Bhutanese at all and a new electronic identity card system has created significant discrimination by ignoring parts of the Christian minority. Buddhist nationalism also pushed Sri Lanka back into the top 50 of the list. Hindu-majority Nepal is facing a similar battle. It was not on the list this year but trends indicate it could join the top 50 in 2018.

Even in China xenophobia has driven new regulations warning Christians to beware of 'hostile


foreign forces'. An expatriate Christian in Beijing told a November conference: "It used to be that the authorities would visit me once a year; but such is their new level of suspicion, it is now twice a week."

In India religious nationalism, gathering pace since the mid 1990s, moved into a higher gear with the landslide election of President Modi in May 2014. Out of power from 2004 to 2014, Hindu nationalists used that time assiduously to expand massively into the large rural populations. Over 600,000 Hindu nationalists were trained to run schools with the object of radicalising families.

Now there is an average of around 60 incidents per month: pastors are beaten, churches burned, converts harassed. At least Eight Christians have been killed for their faith in 2016 alone. Open Doors persecution analyst for India says: "It's not only violence. There is a deterioration in freedom in all aspects of Indian society, and Hindu radicals have virtual impunity from the government." There are 64 million Christians in India, with around 39 million of them facing direct persecution.

Weak governance plays a very significant role in persecution. Not only can there be a reluctance to defend minorities against the excesses of the dominant religion or ideology, governments under pressure can deliberately appeal to and provoke religious or ideological nationalist sentiment.

In China President Xi Jinping has been stoking Chinese nationalism even in the realm of religion, claiming that if you must belong to a religion, try a Chinese one like Confucianism. In most of these countries, governments state that to be, for example, Bhutanese is to be Buddhist; to be a Malay is to be Muslim. Laos has a paranoid government desperate to stay in power, and the tribal Christians bear the brunt, encountering a double persecution from state and tribe. Even in Christian-majority Philippines, converts to Christianity in Muslim-majority Mindanao are persecuted.



**“When I heard a few years ago
that my husband was killed, I was
very shocked...**

“He was on his way back home from a wedding meeting when fighters of Boko Haram killed him. I fled my village and am now living here with my four children.”

Miriam James, pictured here with two of her four children, lives in Maiduguri, capital of Borno State, Nigeria. The Boko Haram insurgency in North-east Nigeria has created a humanitarian crisis described by the UN as the ‘greatest crisis on the continent’ with thousands internally displaced and facing starvation.

Rebecca, a local woman supported by Open Doors, provides help to widows like Miriam in Maiduguri: “I can feed my children thanks to this help I receive. Rebecca helps us widows with everything she can get for us.”

Spreading flames: Islamic radicalisation in sub-Saharan Africa

The vicious actions of sub-Saharan African Islamic militant insurgencies, such as al-Shabaab and Boko Haram, have made headlines for many years. Still they continue.

In November 2016 Boko Haram was accused by the UN of causing Africa's most urgent emergency, with 14 million needing humanitarian aid and hundreds of thousands in danger from starvation as a result of their violent incursions. At least a dozen Christians were killed in Somalia this year by al-Shabaab militants.

Islamic militancy is gaining ground in many more sectors of society. The Open Doors persecution analyst for the region says, "Radical violent movements seem to leave behind them a more radicalised people." In the past, radicals would target only Muslims for support, but now – especially with generous funding from Saudi Arabia – they are building new networks of radical Islamic schools in Somalia, Kenya, Niger and Burkina Faso, and then targeting local government, asking for concessions to build mosques and sponsoring those who are running for office.

Persecution can take the form of the *smash* of violence, or the *squeeze* of pressure on private,

family, community, national or church life. Kenya, a Christian-majority country, still remains firmly entrenched in the top 20. In Nairobi, Christian pastors have to hire private security firms to man the metal detectors at the church doors.

Hausa-Fulani herdsmen in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria have driven thousands of Christians off their land. Somalia is number two on the WWL because, as a local believer says: "Everything works against the Christian." In Sudan, Christians are targeted by the government itself.

Mali was the highest riser in the WWL 2017, up 12 places to 32. On 17 December 2015, three people were killed when a gunman opened fire outside a Christian radio station in Timbuktu.

All over the Sahel region, which delineates the southern edge of the Sahara, the situation is worsening for Christians. According to an August 2016 report from Open Doors International World Watch Research Unit: "This is a critical time for the future of Christianity in the region ... If the instability gets out of control and the militant groups have their way, Christians will be killed and exiled out of the entire region."

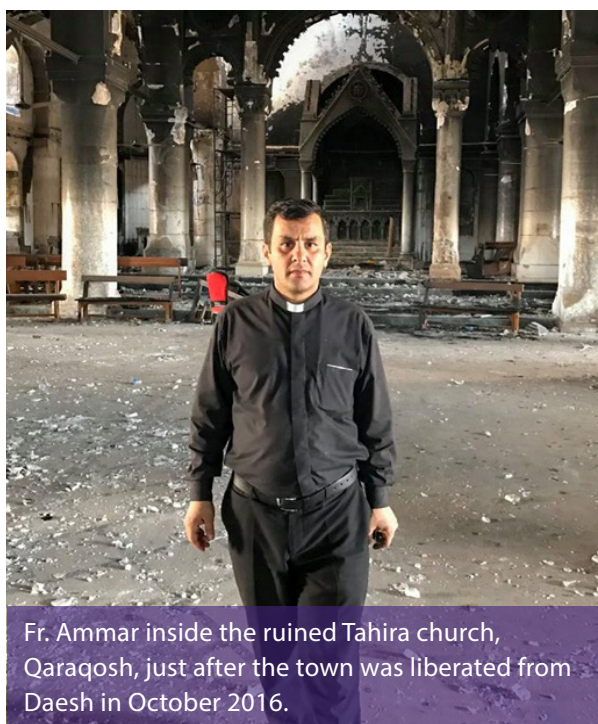


Hausa-Fulani herders in Kaduna State routinely target and destroy Christian properties – thousands have been displaced.

Pressured on every side: Middle East Christians on the frontline

The WWL 2017 includes 17 countries from the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf.

Some are in the middle of horrific civil conflict. Christians in Syria (six) and Iraq (seven) face what many have now named as genocide – what the human rights lawyer and academic Nina Shea describes as a “sprawling horror of leaders assassinated, churches destroyed, businesses bombed for ‘un-Islamic’ tendencies, women and girls raped, hostages taken, and citizens forced to flee.”



Fr. Ammar inside the ruined Tahira church, Qaraqosh, just after the town was liberated from Daesh in October 2016.

It is clear that Christians are not the only victims, but a previous report from Open Doors demonstrated that Christians in Syria were being specifically targeted and were more vulnerable to persecution than other minorities.

Some countries in the region are governed by radical regimes which directly target Christians. Saudi Arabia (14) is a country where the pressure on Christians is extreme and growing. The Saudis are flexing their muscles in Yemen (nine) as

they seek to remove the Shia Houthi movement which is in rebellion against the government. The country has become a wasteland, with many Christians caught in the crossfire; four sisters of the Missionaries of Charity were killed in 2016.

Iran (eight), now that its nuclear deal with the USA is concluded, has arrested record numbers of house-church Christians, and many are losing their livelihoods after having to pay huge fines. At least 193 Christians were arrested and/or imprisoned for their faith, more than the previous year. The methods of interrogation in jail are harsh and can be sexually abusive: in several cases Christians were seriously physically and mentally abused. Prisoners, including Christians, have been denied adequate health care as a means to punish and humiliate them or to extract forced confessions.

Distinct from these radical regimes are a group of more autocratic regimes that clamp down on jihadists – and in doing so, can easily, directly or indirectly, have a negative impact on the freedoms of Christians. In Egypt (21) President al-Sisi's authoritarian style of government has to some extent restored the rule of law, but also implies a stricter compliance with the relatively restrictive legislation related to religious affairs. He seems determined to fight Islamic militants but at the same time seems unlikely to take significant measures to ensure freedom of religion and equal citizenship for Christians.

Algeria (36) continues to use Ordinance No. 06-03, intended to regulate non-Islamic religions, to create a more restrictive environment for Christians. Even in more peaceful Jordan (27), where the King seeks to control radical Muslims, the backlash from his attempts has resulted in higher levels of pressure on Christians.

Hope for the Middle East

Syria and Iraq are in crisis. Christians face the added threat of being targeted by Islamic militants, who are determined to eradicate them from the Middle East.

Yet many Christians in the region remain part of a tradition of active involvement in society, determined to participate fully in the wider community, to contribute to society in a meaningful way, and to play their part in reconciling and rebuilding for the future.

In 2016, Open Doors, together with Middle East Concern, Served, the University of East London and others launched the *Hope for the Middle*

East campaign – a seven-year project aiming to guarantee a solid place and future for Christians, and other religious minorities, as a valuable, integral part of society in the Middle East.

This campaign launched with a petition aiming to gather 1 million voices behind the calls of Christians in Syria and Iraq for:

1. The right to equal citizenship
2. Dignified living conditions for all
3. A prominent role in reconciling and rebuilding society.



Hope for the Middle East: Fr. Yacoub, ringing the bells of the Syriac Orthodox church in Bartella for the first time in 2 years and 3 months, shortly after it was liberated from Daesh.



“Many of them are willing to stay in Iraq; they just need enough hope.

“That’s where I come in. My job is to inspire and mobilise people, to help them rebuild their trust in their neighbours and their position in society.”

Fr. Thabet was displaced from Karamles, Iraq, with his entire congregation in August 2014. He has spent the last two years serving his displaced community in an IDPs camp in Erbil.

After it was liberated from Daesh in October 2016, Fr. Thabet was able to visit his church in Karamles. Here he stands in the burnt and damaged church building, holding a desecrated cross. However, he was nonetheless overjoyed to return to his village, stating: “I’m smiling from cheek-to-cheek and I weep tears of joy...This is the trip I have been praying for, for two years now.”

Those in peril: the spread of violence

The sad toll of Christians being killed because of their faith continues, and the tragedy of martyrdom occurred in more countries in the 2017 WWL reporting period than in the same period for the 2016 WWL – a total of 38. Once again, the highest number of deaths was recorded in Nigeria, at 695 this accounts for over half of the global total of 1,207.

As in previous years, these figures represent the minimum number of deaths, due to lack of reporting by family members for security reasons and because it remains difficult to ascertain reliable statistics from highly violent countries such as Nigeria, Syria and Iraq, and more closed countries such as Burma and North Korea. Our assessment is that the number of deaths in the 2017 WWL reporting period is significantly lower than the 2016 WWL reporting period for two further reasons – many Christians have already been killed or displaced by violence in previous years, and in Nigeria Boko Haram has been forced more on to the defensive, much reducing its wave of murder. Nonetheless, the deaths of 1,207 Christians for faith-related reasons in 38 countries around the world is a strong reminder that the smash of persecution is still all too prevalent. Every murder of a Christian for their faith is a threat and an intimidation for the whole Christian community. Its spread into more countries inevitably means more individual Christians feeling that threat and intimidation.

In 2016 the most all-pervasive violence recorded was in Pakistan. Islamic jihadists attacked Christians in a public park on Easter Sunday in Lahore, killing over 70 people. In September, a Christian watchman, Samuel Masih, protecting the Christian Warsak Dam colony close to Peshawar, was killed when he fended off an attack by four armed men.

Attacks on churches are taking place with a sickening frequency, although the buildings are not always destroyed or may not have to be closed. However, according to interviews with

many pastors, there have been frequent fires, broken windows, damaged property and minor harassments such as power-cuts and water restrictions targeting churches.

This overt violence conceals the daily violence behind the scenes against Christian girls and women who are often abducted, raped and forcefully married and converted. In blasphemy cases, the homes of Christians are frequently attacked, forcing them and their families to go into hiding. Consequently, Pakistan is the only country in WWL 2017 with a maximum score for violence.

Bangladesh also experienced a year of attacks, which surprised a government that prides itself on its secular approach. Separate targeted attacks on Hindus, Christians, Buddhists and atheists have left the country reeling. On top of the violence, some churches have received death threats from Islamist militants. “The Islamists said that Bangladesh would be ruled only by Sharia,” said the secretary of the Bangladesh Christian Association. “We all are really frightened.”

The July attack on the Holey Artisan Bakery in Dhaka, clearly targeting foreigners, has had a devastating impact on expatriate Christians, including those working on development and healthcare programmes, who have left the country in large numbers.

In Kenya, 37 Christians were killed, all in Muslim-dominated regions. Among those killed were two passengers when al-Shabaab militia boarded their bus and separated Christians for execution. Six persons presumed to be ‘Christians’ by al-Shabaab were also killed in their Mandera homes. About 12 non-local Christians were murdered when al-Shabaab militia attacked the guesthouse where they were seeking accommodation.

In Latin America, where large territories are controlled by mafia or guerrillas, standing up against corruption can be fatal. Twenty-three

Christian leaders were killed in Mexico, and four in Colombia. In October 2016 the bodies of four young Catholic missionaries were found in Mexico displaying clear signs of torture. Local drug gangs were thought to be responsible.

Attacks on churches

People are far more important than buildings, but attacks on church buildings are significant because they clearly show a specific attack on the Christian community: to the perpetrators the church building is a potent and specific symbol of

the faith. A damaged or destroyed building remains as a witness to the vulnerability of the Christian community, an ongoing monument to persecution.

In the 2017 WWL reporting period, the Open Doors International World Watch Research Unit recorded 1,329 churches attacks in 62 countries; 600 of these attacks were in Pakistan and 300 in China.

While it is very difficult to gather reliable information on the total number of Christians killed for faith-related reasons worldwide, and for the total number of churches attacked, the World Watch Unit collects data on both.

In situations of civil war and other social disasters, there will always be many more Christians killed and churches attacked than are recorded, since it is not always possible to distinguish precisely between random killings and killings where Christians are being targeted because of their faith. Only the latter qualifies as being 'persecution'. In other cases, it can prove impossible to obtain full and verifiable details, and therefore such incidents are not recorded in the data.

Attacks on churches can vary from light to extreme. Light attacks come in the category of desecration or vandalism, whereas extreme attacks mean the complete destruction of the church. There are countries where there is no visible Church. Christians gather in secret, in 'house' or 'underground' churches, or they just stay on their own. The data on churches attacked includes attacks on 'house' or 'underground' houses, even though it is very difficult to obtain such data.

The squeeze is on: over 200 million Christians under pressure

The media – and governments – pay most attention to the smash of violent incidents of persecution. The search for security and recipes for preventing and reducing radicalisation are high on the agenda; but they are attempting to overcome often decades of neglect of defending the basic principles of freedom of religion or belief.

Effective policy-making must also recognise the reality of the *squeeze*: it is possible for persecution to be so intense in all areas of life that Christians fear to speak openly about their faith. This may result in very low levels of violence – since incidents of persecution often result from Christians visibly living out their faith – but very high levels of persecution and the complete denial of Article 18.

An expatriate Christian in the Maldives says, “I cannot even say that I am going to church. It is a challenge, as sometimes I will be asked where I am going. I have to tell them something else. I always struggle with what I have to say.” Another says, “I could not talk about Jesus freely to others. If they report me, I will lose my job. I know a friend who was caught sharing the gospel. Before they deported him, they kept him in prison for a year.”

The research for the WWL 2017 indicates that more than 200 million Christians across the 50 countries on the list experience high levels of persecution for their faith. Life as a Christian means that although there may be a tolerated church which enjoys some freedom, in practice prominent Christians are targeted, churches themselves are subject to significant restrictions, and the culture remains largely hostile to a Christian presence in such areas as education and employment. For them the *squeeze* is on, and many live in areas where the level of persecution is even higher.

This is what the *squeeze* looks like:

A pastor in Turkmenistan explains: “A couple of days ago I was called to security services and was questioned. They knew about me, my ministry and

church. Everything. They probably have their spies among the church members. I was forced to give detailed explanations of my activities. Then they warned and threatened that next time I would be fined, and further, arrested and imprisoned. I really don’t want to be arrested or to be in prison, but I know that God wants me to stay in my native country, in this city, to be His witness.”

In Indonesia the pastor of a small Pentecostal church seemed relaxed as he welcomed his visitors from Open Doors. Then he looked at his watch and his face became serious. “It’s time for us to go and barricade ourselves in the church,” he said. “Friday prayers are just about to start.”

At the small church, with its corrugated iron roof and simple wooden benches, there were five other families, one had been burned out of their home three times. They nailed boards up over the few windows, and waited. Soon the loudspeaker started up calling the Muslim faithful to prayer. The whole service was broadcast to the town.

Two kerosene lamps were lit in the darkened church interior. The children sat totally still. “This is our weekly routine,” said the pastor. “I was born here, but this is our reality – the man I went to school with who shook my hand yesterday could be the one who torches my church and home today.”



Two Christians praying together in Central Asia – Christians are forced to meet in secret across the region.

"The Imam is about to speak," said the pastor, "let's pray he does not incite some to riot against us." The Christians listened in silence, their lips mouthing silent prayers. Then a new sound appeared – a clap of thunder and suddenly a deafening drumming. Immediately everyone smiled. "Thank God for the rain," smiled the pastor, "rioters rarely come after us in a downpour."

Back at the house, the pastor was no longer smiling. "This is how it is for us," he said. "Every day you worry if your children will get back from school unmolested, if your church will be vandalised, if your friends from childhood will cut you dead, and you can read violence in their eyes."

He went on, "It was never like this growing up. But now the extremists have gained control, and there are young men in the town who are itching to do mischief. If they do it against Christians, they think they will please God, and they also know the police will not intervene."

"We are surrounded by people who seem to hate peace. It wears us down"

Questions persecuted Christians must ask

- Christians in countries such as North Korea, Somalia or even parts of Pakistan ask: "Can I practice the Christian faith without telling anyone?"
- Pastors in countries where religious nationalism is rising ask: "How can we worship and share our faith without bringing down the wrath of the mob?"
- Christian parents in countries where surveillance and control is all pervasive – such as the Central Asian states – ask: "Can we live out our faith as a family in society when the eyes of the government are everywhere?"
- Christians in civil war states, such as Syria and Libya, ask: "Can we get to a place where our house or church will not be bombed tomorrow?"
- Many ask: "How do we get out of the country, but not so far away we can never come back?"

Every day persecuted Christians the world over face these stark dilemmas.

North Korea: still the most difficult place in the world to be a Christian

North Korea heads the WWL for another year running. Christians face extreme levels of pressure in all spheres of life, combined with a very high level of violence directed against them. An estimated 70,000 Christians are imprisoned inside North Korean labour camps.

The outcome of the seventh Congress of the Korea's Workers Party in May 2016 – the first for 36 years – was not encouraging. Christianity continues to be seen as dangerous and an 'opium for the people' (as in classical Communist ideology) and according to songbun, the country's social stratification system, Christians are part of the 'hostile' class. This usually applies to those Christians whose parents or grandparents were known to be Christians. They were banished to isolated villages and, as a result of the 'guilt by association' ideology, the descendants of those Christians face insurmountable social and other obstacles and are watched with great suspicion.

The God-like worship of the ruling Kim family leaves absolutely no room for any religion. It is highly dangerous to read the Bible or to express Christian faith in any way whatsoever. Bibles and other materials are carefully hidden and only used when the believers are sure they are really alone. Christians tend to divide Christian materials up (or destroy them) after memorising the content in order to avoid storing whole copies.

Meeting with other Christians is highly dangerous, talking about one's faith to non-Christian family members (let alone to others) is virtually impossible. Family members are taught that their prime loyalty is to the Kim family. Since even children are willing to denounce their parents because of this high pressure to be loyal to the Kims (as reports continue to show), most parents do not even dare to tell their own children that they are Christians.

Anyone discovered engaging in clandestine religious activities will be subjected to discrimination, arrest, arbitrary detention, disappearance, torture, and/or public execution. It is virtually impossible for Christian parents to teach their children according to their faith, for not only would it be dangerous, but they would also have to work against the weekly indoctrination sessions, which even start with toddlers.

In April 2016, Pastor Han Choong Yeol was killed, very publicly, by a squad of four North Korean agents in the Chinese border town Chiangbai. Earlier the Korean-Canadian pastor Hyen Soo Lim, who had come into North Korea for relief work (which he had done more than a hundred times before, over a number of years), was sentenced to life imprisonment on charges of plotting to overthrow the nation and trying to build a 'religious country'. Another Korean-American pastor, Dong Chul Kim, was arrested and sentenced to ten years' imprisonment in April 2016.

The number of Christians killed or imprisoned would seem to be increasing. The punishment for being a Christian has also become more severe: they are considered spies and betrayers of the nation, and are condemned for treason accordingly.

Countries of special concern

1. Somalia

Mired in ceaseless civil war, social fragmentation, tribalism and radicalism, Somalia now ranks at two on the 2017 WWL. It is just one point away from topping the index. There has been an increase in violent incidents which has two root causes: first, in rural Somalia, Christians are targeted by jihadists and clan authorities with impunity; second, all over the country, family, community and authorities target Christians, and above all they target those who have chosen to convert to Christianity from a Muslim background.

The vast majority of people in Somalia are Muslim. Society expects all Somalis to be Muslims. Imams in mosques and madrasas as well as the leaders of al-Shabaab state publicly that there is no room for Christianity, Christians and churches in Somalia. The country's constitution states that Islam is the state religion. Somalia's society is clan-based, and many clan leaders see conversion to Christianity as a betrayal of Somali family and clan. As a result, if Somalis are suspected of being converts, family members and clan leaders will harass, intimidate and even kill them.

The majority of rural Somalia is controlled by al-Shabaab. Militants collect tariffs and tax and fund their operations through illegal trade. This situation has made life for Christians very delicate; they have no protection whatsoever.

There is a strong desire within society to eliminate Christianity from the country. The provisional constitution limits freedom of religion; it explicitly prohibits apostasy. In 2016 at least 12 Christians were killed because they were suspected of being converts. (This is likely to be an underestimate, because surviving family members, for their own safety, may not want to identify other victims as Christians.) Suspected converts get intimidating messages via phone calls from 'concerned' community members or even from al-Shabaab

personnel. Somali Christians have to hide their religion in order to get access to basic social services or education. Christian women have to dress like Muslims in order to hide their faith. There are no recognisable church buildings in the country.

2. Sudan

The application of full Sharia that President al-Bashir vowed to implement following the secession of South Sudan is taking place in many forms. The Islamist government has also continued its systematic policy of persecuting Christians in the Nuba region. The arrest and trial of Christians and Christian pastors is another indicator that Christians in Sudan are facing serious persecution. Sudan is now ranked five on the WWL.



Sudanese Pastors Kuwa Shamal (left) and Hassan Taour have been in prison for their faith throughout 2016.

The overwhelming majority of the population in the country is Sunni Muslim. Sharia is the foundation of Sudan's legal system; apostasy is criminalised, punishable by the death penalty, and blasphemy laws are being used country-wide to prosecute Christians. Whenever President al-Bashir's government faces socio-economic and political challenges, support among the population at large is revived by using inflammatory language against the West. This, in turn, has an adverse effect on Sudanese Christians, as the government regards Christians as the agents of Western countries.

The role of the government in the persecution of Christians is not only driven by totalitarian tendencies but also Islamist sympathies. The persecution is not a collection of isolated incidents, but rather a pattern. It is systematic and more indicative of a policy of ethnic cleansing based on religious affliction.

Overall, the pressure on Christians in Sudan rose considerably in the WWL 2017 reporting period. It is extreme in all spheres of life. A field researcher reported that the Sudanese government increasingly interfered in the internal running of religious institutions. Due to rules laid down by the Ministry of Guidance and Religious Endowment, pastors have felt forced to censor themselves and curtail their activities. Sudanese security forces have forced Christians to hand over their Christian schools. Christians have found it difficult to build new churches, the major obstacle being obtaining the required permit from government offices. Even if a permit is issued, Christians then face challenges from local Islamic leaders and radical Muslims on a daily basis.

Pastors are being prosecuted for speaking out against persecution in the country. According to a field researcher, more than 12 Christians were arrested during the reporting period because of their faith. The Christian Pastors Hassan Abduraheem, Kodi Taour and Kuwa Shamal, as well as a Czech aid worker faced prison and trial. They are accused of 'espionage', 'waging war against the state' and 'inciting hatred against religious congregations'.

3. Mali

Mali has jumped from 44 to 32 in the WWL ranking. Overall, the pressure on Christians in Mali is at a very high level and increased significantly compared with WWL 2016. The activity and presence of jihadist groups is radicalising society at large and fuelling persecution in the country.

Pressure is strongest in the church, community and family spheres, indicating the particular difficulties that Christians from a Muslim background, and their churches, face from the population as a whole and from Islamic militant groups, especially in parts of the country that are not controlled by the state. Even when Islamic militants are dislodged from the territories they had controlled, they leave behind a more radicalised society that is even less hospitable to Christians than it was before.

4. Mauritania

Mauritania, ranked 47 in this year's WWL, is a self-proclaimed Islamic Republic and has been under military rule for more than 30 years, with only a short democratic interruption in 2007. The country is formally a multi-party democracy, but its parliament is completely dominated by the ruling party. There are several Islamist groups that are active in the political scene in the country.

While explicit violence is very low – one of the few violent incidents reported in 2016 was a forced expulsion from the country of one believer due to harassment from his family members – the overall persecution situation in Mauritania is so intense that most Muslims who choose to become Christians are forced to keep their faith secret.

Signs of hope

Some are refusing to partake in the persecution of Christians. Salah Farah, a Muslim teacher, was shot after refusing to be separated from Christian passengers during an al-Shabaab attack on a bus travelling to Nairobi. He later succumbed to his wounds, leaving behind four young children aged between two and ten, and a pregnant wife. He was posthumously awarded the Order of the Grand Warrior of Kenya by President Uhuru Kenyatta 'in recognition of his remarkable act of valour'.

"He died defending people he did not know. This is because he believed in their right to freedom of worship and he knew that every single life – irrespective of faith – is sacred," Kenyatta said during the State of the Nation address in parliament. "He is a powerful symbol of our country's ambition to attain the full expression of secure and cohesive nationhood, and he is a costly reminder that we all have a role to play in protecting our freedoms."

Many Christians are looking forward to going back to their historic homes in northern Iraq as Daesh control is pushed back. Over 80,000 Christians fled their homes in 2014, and have been refugees in Iraqi Kurdistan since. "We can't wait to go back," said one, in Erbil, and then added: "But we will go back with a greater determination to keep freedom defended."

A Syrian Orthodox Church leader said, "Our churches, even in war-ravaged areas, are fuller than before; our schools better attended, as we have been forced to practice our Christianity more on the streets and in our homes; and so we have embedded the faith in the society in a new way."

The major trends: 25 years researching persecution

This year, 2017, is the 25th year of the publication of the Open Doors World Watch List, which has been and still is the only annual survey ranking the 50 most difficult countries in which to practice the Christian faith.

The consistency in the data is remarkable. Only three countries have ever topped the list: Saudi Arabia, Somalia and North Korea. A calculation of scores over the 25-year period indicates that the top ten overall worst countries in which to be a Christian over the last 25 years would be completed by Iran, Afghanistan, Maldives, Yemen, Sudan, Vietnam and China. Six of these countries are still in the top ten in 2017.

Five major trends in the past 25 years:

1. Changing China

The drive to make China the world's largest economy opened China to the world and saw Chinese society become more relaxed, revealing a massive and rapidly growing church, doubling from 50 million in the 1980s to nearly 100 million people today. Concessions were granted to the official church, and though the Chinese Communist Party is a long way from granting China's Christians anything approaching genuine religious freedom, the days of hundreds kept in detention, a ban on Bibles, and house-church gatherings brutally broken up by police thugs have receded. Unfortunately the current president, Xi Jinping, has put the clock back in terms of church-state relations.

2. Collapsing Communism replaced by determined dictators

Open Doors began with the smuggling of Bibles into Eastern Europe: at that time the then USSR would have dominated the WWL had it existed. In 1989 the Berlin Wall came down and opened the entire Soviet Bloc to religion again, which saw

new churches established in Russia and the newly independent Central Asian states. However the door slammed shut in 1998 and from then on Central Asia states – Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, with their powerful ruling elites running the country through fear and intimidation – have featured significantly on the list.



Following the collapse of the Berlin Wall, Brother Andrew presented the first Albanian Bible to the Albanian authorities, c. 1991/1992.

3. The rise of Islamic extremism

Money from Saudi Arabia and training in Pakistan have been significant contributing factors to the growth in jihadist warriors who have taken terror around the world, to Syria, Libya, Iraq and even Indonesia and Malaysia. Iran has been exporting its Shia-based radical interpretation of Islam since 1979, and in the mid 1990s Sudan was also a global hub of extremist ideology. It was ranked third in the first WWL (1993) – and now it is back to five, reflecting President al-Bashir's 2011 threat to turn the entire country into a Sharia state when a large portion of the Christian population became part of a new independent South Sudan. Africa has seen some of the most deadly and violent Islamic insurgencies – such as al-Shabaab in Somalia and Boko Haram in northern Nigeria – and their influence has been felt in many countries of sub-Saharan Africa, the most violent region for a Christian in the world today.

4. The rebirth of religious nationalism in Asia

Religious nationalism seeks to reserve cultures and territories for the dominant religion or ideology only, and to push out those belonging to other religions. Hindu nationalists formed a government in India in 1997 and attacks on Muslims and Christians increased – this year India is 15 in the WWL, a nation with around 64 million Christians. Buddhist nationalism also grew, most significantly in Sri Lanka and Burma.

5. The exodus from the Middle East

The 9/11 attacks and the aftermath of the Western military activity in Afghanistan and Iraq unleashed new waves of anti-Christian violence and

sentiment in the Middle East. Iraq descended into chaos, especially as a corrupt Shia elite attempted to cleanse much of the land of Christians and Sunni Muslims. The Arab Spring of 2010 turned into a ‘winter’ for Christians in the Middle East as militant Islamic groups soon hijacked the movements for change. Hundreds of thousands of Christians have been and are being displaced from their ancient homelands.

Methodology

The annual World Watch List is the product of year-round research conducted by the Open Doors International World Watch Research Unit, ranking the 50 countries where it is most difficult to live as a Christian.

Persecution analysts scour academic, NGO and news reports, and survey key contacts in various countries – and those contacts in turn survey their own networks – on the state of religious freedom for Christians in five areas of life: private, family, community, national, and within the church. These five areas comprise the *squeeze* element of persecution – the daily pressure of official discrimination, hostile attitudes and family rejection. Separately, the

team measures violence against Christians. This is the *smash* element of persecution, one that often commands headlines but which rarely is the dominant reality of Christians who live in World Watch List countries. For each country surveyed, scores for each of the six categories are combined to create a total score. The scores determine the country’s ranking on the World Watch List. The 2017 World Watch List data is for the 12 months ending 31 October 2016. The research methods for arriving at country scores and comparisons have been independently audited by the International Institute for Religious Freedom.

Recommendations

In the face of increasing worldwide displacement...

Religious persecution is a key driver of enforced migration and asylum-seeking, and the UK government should develop a strategy for positive action in support of the right to freedom of religion and belief (FoRB). This should target nations and areas where there is violent persecution, as well as those where the consistent denial of FoRB and/or the persistent refusal to protect religious minorities is creating the conditions for violence and subsequent displacement in the future.

With the growing threat of religious nationalism...

The UK government should actively champion the full observance of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to increase global security and combat terrorism. It should encourage international bodies such as the United Nations and the Commonwealth to speak out strongly against equating ethnic and/or national identity with an exclusive religion or belief system. We urge it to discourage casual references to the UK as a 'Christian country' while at the same time celebrating the UK's Christian heritage and the roles that people of many faiths, and no faith, have played in shaping our country.

Following the European Union (EU) referendum...

The UK government should take the opportunity presented by future trade negotiations to champion and defend human rights; in particular the right to FoRB. This is especially pertinent to countries such as China, India, Saudi Arabia, Mexico, Indonesia and Turkey, all of which have featured in discussions about trade post-Brexit and rank on the 2017 World Watch List. We echo the Select Committee on Human Rights, which has stated that the human rights clauses currently included in EU trade agreements must be maintained or furthered in any future trade negotiation pursued by the UK.

When combatting the increasing level of persecution against Christians...

The Home Office (HO) should continue revising its country guidance to take full account of the vulnerabilities of Christians and other religious minorities. We urge the HO to increase

the religious literacy of its staff so that those processing asylum applications are well-equipped to recognise and handle cases of religious persecution. Finally, we would urge the HO not to restrict visas for clergy and other religious leaders invited to the UK to share about the suffering in their own countries.

While the **Foreign and Commonwealth Office's** (FCO) 2016 conference on FoRB and preventing violent extremism was commendable, further mainstreaming of FoRB is now needed. This should promote understanding about how FoRB intersects with issues such as extremism, gender and displacement, while not losing sight of FoRB as an important right in and of itself. Ministers should commit to FoRB being raised and acted upon in diplomatic interactions with other countries and at international fora, recognising that FoRB can contribute to countering extremism, encouraging economic development, assisting the poorest and building resilience within communities.

It is vital that the **UK government** recognises the multifaceted nature of persecution, and conducts research at an inter-governmental level to assess not only the violent aspect of persecution, but also legal, social and political oppression. This more subtle, and sometimes less visible, persecution creates a breeding ground for violent and radical groups. Working to limit social, legal and political persecution can greatly reduce violent attacks in the long term.

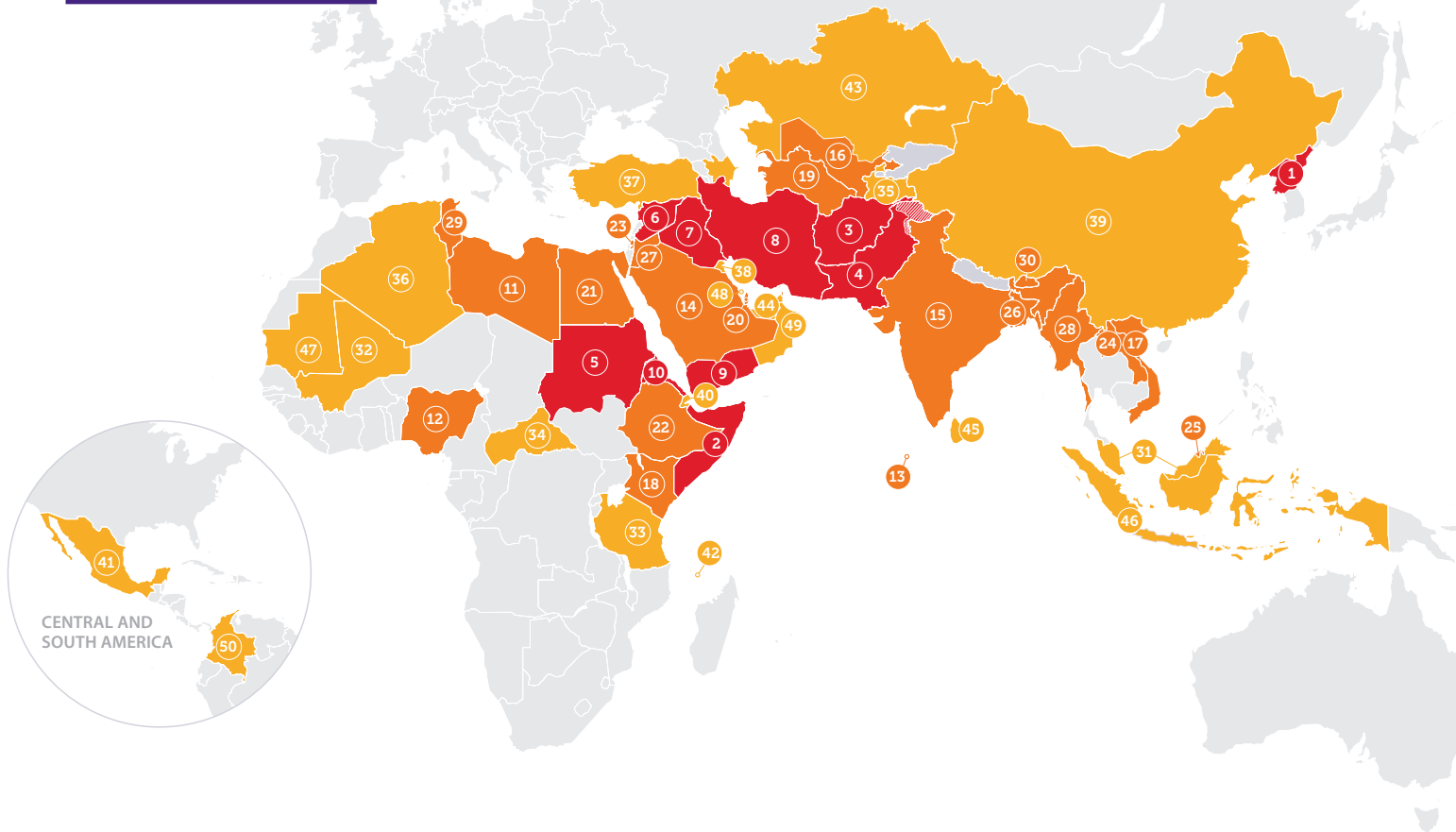
We urge the **Department for International Development** (DfID) to recognise the role of religious leaders as advocates for peace and reconciliation. DfID should work with the FCO and other governments and agencies to identify and equip religious leaders in conflict transformation and reconciliation. Robust checks and balances that are fully integrated into government, UN and partner organisations' programmes are needed to monitor and guarantee equal access to aid and development.

We welcome the increasing interaction between constituents and **Members of Parliament** on FoRB. Parliamentarians should continue to hold the government to account through oral and written questions on FoRB. Particular attention should be given to cross-border issues, for example the evidence of Christian persecution in a number of European refugee camps.

OpenDoors WORLD WATCH LIST 2017

– 25th Edition –

This map illustrates the Open Doors World Watch List – a ranking of the 50 countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian. The list is based on detailed information provided by Open Doors co-workers in more than 50 countries, as well as independent experts. Data is gathered on five spheres of life – private, family, community, national and church life – plus a sixth sphere measuring the degree of violence impacting Christians.



WORLD WATCH LIST RANKING

■ Extreme levels of persecution ■ Very high levels of persecution ■ High levels of persecution

- | | | | |
|----------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. North Korea | 14. Saudi Arabia | 27. Jordan | 39. China |
| 2. Somalia | 15. India | 28. Myanmar | 40. Djibouti |
| 3. Afghanistan | 16. Uzbekistan | 29. Tunisia | 41. Mexico |
| 4. Pakistan | 17. Vietnam | 30. Bhutan | 42. Comoros |
| 5. Sudan | 18. Kenya | 31. Malaysia | 43. Kazakhstan |
| 6. Syria | 19. Turkmenistan | 32. Mali | 44. United Arab Emirates |
| 7. Iraq | 20. Qatar | 33. Tanzania | 45. Sri Lanka |
| 8. Iran | 21. Egypt | 34. Central African Republic | 46. Indonesia |
| 9. Yemen | 22. Ethiopia | 35. Tajikistan | 47. Mauritania |
| 10. Eritrea | 23. Palestinian Territories | 36. Algeria | 48. Bahrain |
| 11. Libya | 24. Laos | 37. Turkey | 49. Oman |
| 12. Nigeria | 25. Brunei | 38. Kuwait | 50. Colombia |
| 13. Maldives | 26. Bangladesh | | |



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