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**WORLD
WATCH
LIST
2024**

Turkmenistan

LANDSINFORMATION

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World
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Turkmenistan: Full Country Dossier

December 2023



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Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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Introduction

World Watch List 2024

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	12.8	96	98	96	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	10.6	93	92	91	92	92
3	Libya	15.9	16.0	15.9	16.1	16.4	10.2	91	88	91	92	90
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.8	89	89	88	88	87
5	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	89	88	87	85
6	Nigeria	13.5	13.9	14.5	14.9	14.4	16.7	88	88	87	85	80
7	Pakistan	13.2	13.9	15.0	15.1	13.1	16.7	87	86	87	88	88
8	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	13.3	87	83	79	79	85
9	Iran	15.0	14.6	13.5	15.8	16.5	10.9	86	86	85	86	85
10	Afghanistan	15.7	15.9	15.2	16.3	16.6	4.6	84	84	98	94	93
11	India	12.2	12.6	13.3	14.8	13.2	16.5	83	82	82	83	83
12	Syria	13.4	14.3	13.9	14.3	14.2	11.1	81	80	78	81	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.8	15.7	16.6	3.3	81	80	81	78	79
14	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	12.8	15.1	15.6	79	76	70	67	66
15	Algeria	14.4	14.1	11.5	14.0	15.6	9.8	79	73	71	70	73
16	Iraq	14.2	14.4	14.0	14.8	13.9	7.8	79	76	78	82	76
17	Myanmar	12.2	10.6	13.4	13.7	13.0	16.1	79	80	79	74	73
18	Maldives	15.6	15.5	13.6	16.0	16.4	0.9	78	77	77	77	78
19	China	13.0	10.0	12.8	14.6	16.0	11.1	78	77	76	74	70
20	Burkina Faso	11.7	9.7	13.2	11.5	13.8	15.6	75	71	68	67	66
21	Laos	11.6	10.6	13.2	14.3	14.0	11.3	75	68	69	71	72
22	Cuba	13.2	8.7	13.8	13.3	15.1	8.7	73	70	66	62	52
23	Mauritania	14.6	14.2	13.8	14.2	14.2	1.3	72	72	70	71	68
24	Morocco	13.2	13.8	11.7	12.8	14.4	5.4	71	69	69	67	66
25	Uzbekistan	14.6	12.7	13.9	12.6	15.5	1.7	71	71	71	71	73
26	Bangladesh	12.4	10.6	12.5	10.8	10.4	14.1	71	69	68	67	63
27	Niger	9.4	9.6	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.9	70	70	68	62	60
28	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	70	68	66	68
29	Turkmenistan	14.2	12.3	13.6	13.9	15.5	0.6	70	70	69	70	70
30	Nicaragua	12.1	7.6	13.2	13.2	14.1	9.6	70	65	56	51	41
31	Oman	14.3	14.0	10.6	13.3	14.0	3.1	69	65	66	63	62
32	Ethiopia	9.9	9.7	12.6	10.4	12.1	14.4	69	66	66	65	63
33	Tunisia	12.3	13.2	10.2	12.4	13.8	6.9	69	67	66	67	64
34	Colombia	11.1	8.6	12.9	11.3	10.4	14.1	68	71	68	67	62
35	Vietnam	11.3	9.4	12.4	13.8	14.2	7.2	68	70	71	72	72
36	Bhutan	13.1	12.1	12.4	14.1	14.3	2.2	68	66	67	64	61
37	Mexico	11.5	8.5	12.5	11.1	10.6	14.1	68	67	65	64	60
38	Egypt	12.5	13.7	11.4	11.9	10.9	7.8	68	68	71	75	76
39	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.0	68	68	65	63	43
40	Qatar	14.2	14.2	10.5	13.2	14.4	0.6	67	68	74	67	66
41	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.9	67	67	66	64	56
42	Indonesia	10.9	12.3	11.5	10.2	9.7	11.5	66	68	68	63	60
43	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	8.0	13.1	15.9	66	65	65	64	60
44	Brunei	15.0	14.7	10.0	10.8	14.1	1.3	66	65	64	64	63
45	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.1	66	66	63	62	57
46	Tajikistan	13.8	12.6	12.3	12.9	13.4	0.6	66	66	65	66	65
47	Kazakhstan	13.3	11.8	12.1	12.8	14.3	1.1	65	65	64	64	64
48	Jordan	12.9	14.2	10.5	12.4	12.8	2.2	65	65	66	64	64
49	Malaysia	13.0	14.1	11.5	12.2	11.1	2.4	64	66	63	63	62
50	Turkey	13.0	11.5	11.6	13.2	11.4	3.1	64	66	65	69	63

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	12.4	63	64	63	62	61
52	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	14.4	62	63	61	58	55
53	Nepal	12.1	10.4	9.5	13.2	12.3	4.4	62	61	64	66	64
54	Kuwait	13.1	13.6	9.4	12.0	12.2	0.9	61	64	64	63	62
55	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	1.1	61	60	59	56	56
56	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	10.6	61	58	55	53	56
57	UAE	13.3	13.4	9.5	11.3	12.8	0.7	61	62	62	62	60
58	Sri Lanka	12.9	9.2	10.8	11.5	9.7	5.9	60	57	63	62	65
59	Azerbaijan	13.2	9.9	9.6	11.9	13.6	1.7	60	59	60	56	57
60	Palestinian Territories	13.1	13.3	9.7	10.7	12.1	0.9	60	60	59	58	60
61	Kyrgyzstan	13.2	10.3	11.3	10.5	12.2	1.3	59	59	58	58	57
62	Russian Federation	12.7	7.7	10.6	12.8	12.9	1.7	58	57	56	57	60
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	9.4	58	57	50	42	42
64	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	12.8	57	55	52	48	48
65	Bahrain	12.0	13.2	8.6	11.3	8.5	1.1	55	55	57	56	55
66	Honduras	7.9	4.7	12.2	7.3	9.9	12.6	55	53	48	46	39
67	Venezuela	6.0	4.4	11.1	10.0	10.8	10.7	53	56	51	39	42
68	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	8.9	52	49	44	43	41
69	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	7.2	52	48	43	47	45
70	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	8.8	15.9	52	51	48	47	48
71	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	52	51	46	43
72	Lebanon	11.0	10.2	7.0	6.1	6.6	7.2	48	40	11	-	35
73	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	3.7	47	44	44	43	43
74	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.6	46	46	43	43	44
75	Belarus	9.6	3.8	5.8	9.7	13.3	3.3	46	43	33	30	28
76	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	44	42	42	42
77	Ukraine	5.5	4.8	8.0	11.6	11.6	2.8	44	37	37	34	33
78	Israel	9.8	8.6	5.8	6.3	6.9	6.7	44	38	41	40	38

Copyright note

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Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. In order to reduce the length of these reference sections, a table containing links to regularly used sources can be found at the beginning of the “Keys to Understanding” chapter under the heading “Links for general background information”. Where one of these sources has been quoted in the dossier text, a quote reference is supplied as indicated in the second column of the table.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 01 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology can be found on the research pages of the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/> and on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom): <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>.

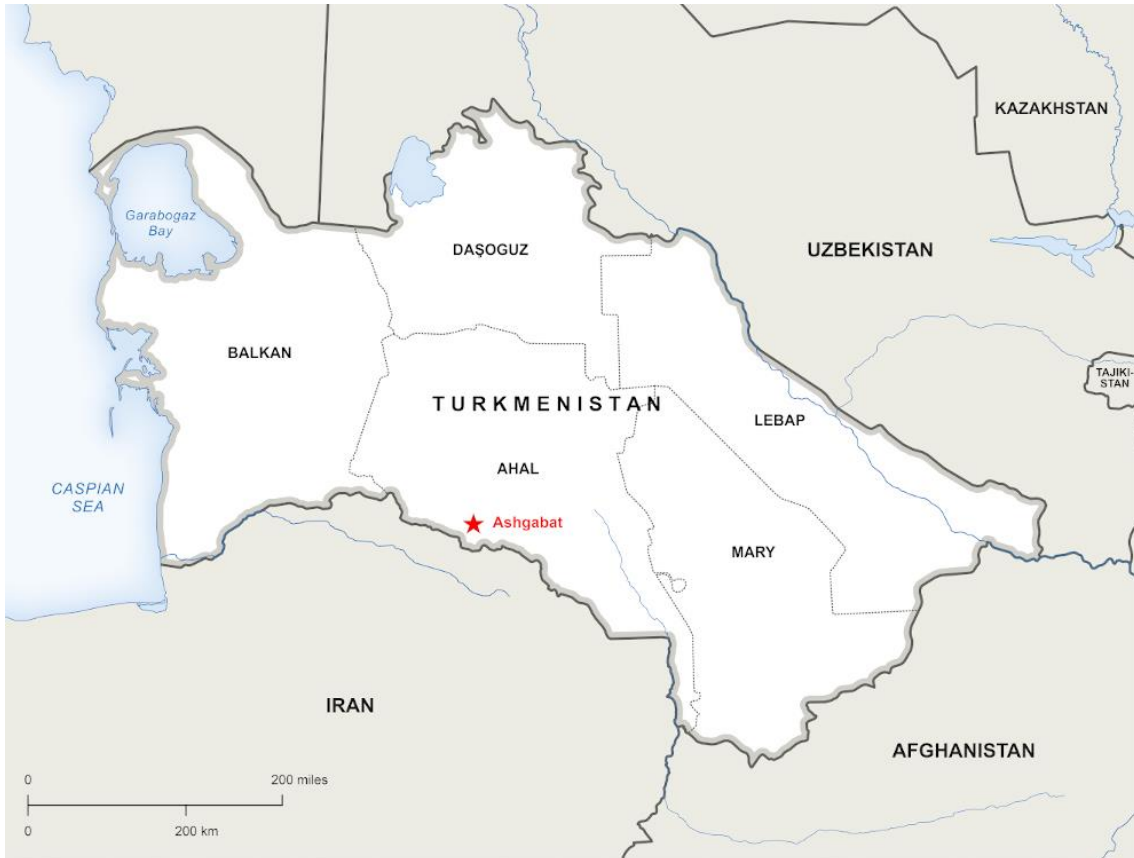
WWL 2024 Situation in brief / Turkmenistan

Brief country details

Turkmenistan: Population (UN estimate for 2023)	Christians	Chr%
6,283,000	66,000	1.1

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

Map of country



Turkmenistan: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	70	29
WWL 2023	70	26
WWL 2022	69	25
WWL 2021	70	23
WWL 2020	70	22

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Turkmenistan:	
Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials, Political parties, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs
Islamic oppression	Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, One's own (extended) family, Government officials, Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders
Clan oppression	Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, One's own (extended) family, Government officials, Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders

Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.

Brief description of the persecution situation

Turkmenistan is ruled by an authoritarian government where state agents constantly monitor religious groups and individuals, and impose restrictions. Even Russian Orthodox and Armenian Apostolic churches may experience Sunday services being monitored. The printing or importing of Christian materials is restricted. Christians from a Muslim background bear the brunt of the rights violations both at the hands of the state and from family, friends and community.

Summary of international obligations and rights violations

Turkmenistan has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in the following international treaties:

1. [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR)
2. [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#) (ICESCR)
3. [Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment](#) (CAT)
4. [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) (CEDAW)
5. [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (CRC)

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

- Non-registered churches are raided, its members arrested, threatened and fined (ICCPR Arts. 9 and 18)
- Christians and their activities are closely monitored by the authorities (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Christian converts experience pressure and violence from their family and community to renounce their faith (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Access to religious literature is severely restricted and subject to official screening and approval (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)
- Female converts face physical beatings, house arrest, verbal and physical abuse, threats and rejection from their own family because of their faith (ICCPR Arts. 9, 12 and 18)

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

Due to security reasons no specific details can be published.

According to US State Department (IRFR 2022 Turkmenistan):

- There were no government reports of arrests of members of religious organizations for holding illegal religious gatherings or possessing prohibited religious literature. Minority religious groups also reported no such arrests. Most minority religious leaders reported no cases of harassment by government security services during the year, which they said was a significant change from previous years.

Specific examples of positive developments

According to US State Department (IRFR 2022 Turkmenistan):

- "Minority groups, mostly Christian, continued to face restrictions, but they said they had considerably more freedom to worship. Leaders of minority religious groups reported improvements in the religious freedom climate in the country over the last year, including better relations with government officials, fewer barriers to registration, easier access to digital religious literature, the alternative for required national service, and more assistance providing places for worship."
- "In contrast to [2021], there were no government reports of arrests of members of religious organizations for holding illegal religious gatherings or possessing prohibited religious literature. Minority religious groups also reported no such arrests."
- "Beginning in December [2022], the government offered an alternative to required national service for conscientious objectors. ...The government has offered a civilian service alternative in the State Migration Service for conscientious objectors. Refusal to perform the compulsory two-year service is punishable by a maximum of two years in prison or two years of 'corrective labor.' ... The law does not provide for an exemption to compulsory service for religious reasons. Until the age of 27, individuals may be convicted each time they refuse compulsory military service or alternative service, potentially resulting in multiple lifelong convictions."

External Links - Situation in brief

- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cat.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Rights of the Child - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

WWL 2024: Keys to understanding / Turkmenistan

Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2022/23 Turkmenistan report	AI Turkmenistan 2022	https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/europe-and-central-asia/turkmenistan/report-turkmenistan/	29 June 2023
BBC News Turkmenistan profile - updated 24 March 2023	BBC Turkmenistan profile	https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-16094646	29 June 2023
Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2022 – covering 137 countries	BTI Turkmenistan Report 2022	https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/TKM	29 June 2023
CIA World Factbook Turkmenistan - updated 21 June 2023	World Factbook Turkmenistan	https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/turkmenistan/	29 June 2023
Crisis24 Turkmenistan report (Garda World)	Crisis24 Turkmenistan report	https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/turkmenistan	29 June 2023
Economist Intelligence Unit Turkmenistan profile 2023	EIU Turkmenistan profile 2023	https://country.eiu.com/turkmenistan	29 June 2023
FFP's Fragile States Index 2023 – covering 179 countries	FSI 2023 Turkmenistan	https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/	29 June 2023
Freedom House's 2023 Democracy Index – covering 29 countries	Democracy Index 2023 Turkmenistan	https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkmenistan/nations-transit/2023	29 June 2023
Freedom House's 2023 Global Freedom index – covering 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2023 Turkmenistan	https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkmenistan/freedom-world/2023	29 June 2023
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023 report – covering 70 countries, Turkmenistan not included	Freedom on the Net 2023	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores	
Georgetown's Women, Peace and Security Index 2021/2022 – covering 170 countries	GIWPS 2021 Turkmenistan profile	https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/turkmenistan/	29 June 2023
Girls Not Brides Turkmenistan profile	Girls Not Brides Turkmenistan	https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/turkmenistan/	29 June 2023
Human Rights Watch World Report 2023 Turkmenistan country chapter	HRW 2023 Turkmenistan country chapter	https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/turkmenistan	29 June 2023
Internet World Stats available in 2023	IWS 2023 Turkmenistan	https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#tm	29 June 2023
RSF's 2023 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2023 Turkmenistan	https://rsf.org/en/turkmenistan	29 June 2023
Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index – covering 180 countries	CPI 2022 Turkmenistan	https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/turkmenistan	29 June 2023
UNDP: Human Development Report Turkmenistan	UNDP HDR Turkmenistan	https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/TKM	29 June 2023
US State Department's 2022 International Religious Freedom Report Turkmenistan	IRFR 2022 Turkmenistan	https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/turkmenistan/	29 June 2023
USCIRF 2023 country reports – covering 17 CPC / 11 SWL	USCIRF 2023 Turkmenistan CPC	https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/Turkmenistan.pdf	29 June 2023
World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook - April 2023 Turkmenistan is not included	Macro Poverty Outlook	https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/d5f32ef28464d01f195827b7e020a3e8-0500022021/related/mpo-eca.pdf	29 June 2023
World Bank Turkmenistan data 2021	World Bank Turkmenistan data	https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=TKM	29 June 2023
World Bank Turkmenistan overview	World Bank Turkmenistan overview	https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/turkmenistan/overview#1	29 June 2023

Recent history

After 69 years as part of the Soviet Union, Turkmenistan declared its independence on 27 October 1991. Until the death of former President Saparmurat Niyazov in 2006, the country had been in the tight grip of his quasi-religious personality cult, based on his book called “Ruhnama”. The philosophy embedded in this "book of the Turkmen soul" dominated public life and was taught in schools and universities. Perhaps the climax of this reverence was the construction of a huge tower in the capital Ashgabat which was topped by a golden, rotating statue of the president. The statue was always facing the sun. The official explanation was that the sun followed the statue, not the other way round. It is hardly surprising that observers used to refer to the country as the North Korea of Central Asia.

Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov took office after President Niyazov's death in December 2006 and overturned some of his decisions, e.g. the plan to re-name months and days according to Turkmen heroes, but he had to move carefully in deposing his predecessor who had been revered almost like a god. The compulsory teaching of Ruhnama in the country's education system was gradually reduced. The golden statue was moved to the outskirts of Ashgabat.

It did not take long before Berdimukhamedov developed his own personality cult around the honorary title “Arkadag” (Protector). After Berdimukhamedov's re-election in 2012, an "Era of Supreme Happiness" was announced. The regime decided to tear down thousands of homes and rebuild the capital Ashgabat as a white marbled city. On 25 May 2015, the authorities unveil-

ed a giant statue of President Berdymukhamedov on horseback, holding a dove - everything covered with a layer of 24-carat gold. In September 2016 constitutional amendments were made to allow the president to run in future presidential elections regardless of his age.

In July 2019 there was commotion in Turkmenistan when the rumor spread that President Berdymukhamedov was [dead](#), (RFE/RL, 29 July 2019) after not being seen in public for a number of weeks. However, he re-appeared later in August 2019 at the [opening of a conference](#) (RFE/RL, 12 August 2019). No explanation was ever given for his absence, but it shows how central the president is to the life of the nation.

When the COVID-19 crisis began in early 2020, President Berdymukhamedov denied that any pandemic had reached the country. The claim of there being no infections was accepted by a [WHO delegation](#) visiting in July 2020 (UN Press briefing, 15 July 2020). In November 2020, the Turkmen government still [claimed](#) the absence of COVID-19 infections and deaths, but measures including mask-wearing and travel restrictions had meanwhile been imposed (VOA news, 30 November 2020). The total denial of the presence of the pandemic in Turkmenistan has been maintained.

On 12 February 2022, the 64 year old president hinted that he had plans to resign. Three days later his son Serdar was nominated as a presidential candidate hours after the Central Election Commission launched the first stage of the country's campaign in an early presidential election (Source: [RFE/RL, 14 February 2022](#)). The early presidential elections were held on 12 March 2022 and as expected Serdar Berdymukhamedov won with 72.97% of the vote (Source: [RFE/RL, 15 March 2022](#)). 11 months later, Human Rights Watch came with the following summary: “A change in leadership in Turkmenistan in 2022 did not lead to improvements in its human rights record. The country remained one of the most closed and repressive in the world. The government tolerates no political pluralism, independent media, or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Authorities jail perceived opponents and government critics. The fate and whereabouts of dozens of victims of enforced disappearances remain unknown. The government failed to adequately address a worsening food security crisis. Freedom of movement is subject to substantial restrictions.” (HRW 2023 Turkmenistan country chapter)

When the war in Ukraine broke out in February 2022 the Turkmen government initially refrained from making any public statement about its standpoint. This changed, however, in December 2022 when the government clearly took sides with Russia. (Source: [RFE/RL, 14 December 2022](#)).

Political and legal landscape

Turkmenistan is a presidential republic, whereby the President of Turkmenistan is both head of state and head of government. No true opposition parties are allowed. Power is concentrated in the presidency; the judiciary is wholly subservient to the government, with all judges appointed for five-year terms by the president without legislative review.

According to US State Department (IRFR 2022 Turkmenistan):

- “The constitution establishes the republic as a secular country and provides for the freedom of religion and for the right of individuals to choose their religion, express and disseminate their religious beliefs, and participate in religious observances and ceremonies. The consti-

tution separates the roles of government and religion and stipulates that religious organizations are prohibited from "interference" in state affairs. The constitution provides for the equality of citizens before the law, regardless of their religious preference."

- "The law requires all religious organizations, including those that had registered previously, to reregister with the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) whenever the organization changes its address or amends its legal charter. The law permits the registration only of those religious organizations that have at least 50 resident members older than 18; a similar requirement applies to nonreligious civil associations. The law defines a religious organization as a voluntary association of citizens affiliated with a religion, organized to conduct religious services and other rites and ceremonies and/or to provide religious education, that is registered in accordance with the country's legislation."
- "Unregistered religious organizations and unregistered subsidiary congregations of registered religious organizations may not legally conduct religious activities; establish places of worship; gather for religious services, including in private residences; produce or disseminate religious materials; or proselytize. Any such activity is punishable as an administrative offense by fines ranging from 100 to 2,000 manat (\$570), with higher fines for religious leaders and lower fines for members."

According to USCIRF 2023 Turkmenistan CPC:

- "In 2022, religious freedom conditions in Turkmenistan remained poor. The government controls all aspects of religious life and expression, dictating and surveilling religious practice and punishing nonconformity through administrative harassment, imprisonment, and torture."
- "The government of Turkmenistan is an extremely authoritarian regime with an abysmal record on human rights and freedom of the press. As a result, the country is largely closed off from the rest of the world, making it difficult for accurate information to flow into or out of its borders. The government's tight hold on society and information also makes it difficult to document the full scope of the ongoing religious freedom violations, which are certainly more extensive than the limited number of reports indicate. In addition to the closed-off nature of the country, those who can get information out often do so at great risk to their lives and liberty. Turkmenistan's diaspora community and citizens in exile are often unwilling to share information about the government's religious freedom violations for fear of retaliation against them or their families. Nevertheless, the available information continues to present a bleak picture."
- "During [2022], the government continued to treat all independent religious activity with suspicion, maintaining a large surveillance apparatus that monitors believers at home and abroad. Turkmen law requires religious groups to register under intrusive criteria, strictly controls registered groups' activities, and punishes religious activities by unregistered groups, which are banned."

Gender perspective

According to the law, men and women have equal constitutional rights in relation to marriage, divorce, custody and inheritance. Despite this, the persistence of discriminatory religious and customary laws – as well as harmful gender norms - results in gender inequality.

In a [2018 periodic report](#), the CEDAW Committee noted that Turkmenistan had inadequate laws in relation to gender-based violence (particularly domestic violence) and that women had limited access to assets. Furthermore, the systemic impunity granted to perpetrators was highlighted as an issue of concern, in addition to inadequate access to justice for victims. Despite being illegal, child marriage also remains an ongoing practice, with 6% of girls being married before the age of 18 (Girls Not Brides Turkmenistan).

Turkmenistan had come under recent criticism for imposing new restrictions on women’s appearance and their ability to travel, a move that has been linked to a ‘Taliban-style’ of rule ([RFE/RL, 4 May 2022](#); [The Diplomat, 3 May 2022](#)). Such developments have led women’s rights groups in Turkmenistan to label the newly elected leader as a “misogynist president” ([AsiaNews, 12 May 2022](#)).

Within the armed forces, Christian men have faced hostile treatment and harassment. Military service is mandatory in Turkmenistan, with men obliged to serve for two years between the ages of 18 and 30. Evasion of military service is punishable with up to two years in prison (World Factbook Turkmenistan). In December 2022, the government began to offer an alternative to required national service for conscientious objectors (US State Department IRFR 2022 Turkmenistan).

Religious landscape

Turkmenistan: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	66,000	1.1
Muslim	6,079,000	96.8
Hindu	0	0.0
Buddhist	820	0.0
Ethno-religionist	1,000	0.0
Jewish	500	0.0
Bahai	1,300	0.0
Atheist	24,100	0.4
Agnostic	110,000	1.8
Other	730	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

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

According to the World Christian Database (WCD March 2023) 96.8% of the population of Turkmenistan is (predominantly Sunni) Muslim. As reported by the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Turkmenistan): "There are small pockets of Shia Muslims, consisting largely of ethnic Iranians, Azeris, and Kurds, some located in Ashgabat, with others along the border with Iran and in the western city of Turkmenbashi." Despite the large Islamic majority, it would be wrong to call Turkmenistan a Muslim country. 70 years of atheism during the Soviet era have left a deep influence. The government is staunchly secular and has the country's Islamic community firmly under control. Muslim citizens follow basic Islamic culture rather than strict doctrine.

According to WCD 2023, the next largest religious categories are agnostics and atheists (in total 1.8% of the population), found particularly in the capital Ashgabat and other major cities. This is the result of 70 years of forced atheism by the government of the USSR from 1917 to 1991 and by the Turkmen regimes of Presidents Niyazov and Berdymukhamedov since then.

Christians are a very small group, making up only 1.1% of the population. The small Christian minority is weak due to much division and little cooperation between the various denominations. There are but few exceptions to this and it plays into the hands of the government.

There is little freedom of religion in Turkmenistan despite the claims to the contrary in the country's Constitution (but see above: *Specific examples of positive developments*). The authoritarian government of Turkmenistan uses a vast number of state agents (police, secret services, local imams) to closely monitor all religious activities and has imposed an array of restrictions on all religions, not only targeting Christian faith.

According to US State Department (IRFR 2022 Turkmenistan):

- "Minority religious groups said persons who were not Sunni Muslim or Russian Orthodox continued to report harassment, such as public shaming by family members, friends, and neighbors. Some religious leaders stated that the government's suspicion of religion continued to be mirrored by private sector employers, and that membership in a minority religious organization or even 'excessive' expressions of religiosity - including by members of the dominant Sunni Muslim community - could result in the loss of employment opportunities and frequently triggered harassment. According to Christian community leaders, Muslims who converted to Christianity faced pressure from families, friends, and local communities to return to their former faith."

Economic landscape

According to the World Bank Turkmenistan data:

- **GDP (current US\$) (billions):** 45.6 (in 2020)
- **GDP growth (annual %):** -3.4 (in 2020)

Turkmenistan is very rich in oil and natural gas and has been a major exporter of both for decades, mainly to Russia and China. In [April 2019](#), after settling its commercial dispute with Turkmenistan, Russia's Gazprom resumed gas imports (halted in 2016) from this Central Asian state (Jamestown Foundation, 2 October 2019). Most of Turkmenistan's gas goes to China, via the Central Asia-China pipeline. This west-east pipeline also pumps gas from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, restricting Ashgabat's options to augment the volumes it sends to China. Until the fourth string of this pipeline is completed, Turkmenistan needs an alternative export route, weakening Ashgabat's position in negotiations with Moscow. Moreover, Turkmenistan is repaying Chinese loans for the construction of the Central Asia-China pipeline through subsidized or even free gas exports. Falling oil prices further affected Turkmenistan's gas contracts with China since their negotiated prices were indexed to international crude oil prices.

The unemployment and the poverty rate remain at a very high level. The considerable growth of GDP in pre-pandemic years – per capita as well as in percentage – did not improve the living conditions of all citizens on an equal basis. The huge drop in the oil price since 2014 has had a negative effect on Turkmenistan's economy, causing the planned reconstruction of the capital Ashgabat to be delayed.

The government is known for gross [mismanagement](#) of the economy and has seemingly scant regard for the welfare of the general public (RFE/RL, 7 December 2019). Food shortages and price surges in [Turkmenistan](#) first appeared in late 2016, although the authorities have never publicly acknowledged or addressed them (RFE/RL, 27 September 2019). Despite the country's potential wealth due to enormous amounts of natural gas and other commodities, only a very small elite benefits from it. Turkmenistan does not have [billions](#) of dollars available to spend defending its currency and the government has rejected advice for years that it should devalue the manat (RFE/RL, 23 April 2020). According to reports, "another sign the Central Asian energy-rich nation may be cash-strapped" is that cash [withdrawals](#) via ATM have been restricted (RFE/RL, 6 April 2020). Food shortages and price rises that began about five years ago show no sign of abating and are pushing more people into poverty. But instead of working to fix the economy, the government in Ashgabat is stepping up control of people's access to information. (Source: [RFE/RL, 16 November 2021](#))

Christians in Turkmenistan are under severe state pressure. Additionally, they suffer like the rest of the population from the deteriorating economy. For instance: Although the COVID-19 pandemic never officially reached Turkmenistan, in [March 2020](#), food prices reached record levels in the Turkmen capital as the government restricted entry into Ashgabat amid apparent government efforts to prevent any spread of COVID-19 (RFE/RL, 25 March 2020). In November 2021 small private shops in the Turkmen capital, Ashgabat, were shut down apparently as a measure to prevent the spread of the coronavirus although the authorities continued to deny the presence of COVID-19 within the country's borders (Source: [RFE/RL, 5 November 2021](#)).

Gender perspective

As highlighted by Georgetown’s Women, Peace and Security Index, Turkmenistan has shown improvement in recent years in relation to financial inclusion for women (in part reflecting the impact of the [2016 Employment Act](#)) which allowed women greater access to jobs (GIWPS 2021 Turkmenistan profile). Greater gender parity has also been reached in the context of education, although boys remain more likely to study at the tertiary level than girls ([UNICEF, 2021](#)). Despite these positive developments, women and girls continue to lose out in matters of inheritance due to ongoing patrilineal inheritance practices.

Social and cultural landscape

According to the World Factbook Turkmenistan:

- **Main ethnic groups:** Turkmen 85%, Uzbek 5%, Russian 4%, other 6% (2003 estimate)
- **Main languages:** Turkmen (official) 72%, Russian 12%, Uzbek 9%, other 7%
- **Urban population: 54% of total population (2023)**
- **Literacy rate:** 99.7% (male: 99.8%, female: 99.6%) (2015)

According to the UNDP Human Development Report Turkmenistan:

- **HDI score and ranking:** 0.745 (0.73 for females, 0.76 for males), ranking 91
- **Total population:** 6.34 million (2021)
- **Life expectancy at birth:** 69.3 years (72.7 for females, 65.8 for males) (2021)
- **Expected years of schooling:** 13.2 years (13.0 for girls, 13.4 for boys) (2021)
- **Gender inequality index:** 0.177 (2021)
- **Labor Force Participation Rate:** Female: 36.5, Male: 55.6 (2021)

In April 2022: Turkmen police began monitoring the people queuing at state grocery stores, taking pictures and filming customers to prevent them from returning to buy extra bread. As they studied the crowds, police warned that anyone found buying more than their allotment of bread would face a penalty of up to 15 days in jail. The authoritarian government in Turkmenistan has been forced to tighten controls as poverty and economic hardship grow across the country despite its wealth of energy resources. The country has seen a dramatic increase in the number of households relying on government-subsidized food. (Source: [RFE/RL, 22 April 2022](#))

In December 2022: “Education officials along with police and intelligence officers have held several meetings with students and employees in the Balkan and Lebap provinces in recent days, urging people to shun Western media and culture that they say brainwash young Turkmen” (Source: [RFE/RL, 14 December 2022](#)).

In February 2023: [RFE/RL](#) reported that many citizens were planning to leave Turkmenistan. There are many important reasons for doing this - massive unemployment, extremely high inflation, food shortages, corruption, and a government bent on controlling every facet of its citizens’ lives. [AsiaNews](#) reported in April 2023 that the situation had not improved.

In general, Christians experience the same problems as all other people in the country and are not especially targeted economically or socially. The only exception to this is the pressure from the social environment (family, local imams, villagers) on Christians with a Muslim background.

Gender perspective

In May 2022, the presidency of Serdar Berdymukhamedov began with measures to crack down on women's rights in Turkmenistan, earning the newly elected leader a reputation for being a "misogynist president." Not that his father Gurbanguly, now president of the Senate, was much more accommodating when it came to civil rights, but he did not seem to be particularly hostile towards the female population as much as his 40-year-old son is. (Source: [RFE/RL, 12 May 2022](#))

There remain strong stereotypes in Turkmenistan about the roles of men and women. Women are viewed primarily as mothers and caregivers, assuming a disproportionate domestic workload (often in addition to a job), whereas men are viewed as financial providers and decision makers. According to Georgetown (GIWPS 2021 Turkmenistan profile), Turkmenistan scored worst in the region for discriminatory gender norms. Whilst Turkmenistan scored relatively highly in relation to community safety in GIWPS 2021, women and girls remain vulnerable to sexual harassment and abuse in the public sphere ([CEDAW, 2018](#)). Violence within the home reportedly rose within the context of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions and remains rife ([UN Turkmenistan, July 2020](#); [OSCE, September 2021](#)). Violence victims (usually women) rarely report crimes, resulting in widespread impunity for perpetrators ([CEDAW, 2018](#)). There is strong stigma attached to sexual harassment and rape in particular, meaning such attacks are rarely reported or taken to court. This broad societal acceptance of gender-based violence provides an avenue that can be exploited for the means of religiously motivated persecution.

Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (IWS 2023 Turkmenistan):

- **Internet usage:** 25.3% penetration - survey date: July 2022
- **Facebook usage:** 5.2% penetration - survey date: July 2022
Despite access to Facebook being so limited, according to [NapoleonCat \(June 2023\)](#), 53.1% of Facebook users are men compared to 46.9% of women, indicating only a slight gender gap.

According to World Bank Turkmenistan data:

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 98.6 per 100 people (2021)
Compared to other regions, Central Asia has a relatively [small gender gap](#) in relation to cell phone ownership, although men are more likely to own a phone (GSMA, 2020).

According to [BuddeComm Research](#) (updated June 2023):

- “The hermit nation of Turkmenistan, which rivals only North Korea for its isolationism, continues to keep its telecom sector – along with the broader populace – under tight control.”

- “The country inched up just one point off the bottom of the world rankings for press and internet freedom in the most recent report from Reporters Without Borders. Most social networks in the country are blocked, although locals do have access to the government-developed Biz Byarde (We Are Here) platform released in 2019. All internet users, however, need to identify themselves before logging on, and strict censorship over what can be viewed is in force. The end result is that Turkmenistan has one of the lowest penetration rates for internet access in the world.”
- “The President of the republic, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, announced early presidential elections for mid-March 2022. There is, therefore, some prospect – admittedly very slim – of a loosening of restrictions on the country’s telecom sector following regime change. But with the President’s son already widely tapped to be the successor, there seems little chance of Turkmenistan moving far away from the bottom of the world’s Telecom Maturity Index any time soon.”

Despite Turkmenistan not being included in Freedom House’s Freedom on the Net report, as indicated above, Turkmenistan is one of the most closed countries when it comes to the Internet. There are several Internet cafés in the capital Ashgabat, but access to most international websites is blocked. The government has a monopoly on Internet access, and uses computer programs to search emails for coded words and block suspicious messages. Foreign Christian sites are blocked. Low connection speeds do not allow the downloading of content from the few websites that are available.

In December 2021, cable.co.uk said in a report on worldwide broadband speed in 2021 that Turkmenistan, with an Internet speed of 0.50 megabits per second (Mbps), was the slowest of all 224 countries surveyed. That puts the secretive and isolated Central Asian country behind even war-torn nations such as Yemen, South Sudan, Somalia and Afghanistan in terms of Internet speed, the report showed. (Source: [RFE/RL, 3 December 2021](#))

Security situation

All borders are guarded by police, secret services and the army, especially the borders with Iran and Afghanistan. There are checkpoints along all major routes. Media are monitored, and public rooms and also hotel rooms are likely to be tapped.

According to [World Scientific](#) (accessed 17 October 2023):

- "Despite being an immediate neighbour of Afghanistan, Turkmenistan (formerly known as Turkmenia), remains largely unaffected by terrorism. According to the Global Terrorism Index (GTI), published by the Institute for Economics and Peace the risk of a terrorist attack in Turkmenistan remains low. Nevertheless, Turkmenistan, like other countries bordering Afghanistan, is concerned about the implications of the US military drawdown from Afghanistan. The presence of the Taliban, al-Qaeda and its affiliated Central Asian militant groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan pose a potential threat to Turkmenistan. Furthermore, transnational crime such as drug production and smuggling in Afghanistan have exacerbated in recent years. There have also been reports that the citizens of Turkmenistan are fighting among rebel forces against the Syrian government. The Turkmen fighters re-

turning to home from Syria is another legitimate security concern for the Turkmen government."

On 3 January 2022, Turkmen border guards were reportedly involved in a sustained exchange of fire with Taliban forces, the first known time the two have been in a shoot-out. According to Helal Balkhi, head of the Taliban's Information Department in the northern Jowzjan Province, it was Turkmen border guards who started shooting and the incident came after Turkmen troops shot and killed an Afghan civilian in the same area several days earlier. The Turkmen side did not comment on the incident; state media always go to great lengths to avoid reporting any bad news concerning Turkmenistan. (Source: [RFE/RL, 5 January 2022](#))

Christians in Turkmenistan need to be extremely careful. Police and secret services constantly monitor their activities. It is very difficult for foreign Christians to visit Turkmenistan - either as a tourist or in any other role. Only a very limited number of foreigners visit the country. It is practically impossible to get a religious visa to visit the churches. Only short-term visits (5 days) will be allowed in rare cases. All visitors are monitored by the government. Citizens are also hindered from visiting Christians in other countries. Exit visas are required and are often denied.

Trends analysis

1) Politics: No major changes in view

The change of leadership (from father Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov to son Serdar Berdymukhammedov) has not brought any major changes to state politics. It is even [suspected](#) that behind the screens the father still has big impact on the country's government. The authoritarian government has not faced any serious challenges from any form of opposition (including demonstrations of any kind) and it has consistently imposed severe surveillance of almost every aspect of life. Thousands of people are sent to prison or labor camps every year. Turkmenistan has been called the 'North Korea' of Central Asia. Life for Christians is unlikely to improve in the foreseeable future.

2) Economy: Hard times have arrived

The days when Turkmenistan could rely on steady income from oil and natural gas are over. This has caused much uncertainty for the Turkmen population, especially since they get very little help from the government. The regime has continued to claim that there were never any COVID-19 infections in the country.

External Links - Keys to understanding

- Recent history: dead - <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmen-celebs-try-to-debunk-rumors-of-president-s-death/30082030.html>
- Recent history: opening of a conference - <https://www.rferl.org/a/gurbanguly-berdymukhammedov-turkmenistan-/30105422.html>
- Recent history: WHO delegation - <https://turkmenistan.un.org/en/53288-press-briefing-who-europe-experts-preliminary-outcomes-their-covid-19-mission-turkmenistan>
- Recent history: claimed - <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/turkmenistan-clamps-down-covid-19-criticism>
- Recent history: RFE/RL, 14 February 2022 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/31702881.html>
- Recent history: RFE/RL, 15 March 2022 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/31753690.html>

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- Political and legal landscape: AsiaNews, 12 May 2022 - <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/The-misogyny-of-the-new-Turkmen-president-55786.html>
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- Economic landscape: Turkmenistan - <https://www.rferl.org/a/food-shortages-ashgabat-turkmenistan/30187280.html>
- Economic landscape: billions - <https://www.rferl.org/a/qishloq-ovozi-plunging-oil-prices-kazakhstan-turkmenistan-economic-problems/30572905.html>
- Economic landscape: withdrawals - <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmen-district-further-restricts-daily-atm-cash-withdrawals-card-payments/30535309.html>
- Economic landscape: RFE/RL, 16 November 2021 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmenistan-hardship-control-information/31564824.html>
- Economic landscape: March 2020 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmenistan-coronavirus-food-prices-skyrocket-special-measures/30508897.html?itflags=mailer>
- Economic landscape: RFE/RL, 5 November 2021 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmenistan-covid-ashgabat-shops-shut/31547315.html>
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- Economic landscape: UNICEF, 2021 - <https://www.unicef.org/turkmenistan/gender>
- Social and cultural landscape: RFE/RL, 22 April 2022 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/31816546.html>
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- Trends analysis: suspected - <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Berdymukhamedov-senior-and-his-'elders'-will-hold-the-reins-of-Turkmenistan-58842.html>

WWL 2024: Church information / Turkmenistan

Christian origins

The first Christians to enter Central Asia (including Turkmenistan) were Nestorian missionaries in the 4th century. From the 5th century onwards there were great movements of peoples in Asia and Europe and for Turkmenistan this meant the arrival of a Turkic tribe from eastern Asia named Oghuz (the ethnic ancestors of the Turkmen). According to Islamic tradition, Islam entered the region in the 8th century, following the tracks of the Silk Road trade route. Christians subsequently disappeared from the country.

In the 16th century, Turkmenistan became part of the Uzbek khanates of Khiva and Bukhara which deeply influenced the country's culture and religion.

The current presence of Christians in Turkmenistan dates from the 19th century. In 1867, the Russian Empire expanded its territory into Central Asia during a number of military campaigns, conquering the khanates of Khiva and Bukhara. The regime brought in ethnic Russians, who mostly belonged to the Russian Orthodox Church. During the Second World War, Joseph Stalin ordered the deportation of large numbers of ethnic Germans, Ukrainians, Poles and Koreans to Central Asia. With them, other Christian denominations found their way into Turkmenistan.

Church spectrum today

Turkmenistan: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	50,200	76.1
Catholic	200	0.3
Protestant	2,500	3.8
Independent	10,600	16.1
Unaffiliated	2,500	3.8
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
Total	66,000	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	660	1.0
Renewalist movement	3,900	5.9

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

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox.
Roman Catholics: All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to

be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalist movement:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

According to the World Christian Database data of March 2023 the largest official church denominations in Turkmenistan are:

- Russian Orthodox Church
- Armenian Apostolic Church
- Ukrainian Orthodox Church
- Other Orthodox groups

The biggest church is the Russian Orthodox Church and its members are practically all ethnic Russians. As in many other countries in Central Asia the Christian community is having to face the emigration of many Russians. Members of the Armenian Apostolic Church are predominantly ethnic Armenians. The members of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church are mostly ethnic Ukrainians.

There is little trust and cooperation between the various denominations, a fact which the government utilizes to its advantage.

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

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

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians: These do not exist according to Open Doors sources and were therefore not counted as a separate category in the WWL analysis.

Historical Christian communities: The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has accustomed itself to the limitations provided by the government and is therefore left more or less undisturbed. Sunday services may be monitored, but they are conducted unhindered and members can meet. Printing or importing Christian materials is restricted.

Converts to Christianity: Christian converts from a Muslim background bear the brunt of persecution in Turkmenistan. Apart from the state, they are also under strong pressure from family, friends and community. The latter pressure is by far the more powerful because it dominates their everyday life.

Non-traditional Christian communities: After converts, this category of Christians experiences the most rights violations for their faith, especially when their churches have not been registered. Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal groups suffer from raids, threats, arrests and fines.

WWL 2024: Persecution Dynamics / Turkmenistan

Reporting period

1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023

Position on the World Watch List

Turkmenistan: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	70	29
WWL 2023	70	26
WWL 2022	69	25
WWL 2021	70	23
WWL 2020	70	22

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods

The WWL 2024 score for Turkmenistan is less than 1 point higher than in WWL 2023. The situation is one of stability, with only minor changes in some areas of pressure and violence in the country. The pressure on Christians is extremely high in the *Church, Private and National spheres of life*. The two main Persecution engines in Turkmenistan are *Dictatorial paranoia* and *Islamic oppression (blended with Clan oppression)* and are active in all spheres of life, but *Islamic oppression (blended with Clan oppression)* dominates in the *Private and Family spheres of life*, while *Dictatorial paranoia* dominates in the *National and Church spheres of life*. Both engines 'meet' each other in the *Community sphere of life*. State agents constantly monitor churches and Christians. Muslim families, friends and villagers exert pressure on converts.

Persecution engines

Turkmenistan: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Not at all
Clan oppression	CO	Strong
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Not at all
Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Very strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Not at all

The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.

Dictatorial paranoia (Very strong)

No religious activities beyond state-run and state-controlled institutions are allowed. Protestants are frequently branded 'extremists' due to their religious activities outside state-sanctioned structures. Members of Protestant churches are often regarded as followers of a foreign sect that has only one goal, namely to spy on and destroy the current political system. From this perspective, they need to be not only controlled, but if necessary, eradicated.

Islamic oppression (Strong), blended with Clan oppression (Strong)

If indigenous citizens (who are Muslim) convert to Christianity, they are likely to experience pressure and occasionally physical violence from their families, friends and local community to force them to return to their former faith. Some converts are locked up by their families for long periods, beaten and may eventually be expelled from their communities. Local imams preach against them, so adding pressure. As a result, converts will do their best to hide their faith – they become so-called secret believers.

Drivers of persecution

Turkmenistan: Drivers of Persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	STRONG	-	-	STRONG	-	-	-	VERY STRONG	-
Government officials	Medium	-	-	Medium	-	-	-	Very strong	-
Ethnic group leaders	Medium	-	-	Medium	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Medium	-	-	Medium	-	-	-	-	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Strong	-	-	Strong	-	-	-	Medium	-
One's own (extended) family	Strong	-	-	Strong	-	-	-	-	-
Political parties	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Strong	-
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Organized crime cartels or networks	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN, OIC etc.) and embassies	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology.

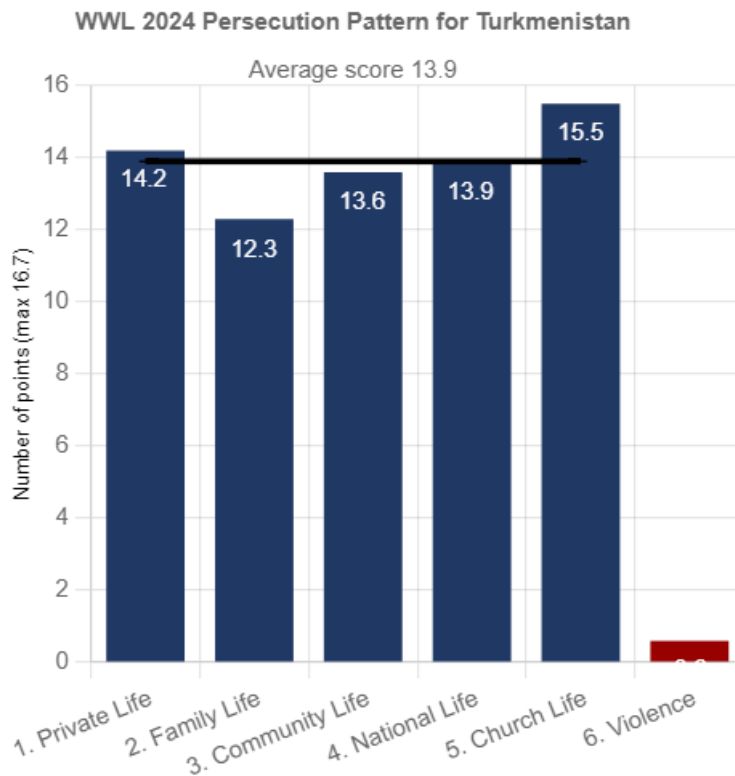
Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia

- **Government officials (Very strong):** Officials at all levels are very hostile towards religious groups. All religious activity is closely monitored to see if government rules are being followed. If not, raids, detentions, confiscations and fines are likely. Such measures are very common in Turkmenistan.
- **Political parties (Strong):** Although few political parties are allowed in Turkmenistan, the ruling party which controls the government of President Berdymukhamedov by definition participates in the violation of rights of Christians insofar as much of the pressure and violence directed at Christians is government-sanctioned.
- **Normal citizens (Medium):** Especially at the local level, citizens will monitor any religious activities they see and report to the authorities.

Drivers of Islamic oppression (blended with Clan oppression)

- **Extended family (Strong):** Especially in the countryside, Muslim family members will exert high pressure on converts to Christianity. This can lead to threats, beatings, house arrest or ostracism.
- **Normal citizens (Strong):** At the community level, members of society will exert additional pressure on converts to return to Islam. In the case of conversion, converts are persecuted severely by the local community and religious leaders.
- **Ethnic or Clan group leaders (Medium):** With the support of the authorities, Turkmen ethnic leaders encourage all the forms of persecution mentioned above. Mahalla community groups ("Mahalla" refers to a self-governing administrative unit of residents) have been provided with authority by the government to carry out official action against Christians and prohibit missionary activity.
- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Medium):** Muslim clerics are open in their hostility towards non-Orthodox Christians and particularly against converts from Islam.
- **Government officials (Medium):** At the community level there is a link between local government and Muslim pressure. Often, active Muslims and local officials know each other. This is why the pressure on converts is stronger at the community level than at the state level, where officials claim that they are secular.

The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2024 Persecution pattern for Turkmenistan shows:

- The average pressure on Christians is at an extremely high level (13.9 points), very slightly higher than in WWL 2023 (13.8). Pressure increased very slightly in the *Family sphere of life* and decreased slightly in the *Private, National and Church spheres of life*.
- The scores for pressure are extremely high in *Church life* (15.5), *Private life* (14.2) and *National life* (13.9). The fact that the highest score is in the *Church sphere of life* is a reflection of the many restrictions on Christians imposed by the state.
- The score for violence remained very low (0.6 points), the same score as in WWL 2023; very few violent incidents were reported.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2024 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

Block 1.6: It has been risky for Christians to access Christian radio or TV, or Christian material on the Internet. (3.75 points)

Converts need to be very careful in accessing Christian broadcasts and websites in their homes, since discovery by their family will lead to harsh reactions. Accessing foreign Christian media is difficult for all Christians in Turkmenistan. Internet access goes via state ISPs and is therefore under surveillance.

Block 1.1: Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another. (3.50 points)

Conversion is viewed as betrayal of the family and culture, as well as Islam. This could lead to physical violence too. Officially, there is no hindrance to conversion since the laws are secular. However, the government disapproves of anything that is likely to lead to tension among the population.

Block 1.3: It has been dangerous to privately own or keep Christian materials. (3.50 points)

In the case of converts, the rights violations come from their family or community if Christian materials are discovered. Christian materials are considered as hard evidence for conversion. When such materials are found they will be destroyed and the convert will be dealt with harshly. The government has a strict requirement for all religious literature (whether imported or produced in the country) to be screened by the state authorities. Otherwise it is illegal and banned. Houses and churches are regularly raided by police in search of illegal religious materials. One church leader said: "All electronic devices, computers, mobile phones, androids etc. will be confiscated and checked for content".

Block 1.5: It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols. (3.50 points)

Converts know that displaying a cross or other Christian symbols will draw unwanted attention from their family and community. (Non-convert) Protestants are also at risk because the Muslim community are likely to accuse them of attempting to evangelize. Converts and Protestant Christians will also draw unwanted attention from state agents if they openly wear Christian symbols.

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

Block 2.4: Christian baptisms have been hindered. (3.50 points)

For the family, friends and community of converts baptism is regarded as the final farewell to the faith of the fathers and will therefore be opposed. Baptisms in unregistered churches are not allowed and if the state finds out about it, the meeting will be raided and all Christians present are likely to be interrogated and fined.

Block 2.7: Parents have been hindered in raising their children according to their Christian beliefs. (3.50 points)

The surrounding family will try to keep the children of converts to Christianity within Islam and raise them according to traditional customs. There is no official religious education in public schools; private religious education is restricted by the government.

Block 2.8: Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education. (3.50 points)

The Muslim environment (family, friends, community) will pressurize children of converts in particular into receiving Islamic teaching – sometimes even against the wishes of their parents. It is compulsory for students to participate in all activities organized by schools or other educational institutions.

Block 2.9: Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith. (3.50 points)

Children of converts and Protestants are usually isolated from having fellowship with other children. They are often humiliated and slandered at schools in front of all other children.

Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

Block 3.2: Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (this includes reporting to police, being shadowed, telephone lines listened to, emails read/censored, etc.). (3.75 points)

Converts will be monitored by members of their family and community. Protestants will also be monitored by the Muslim community as they are constantly suspected of missionary activity. The state is constantly monitoring all religious groups, even by installing informers in religious communities.

Block 3.7: Christians have been pressured by their community to renounce their faith. (3.75 points)

Converts will experience immense pressure from practically everyone to return to Islam. Protestant Christians will also face pressure from the community to convert to Islam.

Block 3.13: Christians have been interrogated or compelled to report to the local vigilante/police for faith-related reasons. (3.75 points)

Known converts will be harassed and interrogated harshly by their family and community. The state regularly raids Christian meetings, even those of registered groups. All those present will be interrogated, many will be detained, many will be fined, and all materials found will be confiscated.

Block 3.1: Christians have been harassed, threatened or obstructed in their daily lives for faith-related reasons (e.g. for not meeting majority religion or traditional dress codes, beard codes etc.). (3.50 points)

Converts are threatened by family, friends and community (including local Islamic leaders) in an effort to make them give up their Christian faith. Local Muslim communities will also harass Protestants whom they accuse of missionary activity. (Unregistered) Protestants face harassment, threats, discrimination, obstruction etc. from the authorities.

Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

Block 4.3: Christians have been forced by law or in practice to act against their conscience, e.g. regarding military service or in certain professions. (4.00 points)

For years, military service has been compulsory and Christians have not been able to refuse on grounds of conscience. According to the US State Department (IRFR 2022), since December 2022 the government started offering a civilian alternative which is just as compulsory and cannot be refused on grounds of conscience (See above: *Specific examples of positive developments*).

Block 4.9: Christian civil society organizations or political parties have been hindered in their functioning or forbidden because of their Christian convictions. (4.00 points)

The state will not allow Christian organizations or political parties. Muslims would also regard Christian organizations as an attempt to convert people to Christianity and would oppose them.

Block 4.16: International monitoring has been hindered when Christians had to stand trial (4.00 points)

Turkmenistan does not allow any international interference in its internal judicial system. International monitoring (e.g. by Forum 18) is as good as impossible.

Block 4.1: The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (3.75 points)

The Law on Religion (2016) contains many restrictions on religious freedom including, for example, a ban on unregistered religious organizations (even though it is practically impossible for a church to obtain official registration), a ban on private religious education, and the requirement for religious literature to be screened by the authorities.

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

Block 5.8: Christian preaching, teaching, and/or published materials have been monitored. (4.00 points)

All religious activities are strictly monitored by the state and very often this leads to raids etc. Christian materials are no exception.

Block 5.12: Churches or Christian organizations have been hindered in printing Christian materials or owning printers. (4.00 points)

Unauthorized printing of religious literature is considered an illegal religious activity and is prohibited by the law. All printed religious materials must pass state review. Printing without permission is forbidden. Everything is controlled by the state.

Block 5.13: Churches have been hindered in importing Christian materials from abroad. (4.00 points)

All imported religious materials must pass the official screening. In most cases the items are confiscated and destroyed. For that reason, Protestants do not try to bring printed materials into Turkmenistan. Muslims will report to the authorities if they discover Christians are importing religious materials illegally.

Block 5.16: Churches, Christian organizations, institutions or groups have been prevented from using mass media to present their faith. (4.00 points)

All media are state-controlled and inaccessible to Christians (or to adherents of any other faith for that matter). Internet access is also state-controlled, and many sites are blocked. The government has even prohibited the use of satellite dishes.

Violence

Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible, but since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as being minimum figures. The following 5 points should be considered when using the data provided in the Block 6 table:

1. Some incidents go unreported because the Christians involved choose not to speak about the hostility being faced. Possible reasons for this may be:

- *Doing so would expose them to more attacks. For example, if a family member is killed because of his/her faith, the survivors might decide to keep silent about the circumstances of the killing to avoid provoking any further attacks.*
- *In some circumstances, the reticence to pass on information may be due to the danger of exposure caused by converts returning to their previous faith.*
- *If persecution is related to sexual violence - due to stigma, survivors often do not tell even their closest relatives.*
- *In some cultural settings, if your loved one is killed, you might be under the obligation to take revenge. Christians not wishing to do that, may decide to keep quiet about it.*

2. Other incidents go unreported for the following possible reasons:

- *Some incidents never reach the public consciousness, because no one really knows about it; or the incident is simply not considered worth reporting; or media coverage is deliberately blocked or distorted; or media coverage is not deliberately blocked, but the information somehow gets lost; or the incidents are deliberately not reported widely for security reasons (e.g. for the protection of local church leaders).*
- *In situations where Christians have been discriminated against for many years, armed conflict can make them additionally vulnerable. Christians killed in areas where fighting regularly takes place are unlikely to be reported separately. Examples in recent years have been Sudan, Syria and Myanmar.*

- *Christians who die through the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care (due to long-term discrimination) are unlikely to be reported separately. Christians are not always killed directly; they can be so squeezed by regulations and other oppressive factors that they die – not at once, but in the course of years. This often includes the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care, or exclusion from government assisted socio-economic development projects. These numbers could be immense.*

3. The use of symbolic numbers: *In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10*, 100* etc.) is given and indicated with an asterisk. A symbolic number of 10* could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100* could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1,000* could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*: Each could indicate much higher numbers, but WWR chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain..*

Turkmenistan: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire	WWL 2024	WWL 2023
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	0	0
6.2 How many churches or public Christian properties (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.4 How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	0	0
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	0	0
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	22	22
6.9 How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.10 How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	0	0
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	0	0

In the WWL 2024 reporting period:

- **Christians attacked:** Sources reported that at least 22 Christians were physically or mentally abused. The majority of reported cases involved violence within a convert's family - beatings, forced isolation etc.

5 Year trends

The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

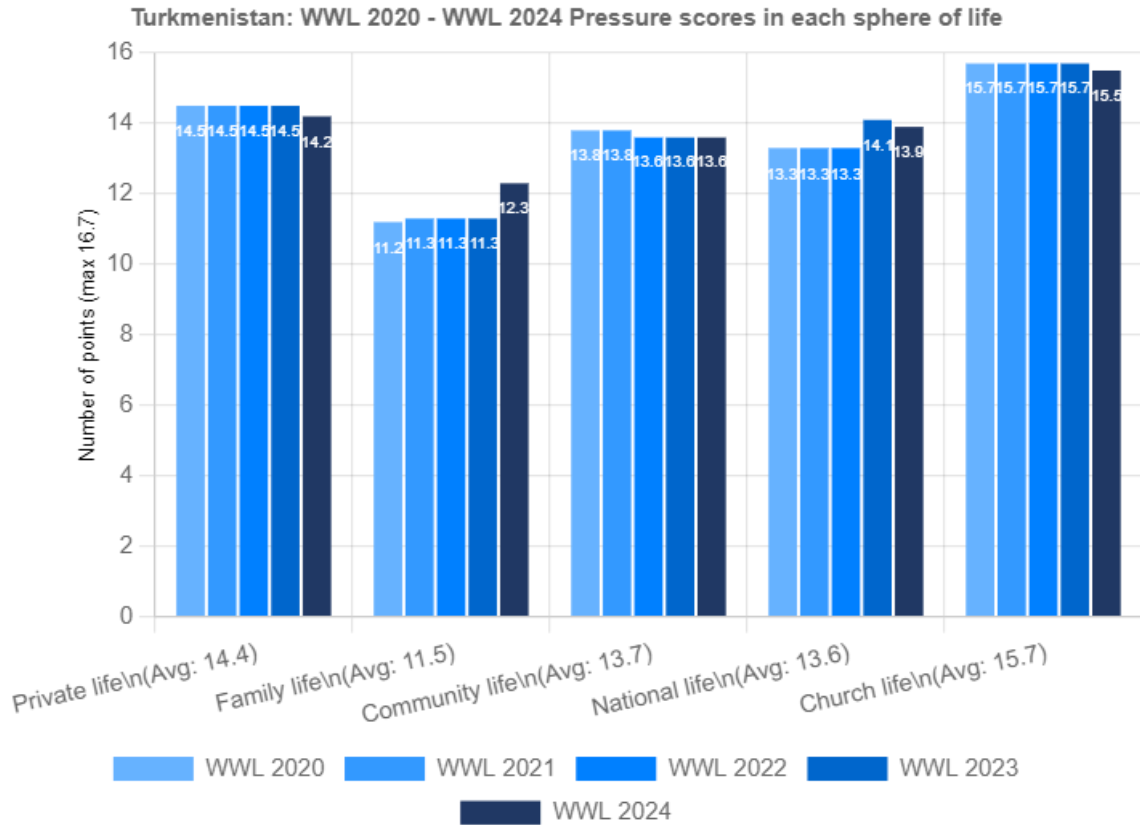
5 Year trends: Average pressure

Turkmenistan: WWL 2020 - WWL 2024	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2024	13.9
2023	13.8
2022	13.7
2021	13.7
2020	13.7

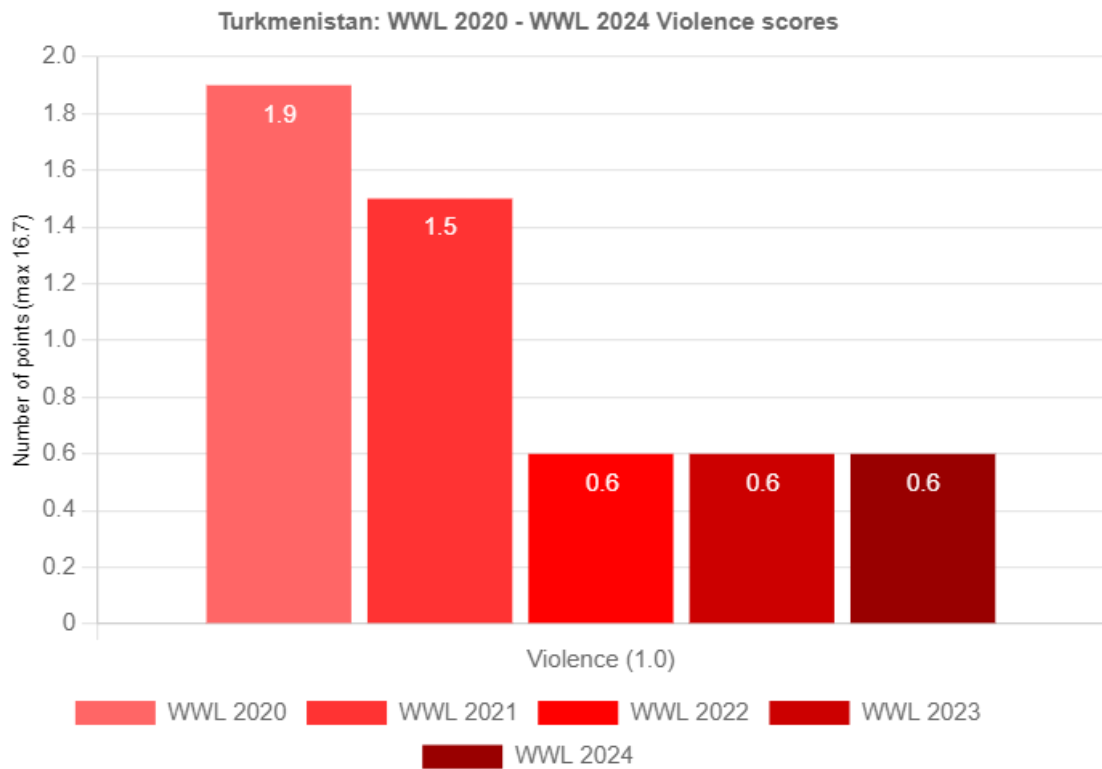
As can be seen from the table above, the average pressure over the 5 spheres of life in Turkmenistan has increased since WWL 2020 but remains stable within the range of 13.7 - 13.9 points. This is a clear indication of how little the situation for Christians in the country has changed.

5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life

As can be seen in the chart below, over the past five WWL reporting periods, the scores in the five spheres of life have not changed dramatically and have more or less levelled off. This means that the situation for Christians in Turkmenistan has been quite stable, with few changes occurring. The average pressure per sphere is highest - and indeed at an extreme level - in the *Church* and *Private spheres of life*. This reflects the influence of the two dominant Persecution engines, *Dictatorial paranoia* and *Islamic oppression* (blended with *Clan oppression*).



5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



Another stable element is the low score for violence targeting Christians in Turkmenistan. As shown in the chart above, in the last five WWL reporting periods, the score never reached 2 points - it has always moved between 0.6 points at the lowest and 1.9 points at the highest. The lack of incidents can be explained by the sheer effectiveness of state surveillance and control which force Christians to be very cautious. However, a possible main reason for the low scores is the fact that very few incidents get reported, since many Christians in Turkmenistan are very reluctant to talk about incidents that have occurred.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Forced marriage
Security	Abduction; Incarceration by family (house arrest); Violence – physical; Violence – sexual
Social and Cultural	Violence – psychological
Technological	-

Within Turkmenistan’s traditional, patriarchal and Islamic culture, domestic violence is the greatest threat for Christian women who live with non-Christians. Total submission is expected, both to their husbands as well as to their parents. A country expert explains that women from a Muslim background in particular are expected to live in “total obedience to husbands.”

Female converts therefore, who by turning away from Islam challenge the existing accepted social order, are particularly vulnerable to persecution. An expert states that “traditional culture puts women lower than men and requires obedience ... for that reason a woman cannot choose her own religion and will be persecuted if she converts to Christianity.” Female converts face harsh physical beatings, house arrest, verbal abuse, threats and rejection. They may even be sexually assaulted as a form of punishment, although such instances are rarely reported due to the attached stigma and shame, and the impunity granted to perpetrators.

Female converts in conservative regions run the risk of being kidnapped and married off to a Muslim, as a corrective measure. A country expert explains that “in some cases fathers would especially marry their daughters off to Muslim men in order to force them return to Islam”. Converts may also be forced into marriages not due to kidnappings, but due to the obligation to follow pre-marital arrangements made by her parents prior to conversion. Considering such pressure, many women choose to live as secret believers upon their conversion out of fear.

More broadly, abusing women can be used as an instrument to intimidate and cause distress for Christian husbands and family members, thereby pressuring the wider Christian community and fostering fear and feelings of helplessness across the Turkmen Church. As a country expert describes, “persecuting women is an instrument for persecuting their husbands and other family members.”

Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	Economic harassment via business/job/work access; Economic harassment via fines
Political and Legal	Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings and rites; Imprisonment by government; Travel bans/restrictions on movement
Security	Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
Social and Cultural	Violence – Verbal
Technological	-

Men in Turkmenistan normally hold leadership roles within the family, as heads of the family and financial providers, and within the Church. Pressure and violence directed against them affects entire families and congregations, causing fear, anger and financial hardship. Christians feel that state agents look for any excuse to issue fines to Christian men, for instance for holding illegal gatherings, for the possession of religious literature, even for downloading Christian songs. Pressure also comes from the community on a local level; Muslims obstruct business activities of converts and Protestants (whom they view as a sect), forcing many Christian business owners to keep their faith a secret. As men are the primary financial providers in Turkmenistan, they cannot afford to lose financial income.

Church leaders in Turkmenistan, who are generally male, are especially targeted for persecution. Muslims consider them primarily responsible for leading people away from Islam and attack those they deem to be most active evangelistically. The state authorities regard them as primary targets to control Christian activities; they expect a certain level of cooperation from those in leadership to inform them of anybody with radical or 'extremist' views. A country expert explains: "The state regards pastors and church leaders as primary targets to control Christian activities. They are used as examples for the other Christians of what may be expected."

With this in mind, it comes as no surprise that the authorities also influence the choice of who assumes leadership positions. Church leaders also face challenges in obtaining religious training; many have been denied exit visas when going to Christian conferences and seminars. Tight restrictions exist over religious education and institutions in Turkmenistan; training can only be conducted in special, state-licensed religious institutions. There are, however, no such institutions in Turkmenistan.

Christian men also face discrimination, intolerance and bullying within the context of the armed forces; military service remains mandatory in Turkmenistan, and objection on grounds of conscience is not permitted. Those who refuse, risk imprisonment. Additionally, male converts face harassment and interrogation by their families and local communities. They may also experience threats, disinheritance, limits on travel, shaming and beatings.

Persecution of other religious minorities

The government does not focus on any specific religious group - Muslims, Christians, Jews, Bahais etc. have all experienced a high level of state surveillance and oppression over the years.

According to US State Department (IRFR 2022 Turkmenistan):

- "[A]n unknown number of Muslims arrested in previous years based on religious grounds remained in prison."
- "Jehovah's Witnesses reported no new instances of conscientious objectors ... being detained or imprisoned during the year."

Further information

- "Five Sunni Muslims jailed in Balkanabat for 12 years each in August 2017 for meeting to study the works of the theologian Said Nursi were transferred [in 2022] to new labor camps. The strict-regime labor camp at Bayramali in Mary Region, where four of the five are held, also holds another jailed Nursi reader, 47-year-old Begench Dadebayew. At least two among more than 60 men jailed from 2013 for participating in a Sunni Muslim group in Turkmenabat have been freed after completing their jail terms." (Source: [Forum 18, 28 October 2022](#))

Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

Dictatorial paranoia

Turkmenistan is known as the North Korea of Central Asia. The current government exerts a very high level of control over the country and its position is very stable. No opposition to the regime of President Berdymukhammedov is visible. Government officials at all levels are the strongest violators of rights of Christians in Turkmenistan. They have imposed all kinds of legal restrictions, monitor all religious activities, raid meetings and block the use of religious materials. The chances that this situation will change are very slim indeed.

Islamic oppression / Clan oppression (blended)

Islam is not the state religion and is treated by the authorities in the same manner as other religions. However, Islam is the traditional religion of most of the population and the Muslim pressure on Christians in Turkmenistan comes from the far-reaching influence of family, friends and community on converts, but also on those Christians active in missionary activities. Since this is a matter of culture, it is highly unlikely that this situation will change.

Due to the stability of these three main Persecution engines, Christians in Turkmenistan will continue to face considerable levels of surveillance and pressure.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution of other religious minorities: Forum 18, 28 October 2022 - https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2786

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

As in earlier years, these are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Turkmenistan>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.