

# Freedom of Religion and the Persecution of Christians

## The Open Doors Report, 2014

### Introduction

Open Doors UK & I is part of an international NGO network which has for over 50 years supported and strengthened persecuted Christians. It now works in around 50 countries world-wide, in close consultation with church leaders and Christians who experience the reality of the denial of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights first-hand. Each year Open Doors International publishes the World Watch List, highlighting the 50 countries where it is most difficult to live as a Christian.

On the basis of the research behind Open Doors' World Watch List this paper highlights the most important trends of persecution affecting Christians and Christian communities at the start of 2014, and offers an analysis of persecution – how and why individual Christians experience the denial of their rights as expressed in Article 18.

The key findings in this report are:

- **there continues to be an increase in the persecution of Christians worldwide**
- **the persecution of Christians is becoming *more* intense in *more* countries of the world**
- **the most significant factor for this change is increased persecution in African countries**
- **the main engine driving persecution of Christians in 36 of the 50 countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian is Islamic extremism**
- **the most violent region for the persecution of Christians is the states of the African Sahel belt, where a fifth of the world's Christians meet one seventh of the world's Muslims in close proximity**
- **the extent and prevalence of persecution of Christians in failed states indicates that freedom of religion or belief is a major casualty of civic and political breakdown.**

The report also lists the 'hard facts' of persecution as recorded by the media in 2013.

### Persecution of Christians is still increasing

Open Doors' World Watch Research indicates an increase of persecution worldwide:

- **In 8 countries the level of persecution increased seriously** (Syria, Iraq, Pakistan, Sudan, Libya, Egypt, Colombia, Kazakhstan) It is likely that Central African Republic, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh can also be added to this list.
- **In 22 countries the level of persecution increased** (Somalia, Afghanistan, Maldives, Iran, Nigeria, Uzbekistan, Ethiopia, Vietnam, Qatar, Turkmenistan, Laos, Burma, Brunei, Jordan, India, Tunisia, Algeria, Palestinian Territories, Malaysia, Comoros, Kenya, Niger, Kyrgyzstan)
- **In 13 countries the level of persecution stayed more or less the same** (North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Eritrea, Oman, Bhutan, China, Kuwait, Bahrain, Morocco, Tajikistan, Djibouti, Indonesia, Azerbaijan)
- **In 3 countries the level of persecution decreased** (UAE, Mauritania, Uganda)
- **In 2 countries the level of persecution decreased considerably** (Mali, Tanzania)

We noted in last year's report that **persecution of Christians in Africa** significantly increased in 2012 as a result of the growing influence of Islamic extremism. While there have been improvements in some countries of concern, notably **Mali**, many Christian-majority countries continue to see increasing numbers of violent incidents that appear intended to destabilise the local situation. It is also clear that radical Muslims are infiltrating politics, business and the judiciary, such as introducing *sharia* family courts.

We continue to urge the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office to encourage cross-border strategies in sub-Saharan Africa to combat extremism and in support of religious liberty. We are concerned that a country-limited focus on individual incidents will fail to combat what is a transnational issue, and also ignore the pattern of infiltration and strategic positioning that allows radical Muslims to gain influence in society.

For the first time in the history of the Open Doors World Watch List, a sub-Saharan African country is ranked at number 2: **Somalia**. Although the capital Mogadishu is under more moderate Muslim government control, surveillance is still conducted to root out converts from Islam, pressure in the private sphere is high and the church has to remain very secret. Somalia is largely run by Muslim clans and tribes, who do not accept Christians in their group, and put to death almost any individual Christian they come across. Large tracts of the country remain ungovernable and retreating al-Shabaab rebels vent their anger by imposing an even severer form of *sharia*. One Christian told an Open Doors researcher, "In this country, a Christian cannot trust anyone...one false confidence and you literally lose your head."

### **Islamic extremism is the most widespread, but not the only source of persecution of Christians**

Overwhelmingly the main engine driving persecution of Christians – in 36 of the top 50 countries in Open Doors World Watch List – is Islamic extremism. The most violent region is the states of the African Sahel belt where a fifth of the world's Christians meet one seventh of the world's Muslims in perilous proximity.

But **North Korea** remains the most difficult country in the world to be a Christian. Like others in that country, Christians have to survive under one of the most oppressive regimes in contemporary times. They have to deal with corrupt officials, bad policies, natural disasters, diseases and hunger. They must also hide their decision to follow Christ. Being caught with a Bible is grounds for execution or a life-long political prison sentence. An estimated 50,000 to 70,000 Christians live in concentration camps, prisons and prison-like circumstances under the regime of leader Kim Jong-Un. In 2014 Open Doors is working in Parliament to highlight the urgent need for progress to freedom of religion or belief in North Korea.

In Africa, the **Eritrean** government continues to severely restrict religious liberty for members of many Christian churches; in **Uzbekistan** non-Orthodox Christians are labelled 'extremists' and church services are in constant danger of disruption, with those holding private prayer meetings subject to potential detention; **Vietnam** introduced a law in 2013 requiring all churches to register at a local level – a requirement that has proved very difficult to fulfil. An Open Doors researcher explains, "in **South East Asia** especially, persecution is becoming more localised and more clandestine... governments are getting more cunning at covering their tracks, introducing laws for example that appear to have little to do with religion, yet hamper church growth just as effectively as a head-on clash."

In **India** Christians face pressure from Hindu nationalism and Maoist rebels; in **Laos, Burma and Sri Lanka** from Buddhist nationalism. Organised crime is the main source of persecution in **Latin American** countries.

### **The Middle East: a continuing crisis**

The Arab Spring has had disastrous consequences for Christians – a major exodus of Christians from the Middle East is in progress. This was already true of **Iraq** and events in 2013 were even more disastrous for Christians in **Egypt** and **Syria**: tens of thousands have already fled from both these countries. Christianity, with its historic roots in the Middle East, is being marginalised rapidly and painfully. Open Doors has

highlighted this in Parliament in recent years, through its Right to Believe: Arab World campaign (2012) and Save Syria campaign (2013).

In **Syria**, atrocities against the Christian community, perpetrated especially by foreign supported jihadi groups, run at their highest level since the war began almost three years ago. There is evidence that these fighters are destabilising neighbouring countries such as **Iraq**, and even relatively peaceful **Jordan**. “Polarisation is increasing across the Middle East, and Islam is becoming even more radicalised with the civil war in Syria giving the jihadists a new impetus,” reports an Open Doors persecution analyst for the area.

### Failed states

The extent and prevalence of persecution of Christians in failed states indicates that freedom of religion or belief is a major casualty of civic and political breakdown; indeed, the converse may also be true, that the failure to preserve, defend and promote freedom of religion or belief contributes to social, economic and political breakdown. The Open Doors World Watch List top ten contains no less than six states that also appear in the Failed States Index published by the US think-tank Fund for Peace: **Somalia** (2 on WWL/1 on FSI), **Syria** (3/21), **Iraq** (4/11), **Afghanistan** (5/7), **Pakistan** (8/13) and **Yemen** (10/6).

### The nature of persecution

Persecution presents a complex reality. It is not always clear if and to what extent pressure felt by Christians or even violence against them is directly related to them being Christian. Sometimes, just living in a chaotic world creates substantial amounts of suffering for Christians and others alike. At other times, suffering results from antipathy or hatred. Persecution takes place when Christians and their communities experience specific pressure and/or violence that is related to persecution dynamics prevalent in their environments and which forces them to comply with the drivers of these dynamics. The methodology of the Open Doors World Watch List groups these dynamics in three different impulses that fuel eight different persecution engines that are driven by specific actors or drivers of persecution.

Underlying impulses	Persecution engine
Tribal impulse	Islamic extremism
	Other religious militancy
	Tribal antagonism
	Ecclesiastical arrogance
Secular impulse	Communist oppression
	Aggressive secularism
Exploitative impulse	Organised corruption
	Totalitarian paranoia

Drivers of persecution	
Government	Government officials at any level from local to national
Society	Ethnic group leaders
	Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national
	Religious leaders of other churches at any level from local to national
	Fanatical movements
	Normal citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs
	Extended family
	Political parties at any level from local to national
	Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups
	Organised crime cartels or networks
Multilateral organisations	

Often more than one driver is active in and around one or more persecution engines.

Thus **the sources of the denial of freedom of religion and belief** can be summarised as: a) **Islamic extremism** – aiming to bring the country or the world under the 'House of Islam' through violent or non-violent actions; b) **Religious militancy** – where another religion is defined as the sole basis of national or ethnic identity either by the state or by extremist groups within the state, for example 'Hindutva' ideology in India, Buddhist militancy in Sri Lanka and elsewhere, Ultra-Orthodox Judaism in Israel; c) **Tribal antagonism** – the continuing influence of age-old norms and values shaped in tribal context, which can be in the 'package' of traditional religion or otherwise; d) **Ecclesiastical arrogance** – churches do not recognise nor want to give room for Christians outside their structure or theological definition; e) **Communist oppression** – seeking to maintain communism (however defined) as the prescriptive national ideology; f) **Aggressive secularism** – attempting to eradicate the Christian faith from the public domain, if possible even out of the hearts of people; g) **Organised corruption** – the creation of a climate of impunity, anarchy and corruption as a means for getting rich; h) **Totalitarian paranoia** – in which religious freedoms suffer, alongside other freedoms, in the attempt to maintain power.

The media's portrayal of persecution is almost always stripped of its context. Generally, only the most visible incidents of persecution get mentioned in the headlines of the press, and considerably less attention is given to the analysis of the dynamics behind the violence and the hostilities. This may also be true of the understanding and approach of the UK Foreign Office, which is alerted and responds to specific incidents of persecution when notified through UK embassies. We believe there is scope for more refinement and application of the FCO's toolkit in this area. The recording of violent incidents by the press is nevertheless essential, as it highlights the physical and emotional suffering of many believers and can prompt positive reactions.

The story of persecution is therefore more than simple enumerations of violent incidents against Christians. In many countries, it is not the violence that causes the most harm to Christians. It is the constant fear and the pressure that is experienced in each sphere of life. We do not limit the term persecution to the more extreme forms of suffering because it is very difficult in practice to say what is, in fact, extreme. Often losing a job can be far worse in its effects than a beating in prison; being shunned by one's parents can be more psychologically scarring than being part of a skirmish on the street.

Open Doors defines persecution as 'any hostility experienced as a result of one's identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians both from within and outside Christianity'. We believe that persecution is therefore a denial of Article 18: any hostility directed towards an individual on the basis of their religious belief has the effect of limiting freedom of religion, whether or not that is the specific intention. To say that persecution has to be deliberate underestimates the implicit and indirect power of culture, over decades, created a society or situation that freezes Christians out of normal life.

Thus the belief that the more incidents of persecution there are, the more persecution there must be, while on the surface apparently an obvious truth, fails to take into account the difference between **squeeze** (pressure) and **smash** (plain violence). The Christians of the **Maldives** are surrounded on every side with massive pressure from friends, neighbours, family, and the government, which means they can hardly express their faith at all. Because they are so persecuted, they are virtually unable to witness. If you were looking for a list of incidents where Christians were beaten, put in jail or deported, there would be very few.

Sometimes the degree of persecution is so intense, and so all-pervasive, it actually results in fewer incidents of persecution, since acts of public witness and defiance are rare. So while there is no evidence of smashing the church through violence and imprisonment, the squeeze is what is killing the church. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to say that many persecutors prefer to squeeze the church, rather than smash it, in the belief that it is a more successful form of persecution.

Last year's report highlighted the reality of this **squeeze** as it affected private life, family life, community life, national life and church life. This is as much a denial of freedom of religion and belief but cannot be tracked by monitoring specific incidents. The countries that put the greatest squeeze on Christian activity in this year's reporting period were **North Korea, Afghanistan, Maldives, Somalia, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Iran, Libya, Uzbekistan and Qatar**; places, for example, where in most cases it can lead to serious problems if it is discovered you have a Bible in the home.

Where the squeeze is most effective, there will be little or no evidence of the **smash** (physical violence) which can and does cut across and impact all these spheres of life. In 2013, the countries where Christians experienced the most violence were, in this order, **Central African Republic, Syria, Pakistan, Egypt, Iraq, Myanmar, Nigeria, Colombia, Eritrea and Sudan**.

**Violence** can be expressed and experienced within the family and the community. It can be perpetrated by neighbours, by marauders from within or from outside the neighbourhood, even the country. It can be directed at specific individuals, families, whole communities; it can also be directed at places of worship when empty, or at the worshipping community when present. In each and every case it impacts individuals and is a direct denial of their human rights under Article 18.

We recognise that analysing persecution on a country-by-country basis can obscure vital variations in the experience of persecution. This is true at a simple geographical level: Christians may live in freedom in one part of a country and face appalling persecution elsewhere – **Nigeria** would be a very obvious example of this. It is also true that different Christian communities can face very different levels of persecution in the same country: in many Middle Eastern countries, Christians from historic traditions face less and different kinds of persecution as a group than those who have chosen to become Christians having grown up as Muslims.

Therefore it is important to recognise the distinctive experience of four categories of Christians in any given country: a) expatriate or migrant Christians; b) members of historical Christian communities (like Roman Catholics, Orthodox, traditional Protestants) and/or government controlled churches; c) converts to Christianity from 'persecutor background' (majority religion or ideology, traditional religion, etc.); d) members of non-traditional Christian Communities (such as Evangelicals, Pentecostals, house churches) and other Christians not yet included.

**The right to change, the right to choose, the right to share:** it remains our view that the greatest difficulties are faced by those who choose to become Christians having been born into a non-Christian ethno-religious grouping, and those who openly share their faith. The rights of individuals in one or both of these groups are specifically protected by the wording of Article 18, even though we recognise that the concept of 'conversion' is very difficult for countries where religious identity is inseparable from or closely identified with ethnic or national origin. In most interpretations of sharia, conversion by Muslims to other religions or becoming non-religious is strictly forbidden. In Israel, Jews who choose to become Christians can face significant difficulties.

**Religious freedom is considerably more than freedom of worship.** While there remains some reluctance to promote the freedom to change one's religion as a vital component of full religious liberty for fear of the backlash from OIC nations, we have been encouraged to hear a number of clear statements in support of the freedom to change belief from government ministers and parliamentarians in the UK. It is still true, however, that in far too many countries there are particular difficulties for evangelical Christians, where attempts to share one's faith openly are undoubtedly risky. While not automatically supporting every method of evangelism as being necessarily appropriate, nonetheless this freedom is a vital part of Open Doors' understanding of religious liberty, and it is one in urgent need of defence. Article 18 explicitly states "this

right includes freedom to change his religion or belief.” Article 19 says “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression... to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”

### **The Commonwealth and religious liberty**

When the Commonwealth Heads of Government met in Sri Lanka in November 2013, there was a surge of interest and concern about Sri Lanka’s human rights record. As the Commonwealth Games come to Glasgow in 2014, we believe it is right to ask ongoing questions about the failure of many Commonwealth countries to observe the very clearly stated principles of the Commonwealth Charter: “We are committed to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other relevant human rights covenants and international instruments... We emphasise the need to promote tolerance, respect, understanding, moderation and religious freedom which are essential to the development of free and democratic societies, and recall that respect for the dignity of all human beings is critical to promoting peace and prosperity.”

The following Commonwealth countries appear in the Open Doors World Watch List: **Maldives** (7); **Pakistan** (8); **Nigeria** (14); **Brunei** (24); **India** (28); **Sri Lanka** (29); **Malaysia** (40); **Kenya** (43); **Bangladesh** (48); **Tanzania** (49). Some of these countries have national, regional and local laws that are inimical to their commitment to the Commonswealth Charter.

### **The ‘hard facts’ of persecution**

Open Doors carefully screens media and internet sources to collect all persecution-related hard facts, which allows an objective description of the intensity and the scope of the violence against Christians that occurred during our most recent reporting period (November 2012 - October 2013).

All information included in the violent incidents database is based on media and internet research, which means that only facts that were reported in the media and on the internet are counted. Clearly, many incidents may go unreported, and that percentage will vary from country to country depending on a variety of factors, including the freedom of the press and sensitivities about reporting incidents.

In addition, when assessing the significance of the number of incidents, the size of the population should be taken into account – the number of incidents per million people, or per million Christians, gives an important tool of comparison.

We recorded **1044 violent incidents** in the reporting period. Each incident involved one or more Christians and/or churches. Most incidents were recorded in **Egypt** (167), followed by **India** (125), **Nigeria** (118), **Syria** (83), **Pakistan** (60), **China** (40), **Indonesia** (32), **Uzbekistan** (28), **Iran** (24), **Kazakhstan** (22).

In total, the **killings of 2123 Christians** were recorded in the media during this reporting period. This is nearly double the 2013 figure of 1201. **Nigeria** once again had an extremely high number (612), but was overtaken by **Syria** (1213); together they accounted for a high proportion of the total. **Pakistan** (88) and **Egypt** (83) were next in the list.

The death toll in the **Central African Republic** (9) is very likely underreported; reports from the field included the killing of at least 13 pastors. Many types of horrendous violent acts perpetrated by members of Séléka targeting Christians were reported, including the evicting and looting of Christian rural populations. Christians have been victims of the intentional killing of civilians and the razing of more than 1,000 homes. In recent weeks, Open Doors has been actively working with church leaders in CAR and in the UK Parliament seeking peace, stability and religious freedom in this country where so many have been affected by violence, which has sometimes been sectarian in origin.

It is worth emphasising that this total figure is likely to significantly under-estimate the number of Christians who died as result of their faith in this period. The explanation for this highlights some important considerations whenever figures about Christian martyrs are presented.

First, there will be Christians whose death never reaches the public media, because media coverage is blocked or their death is simply not considered worth reporting.

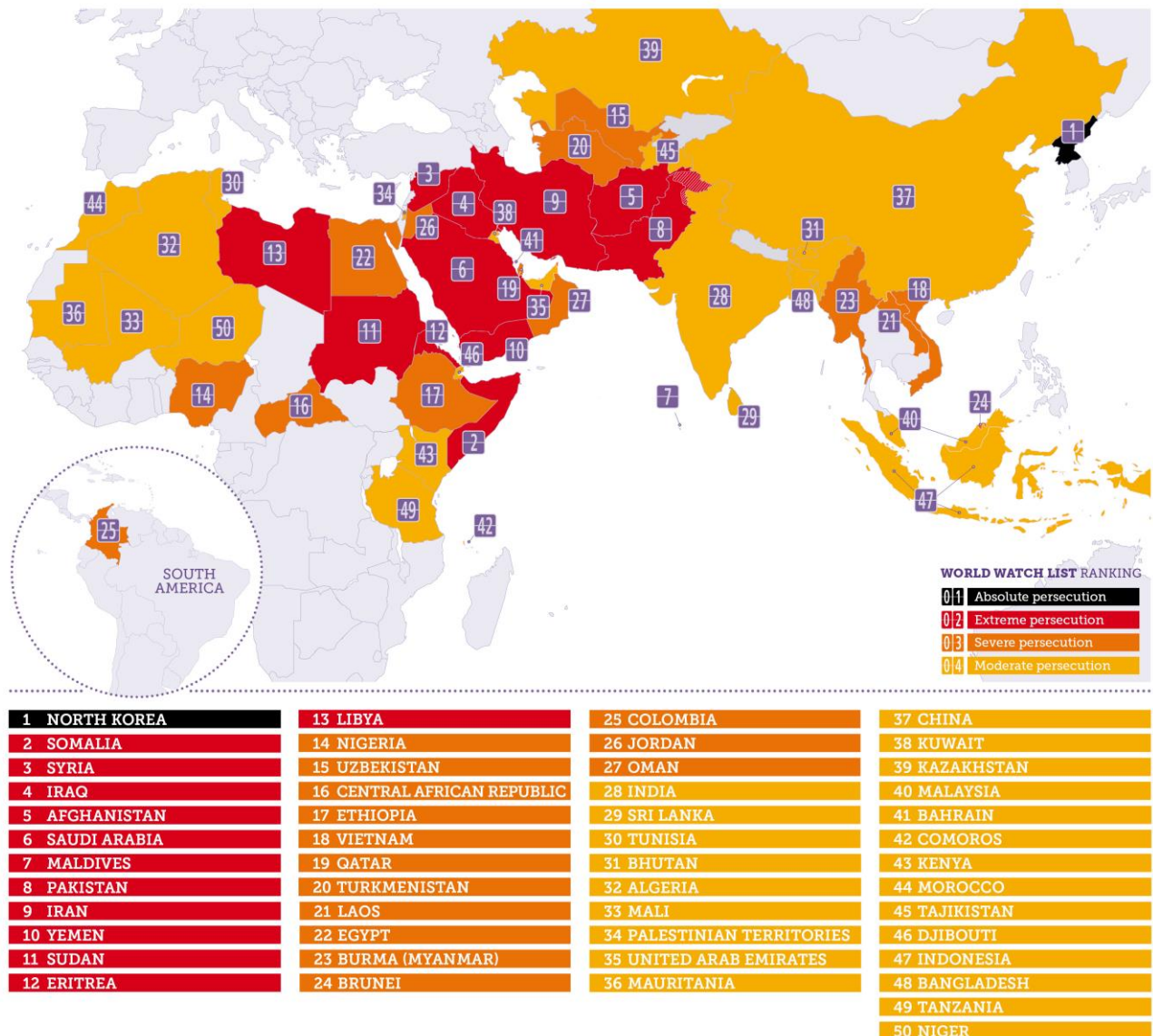
Second, there are Christians who are killed due to increased vulnerability that results from their faith. In conflict areas there is a double vulnerability: where Christians have not been respected, or have been discriminated against for many years, conflict can bring them extra negative attention from either or both sides of the conflict. They can also be the easiest to attack because they are either not properly protected by the state, or the state regards them as potential allies of rebels. They may also be reluctant to take up arms to defend themselves.

Third, there are Christians who die as a result of long-term discrimination, through the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care; or those who die in emergency situations because as a 'minority' they are denied access to relief provision.

Open Doors, however, does not accept that every Christian who dies prematurely or violently should be regarded as a martyr. Any attempt to assess the number of Christian martyrs must take into account whether they died as a direct result of their faith. Thomas Schirrmacher of the International Institute for Religious Freedom estimates a figure of between 7000 and 8000 Christian 'martyrs' each year. This is shocking and significant – but at approximately one per hour still falls far short of the oft-quoted figure of one Christian killed every five minutes.

Open Doors has sometimes been quoted, in error, as the source for the figure of 100,000 Christians dying each year: this is not a figure that is either helpful or sustainable. In summary, it is a figure based on an average for the previous decade that was inflated by including deaths as a result of internal conflict in Sudan and Rwanda in the 1990s, and in the Democratic Republic of Congo the 2000s.

During the reporting period **1111 attempts to close or destroy churches** (and other Christian buildings such as schools or hospitals) were recorded in the media: **Egypt (492), Nigeria (269), Syria (78), Myanmar (66), India (32), China (27), Central African Republic (14), Indonesia (14), Colombia (13), Pakistan (12) and Tanzania (10)**. This is around four times as many as recorded during the previous year.



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 over 65 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.



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