

World
Watch
Research

Afghanistan: Full Country Dossier

January 2022



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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Girl in Afghanistan (c) UNSPLASH

Introduction

World Watch List 2022

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018
1	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	15.0	98	94	93	94	93
2	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	13.1	96	94	94	94	94
3	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	8.5	91	92	92	91	91
4	Libya	15.6	15.5	15.9	16.2	16.3	11.5	91	92	90	87	86
5	Yemen	16.7	16.6	16.5	16.7	16.7	5.2	88	87	85	86	85
6	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.6	11.1	88	88	87	86	86
7	Nigeria	13.8	13.8	14.3	14.5	14.4	16.7	87	85	80	80	77
8	Pakistan	13.6	14.0	15.1	14.9	13.1	16.7	87	88	88	87	86
9	Iran	14.5	14.6	13.6	15.8	16.5	10.4	85	86	85	85	85
10	India	12.7	12.7	12.9	14.7	13.3	15.6	82	83	83	83	81
11	Saudi Arabia	15.1	15.1	15.0	15.9	16.7	3.1	81	78	79	77	79
12	Myanmar	12.4	11.5	13.8	13.4	13.1	14.8	79	74	73	71	65
13	Sudan	13.4	13.4	14.3	13.6	15.7	8.5	79	79	85	87	87
14	Iraq	14.0	14.6	14.0	14.8	13.9	6.9	78	82	76	79	86
15	Syria	12.9	13.8	13.5	14.3	13.9	9.3	78	81	82	82	76
16	Maldives	15.4	15.3	13.7	15.8	16.5	0.4	77	77	78	78	78
17	China	12.6	9.8	12.2	14.4	15.5	11.1	76	74	70	65	57
18	Qatar	14.2	14.1	11.1	13.0	14.3	7.2	74	67	66	62	63
19	Vietnam	11.3	9.7	12.7	14.1	14.5	8.7	71	72	72	70	69
20	Egypt	12.7	13.2	11.5	12.7	10.8	10.0	71	75	76	76	70
21	Uzbekistan	14.9	12.7	14.1	11.8	15.6	1.7	71	71	73	74	73
22	Algeria	14.0	14.0	11.1	13.4	14.1	4.1	71	70	73	70	58
23	Mauritania	14.3	13.9	13.1	14.0	14.1	0.9	70	71	68	67	57
24	Mali	9.4	8.2	13.9	10.3	12.8	15.0	70	67	66	68	59
25	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.6	13.3	15.7	0.6	69	70	70	69	68
26	Laos	12.0	10.3	13.2	13.3	14.1	5.9	69	71	72	71	67
27	Morocco	13.1	13.8	10.8	12.8	14.2	3.9	69	67	66	63	51
28	Indonesia	11.3	11.5	11.5	11.0	9.6	13.5	68	63	60	65	59
29	Bangladesh	11.8	10.7	12.9	11.3	10.2	11.3	68	67	63	58	58
30	Colombia	11.5	8.8	13.1	11.0	9.9	13.3	68	67	62	58	56
31	CAR	9.0	8.6	13.6	9.6	11.4	15.6	68	66	68	70	61
32	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.0	9.6	12.1	14.8	68	67	66	48	-
33	Niger	9.4	9.5	13.9	7.2	12.8	14.8	68	62	60	52	45
34	Bhutan	13.4	12.4	11.7	13.7	13.8	1.7	67	64	61	64	62
35	Tunisia	11.9	12.7	10.6	11.3	13.4	6.5	66	67	64	63	62
36	Oman	13.8	14.0	10.3	13.2	13.4	1.5	66	63	62	59	57
37	Cuba	12.3	8.1	12.6	13.2	14.0	5.9	66	62	52	49	49
38	Ethiopia	9.9	10.3	13.1	10.3	12.3	9.8	66	65	63	65	62
39	Jordan	12.9	14.0	11.0	12.3	12.5	3.0	66	64	64	65	66
40	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	12.0	15.6	66	64	56	55	33
41	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	11.3	7.9	12.5	15.6	65	63	43	43	-
42	Turkey	12.6	11.5	11.4	13.2	11.6	4.6	65	69	63	66	62
43	Mexico	10.3	8.3	12.5	10.8	10.3	12.6	65	64	60	61	59
44	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.2	13.1	15.4	65	64	60	54	38
45	Tajikistan	13.8	12.3	12.0	12.6	13.2	0.7	65	66	65	65	65
46	Brunei	14.8	14.5	10.3	11.0	13.2	0.6	64	64	63	63	64
47	Kazakhstan	13.4	11.6	11.1	12.6	13.5	1.7	64	64	64	63	63
48	Nepal	12.4	9.8	9.9	13.6	12.7	5.2	64	66	64	64	64
49	Kuwait	13.5	13.7	9.8	12.3	13.1	1.1	64	63	62	60	61
50	Malaysia	12.5	14.3	11.5	11.6	10.2	3.3	63	63	62	60	65

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018
51	Kenya	11.7	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	11.1	63	62	61	61	62
52	Sri Lanka	12.9	9.9	11.4	11.3	9.4	7.8	63	62	65	58	57
53	Comoros	12.7	11.1	11.2	12.4	14.2	0.9	63	62	57	56	56
54	UAE	13.4	13.6	10.1	11.8	12.2	1.3	62	62	60	58	58
55	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	13.7	61	58	55	52	53
56	Azerbaijan	13.1	9.9	9.3	11.0	13.4	3.3	60	56	57	57	57
57	Palestinian Territories	13.0	13.4	9.8	10.2	12.0	0.9	59	58	60	57	60
58	Djibouti	12.3	12.3	11.1	10.0	12.2	0.7	59	56	56	56	56
59	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.1	11.1	10.4	12.0	1.5	58	58	57	56	54
60	Bahrain	12.5	13.2	9.1	11.1	10.2	0.9	57	56	55	55	57
61	Nicaragua	9.1	5.6	11.1	11.8	11.3	7.6	56	51	41	41	-
62	Russian Federation	12.3	8.0	10.2	10.6	12.3	2.2	56	57	60	60	51
63	Chad	11.5	8.2	10.2	9.6	10.3	5.6	55	53	56	48	40
64	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.7	9.2	9.6	8.1	52	48	48	43	-
65	Venezuela	5.6	4.5	11.2	9.4	11.1	9.6	51	39	42	41	34
66	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	10.1	11.4	7.8	51	46	43	42	-
67	Rwanda	8.1	5.5	6.7	10.3	10.1	9.3	50	42	42	41	-
68	Honduras	7.2	5.1	10.5	7.7	9.2	8.7	48	46	39	38	-
69	Uganda	8.1	4.6	7.4	6.7	9.1	11.7	48	47	48	47	46
70	El Salvador	7.7	4.6	10.7	5.7	9.1	7.2	45	42	38	30	-
71	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	9.8	2.4	44	43	41	42	-
72	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.7	8.3	8.8	1.7	44	43	43	43	-
73	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	7.0	8.1	2.0	43	47	45	46	-
74	South Sudan	5.7	0.9	7.0	6.3	7.8	15.0	43	43	44	44	-
75	Ivory Coast	9.8	8.6	8.2	5.5	7.9	2.0	42	42	42	43	-
76	Israel	9.8	8.4	5.6	6.6	6.6	4.3	41	40	38	39	40

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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 2022 reporting period was 01 October 2020 - 30 September 2021.
- 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 including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

Effect on data-gathering during COVID-19 pandemic

In the WWL 2022 reporting period, travel restrictions and other measures introduced by the governments of various countries to combat the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic did cause delays and create the need for restructuring grass-roots research in some cases. Through the agile cooperation of In-country networks, Open Doors country researchers, External experts, WWR analysts and an increased use of technological options, Open Doors is confident that – as in the previous reporting period – WWL 2022 scoring, analysis and documentation has maintained required levels of quality and reliability.

External Links - Introduction

- Sources and definitions: World Watch List Documentation - <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>

WWL 2022 Situation in brief / Afghanistan

Brief country details

In the table below, the number of Christians shown is an Open Doors (OD) estimate.

Afghanistan: Population (UN estimate for 2021)	Christians	Chr%
38,914,000	thousands	OD estimate

Map of country



Afghanistan: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2022	98	1
WWL 2021	94	2
WWL 2020	93	2
WWL 2019	94	2
WWL 2018	93	2

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2018-2022 reporting periods

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Afghanistan: Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Islamic oppression	Government officials, Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders, Violent religious groups, Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, One's own (extended) family
Clan oppression	Government officials, Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders, Violent religious groups, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, One's own (extended) family
Organized corruption and crime	Violent religious groups, Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups, Organized crime cartels or networks, Government officials
Ethno-religious hostility	Government officials, Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders, Violent religious groups, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, One's own (extended) family

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

Brief description of the persecution situation

Almost all Afghan Christians are converts from Islam and are not able to practice their faith openly. Leaving Islam is considered shameful and punishable by death under the prevailing Islamic law. If exposed, Christian converts have to flee the country. Many went into hiding after the Taliban took over government control on 15 August 2021. This take-over proved to be a game-changer not only for women and ethnic minorities, but also for religious minorities, including Christian converts, who are seen as apostates. The family, clan or tribe must save its 'honor' and get rid of any known convert. With the Taliban's grip on power growing stronger and reaching into more and more districts, the situation for Christian converts is becoming increasingly challenging. Once the Taliban has consolidated power, Christian converts will have to adapt and conform to the rigid form of society implemented.

Summary of international obligations and rights violations

Afghanistan 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)

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

- Christian converts are killed on suspicion of their faith (ICCPR Art. 6)
- Women converts are forcibly married and forced to recant their beliefs (ICCPR Art. 23.3 and CEDAW Art. 16)
- Afghans are assumed to be Muslims and are not allowed to change their religion (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christians cannot display any religious images or symbols (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)
- Children of Christian converts are forced to adhere to Islamic religious precepts and receive Islamic teaching (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

No specific examples can be given for security reasons, for more information, please refer to the section on Violence below.

Specific examples of positive developments

The following statement was made in the Full Country Dossier for WWL 2021: "The fact that the government and Taliban have started official talks in Doha could be considered a positive sign, although this has not yet translated into a reduction of violence. At the same time, the painstakingly slow progress in the peace-process is a strong reminder not to be too optimistic about the negotiations bearing much fruit." Even this cautious hope turned out to be too optimistic, as the official talks did not even agree on procedural questions and completely stalled after the announcement of the [international troop withdrawal](#) in April 2021 (Relief Web, 22 June 2021).

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>

- Specific examples of positive developments: international troop withdrawal - <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/swift-withdrawal-international-troops-sparks-widespread-fear-afghanistan-experts>

WWL 2022: Keys to understanding / Afghanistan

Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International country report	AI 2021	https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/asia-and-the-pacific/afghanistan/	5 July 2021
BBC News country profile	BBC country profile	https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12011352	5 July 2021
Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2020	BTI 2020	https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard-AFG.html	5 July 2021
CIA World Factbook	CIA Factbook	https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/afghanistan/	5 July 2021
Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2020	EIU 2020	https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/democracy-index-2020.pdf	
FFP's Fragile States Index 2021	FSI 2021	https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/	5 July 2021
Freedom House's 2021 Democracy index	Freedom House/Democracy 2021	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores	
Freedom House's 2021 Global Freedom index	Freedom House/Global Freedom 2021	https://freedomhouse.org/country/afghanistan/freedom-world/2021	5 July 2021
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2020 report	Freedom House/Internet Freedom 2020	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores	
Garda World country report	Garda World	https://www.garda.com/crisis24/country-reports/afghanistan	5 July 2021
Human Rights Watch World Report 2021	HRW 2021	https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/afghanistan	5 July 2021
Internet World Stats 2021	IWS 2021	https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#af	5 July 2021
RSF's 2021 World Press Freedom Index	World Press Freedom 2021	https://rsf.org/en/afghanistan	8 January 2022
Transparency International's 2020 Corruption Perceptions Index	CPI 2020	https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2020/index/afg	5 July 2021
UNDP's Global Human Development Indicators	HDI	http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/AFG	5 July 2021
US State Department's 2020 International Religious Freedom country reports	IRFR 2020	https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/afghanistan/	5 July 2021
USCIRF 2021 country reports	USCIRF 2021	https://www.uscifr.gov/countries/afghanistan	5 July 2021
World Bank country report	World Bank	https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/afghanistan	5 July 2021

Recent history

It is not often that a single date turns out to be a game-changer for a whole country, but Afghanistan experienced such a date in the WWL 2022 reporting period. The 15 August 2021 marked the date when the Taliban took over power after the elected government had fled the country. The take-over was surprisingly swift and at the time of writing this report at the beginning of November 2021, the dust still has to settle. However, it is possible that in the end, not that much will change. Afghanistan has not known peace for more than forty years. In 1996 the Taliban seized control of Kabul and imposed radical Sharia law until 2001 when they were ousted from power by the US-led international military invasion. There are signs that many of the Taliban's policies of the 1990s are now making a re-appearance .

In 2004 Hamid Karzai won the first presidential elections and in 2005 the first parliamentary elections were held for more than 30 years. In 2014 NATO formally ended its combat mission in Afghanistan. However, international troops continued to be based in the country and the Taliban continued to control certain areas. Talks between the US government and the Taliban collapsed in September 2019, but the USA [signed](#) an agreement with the Taliban on 29 February 2020 and withdrew almost one third of its remaining troops by end of June 2020 (The Guardian, 29 February 2020). The new US administration's [announcement](#) in April 2021 to withdraw all of its troops by 11 September 2021 at the latest was a real game-changer - and the hasty and messy process of withdrawal by the end of August 2021 damaged the image of the USA far beyond Afghanistan. A [double bomb-attack](#) at the crowded Kabul airport, claimed by Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), can be seen as a foreshadowing of the struggles the new Taliban government (and the Afghan people) are to face (BBC News, 27 August 2021).

The small groups of Christians in the country had to adapt to the new circumstances by either relocating within the country, seeking refuge abroad for security reasons, or by trying to stay put but more deeply hidden. They are affected by the insecurity and the difficult economic situation (worsened by the COVID-19 crisis) which affects them as well. Once the Taliban consolidates power, Christians cannot expect any space in society and they may be affected by possible infighting between the various Taliban factions as well as by the Taliban's battle against ISKP.

Political and legal landscape

The announcement (and implementation) of a complete foreign troop withdrawal changed the political landscape fundamentally, although all actors were still in place. Before the USA's announcement about military withdrawal, the 'peace talks' in Doha had made little tangible process. It was quite clear even then that the Taliban had no real intention of prioritizing issues such as [human and women's rights](#) if they returned to power (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty - RFE/RL, 6 February 2019), as can be seen from [their "Constitution"](#) (RFE/RL, 26 April 2020). It was also clear that they had no real interest in protecting religious minorities such as Christians, who, according to the government, were anyway non-existent in the country. The fact that the Taliban had chosen one of their top clerics as chief negotiator, who was "reputed to be a [hardliner](#) dedicated to sustaining the jihad until an Islamic emirate can be re-established in Afghanistan", showed in hindsight that agreements were tough or even impossible to reach (RFE/RL, 10 September 2020).

The swift Taliban progress, taking over the country in a few weeks and the more or less non-existent resistance of the Kabul authorities, shocked observers but also showed that institution-building in Afghanistan had remained weak. It also proved true what has been said already for many years, namely that Afghan loyalty is first to one's family and clan or tribe, not to a country or nation. A resistance movement did emerge in the mountainous north, bolstered by the remains of the Afghan National Defense Force. However, the Taliban took control of the [whole of Afghanistan](#) after a successful final military offensive in the mountainous province of Panjshir, 100km north of Kabul (BBC News, 6 September 2021). Opposition forces have announced that resistance will continue.

While the first days of Taliban rule have been [called](#) "a dizzying variety of approaches to civilian and government-affiliated populations in areas they have recently captured" (International Crisis Group - ICG, 14 August 2021), a more formidable challenge arose almost immediately. The suicide [attacks](#) on Kabul airport on 26 August 2021 show that there is another radical player to be reckoned with, namely the Islamic State group (IS) or – as it is called in the region – Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) (Reuters, 27 August 2021). While this IS group has been around since 2015 and has committed some of the most violent attacks in recent years, often against the Hazara minority, it is thought to have less than 5,000 fighters and only limited operational territory. The recent attacks, however, show that it is able to commit large-scale atrocities.

There were no real [surprises](#) when, on 7 September 2021, the Taliban announced the names of various officials whose task is to form a new interim government (ICG, 9 September 2021); it is worth remembering that the earlier Taliban government was termed 'interim' throughout their time in power between 1996 and 2001. All calls for an inclusive government went unheard. It

came as no surprise that none of those serving in the former government under President Ghani were included in the Taliban government (with the possible exception of the Minister of Health - in recognition of the dire COVID-19 situation in the country), nor that there were no women included. The fact that the ethnic set-up is almost exclusively Pashtun - of the 33 ministers only two are Tajik and one Uzbek - shows that consolidation of power and unity within the Taliban movement were the dominant motives. The inclusion of ministers still appearing as 'wanted' on international terrorist lists and the strong representation of the Haqqani network (which has strong ties with Pakistan) show that another main goal may have been to share the spoils of victory. The Taliban's final [government line-up](#) added nothing substantial to make it more inclusive of ethnic minorities or even women (Afghan Analysts Network - AAN, 7 October 2021). It also did not come as a surprise that officials intend to [re-introduce harsh Sharia punishments](#) (including amputations and executions), but these would probably not be carried out in public (AP News, 23 September 2021).

The small Christian community faces a difficult future. Observers see little chance of a negotiated peace materializing in the country. Even if it did, it is far from clear how disgruntled Taliban fighters, other insurgents and regional warlords could be prevented from continuing to fight. The Taliban's ranks are being boosted by a steady stream of [new recruits](#), mainly from rural Afghanistan (Foreign Policy, 24 September 2020). One of the most worrying trends which could be witnessed in the WWL 2022 reporting period was that ethnic (and religious) [groups have armed themselves](#) and have sent a clear message to the Taliban that they intend to defend their territory and people (AAN, 4 June 2021). The Christian minority can easily find themselves caught in the middle of such confrontations.

Women's rights in Afghanistan have long been fragile, even prior to the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021. Reflecting this, Afghanistan performed poorly in Georgetown's [Women, Peace and Security Index 2019/20](#), ranking 166th out of 167 countries. Since the start of the peace process, the Taliban consistently claimed to guarantee women's security in Afghanistan. Upon taking over the country, they [publicly stated](#) that women would be allowed to continue to be active in society and benefit from their rights, working 'shoulder to shoulder' with the Taliban within Islamic Sharia (Al-Jazeera, 21 August 2021). Within the months after the Taliban take-over however, human rights organizations have condemned the Taliban's treatment of women. Educational, social and legal rights have all been curtailed, with girls banned from returning to secondary school in most areas, and women excluded from the workforce ([HRW, 1 November 2021](#)). The Taliban appointed an all-male government, and replaced the Ministry of Women's Affairs with the Ministry of Vice and Virtue, a body that was notorious for some of the worst violations against women in the Taliban's previous reign of power ([HRW, 29 September 2021](#)).

Religious landscape

The Open Doors estimate for the number of Christians in Afghanistan is "thousands". According to WCD April 2021 statistics, more than 99% of the population is Muslim and there are also small groups of Hindus, Bahai and Buddhists (among others). For security reasons, no WCD breakdown is shown here. 90% of Muslims in Afghanistan follow Sunni Islam, while approximately 9.7% adhere to Shiite Islam. The Hazara tribe is predominantly Shiite, while the main ethnic group in Afghanistan, the Pashtu, are Sunni. They dominate the political landscape, but are in need of such minorities as the Uzbeks and Tajiks to exercise power.

From an official point of view, there were no Christians in the country apart from some international military staff, diplomats and NGO workers. After the withdrawal of international troops and the related exodus of other international staff, the number of Christians has indeed declined. Indigenous Christians (mostly those with a Muslim background) are in hiding as much as possible.

Against this religious backdrop, daily life is challenging for both Christian men and women and they are forced to live out their faith in secret. Conversion from Islam to Christianity is [unacceptable](#) under Islamic Law (BBC News, 14 January 2014). Female converts may be forcibly married to a Muslim or confined to the walls of their home. They may also be sold into slavery or prostitution, be deprived of food and water and healthcare, locked into rooms, beaten severely, burned or sexually mishandled. Men face verbal abuse, imprisonment, torture, sexual abuse and even the threat of death. Family members of converts may also be persecuted, being suspect by association.

Economic landscape

According to [the full UNDP 2020 report](#) (page 343 onwards):

- **Gross National Income:** 2,229 USD (in 2017 PPP)
- **Rate of multidimensional poverty:** 55.9% of the population are in multi-dimensional poverty and a further 18.1% are vulnerable to it. 54.5% of the population are living below the national poverty line.
- **Remittances:** 4.54%

According to the World Bank:

- Afghanistan is classified by the World Bank as a low-income economy.
- **GDP per capita (PPP constant 2017 international USD):** 2.065
- **Birth rate:** The birth rate has been declining over the decades and stands at 3.2.
- **GDP per capita growth rate:** The annual GDP growth rate is declining and stood at an estimated 1.54% for 2019.
- **Poverty gap at 5.50 USD a day (2011 PPP):** n/a

Afghanistan is a land-locked country and faces multiple challenges in its economy. Maybe the most obvious is that due to decades of civil war, the country has suffered widespread destruction. Its infrastructure is in poor condition and limited in capacity; it also has a very challenging geography with high mountains and harsh weather conditions. The country cannot

currently take advantage of its rich mineral resources (most likely including oil and gas as well) as these commodities need foreign investment and safe transportation, which in turn require political stability. Even China, which is commodity-hungry and willing to take more risks than most other investors, remains cautious. The challenges of [governing the TAPI pipeline](#) (delivering oil from Turkmenistan via and to Afghanistan, Pakistan and India) is a telling example (NBR, 22 June 2021). Despite Beijing's desire to see the Belt and Road Initiative make further progress, China is well aware of Afghanistan's reputation of being a "graveyard of empires".

Afghanistan is classified as a "rent-seeking" economy, meaning that a broad segment of its income comes from international donors. According to an AAN Special Report published in May 2020, [48% of the current government budget](#) is funded by international aid. But those are just the official figures: The report estimates the actual percentage to be nearer to 75% - and in former years this probably even reached 90%. These funds largely dried up with the withdrawal of international troops and many international NGOs. Most Western donors struggle to find ways to keep humanitarian aid flowing without recognizing or even supporting the Taliban government. The aid that other states have pledged, e.g. [China](#) with a 31 million USD fund of COVID-19-relief, will not be able to replace the international aid Afghanistan was used to and is in need of (BBC News, 9 September 2021).

It is very possible that farmers and other citizens will rely more heavily on illicit drugs to make money and earn a living. Traditionally, this has been opium and the crop is still widely planted and harvested. It should be noted that previously, the UNODC had published a special 'Opium Survey' in cooperation with Afghan authorities in November each year. In 2020, however, the data was published as part of the UNODC's worldwide drug report. This would seem to indicate that either the Afghan government considered the lack of progress in fighting opium production too embarrassing to be highlighted in a separate report, or a growing resignation and lack of interest had set in on the part of the government. A more recent challenge has been the surge in production of chemical drugs such as methamphetamine, as has been [reported in detail](#) by the European Monitoring Center for Drugs and Drug Addiction in November 2020. Observers are particularly [concerned](#) about this because significant amounts of these drugs are always consumed in-country (BBC News, 24 November 2020).

According to a report commissioned by NATO, the Taliban earned 1.6 billion USD in their last financial year which ended in March 2020 (latest available data). The main source for such earnings were drugs, precious stones, ores and other commodities. This financial basis gave the Taliban enough stability to continue fighting and - since they were even then close to achieving [financial independence](#) - it probably also encouraged them not to bother honoring any agreement made with the Afghan government (RFE/RL, 16 September 2020).

Farmers are also facing increasing challenges. 42.8% of the total workforce are employed in agriculture and according to the World Bank even 60% of all households derive at least some income from agriculture. Meanwhile, there are claims that global warming and climate change are leading to a thinning and breaking apart of [Afghan glaciers](#), which are important for drinking and irrigation (AAN, 5 January 2021). Additionally, there are claims that the pattern of rainfall is also changing, causing [droughts](#) to become more common and widespread (AAN, 7 February 2021). Pressure to improve efficiency is high: While the population has tripled since the 1960s,

the amount of available arable land has not increased.

The [spread of the COVID-19 virus](#) had 29 of the nation's 34 provinces in its grip, as of May 2020 (ICG, 6 May 2020), and it is very likely that all [numbers](#) of infections were seriously under-reported (AAN, 24 September 2020). Thus, even the fighting was overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the UN and other humanitarian actors raised the alarm about the diminishing access to food and income, fearing a catastrophic food crisis and possible widespread starvation. [Health infrastructure](#) improved over the years, but there is a great imbalance between cities and rural areas (AAN, 9 July 2021). Afghanistan is especially vulnerable because Iran and Pakistan (which were seriously affected by COVID-19) are close neighbors, where hundreds of thousands of Afghans live (see below: *Social and cultural landscape*). The crisis also caused great difficulties for the many [daily wage laborers](#) in the country (AAN, 3 December 2020).

Christians in Afghanistan share the lot of their fellow countrymen. Since any exposure of their Christian faith would certainly mean discrimination, the loss of livelihood and possibly even their very life, they are careful to hide their faith. Due to their Christian convictions, they will not actively participate in opium production and the general drug trade, but it is difficult for them to stand up against it as well, as everyone even mildly opposing it will be targeted - more so as the Taliban gains significant revenue from it for funding their activities.

Women have long been among the most economically vulnerable in Afghanistan, in part due to low education and employment rates, and patrilineal inheritance practices (HDI 2020). Afghanistan's education system has historically suffered from decades of sustained conflict, with low enrolment rates in rural areas, and for girls ([UNICEF, accessed June 2021](#)). Since the resurgence of Taliban rule, only the re-opening of schools for boys was announced in September ([Human Rights Watch, 31 October 2021](#)); as a result, secondary education is no longer available to [female students in most areas](#) (WWR, 15 October 2021) and women have been barred from the workforce ([CNN, 19 September 2021](#)). In light of these developments, women have become increasingly reliant on men as the breadwinners.

Social and cultural landscape

According to the [full UNDP 2020 report](#) (page 343) and CIA Factbook:

- **Main ethnic groups:** The largest ethnolinguistic groups are Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Aimak, Turkmen, Baloch and others. The Afghan Constitution mentions 14 different ethnic groups
- **Main languages:** The two main languages are Dari (a Farsi dialect) and Pashtu
- **Urbanization rate:** While it is difficult to come across reliable data, according to a 2016 World Bank report, 54% of the urban population in Afghanistan lived in Kabul and its urbanization rate is one of the highest of the world. The official HDI figure is 25.8%.
- **Literacy rate:** 43% (15 years and older)
- **Mean years of schooling:** 3.9 (1.9 for girls, 6.0 for boys)
- **Health and education indicators:** Afghanistan has a pupil-teacher ratio in primary school of 49:1. There are 2.8 doctors and 4 hospital beds per 10,000 people.

According to the World Bank:

- **Age:** The population under the age of 14 is 42.5%; the population above 65 is 2.6% (2019)
- **Education:** The completion rate for primary education is 85,6% (2018)
- **Unemployment:** 11.7%, the rate of vulnerable employment is 79.4% (modeled ILO estimate)
- **IDPs/Refugees:** According to the UN's International Organization for Migration ([IOM](#), accessed 16 July 2020), as of December 2020, there were over 4.93 million people living internally displaced. The number of conflict-induced IDPs increased from 369,700 in 2018 to more than 400,000 in 2019. An additional 505,000 refugees returned to Afghanistan, mainly from Iran, during 2019.

According to the UN's HDI 2020:

- **Human Development Index (HDI):** With a score of 0.511, Afghanistan ranks 169th of 189 listed countries, dropping two places in ranking since 2013 and seeing a slowing HDI growth in the last decade.
- **Life expectancy:** 64.8 years
- **Median age:** 18.4
- **GINI coefficient:** n/a
- **Gender inequality:** With a score of 0.655, Afghanistan ranks 157th of 162 listed countries
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 11.1%, the youth (between 15 and 24) unemployment rate 17.4%, the rate of youth neither in school or employment is 41.8%.
- **Labor Force Participation rate:** 48.9% (21.6% female and 74.7% male)

Afghanistan faces a multitude of challenges besides the recovery from decades of war and the continued attacks by ISKP. The country is also split up into a variety of ethnic groups which are strong in different parts of the country. It seems that all are aiming to secure their own position and are not interested in the well-being of Afghanistan as a whole. The Pashtuns are often regarded as being most dominant, but even within the Pashtun community, divisions occur along Pashtun tribal lines as well. These splits became apparent in the 'peace talks in Doha as well. The Taliban are a Pashtun movement and are clearly dominated by this ethnicity. A well-known Afghani saying states: "First my tribe, then my people and then the country". Political cooperation is constantly affected by mistrust and it is worrying that ethnic groups see the need to arm themselves and publicly state that they will defend their people against insurgents.

The term 'civil society' is virtually unknown in Afghanistan, so pressure groups caring for social development and/or issues concerning women, minorities or human rights can do little to influence the country's political development and can even become a target for attacks. Groups supporting the rule of law, participation in the political process or government accountability are quickly suspected of being agents of the international community, furthering the agenda of the West. These accusations come from both the government and society in general. This mindset makes it easy for insurgents to mobilize a large segment of the population to oppose 'foreign occupiers' who are labelled as 'non-believers'. This would seem to apply also to Western NGOs working in the country, including the few Christian ones.

This attitude within society is echoed in the US State Department's IRFR 2020, when it states on page 19: "NGOs reported some Muslims remained suspicious of development assistance projects, which they often viewed as surreptitious efforts to advance Christianity or engage in proselytization." Civil society actors did not have a seat at the negotiation table in Doha, although a small number of women were delegated for the talks.

A [UNICEF country report](#) published in May 2018 showed what the dire situation means for civilians, especially for children: 44% of all children in the age between 7 and 17 were not attending school, 60% of whom were girls. The out-of-school rate increased for the first time since 2002. It is hard to see how the next generation will have any perspective without education. Before the Taliban took over full government control in 2021, in areas ruled by the Taliban, schools were often allowed to function and in some regions, girls were allowed to attend classes up to a certain age. However, many schools buildings were dilapidated and damaged by the war and the Taliban did nothing to repair or renovate them, as a [report](#) from April 2020 showed (USIP, 30 April 2020).

The immediate aftermath of the Taliban take-over of the government in Kabul in August 2021 sent mixed signals in this respect. Even before the take-over was complete, reports were coming in from the provinces that women were being [forced to leave their jobs](#), for example in banks (Reuters, 13 August 2021). The subject of education illustrates perfectly that the Taliban is not yet following a uniform approach. Girls in northern Afghanistan, (such as in [Mazar-e-Sharif](#)) can still attend school classes as long as they follow strict dressing regulations (Reuters, 12 October 2021). However, the so-called 'Islamic Emirate' (as Taliban likes to refer to its government set-up) has only been in full power for a few months and it could be that such regional differences will gradually disappear with time. The Taliban's [vague promise](#) (BBC Newsround, 24 September 2021) that girls should have access to and can [continue their education](#) (The Guardian, 12 September 2021) rings somewhat hollow against this background. It also seems highly unlikely that such regional differences would have any effect regarding the treatment of religious minorities.

According to the report by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction ([SIGAR](#)) published on 12 July 2019, the number of users of drugs (such as opium and heroine) within Afghanistan rose to between 2.9 million and 3.6 million in 2015, which is one of the world's highest per capita rates (more recent numbers are not available). This also indicates that many people, especially the younger generation, are lacking any real future perspectives.

One of the biggest challenges in the WWL 2022 reporting period (not directly related to the conflict) has been the COVID-19 crisis. Afghanistan borders Pakistan and Iran, two countries where the outbreak was particularly widespread. Both countries hold about 3.6 million Afghan nationals and have sped up the repatriation of Afghan [migrant workers and refugees](#) (AAN, 27 March 2020), while others left voluntarily, hoping to avoid infection. It is therefore no surprise that the first large outbreak of the pandemic in Afghanistan was reported in the Western city of Herat. Given the poor state of the health system in terms of quality and quantity, it was feared that the [COVID-19 pandemic](#) could have devastating consequences (AAN, 19 June 2020). Besides the industrial consequences, it also pushed more Afghans into poverty.

It should also be noted that without migrant workers, families lack funds for living provided by remittances. The question of what to do about the hundreds of thousands of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) within Afghanistan has remained an urgent issue, too. According to World Bank estimates, up to [12 million Afghans](#) are considered food-insecure because of the pandemic (World Bank, 4 May 2021). Many feared that a [third wave](#) of the pandemic, coinciding with the retreat of international troops and falling levels of international help, would have even more devastating consequences (Gandhara, 9 June 2021). A complete timeline and assessment can be found in a [dossier](#) compiled by Afghan Analysts Network and published on 17 June 2021.

Relief Web reported on 17 June 2021: "In addition to pre-existing problems, the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 have translated into a dramatic [deterioration in food insecurity](#). The recently released IPC [Integrated Phase Classification (a famine early warning system)] analysis estimates that 12.2 million people – almost one third of the population - are in crisis or emergency levels of food insecurity. Food prices are already higher than normal due to COVID-19 and may increase further in some places due to conflict and water scarcity. Water scarcity is already being seen in a number of areas." This warning has been updated by the World Food Program which estimates that [23 million Afghans](#) will suffer from acute food insecurity "this winter" (Gandhara, 25 October 2021). Reports are emerging from the IDP camps that families increasingly have to resort to [selling their girls](#), some as young as four, to survive (CNN, 2 November 2021).

Christians are affected by these circumstances just like the wider public. Although social-distancing measures can give converts a little bit more freedom for their own personal worship, being in lock-down with family members who are not Christians can also put them in additional danger.

Afghanistan is a deeply patriarchal society which is heavily dominated by the Islamic religious landscape, and in which women are viewed as second-class citizens. Women and girls face restrictions in almost all areas of daily life, and have become increasingly vulnerable within the context of the COVID-19 crisis ([United States Institute of Peace, 10 June 2020](#)) and under Taliban rule.

Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (IWS 2021):

- **Internet usage:** 18.4% of the population - survey date: 31 December 2020
- **Facebook usage:** 11.3% of the population – survey date: 31 March 2021 (According to [Napoleon Cat](#), as of 2018 only 18% of Facebook users were women).

According to the World Bank:

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 59.4 per 100 people.

According to available data, Afghanistan is one of the few countries in the world where the number of Internet users has decreased, but these statistics are not very reliable. Still, it is likely that citizens (converts from Islam in particular) will have more access to online Christian resources (especially resources in Farsi, which is related to the Dari language). As long as govern-

ment intervention remains low, this is likely to strengthen the small Christian community, which is often made up of isolated converts. However, Internet access is more available in urban areas, especially Kabul, which alone makes up more than half of the country's urbanization. With the Taliban taking over control of the country, it is likely that such access will become increasingly difficult and risky.

Due to country instability, Afghanistan was not listed in the Freedom House/Internet Freedom 2020 report. However, in November 2017, VOA News reported that the authorities have at times [blocked social media services](#) temporarily to prevent insurgency groups using WhatsApp, Telegram, Twitter and Facebook to spread propaganda. According to Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom 2021: "Although the peace talks between the Taliban and Afghan government that began in September 2020 offer the hope of a respite, violence against journalists and media outlets has increased significantly. ... There is much concern that basic freedoms, including the freedom of women journalists, could be sacrificed for the sake of a peace deal."

As Afghanistan Analysts Network showed in a series of reports, [access to telecom services](#) (AAN, 13 June 2019) is limited by insurgents, particularly by Taliban control. The Taliban also enforced [cellphone checks](#) in the regions they controlled (prior to the August 2021 take-over) in order to make people follow their strict rules (Gandhara-RFE/RL, 30 October 2020). This applied predominantly to rural areas; it should be noted that the World Bank claims that the [urbanization rate](#) of Afghanistan is the highest in South Asia (World Bank factsheet, accessed 8 January 2022), only topped by smaller countries such as the Maldives and Bhutan. So the gap between cities and rural areas is growing. Overall, the country's technological development is slow and strongly affected by the dire security situation.

Reflecting the gender gap in relation to technology access, a Georgetown report revealed that just 46.2% of women used a mobile phone (Georgetown, [Women, Peace and Security Index 2019/20](#)). It is therefore harder for women to access digital Christian resources or online Christian communities.

Security situation

Violent attacks across the country increased over the WWL 2022 reporting period and civilians have been paying the price, especially since the USA signed a peace deal with the Taliban on 29 February 2020. In the 45 days from signing the pact until end of April, [4500 attacks](#) by the Taliban were recorded (Reuters, 1 May 2020). If calculated on a daily basis, the number of victims as published by UNAMA [did not decrease significantly at all](#) compared to 2019 (AAN, 16 August 2020). The [toll for civilians](#) even increased since the intra-Afghan talks began, according to the 2020 UNAMA report (AAN, 23 February 2021). A drop in civilian casualties reflected the fact that international troops basically stopped aerial attacks, the number of civilian victims from Taliban (and to a lesser extent, Islamic State) attacks actually [increased](#) (AAN, 27 October 2020).

Al-Qaeda is present and active in the country, even though the Taliban claim otherwise; the Islamic State group (IS) has made inroads into the country, boosted by an influx of foreign Sunni militants, many calling themselves "Islamic State of the Khorasan Province" (ISKP) and formed largely out of splinter groups of former Taliban fighters. They have mainly been targeting Hazara

and other Shiites in an effort to sow further sectarian discord. It is also likely to continue serving as a gathering-point for groups from the Taliban, al-Qaeda and other dismantled militia, who opposed the peace negotiations. Despite the planned re-introduction of severe Sharia measures, there are already fears that the position of the [ISKP](#) may be strengthened if disgruntled factions of the Taliban or other groups join their forces or when extremists who have been freed from prison swell their ranks (Foreign Affairs, 14 September 2021). US intelligence warned in October 2021 that ISKP may be capable of [attacking](#) US citizens outside Afghanistan within six months (Reuters, 27 October 2021).

After the April 2021 announcement of a complete troop withdrawal by 11 September 2021, US troops and its NATO allies began leaving Afghanistan and if the Taliban have it their way, they will be leaving the region as well. They [publicly warned](#) Afghanistan's neighbors not to host US military forces, an option the USA considered for monitoring the situation and to gather intelligence at the very least (The Diplomat, 27 May 2021). While there have not been reports about any such US deployment at the time of writing (November 2021), reports emerged that China is running a [military base](#) in Tajikistan at the border to Afghanistan (RFE/RL, 14 October 2021) and is building a second one.

It remains to be seen how the various ethnic groups will react to the Taliban take-over. Reportedly, many had prepared themselves for the time after the withdrawal of international troops by equipping and showcasing [militias](#) (AAN, 4 June 2021). After the IS suicide [attack](#) on a Hazara Shiite mosque in northern Kunduz which killed at least 46 in October 2021 (AP News, 8 October 2021), the Taliban were quick to promise Hazaras that they would be protected like all other Afghan citizens. However, with each successful IS-attack, trust in the Taliban's ability and/or willingness may well weaken.

Against the backdrop of decades-long conflict and instability, life has always been immensely challenging for Christians. In rural locations, the social control is much higher, not just by families, but also by society at large. Over the past years, women have feared the implications of a resurgence of Taliban power, and up until the Taliban take-over in August 2021, activists continued to fight for women to have a greater role in the peace-building process ([HRW, 30 January 2019](#)). Following on from the Taliban take-over in August 2021, the security of both Christian men and women has become increasingly fragile. In an increasingly patriarchal, Islamic context however, the rights of women and minorities are a primary point of concern. Afghan women took to the streets to protest new policies in September 2021 and to demand equal rights, although were violently beaten ([BBC News, 8 September 2021](#)).

Trends analysis

1) Governing a country is unlike fighting a government

The Taliban's swift take-over of power came as a surprise to most observers, although with hindsight, there were many indications of what was to come. The ISKP has been contesting the Taliban fiercely but is unlikely to affect Taliban rule in general. Nevertheless, it is possible that the ISKP will challenge the general provision of security the Taliban wants to present. It is no small task to rule a whole country and it is important to see how different Afghanistan has become compared to twenty years ago. To give just one example, when the Taliban first ruled

in Kabul in 1996, the city had around 500,000 inhabitants; it now has 4.5 - 5 million. One also needs to keep in mind that the Taliban are by no means a [uniform and unified organization](#) (Foreign Policy, 18 August 2021); some parts may indeed be more interested and even focused on governing, while others may be focusing on the continued fighting or in spreading the jihadi success formula into other regions. Any Taliban-government measures not seen as Islamic enough may swell the numbers of disgruntled defectors into the arms of the ISKP. IS presented the takeover of Kabul by the Taliban in their Al-Naba newsletter as a [conspiracy](#) of the Taliban with the USA (Lawfare, 27 August 2021), claiming that the Taliban are not truly Islamic. Likewise, losing factions within the Taliban movement may prefer to continue fighting. As stated above, ethnic militias have been arming themselves, swearing to fight for those under their protection. While no one can predict what is going to happen, all this adds to the country's destabilization. In such a situation, families, clans and society in general will increasingly look for stability within their own groups, which is likely to increase the pressure on Christian converts to conform with religious duties and keep their faith hidden, unnoticed by anyone.

2) Society in general lacks future perspectives

Life for most Afghans is a constant balancing act with little hope for improvement and an ever increasing level of insecurity. Even though Kabul is regarded as the most stable zone, attacks there make life unpredictable as well. The IS claimed an attack at [Kabul University](#) on 2 November 2020, killing at least 22 people - another illustration of the level of violence people in Afghanistan have to endure (Reuters, 2 November 2020). This insecurity is bound to increase and thousands of Afghans are looking for emigration possibilities, especially the better educated ones. Besides the security situation, the socio-economic outlook adds to this impetus. With the withdrawal of international troops, a whole [service industry](#) catering for foreign troops stationed in the country has lost its livelihood (Gandhara, 1 May 2021). Remittances from migrant workers have dried up and COVID-19 is putting a strain on the government budget and administration. More than 50% of the population is younger than 20 years old and the high population growth (combined with the return of refugees and migrant workers) only exacerbates the problem. Unemployment, poverty and inflation rates remain very high. The outbreak of COVID-19 made things worse. Due to a lack of future perspectives, many young people get involved in drug-trafficking or join militant groups. Christians are affected by these challenges as well.

3) The perspectives in politics seem limited

The first decisions the Taliban are taking in the political realm already give some indication where they are heading, e.g. on the inclusion of minorities or women in the government (see above: *Social and cultural landscape*). In the long term, however, the outlook is more sobering. As one analyst wrote: "An [Iran-like internal political and social order](#) may be the best that can be hoped for in Afghanistan. In this system, the Taliban's supreme council, their ruling body of 20 or so leaders, would sit atop a layer of technocratic institutions carrying out the actual business of governance" (Foreign Affairs, 17 August 2021). This seems indeed to be the preferred model with Mullah Hasan Akhund, chief of the Taliban's leadership council 'Rehbari Shura', [leading the government](#), while Taliban leader Hibatullah Akhundzada is to provide spiritual guidance (Reuters, 8 September 2021). The new interior minister, Sirajuddin Haqqani, is the son of the founder of the Haqqani network, which is classified as a terrorist group by the USA. Some

observers see a [déjà-vu of the 1990s](#) (The Diplomat, 5 October 2021). The Diplomat's report is sobering. With quotes taken from articles published more than twenty years ago, it shows that hope had been high at that time that the Taliban would be willing to respect human rights and prioritize topics high on the list of international attention. However, it was not to be and it is unlikely that the stance of the Taliban will [change](#) (Lawfare, 31 October 2021). If this is the new Afghanistan, one may imagine that no religious minority in the country can hope for any increased freedom at all.

4) Neighboring countries and regional powers wield influence

Much of the population long for peace, are fed-up with the violence and do not trust groups like the Taliban or IS. The now defunct National Unity Government, although elected, was widely mistrusted and seen as being marred by factionalism and corruption. With the changing political situation, it becomes visible once again how Afghanistan is a field of interest for its immediate neighbors like Pakistan and Iran, and also for regional and world powers like Russia and China. Also, neighboring [Central Asian countries](#) are trying to shield themselves against any potential consequences as regards their own domestic radical Islamic groups (Gandhara, 25 June 2021). Tajikistan has been the only Central Asian country openly opposing Taliban rule.

Pakistan, which is home to a large part of the Taliban leadership, seems to be preparing itself for the changes by [closing off](#) its 2670 kilometer long border with Afghanistan. A border-fence is under construction which cuts off many families with ties on both sides of the border and traders doing business on both sides (Gandhara, 5 February 2021). This will hardly keep militants from seeping into the country and has grave social consequences for the communities. It also has consequences for the small Christian community in Afghanistan which will become even more isolated. Afghanistan is in dire need of what one observer called "[a neighborly concert](#)" (PRIO, January 2021). Unfortunately, so far, mainly disharmonic tones can be heard and whether the country destined to play the most important role, Pakistan, is willing - and (maybe even more importantly) able - to nudge the Taliban into making certain [compromises](#), remains to be seen (ICG, 30 June 2021). A [very visible visit](#) by Pakistan's Chief of Intelligence (and potential next army chief) in Kabul as the Taliban was putting its government together was most probably carried out to assist in brokering between the various Taliban factions (Gandhara, 7 September 2021).

China has already officially [hosted Taliban leaders](#) (Washington Post, 28 July 2021). As China shares a short border with Afghanistan and is wary of any potential Muslim insurgents, it clearly has interests in the country. However, China undoubtedly knows Afghanistan's infamous reputation as being the "[graveyard of empires](#)", so it will no doubt be careful not to get drawn into involvement in the security situation (The Interpreter, 30 July 2021). Whether this works out, only time will tell. Christians will be extra vulnerable in these insecure times and try to remain undiscovered as best they can.

External Links - Keys to understanding

- Recent history: signed - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/29/us-taliban-sign-peace-agreement-afghanistan-war>
- Recent history: announcement - <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/biden-afghanistan-troop-withdrawal-live-stream-2021-04-14/>

- Recent history: double bomb-attack - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-58349010>
- Political and legal landscape: human and women's rights - <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-afghanistan-open-women-s-rights-only-terms/29755102.html>
- Political and legal landscape: their - <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-constitution-offers-glimpse-into-militant-group-s-vision-for-afghanistan/30577298.html>
- Political and legal landscape: " - <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-constitution-offers-glimpse-into-militant-group-s-vision-for-afghanistan/30577298.html>
- Political and legal landscape: Constitution" - <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-constitution-offers-glimpse-into-militant-group-s-vision-for-afghanistan/30577298.html>
- Political and legal landscape: hardliner - <https://www.rferl.org/a/why-did-the-taliban-appoint-a-hard-line-chief-negotiator-for-intra-afghan-talks-/30832252.html>
- Political and legal landscape: whole of Afghanistan - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-58459130>
- Political and legal landscape: called - <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/are-taliban-path-victory>
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WWL 2022: Church information / Afghanistan

Christian origins

Christianity may have reached Afghanistan by the 2nd century AD. According to traditions passed on by Eusebius of Caesarea (260-339 AD), the apostles Thomas and Bartholomew brought the Christian message to Parthia and Bactria, which includes today's north-western Afghanistan. The congregations which grew up developed into the Nestorian Church and Afghan cities like Herat, Kandahar and Balkh became bishopric seats. In the 13th century a Christian ruler converted to Islam and became Sultan, leading to a decline in the number of followers of Christianity, which was nearly completely extinguished by the reign of Timur in 1405.

In the 17th century, Armenian merchants came to Kabul and in time a small Christian community developed, but this Armenian community was forced to leave the country by 1871. Attempts at building a Protestant church in Kabul came to an end in 1973. Today, Christianity has been pushed underground completely. It is claimed that in the basement of the Italian embassy, there is still a legally recognized church, the only one in the country. But it is not publicly accessible and therefore only serves expatriate Christians. The leader of the small (expat) Catholic community in Afghanistan warned against a [civil war](#) when international troops withdraw (UCA News, 19 April 2021).

Church spectrum today

For security reasons no WCD breakdown is shown here. Most Christians are converts from other religions, but no details can be published.

External Links - Church information

- Christian origins: civil war - <https://international.la-croix.com/news/world/catholic-leader-in-afghanistan-dreads-us-pull-out/14150>

WWL 2022: Persecution Dynamics / Afghanistan

Reporting period

1 October 2020 - 30 September 2021

Position on the World Watch List

Afghanistan: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2022	98	1
WWL 2021	94	2

WWL 2020	93	2
WWL 2019	94	2
WWL 2018	93	2

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2018-2022 reporting periods

For many years, Christians in Afghanistan already endured the same extreme levels of pressure as in North Korea, although by different means and actors. In terms of scoring for the spheres of life, Afghanistan and North Korea did and do not differ at all, scoring the maximum for each of the five spheres. With the take-over of the government by the Taliban the situation changed, as this meant that many Christians relocated within the country for security reasons or tried to leave the country. As a result, many (if not all) house-churches closed, Christians had to leave behind everything they owned and the violence score increased to an unprecedented level of 15 points.

The extremely high score of 98 points has never been seen in the WWL before and warrants a reminder: It does not mean that each and every Christian in the country is fleeing (although each and every Christian will hide his or her faith even more carefully); it does not mean that church life is not possible at all or that house-churches cannot meet at all. It also does not suggest that the persecution situation cannot possibly get worse. This is, on the contrary, a distinct possibility. At the same time, this score does not suggest that the situation in North Korea (which fell one rank in WWL 2022) has improved and is better than in Afghanistan.

Persecution engines

Afghanistan: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Very strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Strong
Clan oppression	CO	Very 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	Not at all
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Very strong

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.

Islamic oppression (Very strong)

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan neither allows any Afghan citizens to become Christians nor recognizes converts as such. Conversion is seen as apostasy and brings shame on the family and the Islamic community. Therefore, converts hide their new-won faith as far as possible. With power now in the hands of the Taliban, which is more inclined to radical Islamic views, all Afghan citizens are facing strict limitations in everyday life inspired by Islamic tenets. Christian converts do not have any space to deviate from the behavior expected from everyone. The extreme violence used by groups related to IS (e.g. Islamic State in the Khorasan Province/ISKP) has translated into an even higher number of people being killed in attacks or displaced as discussed above under the heading *Security situation*. IS appears to have begun a "holier than thou"-competition, trying to brand the Taliban as un-Islamic. The fallout and likely increasing violence will find religious minorities, including Christians, in the crosshairs.

Christians of Afghan nationality are all converts with a Muslim background. If they are discovered, they face discrimination and hostility (including death) at the hands of family, friends and community. Muslim religious leaders will most likely be the instigators and the local authorities can be involved, too. The Taliban will put an even stronger emphasis on frequent mosque attendance, increasing the role of religious leaders. According to a survey published in November 2019 (the latest available data), Afghan people display the [highest levels of confidence](#) in their religious leaders and in the media - far ahead of their trust in any politicians. More than 57% of respondents said they would welcome religious leaders being more involved in politics, but some provinces saw percentages of up to 98.5%.

Clan oppression (Very strong), blended with Ethno-religious hostility (Strong)

A country expert stated: "Ethno-religious norms and traditional belief systems are dominant. Society is very traditional and slow to change. Pashtuns in particular have a strong codex, but other tribes also adhere to their traditions." The Taliban are a Pashtun movement. The concept of nation is alien to the Afghan way of thinking. One's own family comes first, followed by the clan and then the tribe – and all of these are much more important than the country as a whole, which may have been one underlying reason why the Taliban experienced so little resistance in the take-over. People are deeply entrenched in caring for their families, villages and tribes. If someone dares to turn from his tribe to embrace something new and maybe even foreign, this results in high pressure being exerted to make that person return to traditional norms. If this does not happen, such a person will be looked upon as a traitor of the community and hence excluded. This applies to all 'deviations' but even more if someone turns to Christianity. The Christian religion is considered to be Western and hostile to Afghan culture, society and Islam, and leaving Islam is seen as treason. As already mentioned above, the US State Department's 2020 IRFR states on page 19 that "some Muslims remained suspicious of development assistance projects, which they often viewed as surreptitious efforts to advance Christianity or engage in proselytization."

Organized corruption and crime (Very strong)

Criminal gangsters work hand in glove with many of the extremist organizations and provide support for revenue streams which involve human trafficking of minorities, murder for hire,

theft and intimidation of rivals and informers. One country expert said: "Crime and violent crime has been on the rise and affects those living in less secure urban areas or areas dominated by warlords and drug-lords. For some, this poses a more immediate threat than the wider political conflict." The lack of exportable goods has led to a huge trade imbalance, causing the country to be in constant financial debt. A stunning 80% of the GDP comes from the informal sector and so corruption and crime are omnipresent. This also affects Christians because they belong to the low-income majority of society. One of the main economic problems Afghanistan faces is that growing illicit drugs such as opium is much more lucrative than virtually any other crop; details are to be found in the [UN report](#) published in November 2018. The Taliban are heavily involved in drug production; estimations are that 70-80% of all drug trafficking profit is channeled into funding Taliban activities. The income from poppy cultivation not only funds armed militant groups, it also fuels corruption. While the Taliban was previously known for cracking down on opium production during its first rise to power in the 1990s, it remains to be seen what their policy will look like this time round. An early indicator may be the policies they have published on [cultivating cannabis](#): The implementation has been slow and the Taliban picked the low-hanging fruit first by tackling those areas where cannabis planting is not entrenched (AAN, 27 October 2021).

Drivers of persecution

Afghanistan:									
Drivers of Persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	VERY STRONG		STRONG	VERY STRONG					VERY STRONG
Government officials	Very strong		Strong	Very strong					Strong
Ethnic group leaders	Very strong		Strong	Very strong					-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Very strong		Strong	Very strong					-
Violent religious groups	Very strong		Strong	Very strong					Very strong
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Very strong		Strong	Strong					-
One's own (extended) family	Very strong		Strong	Strong					-
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Very strong		Weak	Very weak					Very strong
Organized crime cartels or networks	Weak								Strong

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 Islamic oppression

- **Government officials (Very strong):** Since Afghanistan - as stated in the now obsolete Constitution - is an Islamic state, all other religions are seen as alien to the country and consequently government officials are hostile towards all signs of Christianity. Although the dust is still settling, the term "government official" will increasingly mean a member of the Taliban (sometimes even with religious credentials). The approach towards Christian converts, if discovered, will not change in that respect. The withdrawal of the international troops and NGO personnel will also mean a reduction in the numbers of outsiders watching. Political parties, which had been a driver up to August 2021, have been ruled out now.
- **Ethnic group leaders, Islamic leaders, violent religious groups and revolutionaries or paramilitary groups (Very strong):** As explained above, ethnic and religious leaders are stronger and more powerful than government officials, and sometimes there is an overlap of the different roles. Ethnic group leaders are the law in many parts of the country. The small, but very violent IS influence, puts additional pressure on the already hidden group of Christians. As one country researcher said: "Although things may have got worse - things for Christians facing persecution have not changed that much. It is the access to data by the Taliban which was collected by the former government (identity card databases etc.) that makes this situation particularly dangerous."
- **Families (Very strong):** Although this depends on the family's general ethos, for most families a conversion brings shame, and the family will do much - in some cases everything necessary - to bring the convert back to Islam and to atone for the shame. With the Taliban in power, the pressure on families to follow 'the right version of Islam' will increase.
- **Normal citizens (Very strong):** What has been said for families can be said about the wider community (neighbors and friends) as well. Control within society is very strong and leaving Islam is seen as a rejection of Afghan culture and society which needs to be stopped.

Drivers of Clan oppression blended with Ethno-religious hostility

- **Government officials (Very strong):** As Afghanistan is organized first and foremost along ethnic lines, affiliation to an ethnicity and tribe is the highest priority and needs to be protected and defended above all else, not just on the national, but even more so on the provincial and district level.
- **Ethnic group leaders, Islamic leaders and violent religious groups (Very strong):** Ethnicity, often backed by religious affiliation, defines a person's being and consequently, ethnic leaders wield a strong influence over people. The very same dynamics described for *Islamic oppression* are active in this respect as well.
- **Normal citizens and (extended) Family (Strong):** Everyone leaving his or her given community, for example by changing his or her religion to Christianity, is seen as committing treason and in need of being brought back. The very same drivers already mentioned under *Islamic oppression* are active here as well, since in Afghan culture, ethnic and religious identity are regarded as being one and the same.

Drivers of Organized corruption and crime

- **Government officials (Strong):** The central government in Afghanistan has always been weak and its officials, especially at the local level, have always done everything to capitalize on the (limited) power and authority they hold. It remains to be seen if the Taliban is willing and able to break this pattern. When Christians are exposed or simply oppose illicit practices, they are in a weak position and no-one will protect them. They can even become a high value hostage to barter over and be used for striking deals. Many government officials benefit from receiving bribes for looking the other way.
- **Violent religious groups and revolutionaries or paramilitary groups (Very strong):** It is a well-known fact that opium cultivation and trade is particularly intense in the southern province of Kandahar, a Taliban stronghold. The revenue from the drug trade is an important source for financing the insurgency and anyone seen as endangering this business (or is simply in its way) is driven away by all means necessary.
- **Organized crime cartels or networks (Strong):** The drug-lords - of any affiliation - will protect their business and transportation routes at all costs. Christians, who are deeply hidden in society anyway, will have no protection against them at all if discovered.

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

- **Main areas for Islamic oppression:** It seems safe to say that Taliban power in the south, east and northwest of the country has the deepest roots. At the same time, it should be kept in mind that the whole country is strictly Islamic, so Christians are facing difficulties wherever they are in the country. As a general rule, control and supervision in rural areas is stricter than in most cities.
- **Main areas for Clan oppression:** Family and clan affiliation is strong across the country and even extends into cases where (predominantly) young men migrate to the cities. Filial piety and clan loyalty is expected and given in such cases as well.
- **Main areas for Organized corruption and crime:** Whereas criminal activities and corruption occur countrywide, drug production and distribution is particularly dominant in the south. But again, it is hard to identify a pattern.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians: These are not included as a separate WWL category as they are so few, so protected and so isolated that they are hardly impacted by the country's situation. The number of expatriate Christians in Afghanistan decreased strongly in the WWL 2022 reporting period.

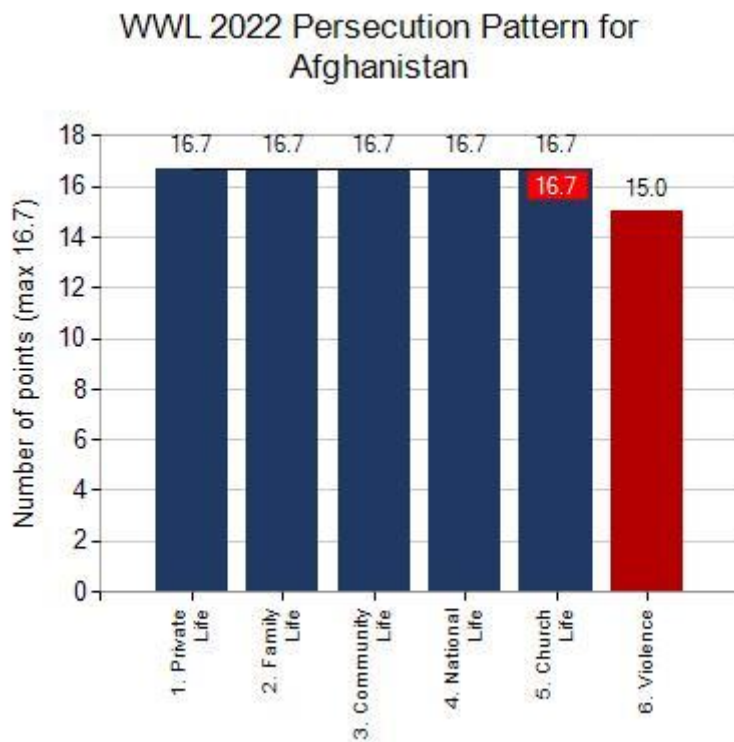
Historical Christian communities: These do not exist in Afghanistan.

Converts to Christianity: Different communities of converts exist in Afghanistan. There are those who left as asylum seekers for western countries and found the Christian faith and then returned to tell others; those who came from the first converts to Christianity in the 20th century - which accounts for a majority of the Christian underground church network; and those who recently converted after being exposed to teaching and evangelism through the radio, Internet, satellite TV or word of mouth. All these Christians come from a Muslim background and try their utmost

not to be discovered by family, friends, neighbors or the wider community. Depending on the family, they may even have to fear for their lives. For them, living openly as a Christian is simply not possible - even the suspicion of being a Christian can bring severe persecution. This remains true under a Taliban rule as well.

Non-traditional Christian communities: These do not exist in Afghanistan.

The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2022 Persecution pattern for Afghanistan shows:

- The pressure on Christians in Afghanistan remained at the maximum level of 16.7 for all spheres of life, reflecting the fact that it is impossible to live as a Christian publicly there. With the take-over of the government by the Taliban, control of Islamic piety and the implementation of strict Islamic rules will strongly increase. Christian converts are having to face the fact that they can be more easily exposed now that the Taliban hold all government records. As a result, they need to comply with all rules and remain 'hidden believers'.
- While maximum scores for pressure in the *Family*, *Private* and *Community spheres* are typical for strictly Islamic countries, the pressure in the *National* and *Church spheres* points to a government relying on strictly interpreted Islamic rules and a basically tribal society. This is not going to change under the Taliban rule. All promises to international bodies about making attempts to live up to and implement human rights standards will end for good.
- The violence score of 15 points increased by 4.8 points, as the government takeover of the Taliban triggered many Christian converts to leave their place of living, either relocating in the country or trying to leave for abroad. In consequence, many house-churches stopped

meeting at least temporarily, but others for good. Also, the Islamic State group is potentially growing in power, posing as the "true Islamic force" and contesting Taliban rule. It is possible and even likely that violence will continue and minorities will be targeted.

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 2021 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 1.1: Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another. (4.00 points)

Afghanistan is an Islamic nation and any deviation from Islam is forbidden by law and tradition, and conversion is punishable. The new Taliban government's position (as well as that of the average Afghan in the street) remains that Afghans cannot be Christian and that it is illegal and impossible to have any other faith than Islam. Converts are dealt with "swiftly and silently", as stated by one country expert, but this may change and be done more publicly if the Taliban want to set an example. Since society is tightly-knit, social control is high and keeping things private is difficult; as a result, converts run a high risk of being discovered, depending on the circumstances.

Block 1.3: It has been dangerous to privately own or keep Christian materials. (4.00 points)

Any Christian material will attract attention as it points to the interests of its owner and is therefore carefully avoided. Christians will try to keep as little Christian material in their homes or in their private belongings as possible since there is always the danger of searches. Even the use of material on communication devices or via the Internet (which is not available in all regions) is done with the utmost caution. According to a report, the Taliban already enforced [cellphone checks](#) in the regions they controlled before taking over the government of the whole country, in order to make people follow their strict rules (Gandhara-RFE/RL, 30 October 2020). Many Christian converts completely disposed of cell phones and other devices after the Taliban take-over and relocated in an effort to hide.

Block 1.5: It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols. (4.00 points)

No one will reveal symbols or any other signs of Christianity in Afghanistan, as this will lead to a public outcry and harsh consequences and directly point to the converts themselves. Even members of the expatriate community in Kabul - who are not included in WWL analysis for Afghanistan - avoided showing any hint of their Christian faith, thus illustrating the levels of pressure experienced. And even just showing interest in any other religion than Islam runs the risk of being strongly opposed.

Block 1.7: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with immediate family members. (4.00 points)

Converts always have to be very cautious as even the suspicion of having converted can lead to severe consequences such as arrest and the destruction of homes. Families often hide their faith from their own children. As they can never know which members of their clan have been recruited by or sympathize with the Taliban, they are intensely cautious about whom they trust in regard to their faith, for even if their names are not passed on to the Taliban, there will be consequences if their faith is known. Social control is high and it is difficult to hide newly won Christian faith over a long period of time, especially if the convert has children. Additionally, converts are in a catch-22 situation as they do not want to send their children to an Islamic madrassa but cannot speak about Christian faith to their children either, because that would be too dangerous.

Block 1 - further information

Given the high pressure under which converts in Afghanistan find themselves, it is clear that they also have great difficulties in meeting each other and need to exercise the utmost care, when they are listening to Christian radio or programs in the internet, especially as there is very little privacy in Afghan culture. Additionally, as many Christians have relocated inside the country, this adds to the difficulties. Praying and Bible reading for oneself is only possible when converts are sure they are alone. In May 2021, a small group of Christians decided they wanted to have 'non-Muslim' added on their ID cards; as a consequence they are being hunted down after the information fell into the hands of the Taliban. During the COVID-19 pandemic and related economic and social crisis (and also due to the very insecure future Afghans are facing), many Afghans have become more open and keen to talk about the deeper issues of life; however, this does not diminish the overall risk associated with sharing the Christian faith.

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

Block 2.1: Babies and children of Christians have automatically been registered under the state or majority religion. (4.00 points)

In Afghanistan, Islam is the only religion under which citizens can be officially registered; as a result, every Afghan is registered as Muslim. Anything else is unacceptable and unthinkable. As stated above under *Private sphere*, the few Christians who tried to opt for "non-Muslim" in their ID cards paid dearly for it.

Block 2.7: Parents have been hindered in raising their children according to their Christian beliefs. (4.00 points)

Even under the previous government (under President Ghani), preserving Islamic teachings and tenets has always been the prerogative (Gandhara, 12 January 2021). These efforts will increase with the Taliban's government take-over. Parents who teach their children Christian faith risk exposure. When it is noticed, that such children have a different opinion from the majority or simply speak out carelessly and innocently about their beliefs, the Christian family will need to leave the region for its own safety. Therefore it is a question of whether parents are willing to

take such a risk. In any case, teaching children about Christian faith can only be done in a very cautious way, having these consequences in mind.

Block 2.11: Spouses of converts have been put under pressure (successfully or unsuccessfully) by others to divorce. (4.00 points)

There is pressure on spouses to divorce or - as divorce is uncommon - nullify a marriage in the case of a Christian spouse. The strongest pressure is put on any woman whose husbands have accepted the Christian faith. Her parents will try to achieve a divorce and cause great trouble in the family. Converts are sometimes sent to a mental hospital, since families believe that no sane person would ever leave Islam. This reasoning makes it also easier to nullify a marriage.

Block 2.13: Christians have lost their inheritance rights because of their conversion to Christianity or (if a person already was a Christian) other types of Christianity. (4.00 points)

A country researcher states: "It is safer to leave the country or the region as there will be the likelihood of great pressure to reconvert back to your original faith. Those who choose to stay, end up in serious difficulty, and suffer hardship and can be killed. Others choose to leave and hide." Losing inheritance rights (or the custody of children) are serious consequences, but they have to be put in perspective.

Block 2 - further information

Converts face many more limitations than those listed above. Baptism as the most visible sign of becoming a Christian is considered a crime punishable by death. Baptisms therefore have to be carried out in secret. As most Christians will keep their conversion secret, they will be buried according to Islamic rites. If Afghans are discovered to have become Christians, their children will automatically be taken away and given to adoption by Muslim families. Those children will be harassed in their new family and at school. If a family succeeds in keeping their conversion secret, the children will have no option but to continue attending madrassa classes and are likely to grow up confused about the divergent beliefs if they know about the Christian faith of their parents.

Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

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.). (4.00 points)

With the Taliban take-over, this kind of pressure has grown exponentially. As a country expert explained, there is no other way for Christian converts than to "play the role of a Muslim". This includes questions of dress code, but also includes the failure to attend the mosque or indeed to grow a beard. If a Christian woman chooses not to wear a head-covering she will draw unwanted attention and locals will try to manipulate her into wearing one.

Block 3.5: Christians have been put under pressure to take part in non-Christian religious ceremonies or community events. (4.00 points)

Whether an Afghan is known as a Christian (e.g. in a more tolerant family) or unknown, participation in such Islamic activities as Namaz (prayer), mosque visits, fasting, Eid celebrations, funerals, births, weddings, sacrifices etc. is expected and even mandatory under Taliban rule. Converts are also pressured into attending mosque prayers, especially on Fridays. This kind of pressure will be implemented throughout the country, including cities.

Block 3.9: Christians have faced disadvantages in their education at any level for faith-related reasons (e.g. restrictions of access to education). (4.00 points)

Christian parents fear sending their children to school because they want to protect them from Islamic indoctrination and from revealing their hidden Christian identity. If they are discovered and are not immediately exposed, they will be pressured into leaving school without being given the necessary documents to continue school elsewhere. Of course, Christian students have to follow the general curriculum, which puts a strong emphasis on Islam. Christian girls are excluded from higher education, although implementation of this policy is not yet uniform throughout Afghanistan. With many Christian converts currently relocating, their children are often not enrolled for school classes.

Block 3.13: Christians have been interrogated or compelled to report to the local vigilante/police for faith-related reasons. (4.00 points)

If Christian converts are discovered, they will certainly be taken away for investigation and interrogation. These interrogations are intense, regardless of whether they are carried out by the Taliban, ISKP or any other group. The police had always been additionally interested in extracting money or confessions. For reaching this goal, suspected converts were put in prison. It remains to be seen if this practice continues under Taliban rule.

Block 3 - further information

Any convert discovered will lose access to community resources and healthcare. Communities exercise immense pressure to ensure allegiance and order and consequently monitor everyone. Whoever is seen as deviating is put under pressure to return to the mainstream religious and political views, be it by physical torture, cursing someone or by using occult practices which are widespread in Afghanistan.

Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

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. (4.00 points)

The Constitution - since August 2021 suspended by the Taliban - guaranteed that adherents of other religions were free to exercise their faith. However, Article 3 of the Constitution, which stated that no law shall contravene the tenets and provisions of Islam, led to restrictions in many areas. Although the wording was flexible and it did not state what may be deemed as inappropri-

ate and against Islam, in practice accusations of conversion were equated with blasphemy and neither Christians nor other religious minorities (including non-Sunni Muslims) enjoyed freedom of religion. Meanwhile, the country is back under the direct rule of Sharia law and it is not yet clear if the Taliban plan to implement a new constitution.

Block 4.4: Christians have been hindered in travelling for faith-related reasons. (4.00 points)

All travel by anyone suspected of being a Christian (or of having interest in the 'Christian West') is monitored and often hindered if it is suspected that a journey is being conducted for faith-based reasons (e.g. to attend a conference). The Taliban is known for notoriously strict and frequent searches (before the take-over, at checkpoints; now, in house raids etc.). Additionally, COVID-19 restrictions hindered many journeys in the WWL 2022 reporting period.

Block 4.10: Media reporting has been incorrect or biased against Christians. (4.00 points)

Christians are seldom the topic of media reports, but if they are, the reporting is always distorted and stirs up anti-Christian sentiment, e.g. by exaggerating the number of Christians in the country. Operations carried out by the US-led military alliance, in particular, were often portrayed as having Christian motivation or of being linked with Christian faith in some way. Whether this narrative will change with the withdrawal of international troops remains to be seen.

Block 4.13: Christians have been accused of blasphemy or insulting the majority religion, either by state authorities or by pressure groups. (4.00 points)

The punishment for blasphemy is not so much a rights issue as it is a societal one; the punishment is carried out swiftly by the local religious authorities, jihadist groups or now - increasingly - government officials. In many cases, blasphemy charges are reportedly brought before the authorities (or taken into people's own hands) for reasons of personal enmity or envy. Even a mere suspicion or allegation can end in immediate death or the individual fleeing.

Block 4 - further information

Christians are discriminated against when they have to deal with the authorities (although at the time of writing - November 2021 - it is still unclear what the administrative authorities under the Taliban will look like). Christians have difficulties in running their own businesses and of course face unjust treatment when they have to stand trial. If they have experienced such problems, it is usually (and officially) not because of their faith, but due to other alleged crimes (e.g. due to treason by working with foreign intelligence agencies, murder or drug dealing). Even people only suspected of being a Christian are likely to face similar ordeals. Smear campaigns can be run against them, rumors spread, causing people to look more deeply at their lifestyle, asking questions like "Why don't you pray as much as we do?, Why do you shave?, Why don't you attend the mosque regularly? etc."

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

Block 5.1: Church activities have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed. (4.00 points)

There is no publicly accessible church in Afghanistan. The only functioning chapel is reported to be in the basement of the Italian embassy in Kabul and only open for the small number of expatriates still working in the city - mainly diplomatic and military staff. Any form of meeting noted by the Taliban receives high attention. Christian groups (no matter how small they are) have to be cautious about how they meet. A country expert states: "Churches are underground and held in secret; many people are not able to share their faith openly, sing loudly or meet for communion. Therefore the ceremonies for church just look like a group of people meeting over a meal with fruit to represent wine and barbequed bread ...".

Block 5.4: Churches have been hindered from organizing Christian activities inside their place of worship. (4.00 points)

Convert fellowships can only gather with the utmost caution and only when it is clear that the members know and trust each other. Precautionary measures such as changing locations etc. make it very difficult to meet as church. Teaching and worship can only be carried out in private premises under extreme caution. After the Taliban take-over, many Christians relocated within Afghanistan for security reasons or tried to flee abroad. This made gatherings even more difficult and often impossible.

Block 5.11: Pastors or other Christian leaders (or their family members) have been special targets of harassment for faith-related reasons. (4.00 points)

Leaders of Christian groups are not known in public. As one country expert stated, if the radical groups or Muslim society in general knew who was a Christian leader, they would kill him, in order to intimidate Christians in his network and seek to destroy the group.

Block 5.14: Openly selling or distributing Bibles (or other Christian materials) has been hindered. (4.00 points)

All Christian material is hidden, especially in homes where there are many different people visiting. Therefore there is a great need to keep Christian material at home secret and safe from prying eyes lest they are discovered, forcing the people to flee or face serious physical violence from the local 'jirga' court. There is no possibility for distributing or selling Bibles and other Christian materials; even sharing electronically can have life-threatening consequences if traced. Due to the scarceness of Christian materials, Christians in Afghanistan consistently seek good sources, but they have to practice extreme caution as many who have been discovered now face dire consequences.

Block 5 - further information

Open work of any kind among youth is not possible. A country expert states: "Youth are very much at risk due to the recruitment of young people to fight in the wars against different Taliban

or ISKP factions. We are seeing a new kind of war - which is a war of showing the rest of the country who is more extreme than the other."

In this kind of conscription race, everyone working openly with youth will be perceived as a competitor for their hearts and minds. Christians cannot set up charitable organizations, openly integrate converts into their meetings, train their own leaders or ask for the registration or building of a church. The Afghan Church is deeply underground and as far as the official view is concerned, non-existent, hence they are also not able to speak out against any incident of persecution.

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).

Due to security concerns, few details can be published; the situation since August 2021 is still developing and is very volatile. Incidents are extremely difficult to verify since many Christians have i) gone into hiding; ii) relocated within the country; iii) tried to leave the country; and iv) disposed of their cell phones for security reasons.

For years, Christians have suffered the same levels of general insecurity and violence as the rest of the population. But being converts, their faith has had to remain unknown for their own safety. In terms of violence, the situation remained basically stable. However, the WWL 2022 reporting period saw a break in this pattern: With the taking over of the government by the Taliban in August 2021, violence greatly increased and when the Taliban got access to records and reports held by the former government, it became easier to identify Christians. Although it does not seem to have been a systematic, nation-wide campaign, it was reported from some districts that lists with the names of Christians circulated and the Taliban were actively hunting them and carrying out house searches: For example, the few Christians who had changed their ID card to "non-Muslim" in May 2021. Because of this, many more Christians had to go into hiding and relocate within Afghanistan or abroad.

In the WWL 2022 reporting period:

- **Christians killed:** Many Christians have been identified by the Taliban and killed. Exact numbers are impossible to verify for the reasons given above. No killings of international Christian humanitarian workers have been reported; most of them have left the country with the international troops and embassy staff etc.
- **Christians attacked:** The Taliban has prioritized the hunting down of anyone who either openly spoke out against them or was aligned with anything the new rulers do not approve of, e.g. being involved with the previous government. Whatever they perceive as a threat to their authority, will be targeted. This naturally includes Christians, who have to be attacked and worse for religious reasons.
- **Christians detained:** Detention is very violent and it is solely aimed at identifying networks of Christians. The end-result of a detention is pre-determined.

- **Churches attacked:** Afghanistan has not had an official church building for almost fifty years. The Taliban take-over led to the dissolving of many, if not most of the house-churches present in the country.
- **Christian homes attacked:** No matter if converts have been abducted, had to go into hiding within the country or even try to relocate abroad, they lost their homes, most of which were either destroyed or taken over by neighbors or Taliban fighters moving in.
- **Christians raped/forcefully married:** There are reports of women and girls being taken and married to young Taliban fighters who want 'spoils of war'. When women and girls are raped, they are not married to a fighter, but trafficked either within the country or across the border.

5 Year trends

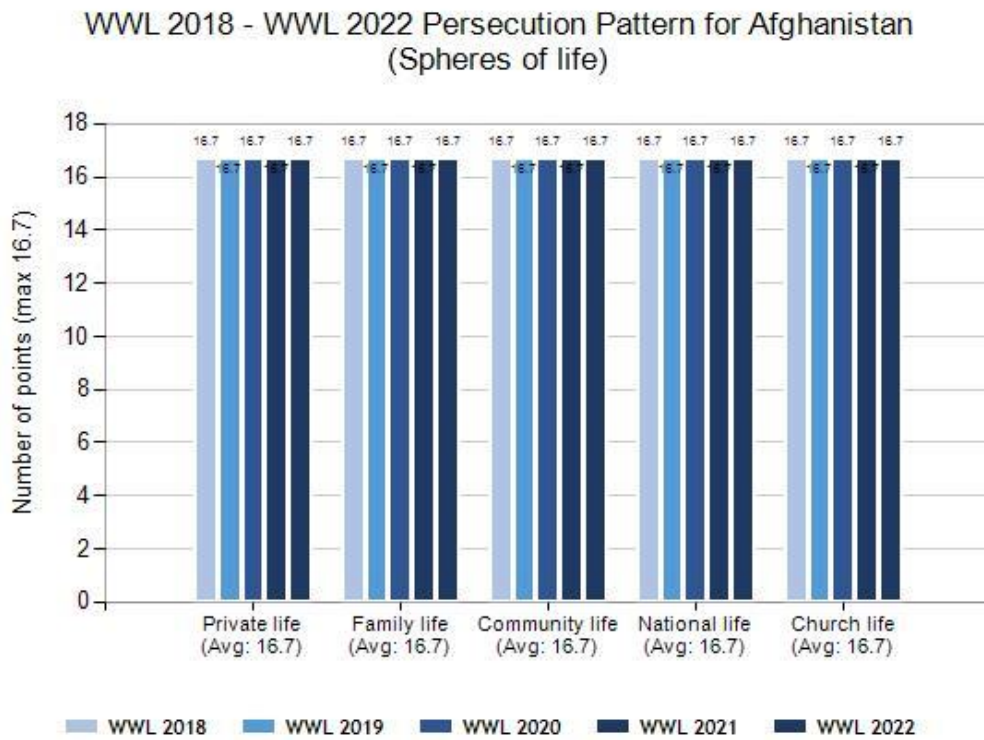
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

5 Year trends: Average pressure

Afghanistan: WWL 2018 - WWL 2022 Persecution Pattern history	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2022	16.7
2021	16.7
2020	16.7
2019	16.7
2018	16.7

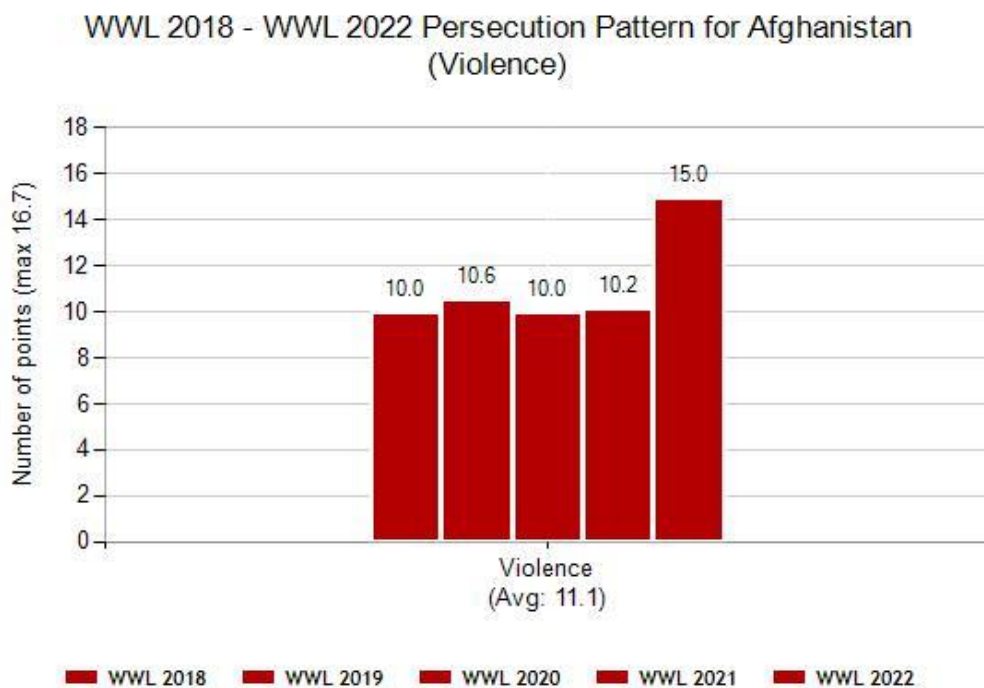
The last five WWL reporting periods have seen the average pressure on Christians at their maximum level. (Due to the constant decrease in the number of expatriate Christians working for NGOs in the country - the vast majority has now left since the Taliban take-over - this category of Christian community has not been included in the scoring since WWL 2018.)

5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life



The score for pressure in each *sphere of life* has consistently reached the maximum level of 16.7 points.

5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



A Christian in Afghanistan is understood to be a convert, and a well-hidden one at that. With the government take-over by the Taliban, it is more necessary than ever to stay hidden and follow all Taliban's Islamic rules. The fact that so many Christians are on the run led to a strong increase in the violence score. It should, however, be kept in mind that it is very difficult to get reliable information, at present. How many Christians left their homes voluntarily, went abroad, or have been abducted and killed, is extremely hard to verify. Added to this, many Christian converts have disposed of their cell phones as they are a liability.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Forced marriage
Security	Abduction; Trafficking; Violence – physical; Violence – sexual
Social and Cultural	Denied access to social community/networks; Violence – psychological; Violence – Verbal
Technological	-

The swift take-over of Afghanistan by the Taliban has thrown the advancement of women's rights into turmoil. Women have long had a lower social status and been viewed as second class citizens, but under Taliban rule face an increasingly uncertain future. Women from religious minorities, including Christians, are especially vulnerable. In an early announcement following their take-over, a Taliban statement declared: "Our women are Muslim. They will be happy to be living within our frameworks of Sharia" ([Al-Jazeera, 17 August 2021](#)). Reflecting the downward trend of women's rights, girls' school attendance is restricted and women are currently barred from the workplace ([CNN, 19 September 2021](#)).

Female converts also face extreme pressures on a familial and societal level, facilitated in part by the limited role women play in Afghan society and their few rights to social protection. Although conversions usually happen together as a family unit in Afghanistan, when a woman decides to convert to Christianity on her own, she is likely to keep it a secret. If her faith is discovered, she is vulnerable to physical abuse and being put under house arrest. She may also be forcibly married to a Muslim or sold for sexual enslavement. According to a country expert, forced marriages are commonplace in Afghanistan and "all marriages face an element of forced marriage". Forced marriages and rape are used as tools for forced (re-)conversion, particularly against women and girls from a Muslim background. A young female Christian convert can be forced to marry a non-Christian (often older) with relative ease. Due to Afghanistan's honor-shame culture, women are unlikely to report instances of rape or sexual abuse due to both the stigma attached and the lack of legislative justice.

According to a country expert, Christian women and girls are being targeted and abducted in order to be forcibly married to Taliban fighters, with fathers being forced to give up their daughters at the point of a gun. "Christians have no value or worth," explains another country

expert, “therefore if or when they are discovered there is a high probability, they will be turned into sex slaves.”

In light of these pressures, female converts choose to keep their faith secret from their families. This means they have fewer opportunities to connect with other believers

Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	-
Security	Abduction; Trafficking; Violence – death; Violence – physical
Social and Cultural	Denied access to social community/networks; Violence – psychological; Violence – Verbal
Technological	-

The Taliban take-over has also increased pressure on Christian men. In particular, men and boys fear being forcibly recruited to join the Taliban’s new army ([The Portal Centre, 26 October 2021](#)). Church leaders - the majority of whom are men - have also been specifically targeted by the Taliban; many have disappeared, others have been beaten, tortured and killed.

As men are at the forefront of public life, male Christians are extremely vulnerable to community and family pressures if their faith is discovered. They will be harassed, socially isolated, beaten or killed. If married, they will likely have their wives and children taken away from them. Given that men have greater freedom of movement, they are additionally vulnerable to being kidnapped, or killed, in the streets. In light of these pressures, Christian men choose to keep as low a profile as possible, with some choosing low-level positions in the workplace so as not to gain unwanted attention. They are forced to live, work and identify as Muslims. Since men are the economic providers in their household, families rely on them financially. If male converts are killed, female family members are left vulnerable to exploitation and poverty.

There is a tradition of abusing young boys in Afghanistan, as well as girls. According to a country expert, this is “part of a culture of paedophilia in the region; which is linked to attacks on minorities and those weaker than them whom they can abuse.” Christian boys, deemed to have no worth on the basis of their faith, are thus vulnerable to this form of exploitation.

Persecution of other religious minorities

The small numbers of Sikh, Hindu and Bahai followers in Afghanistan hardly have more freedom than Christians do, their sole advantage being that they are not perceived as being Western and alien. This does not mean, however, that they are not targeted for attack. In July 2018, the only Sikh candidate for parliamentary elections was killed in a [bomb attack](#) (NYT, 2 July 2018). Attacks against the Shiite Hazara have become much more common [since 2018](#) (RFE/RL, 16 November 2018). Among the most devastating attacks in the WWL 2022 reporting period has been the bomb attack against a [school in Kabul](#) in a predominantly Hazara quarter on 8 May 2021, claim-

ing 85 lives, predominantly girls (The Diplomat, 19 May 2021).

According to US State Department IRFR 2020 (page 1):

- “There were reports that [ISKP], an affiliate of ISIS and a U.S.-designated terrorist organization, continued to target and kill members of minority religious communities and that the Taliban targeted and killed individuals because of their religious beliefs or their links to the government. During the year, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) recorded 19 attacks attributed to [ISKP] and other anti-government elements targeting places of worship, religious leaders, and worshippers, compared with 20 attacks in 2019 – causing 115 civilian casualties (60 deaths and 55 injured), compared with 236 civilian casualties (80 deaths and 156 injured) in 2019. According UNAMA, consistent with trends observed in the past four years, many of the suicide and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks on civilians targeted Shia Muslims, particularly ethnic Hazaras.”
- Additionally (page 3): "According to minority religious leaders, due to the small size of their communities, only a few places of worship remained open for Sikhs and Hindus, who said they continued to emigrate because of violent attacks on the community, societal discrimination, and lack of employment opportunities. Hindu and Sikh groups also reported continued interference with efforts to cremate the remains of their dead, in accordance with their customs, by individuals who lived near cremation sites. Despite requesting and receiving local authority support for security during their cremation ceremonies, the Hindu and Sikh communities continued to face protests and threats of violence that prevented them from carrying out the sacred practice. Before every cremation ceremony, the community requested the support of police, who sent security forces to the area to help avoid any disturbance. According to members of the community, at year's end, approximately 400 members of the Sikh and Hindu communities remained in the country, down from approximately 600 at the start of the year."

According to USCIRF 2021 (pages 54-55):

- "In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Afghanistan continued to trend negatively amid the country's ongoing political instability. Lack of security remains the primary challenge to protecting the freedom of religion or belief in the country. In February 2020, the United States and the Taliban signed an agreement stipulating the withdrawal of foreign presence. In September, the Afghan government and the Taliban commenced peace negotiations. However, these landmark strides toward peace failed to improve security conditions. An increase in attacks by extremist groups—most notably the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) and the Taliban—not only threatened Afghanistan's overall stability but also decimated religious minorities, particularly the Sikh community, which faces near extinction in Afghanistan. The Afghan government's limited control over the country's territory and lack of capacity within the areas it did control continued to hamper its ability to protect its citizens. ... In 2020, fear among religious minorities markedly increased due to a variety of factors, including the downsizing of the U.S. troop presence, continued violence, and the government's lack of control over the entirety of the country's territory."
- Consequently, Afghanistan was recommended for being included on the "Special Watch List".

Further information:

In addition to the attacks against minorities already mentioned in this dossier, minorities in general face a [stark choice](#): Either they convert to Islam, or leave the country, or face being killed (The Spectator, 9 July 2021).

In 2021, the last known Jew in Afghanistan [decided to leave](#) Kabul for Israel, due to an ever deteriorating security situation and increasing hardships in daily life (Gandhara, 29 March 2021). However, statements such as "last" are hard to verify since religious minorities are often well-hidden. AP News reported that the [last Jew](#) may have actually been a woman, leaving later in September 2021 (AP News, 29 October 2021). In a [factsheet](#) on Afghanistan, USCIRF gave an overview of religious minorities in October 2021.

Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

Islamic oppression, blended with Clan oppression

If the Iranian model is indeed the best Afghanistan can hope for under the Taliban, political rule will most likely be submitted to a council of religious rulers. However, it will be a different system to the Islamic Emirate they ruled from 1996 to 2001, since that was a model which the Taliban have already admitted they could not and would not want to revive. But even then, any system with a layer of dominating theocracy would mean no space for religious minorities (including Christians) – and arguably even less space than they have now. Clan identity will become even more important in a torn and Taliban-ruled country, as can be seen by the preparations being made by ethnic militias. Leaving the clan by following a different religion becomes even more unacceptable under such circumstances. What one country expert said already said in 2020 remains true for this WWL 2022 reporting period too: "The writing is on the wall; the withdrawal of the US and the rise of the Taliban and others may bring more suffering and persecution for the underground church in the country."

Organized corruption and crime

As long as opium cultivation and trade make up a significant part of the insurgent groups' budget and also fill the coffers of power-brokers and politicians, organized crime will flourish. The even larger margins of meth production may multiply the organized crime problem, as it is not bound by growing crops in certain places. The same goes for the illicit trade of precious stones, ores and timber. Anyone perceived as obstructing these 'industries' (including Christians) will face violent opposition, starting from simply being pushed away.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines description: highest levels of confidence - https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/2019_Afghan_Survey_Full-Report.pdf
- Persecution engines description: UN report - <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/a-drop-from-peak-opium-cultivation-the-2018-afghanistan-survey/>
- Persecution engines description: cultivating cannabis - <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/economy-development-environment/what-now-for-the-taliban-and-narcotics-a-case-study-on-cannabis/>

- Block 1.3: It has been dangerous to privately own or keep Christian materials. (4.00 points): cellphone checks - <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/taliban-mines-afghan-phone-data-in-bid-for-control/30919738.html>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: Al-Jazeera, 17 August 2021 - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/17/transcript-of-talibans-first-press-conference-in-kabul>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: CNN, 19 September 2021 - <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/09/19/asia/afghanistan-women-government-jobs-intl-hnk/index.html>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: The Portal Centre, 26 October 2021 - <http://www.theportal-center.com/2021/10/taliban-to-build-new-army-in-afghanistan/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: bomb attack - <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/02/world/asia/afghanistan-sikhs-bombing.html>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: since 2018 - <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-why-are-the-taliban-attacking-hazaras/29604830.html>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: school in Kabul - <https://thediplomat.com/2021/05/school-attacks-on-afghanists-hazaras-are-only-the-beginning/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: stark choice - <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/leave-convert-or-perish-the-fate-of-afghanistan-s-minorities>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: decided to leave - <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/jews-hundus-sikhs-exodus-from-afghanistan/31175748.html>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: last Jew - <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-lifestyle-canada-religion-middle-east-893baa3e2849b0081882d06d1da07535>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: factsheet - <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2021-10/2021%20China%20Factsheet.pdf>

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on World Watch Research's Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom) and on the World Watch Monitor website:

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Afghanistan>
- <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/Afghanistan>
- [Afghanistan – What does the Taliban take-over mean for other jihadists – August 2021](#)

External Links - Further useful reports

- Further useful reports: Afghanistan – What does the Taliban take-over mean for other jihadists – August 2021 - <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Afghanistan-What-does-the-Taliban-takeover-mean-for-other-jihadists-August-2021.pdf>