

FINAL WWL 2019 COUNTRY DOSSIER

KUWAIT

LEVEL 3/EMBARGO

(Reporting period: 1 November 2017 – 31 October 2018)

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Introduction

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Introduction

World Watch List Kuwait	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2019	60	43
WWL 2018	61	34
WWL 2017	57	38
WWL 2016	56	41
WWL 2015	49	50

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country was among the fifty highest scoring countries (Top 50) in the WWL 2015-2019 reporting periods.

Please note: The highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”.

WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Kuwait

Link for general background information

BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14644252>

Recent country history

The Middle East and the Gulf region have become more unpredictable than ever and Kuwait, like many other countries in the region, has to deal with many different challenges at the same time. The rise in (militant) Sunni radicalism in the form of the Islamic State group (IS) has been an issue not only for Christians in the region, but also for individual country leaders and the international community. Sunni majority countries, including Kuwait, are on the alert to make sure that such militant groups do not establish their networks in their country. Sources indicate that the fear of IS and other radical groups is decreasing, now that they have lost territory in Iraq and Syria. As long as the country maintains its openness to the world economy, Christians are likely to continue coming to the country regardless of the remaining pressure.

In February 2018, a [diplomatic row erupted](#) between Kuwait and the Philippines, after a Philippine domestic worker was found dead in a freezer, revealing the tip of the iceberg of domestic worker abuse. In reaction, Philippine President Duterte imposed a travel ban for Philippine migrants to Kuwait. After both governments came to an agreement about worker rights in May 2018, the travel ban was [lifted](#). The solutions include the right for Philippine domestic workers to keep their passport during employment, even when they have a day off. Under the *kafala* system, domestic workers had to hand over their passport to their employers to prevent them from potentially running away. (Employers allegedly invest [thousands of dollars](#) to employ such workers.) The move was publicly [criticized](#) by a Kuwaiti blogger, who was subsequently accused of having a 'slavery mentality'. Abuse of domestic workers is a big problem in Kuwait but it is difficult to discern to what extent an employee's Christian faith adds to his/her vulnerability.

The religious landscape

Kuwaiti society is conservative and Islam (*sharia* law) prescribes a wide range of rules for personal, family and community life. Although Kuwait has accepted some of the major United Nations conventions on human rights (e.g. the 1996 Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the 1996 Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights) the constitutional provision regarding religious freedom is full of contradictions. On the one hand, it provides for religious freedom, but also states that the practice of freedom of religion should not violate established customs, public policy or public morals. The government has been using the traditional conservative tribal society of the country to eliminate the liberal and leftist groups and has so far been very successful. In the process, other religious minorities were also seriously affected.

Non-Islamic religions face much opposition. In 2012, a member of parliament [announced](#) a bill to put a halt on non-Islamic places of worship being built. The bill was not approved but churches still have to operate carefully. Proselytizing Muslims is both illegal and socially unacceptable and churches tend to apply self-censorship to avoid this. Criticizing Islam or the Prophet Muhammad will lead to public prosecution; even suggesting that the Kuwaiti Constitution should have priority over the Quran in state affairs [can lead to charges and public hatred](#). During recent years, human rights activists and others [have been convicted](#) for spreading atheism and secularism.

In the background IS is creating a toxic environment for religious minorities in the region and some Kuwaitis have joined the group. If this is ignored, it is difficult to know what might happen to Christians in the future. Even though IS is more or less defeated in both Syria and Iraq, the radicalization that IS has left behind in the minds of the youth and others in the region could take decades to eradicate. Nevertheless, recent reports indicate that the fear of Islamic radicalism has decreased.

The political landscape

Situated at the western part of the Persian Gulf and bordered by Saudi Arabia in the south, Iraq to the north and Iran to the northeast, Kuwait is one of the Gulf countries with close ties to the West. Kuwait is a constitutional monarchy whose head of state is the Emir of the al-Sabah family and was the first Arab country in the Gulf to have an [elected parliament](#). In May 2005 parliament gave women the right to vote and stand as candidates in elections for the 50-seat National Assembly. In 2011 the Arab Spring uprisings inspired some protests in Kuwait but to little effect. However, Kuwait's Prime Minister Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammed al-Sabah and his cabinet resigned in December 2011 due to alleged corruption. In October 2012, parliament was dissolved once more due to on-going tensions between government forces and the opposition composed of Islamic and tribal factions. The political crisis continued into 2013 when the country held its third round of parliamentary elections within 16 months. It was an election where only two women made it into parliament and where the voter turnout was only 50%. According to The Bertelsmann Transformation Index ([BTI / 2018](#)), "the new elections in November 2016 re-introduced an Islamist opposition into the formal political scene, which has opened a period of potential renewed antagonism between the legislative and executive branches, and could potentially lead to the empowerment of pro-reform forces."

In short: "Kuwaitis are proud of their tradition of active political participation, and the country stands out among all Gulf Cooperation Council members in terms of stability and performance, particularly of its parliament. The constitution is widely respected, even if it is not always interpreted in the same way. Various groups within Kuwaiti society, (i.e., tribes, urban business elite, religious groups (the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafis and Shiites) and secular political blocs have all been actively participating in the country's parliamentary life. Although some of the ruling family members have previously tried to diminish the powers of the National Assembly, calls for the abolition of the parliamentary system are generally uncommon."

The socio-economic landscape

With an economic model fully dependent on oil and gas exports and with a large immigrant population, oil is a lifeline for the existence of Kuwait. However, according to BTI, "the state of Kuwait has an abundance of oil reserves and is thus – even with the currently declining oil prices – a very wealthy country. Among Kuwaiti nationals, absolute poverty does not exist. However, wealth is quite unevenly distributed." High oil prices led to significant growth until the global financial crisis started in 2008 and heavily affected the country's economic performance. Nevertheless, Kuwait remains a relatively wealthy country.

Kuwait's immigrant workforce is larger than its citizen population. According to the US State Department's [2017 IRF report](#), the country's working population is estimated at 2.9 million. Altogether, the US report estimates "there are 1.3 million citizens and 3.1 million noncitizens."

Concluding remarks

Kuwaiti society remains conservative and thus produces an environment quite hostile to Christians. The government is likely to allow this to continue (so long as it does not feel challenged in its administration of power) in order to appease the radical Islamic groups in society. However, there is also a growing influence of more liberal youth, especially coming from the large numbers of Kuwaiti's who have studied abroad. This is encouraging for the expatriate Christian communities who are hopeful that the degree of acceptance will continue and be reinforced - but there is still a long way to go before the right to change one's religion is granted or respected. Converts with a Muslim background will continue to face pressure.

External Links - WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Kuwait

- Recent country history: diplomatic row erupted
https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/04/03/how-a-maid-found-dead-in-a-freezer-set-off-a-diplomatic-clash-between-the-philippines-and-kuwait/?utm_term=.2f4ea1628ab7
- Recent country history: lifted
<https://news.mb.com.ph/2018/07/23/not-one-worker-deployed-to-kuwait-despite-accord/>
- Recent country history: thousands of dollars
<https://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/kuwait/kuwaiti-blogger-under-fire-over-comments-on-filipinos-1.2255665>
- Recent country history: criticized
https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=1260544617420376&id=407570359384477
- The religious landscape: announced
<https://www.arabianbusiness.com/kuwaiti-mps-call-for-ban-on-construction-of-churches-445971.html>
- The religious landscape: can lead to charges and public hatred
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36046706>
- The religious landscape: have been convicted
<https://freethoughtreport.com/countries/asia-western-asia/kuwait/>
- The political landscape: elected parliament
<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14644252>
- The political landscape: BTI / 2018
<https://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-reports/detail/itc/KWT/>
- The socio-economic landscape: 2017 IRF report
<https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/281236.pdf>

WWL 2019: Church History and Facts

How many Christians?

Pop 2018	Christians	Chr%
4,197,000	436,000	10.4

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

How did Christians get there?

One of the earliest remnants of Christianity in Kuwait was unearthed on the island of Failaka, off the shore of mainland Kuwait at a site known as Al-Qusur. Archaeologists have excavated a church there that dates back to the 5th-6th Century. The site was a monastery with a church surrounded by a densely settled area and formed the focal part of a Nestorian Christian community that lived on the island.

The second more recent arrival of Christianity in Kuwait goes back to the beginning of the 20th century when Samuel Zwemer (1867–1952), who had introduced the Reformed Church in America into Bahrain, moved to Kuwait in 1903. The National Evangelical Church of Kuwait was organized that same year, though it did not have a building for worship until 1926. After the discovery of oil in 1937, migrant workers from Palestine, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, India and Egypt came to Kuwait bringing with them the Greek Catholic, Roman Catholic, Evangelical, Syrian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Church of South India and many other denominations.

What church networks exist today?

Church networks: Kuwait	Christians	%
Orthodox	88,300	20.3
Catholic	321,000	73.6
Protestant	15,500	3.6
Independent	7,100	1.6
Unaffiliated	3,700	0.8
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
Total	435,600	99.9
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	7,400	1.7
Renewalist movement	33,800	7.8

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. Roman Catholics: All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. Protestants: Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. Independents: Believers who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). Unaffiliated Christians: Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. Doubly-affiliated Christians: Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. Evangelical movement: Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. Renewalist movement: Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

Christianity in Kuwait is primarily associated with the expatriate community. Christian denominations in the country are registered and have compounds where expatriates can gather, but these are too small for the number of people who meet there. There are also a number of Christians with a Muslim background, but these cannot join in worship at the compounds.

Religious context

Religious Context: Kuwait	Numbers	%
Christians	436,000	10.4
Muslim	3,565,000	84.9
Hindu	137,000	3.3
Buddhist	0	0.0
Ethnoreligionist	0	0.0
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	11,200	0.3
Atheist	700	0.0
Agnostic	32,600	0.8
Other	15,500	0.4

OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.

Source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A (eds.), World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2018)

Notes on the current situation

Christians fear that the rise of Sunni radicalism in the region could affect society. It is hoped that this will not change Kuwait's record of low levels of violence against Christians.

WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

With a score of 60, Kuwait ranked 43rd in WWL 2019, one point lower than in WWL 2018.

What type of persecution dominates?

Islamic oppression: Islam is the state religion and Sharia law is an important source for legislation. The government requires Islamic religious instruction for all pupils in state and private schools. Teaching Christianity in public high schools is prohibited, even to legally recognized Christian groups. Many Kuwaitis joined the Islamic State group as fighters abroad.

Dictatorial paranoia: The ruling royal Sunni family dictates all aspects of daily life. Freedom of expression, freedom of press and freedom of association are restricted.

Ethnic antagonism: Islamic norms and values shaped in a tribal context (such as family honor) are forced upon Christians. This particularly affects converts from Islam to Christianity.

Who is driving persecution?

Christians experience persecution at all levels of society: The government, the local community and especially one's family can be dangerous for Christians, in particular for converts from Islam to Christianity. Kuwait's society is bound by conservative Islamic norms, enforced by ordinary citizens, radical Islamic groups and a government that will bow to the demands of the radical groups as long as their power-base is not threatened.

What it results in

Expatriate Christians are relatively free to worship informally. However, the existing places registered for worship are very small for the number of people gathering. According to an anonymous source, the management of the over-stretched church buildings even leads to arguments between different Christian groups. Obtaining property for gathering for worship is extremely difficult.

Converts from Islam bear the brunt of persecution as they face pressure from both family members and the local community to recant their Christian faith. They risk discrimination, harassment, police monitoring of their activities, and all sorts of intimidation by vigilante groups. Moreover, a change of faith (away from Islam) is not officially recognized and is likely to lead to legal problems in personal status and property matters. Despite this, there are hardly ever reports of Christians being killed, imprisoned or harmed for their faith.

Violence

The following table is based on reported cases. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers below must be understood as being minimum figures.

Kuwait	Reporting period	Christians killed	Christians attacked	Christians arrested	Churches attacked	Christian-owned houses and shops attacked
WWL 2019	01 Nov 2017 - 31 Oct 2018	0	20	0	0	0
WWL 2018	01 Nov 2016 - 31 Oct 2017	0	2	0	0	0

Christians killed refers to the number of Christians killed for faith-related reasons (including state-sanctioned executions). Christians attacked refers to the number of Christians abducted, raped or otherwise sexually harassed, forced into marriage to non-Christians or otherwise physically or mentally abused (including beatings and death-threats) for faith-related reasons. Christians arrested refers to the number of Christians detained without trial or sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment or similar things for faith-related reasons. Churches attacked refers to the number of churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons. Christian-owned houses and shops attacked refers to the number of houses of Christians or other property (including shops and businesses of Christians) attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons.

Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period

- Some Christians had to relocate inside the country due to pressure from society.
- Abuse of foreign (domestic) workers is a widespread phenomenon, with the case of the Philippine worker [found dead in a freezer](#) in February 2018 exposing just the tip of the iceberg. Given the high numbers of Christians among the expatriate workers, it is reasonable to assume that at least some of them not only experience (sexual) abuse because of their different ethnic background, but also because of their faith. In other words, it is likely that their Christian faith adds to their vulnerability.
- The government requires Islamic religious instruction for all Muslim pupils in state and private schools. Teaching Christianity in public schools is prohibited, even to legally recognized Christian groups.
- [According to the Amnesty International Report 2017/18](#), "the authorities continued to unduly restrict the right to freedom of expression, prosecuting and imprisoning government critics and online activists under penal code provisions that criminalized comments deemed offensive to the Emir or damaging to relations with neighboring states." This gives an indication of the restrictive environment Christians are having to live in.

External Links - WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

- Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period: found dead in a freezer https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/04/03/how-a-maid-found-dead-in-a-freezer-set-off-a-diplomatic-clash-between-the-philippines-and-kuwait/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.9756f1fa9f37

- Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period: According to the Amnesty International Report 2017/18,
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2018/02/annual-report-201718/>

WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

Position on World Watch List (WWL)

With a score of 60, Kuwait ranked 43rd in WWL 2019, one point lower than in WWL 2018. Pressure remains at a very high level, with converts from Islam bearing the brunt of persecution as they face pressure from both family members and the local community.

Persecution engines

Persecution engines: Kuwait	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethnic antagonism	EA	Medium
Denominational protectionism	DPR	Not at all
Communist and post - Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Medium
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Not at all

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

Islamic oppression (Strong):

As in many countries in the region, *Islamic oppression* is the main engine behind the persecution of Christians in Kuwait. It is operating strongly at both national and local community levels. The whole region is in a volatile situation, with society generally becoming very conservative – this is the context for the situation in Kuwait where the laws and Constitution also affirm the conservative nature of society. According to the Constitution, Islam is the state religion and Islamic law (Sharia) is an important source for legislation. The government requires Islamic religious instruction for all pupils in state and private schools. Teaching Christianity in public high schools is prohibited, even to legally recognized Christian groups. In the past, a significant number of Kuwaitis were tolerant towards non-Muslim residents; however, this has been changing significantly due to the growing influence of radical Islamic groups, who do not want to see Christians in the country. Even though the Islamic State group (IS) has been largely defeated, its influence is still present and enjoys a notable resonance among a significant number of Sunni radicals. There have also been Kuwaiti citizens fighting alongside IS in Iraq and Syria.

Dictatorial paranoia (Medium):

The government of Kuwait is restrictive in many ways. Although the country has one of the strongest parliaments in the region, the ruling royal Sunni family still dictates everyday life. In 2016, two former members of parliament, who were critical of the government and their allies, received prison sentences. *Dictatorial paranoia* is behind most of the government restrictions, as the country's ruler does not want his hegemony threatened in any way. Freedom of expression, freedom of press and freedom of association are also restricted. Getting church registration is a very complicated and

lengthy procedure. Not only Christians have to face the oppressive hand of the government, other minorities like the Shia minority also experience discrimination and have to operate carefully.

Ethnic antagonism (Medium)

Typical for this persecution engine are situations in which age-old norms and values shaped in a tribal context (such as family honor) are forced upon Christians. In the case of Kuwait, *Ethnic antagonism* is clearly mixed with Islam. This particularly affects converts from Islam to Christianity, especially Kuwaiti converts, because of their strong family ties. Turning away from Islam is not only regarded as religious betrayal, but also as betrayal of the family and tribe. Converts are seen as disrespecting their own (grand)fathers, a disloyalty which is socially unacceptable. In general, families put strong social pressure on converts to make them return to Islam, leave the region or to be silent about their new faith. In many cases, converts are alienated from their families as a result of their conversion.

Drivers of persecution

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

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 (long version).

Drivers of Islamic oppression:

Despite its tough rule, the heavy pressure on Christians is not coming from the government in the first instance. Christians have most to fear from members of Kuwait's conservative society. There is a clear dichotomy in the country between Kuwaitis (by definition Muslim) and the many immigrant workers, even more so if the latter are Christian. As a result, due to the already existing societal abuse and discrimination, Christians frequently exercise self-restraint for safety reasons.

Foreign Christian workers have to behave carefully, but converts from Islam to Christianity bear the brunt of persecution. Although there is no criminal penalty for conversion, it is socially unacceptable. A change of faith (away from Islam) is not officially recognized and is likely to lead to legal problems in personal status and property matters. Families will most certainly expel converted family members

from their home, as they see conversion not merely as being an attack on Islam, but also on the family honor.

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia:

The Kuwaiti government does not allow criticism, especially not from (foreign) Christians. As Freedom House reported: "Journalists and social media users deemed to have insulted the emir or Saudi Arabia often face prosecution, and the government sustains efforts to stifle criticism of its actions and policies."

The country is well policed, with the security forces monitoring activities in the country closely. Expatriates speaking out against the government will most probably be deported.

Drivers of Ethnic antagonism:

Tribalism still has a widespread influence within Kuwaiti society. Converts from Islam to Christianity are regarded as being disloyal to their tribe and family. (Extended) family members will pressure them to recant their faith or will even punish them for damaging the family honor.

Context

For a more detailed overview, please see the Keys to Understanding section above.

Kuwait is one of the Gulf countries with close ties to the West. Although it is one of the smallest nations in the Middle East, it has a strong economy based on oil and is one of the richest countries in the Arab world. Of the country's four million or so inhabitants, more than half are immigrants. Kuwait is a constitutional monarchy whose head of state is the Emir of the al-Sabah family and was the first Arab country in the Gulf to have an elected parliament.

Kuwaiti society is conservative and Islam (Sharia law) prescribes a wide range of rules for personal, family and community life. Although Kuwait has accepted some of the major United Nations conventions on human rights, the constitutional provision regarding religious freedom is full of contradictions. On the one hand, it provides for religious freedom, but also states that the practice of freedom of religion should not violate established customs, public policy or public morals.

In the past few years, IS created a toxic environment for religious minorities in the region and some Kuwaitis joined the group. Even though IS has suffered territorial loss in Syria and Iraq, it has succeeded in radicalizing the minds of the youth and others for years to come.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Of the four WWL categories of Christianity, two are present in Kuwait:

Communities of expatriate Christians: Of the total number of Christians in Kuwait, the majority of them are foreign workers. They are relatively free to worship. However, the existing worship places are very small for the number of people gathering. It is extremely difficult to obtain property for worship purposes.

According to the US State Department's International Religious Freedom 2017 report on Kuwait, there are seven officially recognized Christian churches: the National Evangelical (Protestant), Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic (Melkite), Coptic Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox and Anglican. Some religious groups without a licensed place of worship stated they could conduct worship services without government interference provided they did not disturb their neighbors or violate laws regarding assembly and proselytizing. The government allows such groups to operate in rented villas,

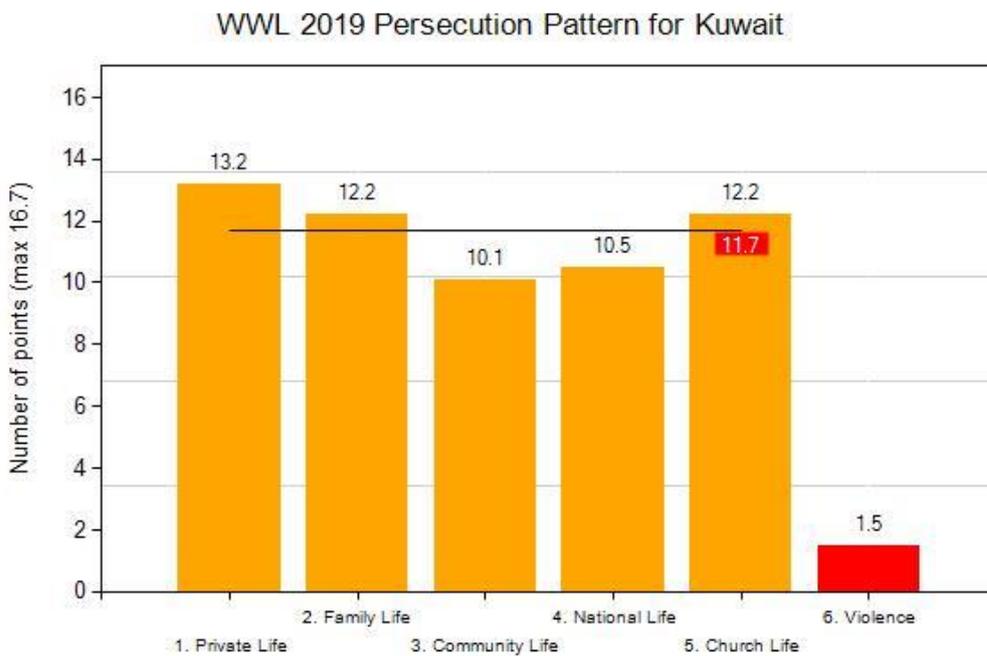
private homes, or the facilities of licensed churches. (Source: [Kuwait 2017 International Religious Freedom Report](#), United States Department of State, p. 4)

Historical Christian communities: These do not exist as a separate category for scoring in WWL analysis; they are included in the category for expatriates above.

Converts to Christianity: Converts from Islam to Christianity face daunting challenges in many forms. The main drivers of persecution are family, community members, radical Muslims and, to a lesser extent, the authorities. They risk discrimination, harassment, monitoring by police and all sorts of intimidation by vigilante groups. Moreover, a change of faith (away from Islam) is not officially recognized and is likely to lead to legal problems in personal status and property matters.

Non-traditional Christian communities: These do not exist as a separate category for scoring in WWL analysis; they are included in the category for expatriates above.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



The WWL 2019 Persecution pattern for Kuwait shows:

- The average pressure on Christians has remained on a very high level (11.7), decreasing from 12.2 in WWL 2018. This drop in points is mainly due to reports of lower pressure on non-Kuwaiti converts.
- Although all *spheres of life* show high or very high levels of pressure, pressure is highest in the *Private, Family and Church spheres of life*. This reflects on the one hand the difficult situation for convert Christians who face very high pressure from their (extended) family and cannot have an official Christian marriage or a Christian funeral. On the other hand, church life is difficult for both converts and expatriate Christians, as proselytizing and integrating converts from a Muslim background are socially unacceptable.

- The score for violence went up from 0.4 in WWL 2018 to 1.5 in WWL 2019. The rise in score was mainly due to the scoring for the situation of (female) domestic workers.

Private sphere:

In a very conservative and tribal society that regards leaving Islam as a betrayal of family values, conversion to Christianity always brings difficulties. As a result, even though the law does not formally prohibit conversion, both society and government put hurdles in the way for people who convert. For instance, they will not get an official document with their new faith recorded on it. Besides that, all (religious) literature deemed offensive towards Islam is forbidden. Converts living with their family (both nuclear and extended) have difficulty worshipping or owning Christian materials as they have to be careful that such materials are not discovered.

Family sphere:

Especially converts from Islam face serious challenges living as a Christian family. The prevailing circumstances in the country also put significant restrictions on expatriate Christian families. Both have to behave carefully in public. Speaking about their beliefs is difficult and even dangerous, because proselytizing in any way is strictly forbidden. Besides this, converts bear the brunt of persecution in the family sphere. Deceased converts are often buried according to Islamic rites in Muslim cemeteries, and there are very limited facilities for expatriate Christians. Baptisms must be conducted discreetly as open baptism might attract severe abuse and harassment from family as well as from the community at large. The law also puts restrictions on marriage - a Muslim female may not marry a non-Muslim man unless he converts to Islam. These laws have a significant implication on questions of custody and inheritance as well. Converts often do not receive any inheritance from their deceased parents, as their leaving Islam has dishonored the family.

Community sphere:

In Kuwaiti communities, Christians are seen as foreigners (and infidels) and are sometimes directly or indirectly prevented from participating in community activities. During the Ramadan month, Christians struggle to cope with the de facto requirement to fast imposed by the government and the community. There is always pressure on converts to renounce Christianity. Education is another area where Christians face challenges. The government requires Islamic religious instruction in public schools for all students and also requires Islamic religious instruction in private schools that have one or more Muslim students. But the law [prohibits](#) organized religious education for faiths other than Islam in public schools.

National sphere:

The Constitution declares that Islam is the state religion. The freedom of religion enshrined in [the Constitution](#) is not up to the international standard, as it merely focuses on the observance of religious rites, which may not conflict with Kuwaiti (i.e. Islamic) morals - see Article 35. There are laws against proselytizing, and the government enforces them. Besides that, the government endorses a policy of funding and supporting Sunni Islam by financing Sunni mosques, imams and Sunni Islamic teaching and education. Although Kuwait does hold democratic elections, running for a public office as a non-Muslim is unthinkable. Several radical groups as well as conservative hardline members of parliament wish to get rid of all non-Muslim influences, such as the expatriate celebration of Christmas.

Church sphere:

Church life in Kuwait is restricted. For example, to purchase a plot of land to build a church, the buyer must be a citizen of Kuwait. For converts to go and buy land for church construction would be very dangerous as this would expose their conversion to the general public. It is not uncommon that churches applying for licenses to build new places of worship have had to wait years for approval. A country researcher noted: "Most of the recognized Christian churches considered their existing facilities inadequate to serve their communities and faced significant problems in obtaining proper approvals from municipal councils to construct new facilities. Municipal authorities obstructed religious gatherings in private spaces and pressured landlords who had leased property to unlicensed churches." Besides obtaining church facilities, publishing religious material is also limited to one's own church congregation. The government allows churches to import religious materials, but under the condition its content does not insult Islam. Signs and symbols on the outside of church buildings are forbidden. The government has prohibited non-Muslim missionaries from working in the country and from proselytizing Muslims.

Violence:

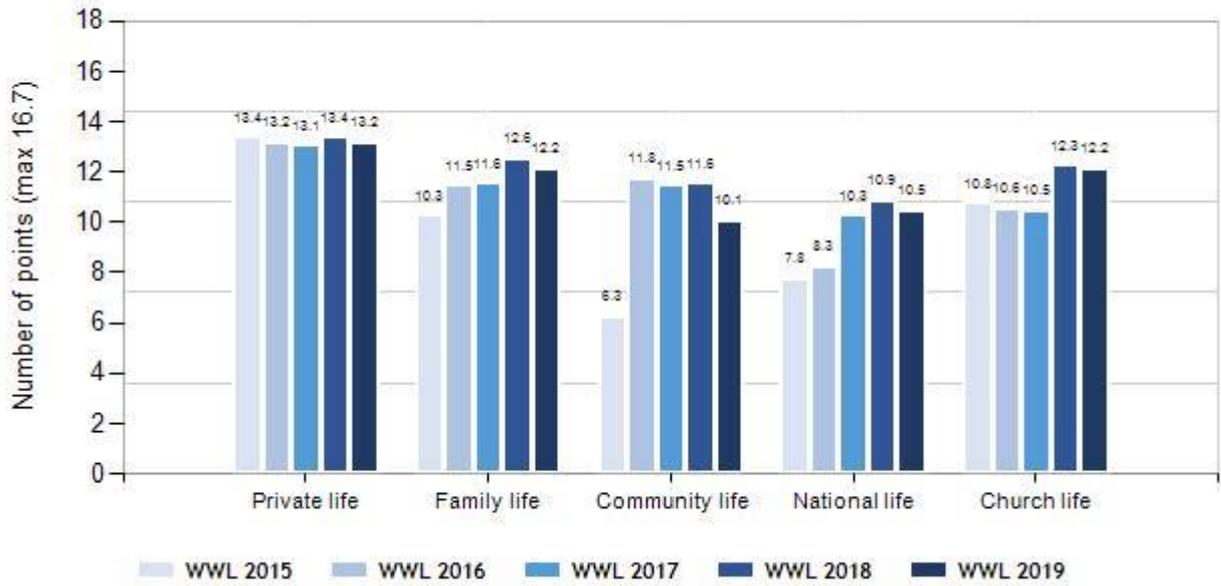
Kuwait is a typical Gulf country in that it experiences a low level of violence targeting Christians. The government does not have to act against Christians as the pressure from society is very high and Christians are self-censoring. It is not easy to get verified reports on specific violent incidents out of the country. However, Open Doors is aware of the difficult situation for low-skilled expatriate workers. According to Amnesty International, these workers "continued to face exploitation and abuse under the official *kafala* sponsorship system". (Amnesty International Report 2017/18, p. 231.) Open Doors fears that Christian workers, especially women, are even more vulnerable and are discriminated against because of their faith.

For a summary of the statistics on violence and examples, please see the Short and Simple Persecution Profile section above.

5 Year trends

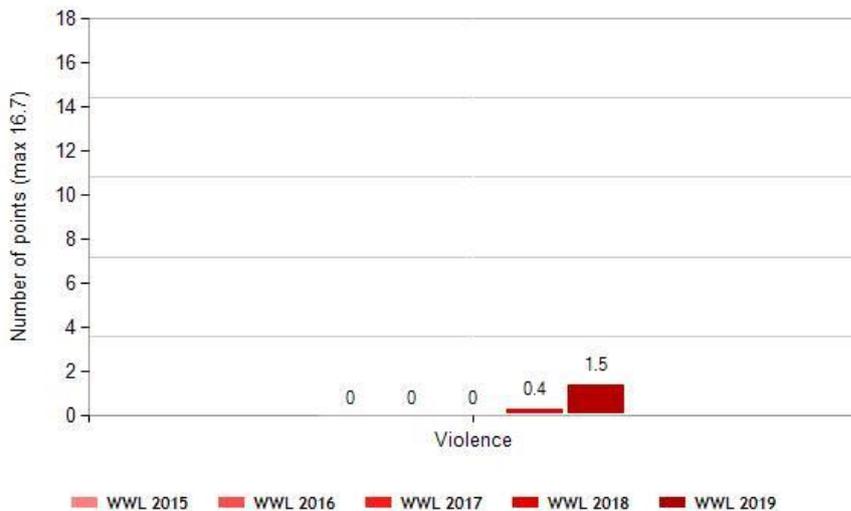
While the very high level of pressure in the *private sphere of life* has been more or less stable over the last five reporting periods (first chart), there have been noticeable increases in the pressure in the *community, national and church spheres of life*. The second chart, showing average pressure, shows that the overall level of pressure on Christians has gradually crept up from a high level to a very high level. The number of violent incidents recorded in Kuwait has not changed dramatically over the years. The scores for violence (third chart) have thus remained more or less stable at a (very) low level. The increase in WWL 2019 is mainly due to an increase in points scored for expatriate domestic workers.

WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Profile for Kuwait (Spheres of life)



WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Pattern history: Kuwait	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2019	11.7
2018	12.2
2017	11.4
2016	11.1
2015	9.7

WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Profile for Kuwait (Violence)



Gender specific persecution

Female:

According to the Tahirih Justice center, domestic abuse, especially against women, is thought to be widespread in Kuwait. Domestic violence is considered to be a family affair; there are [no specific laws on domestic violence](#) and the authorities most probably will not act against it. Besides that, the role of women in society is very limited and they often do not have a choice in marriage. In this kind of atmosphere, it is not difficult to imagine what can be going on with female Christian domestic workers. In March 2017, a shocking [video](#) was published, showing an Ethiopian housemaid falling from a window; the woman filming her does not try to rescue her. The ill-treatment of migrant workers, including sexual abuse, remains therefore a high profile issue. Although not primarily faith-related, some claim that non-Muslim domestic migrant workers, almost all of whom are female, are more vulnerable to such abuse than Muslims.

Christian women remain especially vulnerable, as women in general in Kuwait are treated as being inferior to men. Tribalism also affects the level of persecution experienced by the converts from Islam to Christianity. This persecution affects women and girls most (and young and older males to a lesser extent, corresponding to the cultural levels of status and freedom). A key legal restriction on women who come from a Muslim background is the fact that they cannot by law marry a non-Muslim.

Male:

Men are especially subject to discrimination and hostilities on the work floor. Through the *Kafala* sponsorship system, foreign workers are fully dependent on their employers, which makes them (both men and women) vulnerable to slavery practices. (Source: Amnesty International Report 2017/2018, p. 231.)

Male converts are likely to be ostracized by their families, losing their respect and the (financial) support of their families. Without the family support, it is hard for them to find or keep their job, while marrying becomes almost impossible. Married converts can be divorced by their wives and lose custody of children and family inheritance.

Persecution of other religious minorities

Not only Christians have to face the oppressive hand of the government, other minorities like the Shiites also experience discrimination and have to operate carefully. Although the sizeable Shia community has traditionally enjoyed greater levels of acceptance in Kuwait than in some other countries in the region, restrictions on religious freedom have increased; this is primarily due to political changes concerning Kuwait's relationship with Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Religious groups such as Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs are relatively free to practice their faith in private, although they lack facilities to worship. Conservative groups within parliament view all non-Muslim religious activities with suspicion and regularly oppose them.

According to the US State Department's 2017 International Religious Freedom report (p. 11), "members of non-Abrahamic faiths stated that they remained free to practice their religion in private, but faced harassment and potential prosecution if they practiced their faith in public. Expatriates of non-Abrahamic religions could not have public places of worship nor marry in Kuwait, and they remained subject to sharia if family matters were taken to court. Most members of these communities indicated they were able to practice their faith within their communities, but practiced a discreet form of self-censorship that allowed them to avoid conflict with authorities. In many cases, members of these religious groups stated they resolved conflict internally within their community rather than take legal action in the courts where they would be subject to sharia."

Future outlook

The political outlook: The future of Kuwait, like that of other countries in the Gulf, is intrinsically linked to the political situation in the region. The Middle East and the Gulf region remain unpredictable.

The outlook for Christians - through the lens of:

- *Islamic oppression:* If the authorities feel compelled (for reasons of political expediency) to become more hostile towards Iran and closer to Saudi Arabia, this could potentially lead to Sunni conservatives exerting greater political influence which could result in the political climate becoming more hostile to Christians (including expatriate churches). In addition, although IS facing defeat from a military point of view, its influence still remains. The rise in Sunni radicalism has been an issue not only for Christians in the region, but also for individual country leaders and the international community. Sunni majority countries, including Kuwait, are on the alert to make sure that militant groups do not establish their networks in their country.
- *Dictatorial paranoia:* The Kuwaiti government will continue to do everything to eradicate any dissent and avoid public unrest.
- *Ethnic antagonism:* Although urbanization, modernization and the rise of the internet are also a major influence on the younger generation, it is likely that the influence of tribalism will remain high too. Globalization could even strengthen tribalism, as Kuwaitis may feel threatened and seek to protect their own identity. In such a climate, conversion from Islam to Christianity will remain a very sensitive issue.

Conclusion: As long as the country maintains its openness to the world economy, Christian workers are likely to continue coming to the country regardless of the existing pressure. Despite the regional turmoil (such as the Qatari crisis and the ongoing civil war in Yemen), Kuwait has been politically stable during the WWL 2019 reporting period and there has been no rise in persecution. However, the fear among Christians (especially converts) will continue as the general environment is basically hostile. Society is likely to become even more conservative and the government is likely to allow this to continue (as long as it does not feel challenged in its administration of power) in order to appease the radical Islamic groups in society. Nevertheless, this may not deter foreign Christian workers from continuing to come and take up employment.

External Links - WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

- Christian communities and how they are affected: Kuwait 2017 International Religious Freedom Report
<https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/281236.pdf>
- Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence: prohibits
<http://freethoughtreport.com/countries/asia-western-asia/kuwait/>
- Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence: the Constitution
https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Kuwait_1992.pdf?lang=en
- Gender specific persecution: no specific laws on domestic violence
<http://preventforcedmarriage.org/forced-marriage-overseas-kuwait/>

- Gender specific persecution: video
<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-39456558>

Additional Reports and Articles

WWR in-depth reports

A selection of in-depth reports is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/> (password: freedom).

Open Doors article(s) from the region

A selection of articles is available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/articles/> (password freedom).

World Watch Monitor news articles

Use the country search function at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/>

Recent country developments

Use the country search function at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/> (password: freedom).