

# FINAL WWL 2019 COUNTRY DOSSIER

## TUNISIA

### LEVEL 3/EMBARGO

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

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## Introduction

### Copyright Notice

### Introduction

World Watch List Tunisia	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2019	63	37
WWL 2018	62	30
WWL 2017	61	29
WWL 2016	58	32
WWL 2015	55	36

*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 Tunisia

### Link for general background information

BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-14107241>

### Recent country history

Tunisia used to be a province of the Ottoman Empire before it became a French protectorate in 1883. Tunisia gained its independence from France in 1956. After dominating the political scene in Tunisia from 1956 to 1987, President Bourguiba was ousted from power as a result of a series of economic and political crises as well as concerns about his mental health. President Ben Ali ruled Tunisia from 1987 till 2011, until he was ousted from power through the Arab Spring uprisings. An interim government took over and a new constitution was approved on 26 January 2014. Presidential and parliamentary elections were then held in December 2014, marking the end of the period of transition. Despite security and economic challenges, Tunisia remains the only country in which the Arab Spring uprising led to the emergence of a more democratic and legitimate government in which secularist and Islamist parties have been able to govern on the basis of consensus and compromise.

### The religious landscape

99% of Tunisians identify themselves as Sunni Muslim. Despite the French legacy of *laïcité* or French secularism among the urban and educated elite, Islam is very influential and the Constitution recognizes Islam as state religion. Christianity and Judaism are the most significant minority religions. The number of Christians with a Muslim background are growing in number in Tunisia. This gradual growth of the Church has become noticeable since the 1990s.

### The political landscape

After President Ben Ali's removal from office in 2011, presidential and parliamentary elections were not conducted until December 2014, when Beji Caid Essebsi was declared winner. While some have cautioned that Essebsi's victory posed a danger of a return to the authoritarian past of Ben Ali, Essebsi has presented himself as a capable experienced technocrat bringing about stability and a much needed economic turnaround.

Essebsi's moderate and secularist party, Nidaa Tunis, won the largest number of seats in the parliament. Ennadha, the moderate Islamic party that had won the elections in the immediate aftermath of the 2011 revolution and which had led the transitional government for a while, won the second largest number of seats. Since President Essebsi came to power, there have been many political ups and downs in Tunisia leading to the formation of a series of unity governments led by various prime ministers. Currently, Prime Minister Youssef Chahed is leading a unity government formed by a coalition of secular, Islamist and leftist parties. The key challenges are the activities of militant Islamic groups in the region and revitalizing the economy.

### The socio-economic landscape

By the standards of the region, Tunisia is a relatively prosperous country, with tourism being a key sector of the economy. Although Tunisia's economy had performed relatively well until the eve of the Arab Spring revolution in 2011, there is now a high unemployment rate, especially among the younger generation - even for those with university degrees. With the completion of the political transition in Tunisia, the successive governments that have assumed power have all faced the daunting task of

revitalizing the economy and addressing the socio-economic grievances that ousted the former Tunisian dictator Ben Ali. Tourism, one of the mainstays of the Tunisian economy, suffered a huge blow after [the beach attack](#) in June 2015. However, since then, the government has been improving the security apparatus and tourism has been [steadily recovering](#) in 2018.

In September 2017, in an unique move compared to the wider Arab world, Tunisia [overturned](#) the law that prohibited Muslim women from marrying non-Muslim men. An important step, especially for converts from Islam to Christianity. In November 2018, the government proposed an amendment of the Personal Status Code, which would lead to gender equality regarding inheritance rights. However, the proposal [has ignited a huge debate](#) as conservative Muslims regards it contrary to the Quran and Islamic law.

## Concluding remarks

Tunisia is a country that is more advanced than most northern African countries both in terms of socio-economic development, civil liberties and democratic governance. The country has the potential to act as a model for other Arab countries due to its peaceful and consensus-driven transition to democracy. However, regional instability, the rise of Islamic militancy as well as a high unemployment rate and difficulties in implementing economic reforms necessary for economic growth, means that Tunisian democracy is still in a fragile state. Unless Tunisia manages to tackle the threat of Islamic insurgency and revitalize its economy, Christians in the country could face a very difficult situation and increasing levels of persecution.

## External Links - WWL 2019: Keys to understanding Tunisia

- The socio-economic landscape: the beach attack  
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-33287978>
- The socio-economic landscape: steadily recovering  
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-tunisia-economy-tourism/tunisia-tourism-revenues-jump-as-europeans-return-idUSKBN1K21NJ>
- The socio-economic landscape: overturned  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-41278610>
- The socio-economic landscape: has ignited a huge debate  
<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/12/tunisia-bill-women-rights-equality-inheritance.html>

## WWL 2019: Church History and Facts

### How many Christians?

Pop 2018	Christians	Chr%
11,659,000	23,700	0.2

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

### How did Christians get there?

Tunisia has a very rich Christian history. Some of the early Church Fathers (e.g. Augustine and Tertullian) lived in this country and it was also one of the places where the Donatist controversy erupted in the 4th century concerning the appointment of leaders who had previously betrayed their Christian faith during persecution. As in other countries in North Africa, the arrival of Islam significantly affected Church development, but Christianity managed to survive in Tunisia until the 11th century despite the imposition of Islam. Christianity did not succeed in getting established again until the 19th century when many French and other expatriate Christians came to the country. The Roman Catholic witness grew considerably and an archbishop of Carthage was named in 1884. Various other Christian groups also began work: Anglicans in 1829, the North African Mission in 1881, the Seventh-day Advents in 1905, Methodists in 1908 (from America), and in 1911 Pentecostals from the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee).

### What church networks exist today?

Church networks: Tunisia	Christians	%
Orthodox	220	0.9
Catholic	19,400	81.9
Protestant	1,000	4.2
Independent	2,400	10.1
Unaffiliated	570	2.4
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>23,590</b>	<b>99.5</b>
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	690	2.9
Renewalist movement	2,100	8.9

*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)

According to the US State Department's [2017 International Religious Freedom report](#), the Christian population is mainly composed of Roman Catholics, Protestants, Russian Orthodox, French Reformists,

Anglicans, Seventh-day Adventists and Greek Orthodox Christians. Christians with a Muslim background are also present in the country, as are Jehovah's Witnesses.

## Religious context

Religious Context: Tunisia	Numbers	%
Christians	23,700	0.2
Muslim	11,600,000	99.5
Hindu	0	0.0
Buddhist	88	0.0
Ethnoreligionist	0	0.0
Jewish	1,900	0.0
Bahai	2,300	0.0
Atheist	3,600	0.0
Agnostic	27,500	0.2
Other	190	0.0

*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)*

Approximately 99.5% of the population are Muslim and virtually all are adherents of Sunni Islam, with most following the [Maliki tradition](#). This is one of the largest groups within the Sunni tradition. A major center of Maliki teaching from the 9th to 11th centuries was in the Mosque of Uqba in Tunisia. There is also a very small Jewish minority in Tunisia.

## Notes on the current situation

- The government's legal system is not robust enough to protect the freedom of Christians.
- The rise of Islamic militancy in the region is a threat to Christians.
- Tunisian nationals form one of the largest contingents of radical Islamic fighters in Syria and many of them are returning to Tunisia. This, coupled with the conflict and state collapse in Libya, is contributing to serious security challenges in Tunisia.

## External Links - WWL 2019: Church History and Facts

- What church networks exist today?: 2017 International Religious Freedom report  
<https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/281252.pdf>
- Religious context: Maliki tradition  
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maliki>

## WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

### Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

With a score of 63 points, Tunisia ranked 37th in WWL 2019.

### What type of persecution dominates?

**Islamic oppression:** Especially in rural areas, converts face high risks, with known cases of converts from Islam to Christianity being confined to their homes by their own families. At the political level, Islamist political parties are still influential. However, Tunisia is at a crossroads and must decide whether to keep the country strictly Islamic or move towards a more moderate form of Islam, mixed with secular principles. The more urban north tends to the latter, while the more rural south remains conservative. Islamic militants spread fear throughout the country, many having links to organized crime.

### Who is driving persecution?

Persecution in Tunisia is driven mainly by the general hostility towards Christians evident in Islamic society. Even though, relatively speaking, the state has become more tolerant towards Christians since the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, there is a noticeable growing influence of radical Islamic teachings. Foreigners in Tunisia enjoy a good deal of freedom of religion but are restricted from engaging in openly evangelistic activities. Tunisian converts to Christianity experience persecution from family members, relatives and the community at large and face difficulties with the state authorities in having their conversion to Christianity officially recognized.

### What it results in

A journalist who has investigated the situation of Tunisians Christians in depth states: "Tunisian Christians face [discrimination](#) and targeting that is often obscure and hidden to the public eye. It affects their day-to-day lives. Because of their Christian identities, many experience job insecurity, abandonment from family, friends and even fiancés; they are victims of verbal, mental and physical abuse."

Due to the factors mentioned above, most Tunisian converts to Christianity choose to hide their faith and cannot openly worship and live their lives as Christians. The hostility and pressure they face from society at large makes it dangerous to share their faith with their family members, relatives, neighbors, friends or colleagues. They also find it difficult to gather for worship and fellowship due to the risks any possible exposure would entail.

## Violence

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

Tunisia	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	25	4	0	1
WWL 2018	01 Nov 2016 - 31 Oct 2017	0	57	16	1	2

*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

- Church facilities and buildings are monitored, ostensibly for security reasons but also for the purpose of surveillance.
- In April 2018, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief [reported](#) on Tunisia. He concluded that "old laws and societal pressure pose the greatest challenges to religious freedom in Tunisia; a number of old laws, such as 'public morality concepts' and 'public order provisions', are used to enforce restrictions on, for example, food consumption during Ramadan."
- During the WWL 2019 reporting period, some foreign Christians were detained and interrogated for possessing Christian literature. They were accused of proselytization.
- During the WWL 2019 reporting period, several Christians, especially female converts, had to relocate inside the country due to pressure and threats from their families. It has also been reported that several convert Christians were physically and/or sexually abused.

## External Links - WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

- What it results in: discrimination  
<http://underground.priscillahwang.com/>
- Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period: reported  
<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/tunisias-religious-freedom-curbed-by-societal-pressure/%20>

## WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

### Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

### Position on World Watch List (WWL)

With a score of 63 points, Tunisia ranked 37th in WWL 2019. The rise in 1 point in comparison to WWL 2018 was in reality only a rise of 0.2 points. There were less reports of violent incidents against Christians, which had the effect of offsetting rises in the scores for pressure in some *spheres of life*.

### Persecution engines

Persecution engines: Tunisia	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	Not at all
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Very weak

*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):

This persecution engine operates at different levels: At the family level, converts from Islam to Christianity are often not supported by family members in their decision to convert. There are cases of converts being locked up in their houses by their own families. At the social level, Islamic militants spread fear throughout the country. At the political level, Islamist political parties are still influential. The links between some Islamist movements and organized crime should not be underestimated. They create a lot of unrest in Tunisian society and contribute to the increase of the already high levels of fear among Christians. The prime minister emphasized the [link between terrorism and organized crime](#) and corruption by asserting: "We are persuaded there is a link between smuggling, terrorism financing, cross-border activities and also capital flight."

#### Ethnic antagonism (Medium):

Tribal aspects of society, especially outside of major cities, remain pertinent. This especially effects converts from Islam to Christianity. Turning away from Islam is not only seen as religious betrayal, but also as a betrayal of the (extended) family. Nevertheless, tribalism is less strong than in neighboring countries due to a government campaign in the 1950s and 1960s directly aimed at combatting its influence.

## Drivers of persecution

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

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

### Drivers of Islamic oppression:

The main driver of persecution for Christian Tunisians who have converted from Islam is their own (extended) family. Ordinary people such as neighbors are also sources of persecution for them. This is particularly the case outside the major urban centers. There is also the threat of activities by violent religious groups, in particular militant Islamic groups, affecting all Christians in the country. Despite the country's reputation as being the most celebrated success story of the Arab Spring uprisings, radical Islamic teaching and militancy is widespread, especially among the youth. Such radical groups (whose ranks are swelling with returnees from fighting in Syria and Iraq) are among the major drivers of persecution. The government and state apparatus could also be regarded as drivers of persecution since they deny registration and official recognition to congregations of Christians with a Muslim background.

### Drivers of Ethnic antagonism:

Also in the case of Ethnic antagonism, the (extended) family is the main driver. Especially in the rural areas, society encourages the upholding of traditional values and customs that make it difficult for converts to turn away from Islam. As Katia Boissevain observed (in: Algeria and Tunisia, Christianity in North Africa and West Asia, Edinburgh Companion to Global Christianity, Edinburgh University Press, 2018, p.47): "When a conversion is announced, or discovered, families feel they have been cheated and abandoned [...]. Stepping aside and choosing the Christian religion is not only a break with the social body, but also a break with the social rhythm (*which is defined by Islamic traditions*). Becoming

Christian is interpreted by the others as a choice formulated against everything for which they have been raised."

## Context

There had been a lot of social, economic and political discontent in Tunisia leading up to the Jasmine revolution (Arab Spring). On 14 January 2011, President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and his inner circle fled the country to Saudi Arabia. The regime fell and an interim government was established. The political landscape in Tunisia has since been transformed. A new constitution was approved on 26 January 2014. Subsequently, Tunisia conducted presidential and parliamentary elections in December 2014, marking the end of the period of transition. The presidential election went into a second round and in this run-off election, Beji Caid Essebsi was declared to be the winner.

Due to the fact that no single party has been able to win a majority in parliament and due to the difficulties in reviving the Tunisian economy, there seems to be a constant change of prime ministers and governments in Tunisia since the 2014 parliamentary election. The key challenges that these successive national unity governments have been tasked to deal with are: i) the growing threat of militant Islamic groups in the region, and ii) the economic crises caused especially by the decline of tourism which had been one of the mainstays of the Tunisian economy. Currently, Prime Minister Youssef Chahed is leading a unity government formed by a coalition of secular, Islamist and leftist parties, with the support of independents and a trade union.

Despite the security and economic challenges it is facing, Tunisia remains the only country in which the Arab Spring has led to the emergence of a more democratic and legitimate government in which secularist and Islamist parties have been able to govern on the basis of consensus and compromise with one another. An interesting development in relation to this is the fact that Ennadha, which was the largest and most prominent Islamist political party in Tunisia, has officially become a secular party. At the same time, there are radical Islamic parties such as the Hizb ut-Tahrir which the Tunisian government is trying to ban as a threat to public order. Tunisia has also emerged as the number one country of origin for foreign fighters in Syria, many of whom are returning to Tunisia after being radicalized by the Islamic State group (IS).

## Christian communities and how they are affected

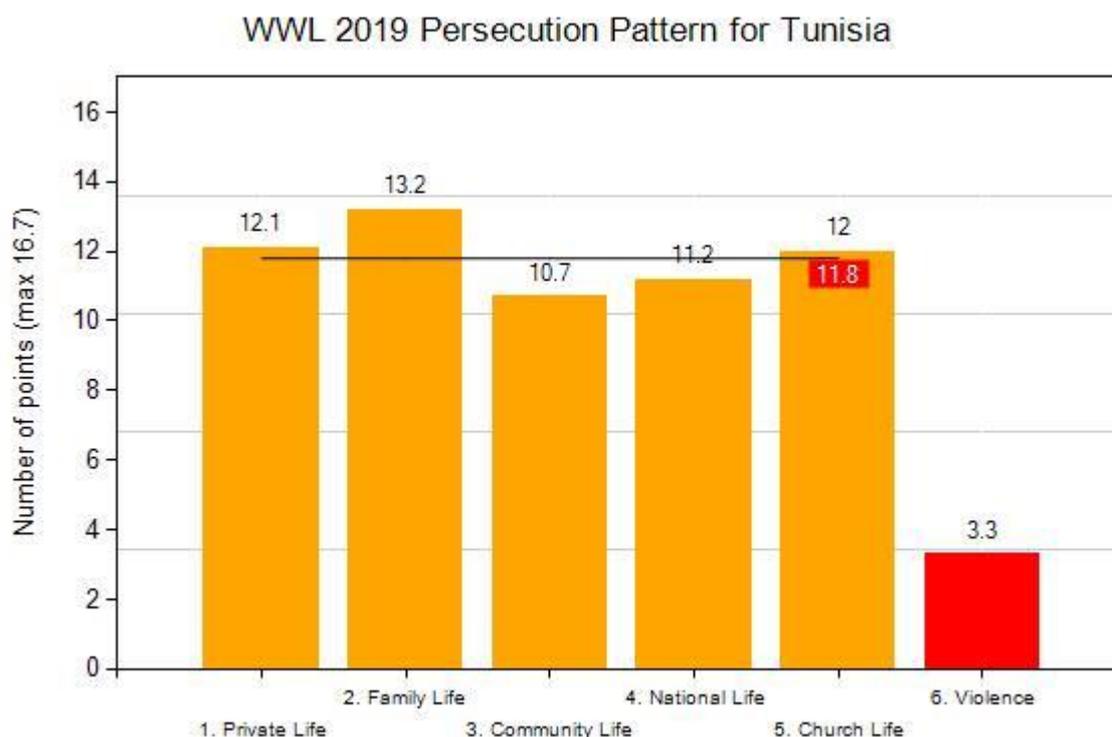
**Communities of expatriate Christians:** Expatriate Christians experience a relative amount of freedom, although public evangelism is not tolerated. Foreign Christians worshipping at the few international churches hardly encounter any problems.

**Historical Christian communities:** This category does not exist in Tunisia as defined by the WWL Methodology.

**Converts to Christianity:** Converts with a Muslim background face various forms of persecution, e.g. from their family members. However, they (and others) are more or less free to seek and receive information about the Christian faith, particularly content posted online.

**Non-traditional Christian communities:** This category does not exist in Tunisia as defined by the WWL Methodology.

## Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



The WWL 2019 Persecution pattern for Tunisia shows:

- The average pressure on Christians is at a very high level (11.8), rising from 11.7 in WWL 2018.
- Although all *spheres of life* show very high levels of pressure, it is highest in *Family* and *Private life*. This reflects the difficulties converts from Islam to Christianity face, both within their own families, as well as in the more public sphere, if they, for example, want to be baptized or have a Christian marriage or funeral.
- The score for violence went down from 3.9 in WWL 2018 to 3.3 in WWL 2019. The main reason for this drop is that in comparison to last year no Christian buildings have been attacked.

### Private sphere:

Particularly converts from Islam experience pressure when their conversion is known at the private level, although there are notable differences between rural areas and the country's capital, Tunis, where the situation is comparatively better. Most converts (especially young people) experience some sort of opposition, rejection and/or persecution because of changing their faith. Especially for young converts it is risky to read the Bible regularly and find a place for prayer by themselves.

### Family sphere:

In the family sphere, the freedom of Christian families to conduct their family life in a Christian way is limited. Every Tunisian is automatically registered as a Muslim. Expatriates have no trouble if their children keep their foreign nationality. Converts have to accept that official documents will state that they are Muslim. If they seek to change this, it proves impossible and causes repercussions. Children of converts will have to follow Islamic education when they go to school and can face harassment if their parent's faith is known.

**Community sphere:**

Converts receive threats from their families or the society around them when their conversion is known. Especially in rural parts of the country young female converts are scared of being forced to marry a Muslim. There are also cases known of converts being expelled from their university, or who are not able to go to school, because of being turned out of their homes. Sometimes customers are told not to buy from shops run by a Christian.

**National sphere:**

When dealing with the authorities, Christians are usually in a disadvantaged position. There are hardly any Christian high profile politicians or government officials in Tunisia. Underlining their vulnerable position is the fact that Christian converts are not likely to be treated equally in court, especially not when it comes to an issue involving family law. They are also vulnerable to abuse, as their families can in some cases act against them with impunity, especially in rural areas. Expatriate churches are the only ones allowed to display Christian symbols.

**Church sphere:**

Although the Constitution of Tunisia currently respects freedom of religion and conversion from Islam is not prohibited, in practice representatives of the government often act very differently. The importation of Christian books in Arabic is obstructed by the authorities. Tunisian converts cannot register their churches and – no new church has been granted official registration since Tunisia's independence in 1956. This stands in stark contrast to the law that regulates mosques. Registered churches are allowed to operate freely but face practical difficulties, particularly relating to their property-upkeep, hiring staff and obtaining permission to publish and distribute Christian texts in Arabic.

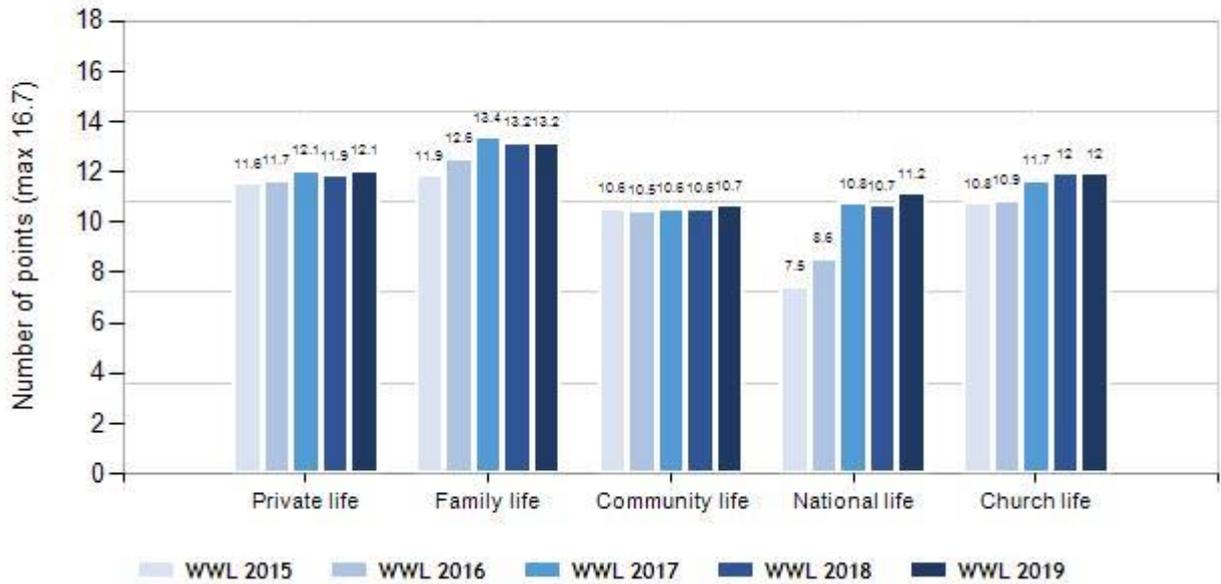
**Violence:**

The fairly high violence score is due to incidents involving (physical) abuse of converts, forced marriage, rape and sexual harassment. In addition, several Christians had to relocate inside the country after facing pressure (from their families). Nevertheless, the score for violence against Christians is not as high as for other countries in the region like Egypt and Libya. For a summary of the statistics on violence and further examples, please see the Short and Simple Persecution Profile section above.

**5 Year trends**

While the levels of pressure in the *Private, Family and Community and Church spheres of life* have been more or less stable over the last five reporting periods (first chart), there have been notable increases in pressure in the *National sphere 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. This reflects the fact that after the Tunisian Revolution the situation for Christians has not significantly improved in Tunisia. The scores for violent incidents have not changed dramatically per year (third chart) and have remained more or less stable at under 4.0 points (a fairly high level) over the last five reporting periods.

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



WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Pattern history: Tunisia	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2019	11.8
2018	11.7
2017	11.7
2016	10.9
2015	10.5

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



## Gender specific persecution

### Female:

The main source of persecution for women in Tunisia comes from the dominating male in the family: For a single female that would mean the father, the brother or any other family member who follows in rank after that (uncle etc.); for a married woman that would be her husband or even fiancé. For a female convert to Christianity, it can also be the whole extended family ganging up against her through questioning, accusing, fabricating rumors etc. This persecution can last for years.

Unmarried female converts can be confined to their family home, even being pulled out of school or job. There is a chance that they will be forced to marry a Muslim husband (often an older man, as finding a 'good' husband has no priority anymore). As one source put it: "General thinking is that women are without brains and they need a man to care for them; women have less wisdom and less capacity to have faith and they need men to help them to find faith and wisdom." This explains why it is riskier for women to speak about their faith with family members, as in the case of men it is sometimes just assumed that they are trying out something new.

Married female converts can be divorced, losing custody over the children and leaving them unprotected and vulnerable, as it is socially not acceptable for women to live on their own and be independent. In other cases when a mother comes to faith, there is the fear that the children (accidentally) might tell the extended family, who will subsequently put pressure on the husband to divorce her.

According to [BTI 2018 Tunisia](#) (p. 24): "Tunisia has a track record on striving for gender equality, but discrimination against women persists. In the 2014 Gender Inequality Index, Tunisia ranks 48th out of 188 countries." However, this is an important improvement as "regional neighbors fared worse with Algeria ranked 83rd, Libya 94th and Morocco 126th."

### Male:

If male converts are still young and living with their parents, they might be banned from their home and lose the (financial) support of their families. They bring shame upon their families by leaving Islam and are therefore likely to be ostracized. Husbands are in most cases the breadwinners of their families, so the whole family suffers if he loses his job and reputation. Wives will desert their husband in some cases and male converts can be isolated within their own families. However, the severity of the backlash after conversion depends on his social position and his political standing within his community.

## Persecution of other religious minorities

According to the US State Department's [2017 International Religious Freedom report](#) (p.7), adherents of Bahai reported difficulties to practice their belief as they are not officially recognized and cannot have an own place of worship. However, they have had some constructive dialogues with government officials in the recent past. In addition, "Salafists said police profiled them on suspicion of terrorism under the continued state of emergency because of their dress and long beards".

Regarding the Jewish community: "The government allows the Jewish community to worship freely and paid the salary of the grand rabbi. It also provided security for synagogues and partially subsidized some restoration and maintenance costs. Government employees maintained the Jewish cemetery in Tunis. The government permitted the Jewish community to operate private religious schools and

allowed Jewish children to split their academic day between public schools and private religious schools."

No issues regarding the Sunni-Shia divide have been reported in the WWL 2019 reporting period, although Shia Muslims are generally discriminated against and public figures have spoken out against Shia Islam [in the past](#).

## Future outlook

**The political outlook:** Although the political situation in Tunisia seems to have stabilized, this does not mean that the pressure on Christians can be expected to decrease. There is a battle going on in both Tunisian society and at the political level between (hard-line) Islamists and moderate liberals. The upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections at the end of 2019 will be a key moment for determining in which direction Tunisia will go.

### The outlook for Christians - through the lens of:

- *Islamic oppression:* Society and culture, particularly in rural areas, remains anti-Christian and this is not (yet) influenced by political changes. Tunisia's Constitution may seem a positive step forward, but the wording is general enough to make restrictive interpretations possible. Interpretation will strongly depend on the kind of government that is in power and its attitude towards religious minorities. If the hard-liners gain more influence in the country this could make life more difficult for Christians. In addition, Tunisia faces a real threat of instability and conflict as a result of the rise in the activity of militant Islamic groups in the country. The situation is getting even more disconcerting now that many Tunisian Islamic fighters who have been fighting alongside Islamic State (IS) in Libya are returning home in the wake of IS's apparent defeat there. If groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir gain more influence in Tunisia, the situation for Christians in the country will get much worse than it is and the persecution of Christians could become much more intense and violent.
- *Ethnic antagonism:* The positive developments regarding women's rights and a more positive approach towards religious minorities among the moderate liberals could create a backlash among more conservative elements within society, who want their traditional customs and practices upheld.

**Conclusion:** There are definitely positive developments going on in Tunisia, which might create a more open society on the long term, allowing Christian converts more freedom to practice their Christian faith. However, it has to be seen if Tunisian society wants to proceed with this unique development within the Arabic world or wants to return to a more strict interpretation of Islam. The upcoming elections in the end of 2019 will be a key moment to see if current government policies are also backed by the Tunisian people.

## External Links - WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines: link between terrorism and organized crime  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/25/world/africa/corruption-crackdown-intensifies-in-tunisia-and-the-people-cheer.html>
- Gender specific persecution: BTI 2018 Tunisia  
<https://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-reports/detail/itc/TUN/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: 2017 International Religious Freedom report  
<https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/281252.pdf>

- Persecution of other religious minorities: in the past  
<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2012/al-monitor/shiites-in-tunis.html>

## 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).