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## Kazakhstan: Country Dossier

December 2019



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

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# Introduction

## World Watch List 2020

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018	Total Score WWL 2017	Total Score WWL 2016
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	11.1	94	94	94	92	92
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.0	93	94	93	89	88
3	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.5	9.4	92	91	91	91	87
4	Libya	15.3	15.5	15.8	16.0	16.4	11.3	90	87	86	78	79
5	Pakistan	14.0	13.9	15.0	14.9	13.7	16.7	88	87	86	88	87
6	Eritrea	14.5	14.9	15.9	15.9	15.4	10.9	87	86	86	82	89
7	Sudan	14.2	14.6	14.5	15.7	16.1	10.4	85	87	87	87	84
8	Yemen	16.6	16.4	16.4	16.7	16.7	2.6	85	86	85	85	78
9	Iran	14.1	14.3	14.1	15.8	16.5	10.4	85	85	85	85	83
10	India	12.9	13.0	13.5	15.0	13.5	14.8	83	83	81	73	68
11	Syria	13.5	14.2	13.0	13.9	14.4	12.6	82	82	76	86	87
12	Nigeria	12.2	11.9	13.5	12.8	13.0	16.7	80	80	77	78	78
13	Saudi Arabia	15.1	14.9	14.1	15.5	16.5	2.4	79	77	79	76	76
14	Maldives	15.4	15.6	14.0	15.9	16.6	0.7	78	78	78	76	76
15	Iraq	14.0	14.6	13.9	14.5	13.6	5.6	76	79	86	86	90
16	Egypt	12.1	13.1	10.7	13.2	10.5	16.1	76	76	70	65	64
17	Algeria	13.5	14.3	10.4	12.8	13.2	9.3	73	70	58	58	56
18	Uzbekistan	15.1	12.9	14.1	12.2	15.7	3.0	73	74	73	71	70
19	Myanmar	11.8	11.9	13.5	12.5	12.2	10.7	73	71	65	62	62
20	Laos	12.8	9.9	14.1	14.4	14.9	5.6	72	71	67	64	58
21	Vietnam	12.3	8.5	12.9	13.6	14.5	9.8	72	70	69	71	66
22	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.2	13.8	13.3	15.7	1.9	70	69	68	67	66
23	China	11.6	8.4	11.6	12.8	15.1	10.2	70	65	57	57	57
24	Mauritania	13.9	14.0	13.0	13.7	13.4	0.2	68	67	57	55	50
25	Central African Republic	10.1	9.1	13.1	9.8	10.2	15.6	68	70	61	58	59
26	Morocco	12.4	13.3	10.8	11.7	14.1	4.1	66	63	51	49	47
27	Qatar	13.6	13.4	10.8	12.2	14.1	2.2	66	62	63	66	65
28	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	10.2	9.4	11.8	15.6	66	48	-	-	-
29	Mali	9.2	8.2	12.8	10.0	11.7	13.7	66	68	59	59	55
30	Sri Lanka	11.5	9.0	11.0	10.9	9.6	13.1	65	58	57	55	53
31	Tajikistan	13.9	12.3	11.9	12.4	13.1	1.1	65	65	65	58	58
32	Nepal	12.4	10.8	9.9	12.1	12.2	7.0	64	64	64	53	53
33	Jordan	13.1	14.1	10.7	11.7	12.5	1.7	64	65	66	63	59
34	Tunisia	12.0	12.8	10.3	10.8	12.3	5.4	64	63	62	61	58
35	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.5	10.7	12.4	14.0	1.7	64	63	63	56	55

36	Turkey	12.6	11.8	10.7	13.3	11.3	3.7	63	66	62	57	55
37	Brunei	13.8	14.3	10.7	10.3	13.5	0.6	63	63	64	64	61
38	Bangladesh	11.1	9.9	12.7	11.1	8.9	9.3	63	58	58	63	57
39	Ethiopia	10.0	9.2	10.6	10.8	10.4	11.9	63	65	62	64	67
40	Malaysia	12.1	14.6	12.7	12.0	9.6	1.5	62	60	65	60	58
41	Colombia	8.9	7.8	11.9	9.8	8.9	15.0	62	58	56	53	55
42	Oman	12.7	13.1	10.0	11.5	12.7	2.0	62	59	57	53	53
43	Kuwait	13.2	13.1	9.9	11.5	13.4	0.7	62	60	61	57	56
44	Kenya	11.7	10.5	10.9	8.3	10.9	9.1	61	61	62	68	68
45	Bhutan	12.8	10.9	11.8	11.6	13.9	0.0	61	64	62	61	56
46	Russian Federation	12.2	8.3	10.7	10.4	12.1	6.9	60	60	51	46	48
47	United Arab Emirates	12.9	13.0	9.5	11.1	12.6	1.1	60	58	58	55	55
48	Cameroon	8.8	7.2	11.6	7.0	10.4	15.0	60	54	38	-	45
49	Indonesia	10.9	11.1	11.6	10.2	9.5	6.5	60	65	59	55	55
50	Niger	9.4	9.5	13.3	7.2	11.1	9.3	60	52	45	47	53
51	Palestinian Territories	12.2	13.0	9.2	10.2	11.9	3.1	60	57	60	64	62
52	Mexico	8.4	6.8	12.2	10.6	10.0	11.5	60	61	59	57	56
53	Azerbaijan	13.0	10.0	9.3	11.1	12.4	1.5	57	57	57	52	57
54	Comoros	11.7	11.5	9.1	9.9	13.9	0.9	57	56	56	56	56
55	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.3	11.1	9.4	11.9	1.1	57	56	54	48	46
56	Djibouti	12.3	12.3	10.3	10.0	11.2	0.2	56	56	56	57	58
57	Democratic Republic of the Congo	5.6	6.7	10.6	7.4	10.4	15.6	56	55	33	-	53
58	Chad	11.5	8.2	10.2	9.6	10.3	5.9	56	48	40	-	51
59	Bahrain	12.1	12.3	9.1	10.1	10.5	0.9	55	55	57	54	54
60	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	7.0	55	52	53	59	57
61	Cuba	9.6	5.6	9.5	11.8	12.0	3.5	52	49	49	47	42
62	Uganda	8.1	4.6	6.7	6.7	9.1	13.0	48	47	46	53	45
63	Burundi	5.1	5.8	9.7	9.2	9.6	8.7	48	43	-	-	-
64	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	7.0	8.1	3.7	45	46	-	-	-
65	South Sudan	5.7	1.5	7.0	6.3	7.8	15.6	44	44	-	-	-
66	Mozambique	6.9	4.6	7.1	5.2	8.0	11.7	43	43	-	-	-
67	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.7	8.3	8.8	1.1	43	43	-	-	-
68	Angola	6.4	3.6	7.0	8.7	10.4	6.7	43	42	-	-	-
69	Venezuela	3.8	4.4	10.6	9.3	9.5	4.8	42	41	34	-	-
70	Ivory Coast	9.8	8.6	8.2	5.5	6.6	3.5	42	43	-	-	-
71	Rwanda	5.3	4.4	6.7	7.8	10.1	7.2	42	41	-	-	-
72	Nicaragua	5.8	4.2	8.5	9.8	9.0	4.1	41	41	-	-	-
73	Togo	8.6	6.7	8.5	7.1	8.4	1.1	41	42	-	-	-

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## Brief note on 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). 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”. The WWL 2020 reporting period was 1 November 2018 - 31 October 2019.

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).

# WWL 2020: Persecution summary / Kazakhstan

## Brief country details

Pop 2019	Christians	Chr%
Kazakhstan		
18,593,000	4,836,000	26.0

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2019).

World Watch List Kazakhstan	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2020	64	35
WWL 2019	63	34
WWL 2018	63	28
WWL 2017	56	43
WWL 2016	55	42

Scores and ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2016-2020 reporting periods.

## Dominant persecution engines and drivers

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

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

## Brief description of persecution situation

Religious freedom is restricted by legislation dating back to September 2011 and the Kazakhstan government is constantly working at increasing its control over the whole of society, which means increased surveillance, raids on meetings and arrests. It is using the threat of militant Islam to restrict more areas of freedom. Russian Orthodox churches experience the least problems from the government as they do not usually attempt to make contact with the Kazakh population. It is the indigenous Christians with a Muslim background who are bearing the brunt of persecution both at the hands of the state and from family, friends and community. Some converts are locked up by their families for long periods, beaten and may eventually be expelled from their communities. Local mullahs also preach against them.

## Specific examples of persecution in the reporting period

- In April 2019 a group of Christians was arrested at a Kazakh airport for smuggling Christian literature into the country. They were taken to a police station and questioned. They were fined after the State Religious Committee judged that the smuggled materials did not have a terrorist character. If the committee would have decided that the materials were terrorist material, the Christians would have been given prison sentences. (Source: Open Doors research)
- At the end of July 2019 Kazakh Pastor Maximov was sentenced for 5 years in prison and his wife to 4 years. Pastor Sergei Zaikin was also sentenced for 4 years. All their property was confiscated. The three Christians announced that they would appeal the verdict. (Source: Open Doors research)
- On 29 April 2019, a US citizen was given deportation orders after the immigration authorities accused her of providing misleading information and took away her permanent residence card. (Source: [International Christian Concern](#), 13 May 2019)

## External Links - WWL 2020: Persecution summary

- Specific examples of persecution in the reporting period: International Christian Concern - <https://www.persecution.org/2019/05/13/deported-christian-kindness-kazakhstan-remains-question/>



# WWL 2020: Keys to understanding / Kazakhstan

## Link for general background information

See BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-15263826>.

## Recent history

Like all other countries in the Central Asia region, Kazakhstan came into existence as an independent country at the end of August 1991. It was the last former Soviet republic to do so. Of all the former Soviet Union states, Kazakhstan has managed the economic transition best. Contrary to all other Central Asian countries, the country's rulers participate in the international community and are eager to cooperate and host international talks. In March 2017, an international meeting was held in the Kazakh capital of Astana on the war in Syria. So far, the highlight for Kazakhstan has been to be honored with the rotating chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in 2010.

However, since 2010 the regime under President Nursultan Nazarbayev took a much more dictatorial character which brought Kazakhstan in line with the other countries in Central Asia. Repressive policies, strict media control and legislative restrictions (also in religious affairs) were introduced and implemented – the purpose being to maintain the government's hold on power. Nazarbayev resigned in March 2019 and Kassym-Jomart Tokayev was elected president on 9 June 2019 (see below: Political and legal landscape).

## Political and legal landscape

Kazakhstan is officially a democratic, secular, unitary, constitutional republic with a diverse cultural heritage. Its first and only president to date is Nursultan Nazarbayev. The president may veto legislation that has been passed by parliament and is also the commander in chief of the armed forces. The prime minister chairs the Cabinet of Ministers and serves as Kazakhstan's head of government. Although four parties are represented in the Kazakh parliament (Majilis), there is no real political opposition. This was obvious again during the latest presidential elections on 26 April 2015 when President Nazarbayev had no real opponents and won the elections with 97.7% of the votes, which enabled him to start his fifth five-year term as the country's president.

The question of who would succeed President Nazarbayev was answered by the president himself. On [19 March 2019](#), out of the blue, he told his citizens that he had abruptly resigned. "I have decided to end my duties as president," Nazarbayev said in a televised address to the nation. "This year I will have held the highest post for 30 years," said Nazarbayev, 78, who has headed the energy-rich country since before the Soviet collapse of 1991. Nazarbayev indicated that the speaker of the upper parliament chamber, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, will be acting president for the remainder of what would have been his term, in accordance with the Constitution. [Unsurprisingly](#), acting Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev was re-elected in the snap elections on 9 June 2019 with 70.76% of the vote.

In politics and economy Kazakhstan is increasingly linking up with Russia (and China). This is partly due to the huge number of ethnic Russian citizens in the northern part of Kazakhstan.

## Religious landscape

According to the World Christian Database (WCD 2019) 70.2% of the population is Muslim – predominantly Sunni. However, it would be wrong to call Kazakhstan a Muslim country. 70 years of atheism during the Soviet era have left a deep influence; the government (the heirs of the atheist Soviets) is staunchly secular and seeks to keep Islam under control, while the overwhelming majority of the population merely follows Islamic traditions rather than strict Muslim teachings. Nevertheless, “to be a Kazakh is to be a Muslim” is the belief of many Kazakhs. As a result, converts to Christianity experience much pressure from family, friends, and local community. This pressure is much stronger in the countryside than in the major cities. Relatives will oppress converts to Christianity, sometimes using physical abuse, in attempts to make them turn back to Islam. Sometimes this is also done by local police. Only about 15,000 indigenous Kazakhs are Christians.

The Christian share of the population of Kazakhstan is 26% (WCD 2019). This means that Kazakhstan has by far the biggest Christian presence in the region. The reason for this is not that Kazakhs have converted on a large scale to Christianity, but is due to the presence of a large Russian minority in the country’s northern provinces. As a result, more than 90% of all Christians in Kazakhstan belong to the Russian Orthodox Church. In contrast to other countries in Central Asia, Kazakhstan has not experienced a mass emigration of ethnic Russians.

Religious Context: Kazakhstan	Numbers	%
Christians	4,836,000	26.0
Muslim	13,055,000	70.2
Hindu	850	0.0
Buddhist	20,100	0.1
Ethnoreligionist	29,100	0.2
Jewish	5,500	0.0
Bahai	9,100	0.0
Atheist	86,700	0.5
Agnostic	538,000	2.9
Other	13,090	0.1

*Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2019). OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.*

According to the Agency on Religious Affairs (ARA), there are 3,563 registered religious associations or branches thereof in the country, representing 18 groups. (Source: [IRF 2015](#))

## Economic landscape

Kazakhstan is blessed with vast resources of oil, gas and various minerals. The current regime has promoted market reforms and has transformed Kazakhstan into the second largest economy of the former Soviet empire (after Russia). Despite the fact that the country was hit hard by the financial crisis that started in 2008 (and later by the economic sanctions imposed by the West on Russia after that country had annexed the Ukrainian peninsula of the Crimea in early 2014) Kazakhstan remains the wealthiest country in the region. As a result, Kazakhstan is the only country in the region that has few labor migrants abroad, but many labor migrants from other Central Asia countries (such as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan). This offers opportunities for Christian outreach among these people.

Kazakhstan holds a strategic position in the East-West connection between China and the West. A new version of the Silk Road is under construction, which is being pushed by both China and Turkey. This means that there are huge construction activities going on to build highways for trucks, and tracks for trains. China has also been particularly active in Kazakh oil and gas exploration.

## Social and cultural landscape

According to [government statistics](#) from 2016, ethnic Kazakhs are 63.1% of the population and ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan are 23.7% (living mostly in the northern provinces). Other groups include Tatars (1.3%), Ukrainians (2.1%), Uzbeks (2.8%), Belarusians, Uyghurs (1.4%), Azerbaijanis, Poles, and Lithuanians. Some minorities such as Germans (1.1%), Ukrainians, Koreans, Chechens, Meskhetian Turks, and Russian political opponents of the regime had been deported to Kazakhstan in the 1930s and 1940s by Stalin. Some of the largest Soviet labor camps (Gulags) existed here.

The government is successfully stimulating the use of the Kazakh language and the renaissance of traditional Kazakh culture. On [12 April 2017](#), President Nazarbayev ordered authorities to come up with a Latin-based alphabet for the Kazakh language by the end of 2017, marking a major shift after nearly 80 years with a Cyrillic-based alphabet. Despite this, 95% of the population of Kazakhstan is still capable of communicating in Russian. Due to the old Soviet educational system, practically all Kazakh citizens are literate. This offers many opportunities for reading Christian materials. Although the regime has imposed many restrictions on the production, importation and distribution of religious materials, the very long and open border with Russia means that access is less problematic than into other Central Asian countries.

In November 2014 the government said it would start a 10-year campaign to combat corruption – a phenomenon that permeates every aspect of Kazakh society and that the Church is facing on an almost daily basis. On 26 December 2014 President Nazarbayev signed a decree introducing the new anti-corruption strategy for 2015–2025.

## Technological landscape

Kazakhstan is by far the most developed country of Central Asia and modernization is taking place rapidly – albeit in the bigger cities and not so much in the countryside (e.g. the extended steppe areas). This also goes for the information and technology sector in the country. Practically every citizen has a cell phone. Internet access (though strictly monitored and censored by the regime) is widely available. This means that foreign Christian websites (e.g. those based in Russia) are mostly accessible.

Satellite dishes provide a good alternative for many people in Kazakhstan to access international information. The media that are under state control offer only very limited independent information, if at all.

There are many options for Christians to present the Christian faith - via (foreign) websites, via SD cards in smartphones, and via radio and television programs through satellite dishes. The situation for books, magazines and DVDs is more problematic since these are tangible and can be easily confiscated during raids and searches.

## Security situation

The end of the year 2011 saw a wave of radical Islamic attacks in Kazakhstan.

- In October 2011, Islamic militants carried out bomb attacks in Atyrau, in western Kazakhstan.
- In November 2011, a suspected Islamic militant killed seven people in the city of Taraz in southern Kazakhstan.
- In December 2011, five Islamic militants and two members of an elite police force were killed in operations in southern Kazakhstan.

Since then, the government of Kazakhstan has stepped up its suppression of radical Islamic influences.

Another indication that some Muslims in Kazakhstan have radicalized is the number of Kazakhs fighting with radical groups such as the Islamic State group (IS), *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* or the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. In late [September 2014](#), the director of the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies, presented a report on Central Asians fighting for the Islamic State group (IS) entitled "Our People in an Alien War: Central Asian Fighters in the Syrian conflict." According to the report, there were 250 nationals from Kazakhstan in 2014 among the foreign jihadists within IS. This poses the same problem for the regime in Kazakhstan as for the other countries in the region: What will happen now that these radical Muslim fighters are returning home?

The border between [Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan](#) is currently closed to traffic.

## Trends analysis

Until 2010, the government of President Nazarbayev ruled mildly in comparison to most other countries in Central Asia. But since 2010, the government has clearly stepped up surveillance and repression. The government has been successful in combating Islamic militancy by arresting and sentencing numerous suspects. Two major issues will dominate the agenda of the Kazakh government for the coming years:

- the situation under the new president;
- the return of Kazakh participants from Islamic jihad abroad.

## External Links - WWL 2020: Keys to understanding

- Link for general background information: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-15263826>. - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-15263826>
- Political and legal landscape: 19 March 2019 - <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakh-president-nursultan-nazarbaev-says-he-is-resigning-/29830123.html>
- Political and legal landscape: Unsurprisingly - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Tokayev-elected-president-amid-protests-and-arrests-with-almost-71-per-cent-of-the-vote-47242.html>
- Religious landscape: IRF 2015 - <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2015/sca/256307.htm>
- Social and cultural landscape: government statistics - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kazakhstan>
- Social and cultural landscape: 12 April 2017 - <http://www.rferl.org/a/kazakh-president-orders-shift-from-cyrillic/28425590.html>
- Security situation: September 2014 - [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=43096&tx\\_ttnews\[backPid\]=7&cHash=83c85544e0de4f4fe4f1908e53ab03e0](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=43096&tx_ttnews[backPid]=7&cHash=83c85544e0de4f4fe4f1908e53ab03e0)
- Security situation: Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan - <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/kazakhstan>

## WWL 2020: Church information / Kazakhstan

### Christian origins

In the 7th and 8th centuries, Nestorian Christianity spread through southern Kazakhstan. In the year 1009, Nestorian missionaries baptized one of the numerous groups of Mongol-speaking ethnic Kereiti whose Khan took the Christian name Mark, Marguz. In the same period Nestorian Christianity spread among other peoples of Central Asia, and Metropolitan sees were established.

Timur Lenk (also called Tamar Lane: 1336-1406) eradicated Christianity in the 14th century. Stalin (1878-1953) ordered the deportation of many politically unreliable and religious citizens of the USSR to Kazakhstan during the “Great Purge” in the 1930s. During those years many Russian Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant Christians were sent to Central Asia and many of them settled in Kazakhstan. Many priests were deported and sent to concentration camps in Kazakhstan. Having been released, they started a clandestine ministry among the people. The church grew mainly among the non-Kazakh people.

After the country gained independence in 1991, the new religious liberty allowed missionary and evangelistic efforts to reach thousands of ethnic Kazakhs who embraced Christianity. The indigenous Church (i.e. Christians with a Muslim background), which was practically non-existent in 1990, is now estimated to number around 15,000.

### Church spectrum today

Church networks: Kazakhstan	Christians	%
Orthodox	4,456,000	92.1
Catholic	153,000	3.2
Protestant	57,200	1.2
Independent	123,000	2.5
Unaffiliated	57,600	1.2
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-11,900	-0.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,834,900</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	40,600	0.8
Renewalist movement	109,000	2.3

Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2019).

*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.*

# WWL 2020: Persecution Dynamics / Kazakhstan

## Reporting period

1 November 2018 – 31 October 2019

## Position on World Watch List (WWL)

With a score of 64 points Kazakhstan ranked 35 in WWL 2020.

In WWL 2019, Kazakhstan scored 63 points and ranked 34. There was a slight increase in pressure in the *Family, Community, National and Church spheres of life*, indicating that the situation for Christians in Kazakhstan has deteriorated.

## Persecution engines

Persecution engines: Kazakhstan	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Medium
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Clan and ethnic antagonism	CEA	Not at all
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Very weak
Communist and post - Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Not at all

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

### Dictatorial paranoia (Strong):

No religious activities beyond state-run and state-controlled institutions are allowed. Pressure from the authorities has been stepped up since 2015 and raids and arrests have continued. Members of Protestant churches are particularly targeted since they are regarded as a foreign influence aiming to destroy the current political system. Hence their need to be severely controlled.

### Islamic oppression (Medium):

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

## Drivers of persecution

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

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

### Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia:

- **Government officials (Strong):** The government suppresses all religious activity taking place independently of state control. Protestants have been fined, arrested and had their churches raided. Registration has been denied for years to several Christian groups. It is illegal for non-registered churches to gather, forcing them to go underground and leading to police raids. Religious literature must be approved by the government. Unapproved religious meetings can result in fines and imprisonment, with members being interrogated.
- **Political parties (Strong):** The ruling party functions as a driver since much of the persecution is government-sanctioned.
- **Normal citizens (Medium):** 71% of the population are Muslims. They will protest against conversions and report Christian activities to the local authorities.

### Drivers of Islamic oppression:

- **Extended family (Strong):** Pressure on converts exerted by family, friends and community to recant their Christian faith and return to Islam is high and can involve violence.
- **Government officials (Medium):** Local officials will have connections to the Muslim community, affecting their dealings with Christians.



- **Ethnic group leaders (Medium):** Kazakh leaders (with the support of the authorities) see conversion as an assault against Kazakh identity.
- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Medium):** Muslim clerics are open in their hostility towards non-Orthodox Christians and particularly against converts from Islam.
- **Normal citizens (Medium):** At the local level, citizens are mostly Muslim and will oppose conversion and have a negative attitude toward Christian activities.

## Geographical hotspots of persecution

There are no hotspots of persecution of Christians in Kazakhstan, but pressure from the Muslim environment on converts is more intensive outside the major cities.

## Christian communities and how they are affected

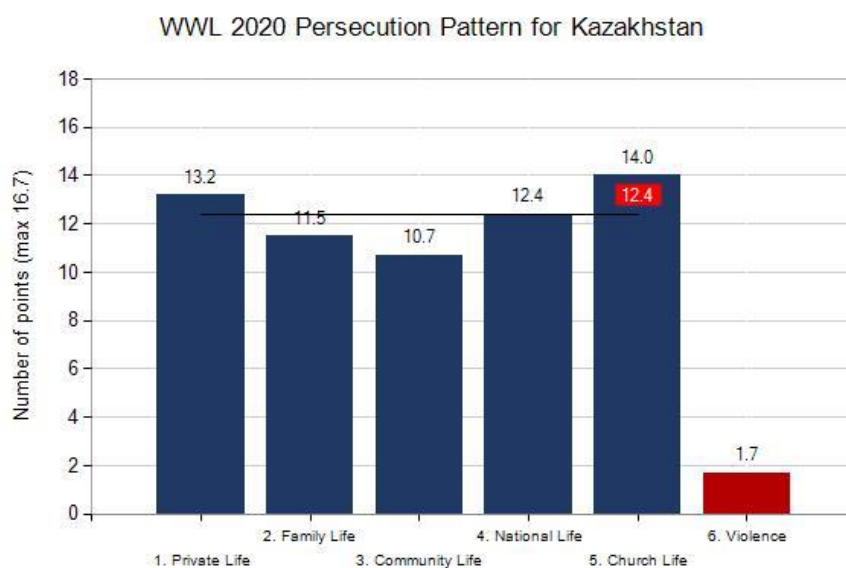
**Communities of expatriate Christians:** Expatriate Christians in Kazakhstan are not isolated from other Christian groups and are therefore not classed as a separate category in WWL analysis.

**Historical Christian communities:** These groups, of which the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is by far the largest, are not involved in evangelism among Kazakhs. They can function relatively freely since the Kazakh regime does not consider them a danger. Also, the Kazakh government has no interest in provoking Russia by making difficulties for the ROC – the events in eastern Ukraine have set an example.

**Converts to Christianity:** Christian converts with a Muslim background bear the brunt of the persecution in Kazakhstan. Apart from certain state restrictions, they are also under strong pressure from family, friends and community. For them the latter is by far the more powerful.

**Non-traditional Christian communities:** The unregistered groups of this category (which include Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations) experience increasing persecution, especially where they are active in evangelism. All Christians in this category suffer from raids, threats, arrests and fines by the authorities.

## The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2020 Persecution pattern for Kazakhstan shows:

- The average pressure on Christians is at a very high level (12.4 points), increasing from 12.0 in WWL 2019. The increase in pressure occurred mainly in the *Family, Community, National and Church spheres of life*.
- Pressure is extreme in the *Church sphere* and at very high levels in all other *spheres of life*. After the *Church sphere*, the next highest levels of pressure are to be found in the *Private and National spheres of life*. This is an indication that pressure on Christians in Kazakhstan comes from two main sources: Islamic oppression (*Private sphere of life*) and Dictatorial paranoia (*National and Church spheres of life*).
- The score for violence is low, decreasing from 3.2 in WWL 2019 to 1.7 in WWL 2020. As in all other countries in Central Asia, reports of violent incidents tend to be few.

## Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, details are shown from four of the highest scoring block questions, with those items scoring highest listed first. 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 0 – 4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

### Private sphere:

- ***It has been dangerous to privately own Christian materials (Block 1.3 / Score 3.5 points):*** Christian materials are considered as hard evidence for conversion. For converts at home in the countryside, if such materials are discovered, persecution comes from family and local community. The government of Kazakhstan distinguishes between approved and non-approved materials, and between registered and unregistered Christians. The ROC does not seem to experience problems in this respect.
- ***Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable (Block 1.1 / Score: 3.25 points):*** Conversion is the issue that triggers the fiercest reaction from family, friends and community in Kazakhstan. Conversion is viewed as betrayal of the family and culture, as well as of Islam. This can lead to physical violence too. This only affects converts in the countryside. Officially, there is no hindrance to conversion - the laws are secular. But the government is concerned that conversions could lead to tension among the population.
- ***It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols (Block 1.5 / Score 3.25 points):*** Converts in the countryside have a problem in this respect as openly showing their new faith will draw negative reactions from their families, friends and the community, but any Christian wearing Christian symbols will draw attention from the Muslim environment. Any non-Orthodox Christian wearing Christian symbols also draws unwanted attention from the state.
- ***It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than family (Block 1.8 / Score 3.25):*** Converts in the countryside will avoid sharing their new faith with members of their communities as this could be regarded as a form of evangelism. Non-traditional Protestants can also be quickly accused of conducting evangelism by the state authorities.

*Christians in Kazakhstan have also experienced difficulties in revealing their faith, speaking about their faith to the family, and meeting with other Christians. This indicates that life in the Private sphere is especially difficult for converts.*

#### **Family sphere:**

- ***Christian children have been pressured into attend anti-Christian teaching (Block 2.8 / Score 3.5 points):*** The Muslim environment (family, friends, community) will pressurize children of converts in particular to attend Islamic instruction - sometimes even against the wishes of their parents. The administration of schools and institutes periodically organize state-funded public meetings about combating "sects". These meetings spread negative propaganda against religious minorities, including against Evangelical churches. These meetings are supposedly voluntary, but everyone is strongly urged to attend.
- ***Christian baptisms have been hindered (Block 2.4 / Score 3.25 points):*** Baptisms are regarded as the final farewell to the faith of the fathers - the final sign of conversion. Family, friends and community will oppose this. Baptisms are regarded by the state with hostility as they are automatically connected to evangelism and conversion - two activities opposed by the state.
- ***Christian couples have been hindered in adopting children or serving as foster parents (Block 2.6 / Score 3.25 points):*** Muslim families and communities will block adoption and fostering procedure if it is known that a person is a Christian. The adoption of a Kazakh child into a Christian family is not permitted.
- ***Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against (Block 2.9 / Score 3.25 points):*** Christian children are slandered and Muslim children are kept from having close contact with Christian children. Children of converts are seen as outsiders and so often experience harassment from their Muslim peers.

#### **Community sphere:**

- ***Christians have been harassed, threatened or obstructed in their daily lives (Block 3.1 / Score 3.25 points):*** Threats are very common. Converts are threatened by the family, friends and community (including the local imam). Local state officials regularly threaten unregistered Christian groups.
- ***Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (Block 3.2 / Score 3.25 points):*** Converts are monitored by their family and surrounding community. Unregistered Christian churches are monitored by the local authorities.
- ***Christians have been fined for faith-related reasons (Block 3.12 / Score: 3.25 points):*** This occurs frequently and all over the country. Christians are fined for illegal religious activities such as worshipping at a non-registered church, distributing religious literature or sharing their faith. Worst hit are converts and unregistered churches.
- ***Christians have been interrogated or compelled to report to the local police for faith-related reasons (Block 3.13/Score: 3.25 points):*** Known converts will be harassed and interrogated harshly by their family and community. When a meeting is raided, people present will be interrogated, fined and sometimes detained, while all materials found on the spot are confiscated. Once they have been recorded in police records, Christians are required to report regularly.

**National sphere:**

- ***The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Block 4.1 / Score: 3.75 points):*** The amendment to the existing Constitution recognizes two religious organizations that are not required to re-register: i) the state-supported Muslim Board and associated religious communities, and ii) the Russian Orthodox Church, as a cultural representative of Russian Federation. Other religious organizations and communities are required to re-register. The registration process is complicated and limits the opportunities for non-traditional religious organizations to operate on an official basis. Islam has no impact on legislation in Kazakhstan. The role of the Muslim community does not reach to this level.
- ***Christians have been forced by law or in practice to act against their conscience (Block 4.3 / Score: 3.75 points):*** Military service is obligatory and those Christians who for religious reasons do not want to take up arms, are still forced to join the army.
- ***Christians have been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public (Block 4.8 / Score: 3.5 points):*** It is prohibited to express religious views in public, without official authorization, according to the law regulating religious life. In practice, such permission is only given to state-supported religious organizations.
- ***Christians have been subject to smear campaigns or hate speech (Block 4.11 / Score 3.25 points):*** The media (both state-run and private channels) provide negative reporting on Christians from time to time. The Muslim majority has a hostile attitude towards Christianity. Converts and evangelizing Protestants experience hate-speech from Muslims.

**Church sphere:**

- ***Churches have been hindered in establishing, managing, maintaining and conducting schools, or charitable, humanitarian, medical, social or cultural organizations, institutions and associations (Block 5.18 / Score 4 points):*** According to the law, no religion-based organizations, institutions or schools are allowed. The Muslim community will regard any social work by Christians as a form of outreach and will oppose this.
- ***It has been risky for churches or Christian organizations to speak out against instigators of persecution (Block 5.20 / Score 4 points):*** When the instigators of persecution are state agents at any level, it is dangerous to speak out against them and they can more or less act with impunity. And since the judiciary in Kazakhstan is not independent, any complaints will result in detention or fine. Speaking out against incidents of persecution committed by traditional Muslims in the countryside is also risky and useless.
- ***Christian preaching, teaching and/or published materials have been monitored (Block 5.8 / Score 3.75 points):*** The law on religion is very restrictive about literature which can only be distributed in registered church buildings, recognized religious educational institutions and special places appointed by the state. In December 2016 President Nazarbayev signed amendments to anti-terrorism legislation which affect the area of production and distribution of religious literature, which requires compulsory censorship of all religious literature produced and distributed in Kazakhstan. New, more restrictive legal amendments are presently under consideration by parliament. Muslims regard most Christian materials as evangelism tools.

- **Churches have been hindered in printing Christian materials or owning printing presses (Block 5.12 / Score 3.75 points):** The law on religion puts restrictions on printing and distributing religious literature. Since January 2017, more restrictions came into force under the law on anti-terrorist activities. There is a requirement for compulsory censorship of all religious literature produced by registered organizations. Non-registered organizations are prohibited from printing and distributing religious materials. New more restrictive legal amendments are presently under consideration by parliament.

*Christians in Kazakhstan have also experienced difficulties in getting registration, in organizing activities outside church buildings, in integrating converts, in importing, distributing and/or selling, and in using the media.*

## Violence

*The following table is based on reported cases as much as possible. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers below must be understood as being minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100 or 1000) is given. (A symbolic number of 10 could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100 could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1000 could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain.) In cases where it is clear that (many) more Christians are affected, but a concrete number could be given according to the number of incidents reported, the number given has to be understood as being an absolutely minimum figure.*

Kazakhstan	Reporting period	Christians killed	Christians attacked	Christians arrested	Churches attacked	Christian-owned houses and shops attacked
WWL 2020	01 Nov 2018 - 31 Oct 2019	0	2	19	0	0
WWL 2019	01 Nov 2017 - 31 Oct 2018	0	10	11	3	1
WWL 2018	01 Nov 2016 - 31 Oct 2017	0	2	25	2	30

*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.*

For the WWL 2020 reporting period:

- **Christians attacked:** 2 Christian deaf women received beatings.
- **Christians arrested:** At least 19 Christians were arrested, including a group of Christians at a Kazakh airport in April 2019 and 2 pastors and a pastor’s wife in July 2019.

## 5 Year trends

The following three charts illustrate how the situation for Christians in Kazakhstan has deteriorated since WWL 2016.

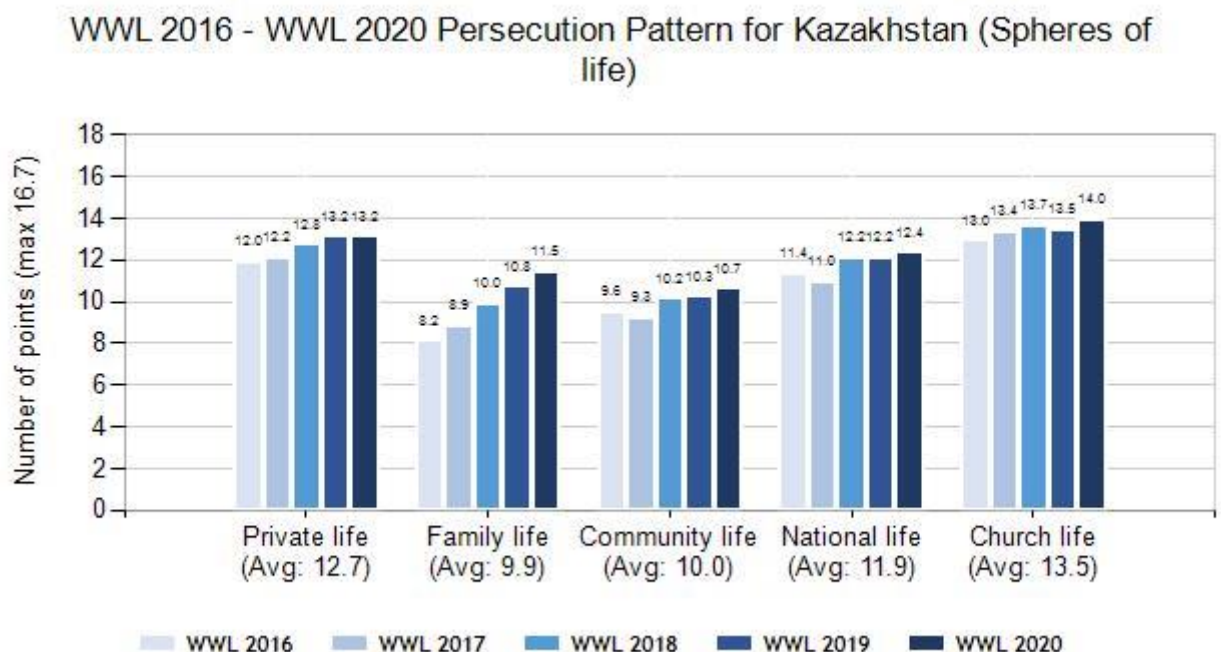
### Chart 1:

The table below shows that the average pressure on Christians has risen steadily over the past five reporting periods from 10.8 to 12.4 points.

WWL 2016 - WWL 2020 Persecution Pattern history: Kazakhstan	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2020	12.4
2019	12.0
2018	11.8
2017	11.0
2016	10.8

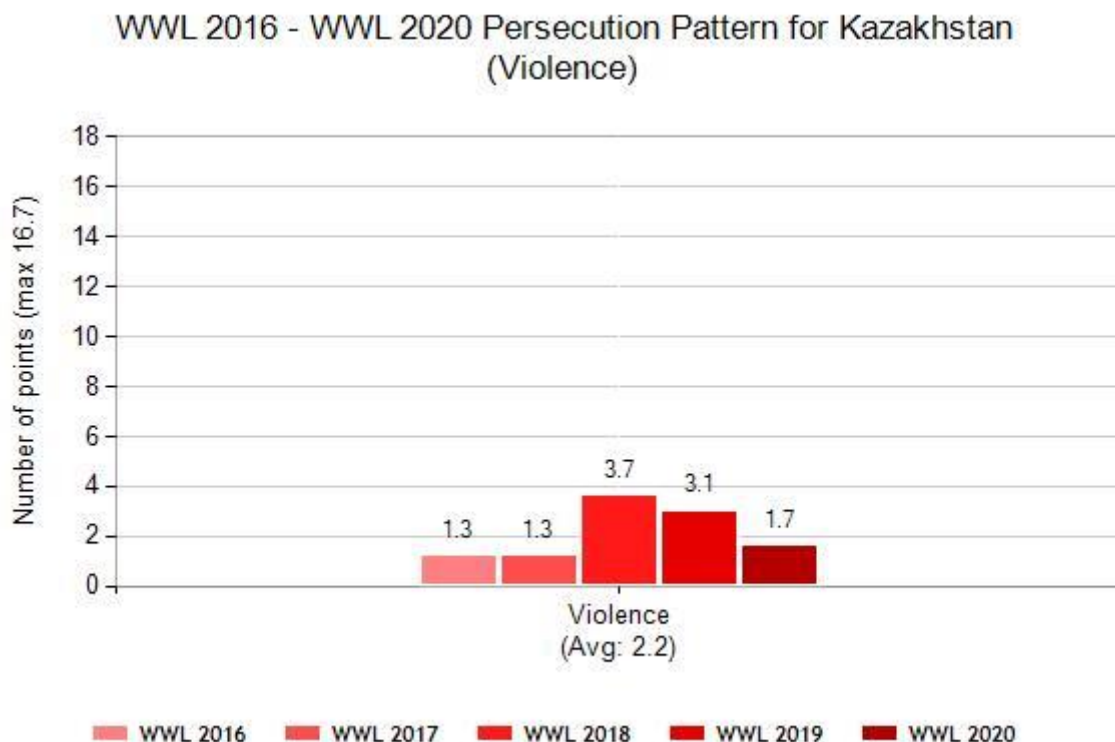
### Chart 2:

The chart below shows that pressure seems to have more-or-less levelled off in the *Private, Community, National and Church life spheres* (the latter at an extremely high level). However there have been rises in pressure in every reporting period in *Family life*, reflecting how especially converts have come under greater pressure.



**Chart 3:**

The chart below shows that the scores for violence seem to be returning to their original low level of under 2 points after reaching a level of over 3 points in WWL 2018-WWL 2019.



### Gender profile of persecution

**Female Pressure Points:**

- ***Abduction***
- ***Forced to flee town/country***
- ***Incarceration by family***
- ***Violence - physical***

Although Kazakh law gives equal rights to men and women, [traditionalists](#) continue to reject the idea of gender equality. A report by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women ([CEDAW](#)) published on 11 November 2019 congratulated Kazakhstan for its progress in reducing maternal mortality and improving girls’ access to education. Nonetheless, it also noted the lack of effective measures necessary to address gender-based violence against women, as well as the prevalence of polygamy, child and forced marriage and bride kidnapping. The traditional Islamic and cultural practices which treat women as inferior to men is felt to be the main factor that makes women and girls who convert to Christianity more vulnerable to persecution.

Female converts are at greater risk of suffering physical and verbal abuse, harassment, threats and house arrest. A family might keep a convert under house arrest, since the exposure of a convert in the family would bring great shame to the family in the eyes of the community. Such persecution is experienced especially by converts, but non-convert Christians who are married to a non-Christian may also experience this.

Forced marriage to a Muslim is not uncommon and is sometimes linked to abduction. Spouses and children of converts in the countryside have also experienced pressure from their families who try to keep them within Islam. Some female Christian converts find the pressure so intense that they are either forced to leave their homes or have to go into hiding. Women have very little possibility of [living on their own](#), with few skills, very high unemployment and no outside support from the authorities.

#### **Male Pressure Points:**

- ***Denied access to Christian religious material***
- ***Denied inheritance or possessions***
- ***Discrimination/harassment via education***
- ***Economic harassment via fines***
- ***Economic harassment via work/job/business***
- ***Incarceration by family***
- ***Military/militia conscription/service against conscience***
- ***Violence – physical***
- ***Violence – psychological***
- ***Violence – verbal***

In the public sphere, men tend to have roles with [higher levels of responsibility](#) than women, and the religious persecution which Christian men experience reflects this socio-cultural structure. Christian men are, for their faith, subject to verbal and physical abuse, accusations and threats, beatings, home detention, rejection and loss of their inheritance.

State-based persecution has included interrogations, fines, detention and imprisonment. When a Christian gathering is raided, the leaders (generally men) bear the brunt of the raid. Further, obligatory military service for young men provides an extra potential risk of persecution because it is a highly controlled environment in a Muslim-majority state. Further, those Christians, who for religious reasons, do not want to take up arms are still forced to join the army.

Church leaders are normally male; men are the head of the family and the main bread winners. When a Christian man becomes a target of persecution - for instance, by losing his job - his whole family will be affected. Earning a living remains complicated for Christian men since they are directly affected by the bribes required of Protestants in order to run their businesses. Converts in the countryside are especially under pressure at this point. Some business owners keep their Christian beliefs a secret. Reports indicate that Protestants are persecuted in this way but not Orthodox Christians, and converts most definitely face pressure on their businesses from the local authorities and local community.



Converts and church leaders particularly risk losing employment due to their faith. If a man is a church leader, any persecution he faces will also affect the congregation he serves, which can easily result in an increase of fear in the church community.

In addition, men who convert to Christianity are also vulnerable to persecution from their family. Young men who are still students and need financial support, risk losing this support upon conversion. Compounding the issue for young male converts seeking a Christian education, a recent regulation now restricts travel for educational purposes. These regulations severely limit the opportunity for Kazakh citizens to travel abroad to study in institutions of Christian education. Since men travel more than women, men are affected more.

## Persecution of other religious minorities

According to Forum 18 – a Norwegian human rights organization that promotes religious freedom – during 2017, the Kazakh authorities brought administrative charges against 279 individuals, religious communities, charities and companies for attending worship meetings, offering or importing religious literature and pictures, sharing or teaching faith, posting religious material online, praying in an unapproved manner in mosques, bringing a child to a religious meeting, maintaining inadequate security measures at places of worship, or failing to pay earlier fines. The punishments included fines, prison sentences, bans on religious activity, deportations and seizure of religious literature. During the year, the government convicted 23 individuals for practicing their religion. Of these, 20 were Sunni Muslims, two Jehovah’s Witnesses, and one Baptist. (Source: [US State Department, International Religious Freedom Report for 2017](#))

Examples:

- A 28-year-old resident of Balkhash has become the 73rd Muslim (since the beginning of 2015) known to have been convicted and punished for alleged membership of the Tablighi Jamaat Muslim missionary movement. Balkhash City Court jailed Abilai Bokbasarov for three years on 9 January 2019 and banned him for a further five years (upon release) from exercising freedom of religion or belief. (Source: [Forum 18](#), 14 February 2019)
- In April 2019 Forum 18 reported that 18 Sunni Muslims are known to be in jail for faith-related reasons. In addition, a further 10 Sunni Muslims are known to be serving restricted freedom sentences for faith-related reasons. (Source: [Forum 18](#), 18 April 2019)
- On 2 July 2019, Aktobe Regional Court rejected Bolat Isabayev's appeal against a fine of three weeks' average wages for leading a Jehovah's Witness meeting. Police had raided the 19 April meeting (Good Friday) in Kandyagash, allegedly after complaints from neighbors. (Source: [Forum 18](#), 11 July 2019)

## Future outlook for the church

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

**Dictatorial paranoia:** The current government exerts a high level of control over the country. Government officials at all levels are the main persecutors of Christians in Kazakhstan, imposing all kinds of legal restrictions, monitoring all religious activities, carrying out raids on meetings and blocking the availability of religious materials. This is not likely to change in the near future.

**Islamic oppression:** Islam is not the state religion but it is the traditional religion of most of the population. Muslims are treated in the same manner as other religions. Muslim pressure on Christians in Kazakhstan does not come from radical Islamic movements but rather from the far-reaching cultural influence of Muslim family, friends and community on converts. The chances that this will change soon are as good as non-existent.

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

## External Links - WWL 2020: Persecution Dynamics

- Gender profile of persecution: traditionalists - <http://http://www.socialwatch.org/node/10930>
- Gender profile of persecution: (CEDAW) - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25277&LangID=E>
- Gender profile of persecution: living on their own - <http://https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/fighting-patriarchy-in-kazakhstan/%20>
- Gender profile of persecution: higher levels of responsibility - <https://www.oecd.org/gov/Gender-Highlights-Kazakhstan.pdf>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: US State Department, International Religious Freedom Report for 2017 - <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dclid=281024>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Forum 18 - [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2452](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2452)
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Forum 18 - [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2469](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2469)
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Forum 18 - [http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article\\_id=2492](http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2492)

## Additional reports and articles

### WWR in-depth reports

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

### World Watch Monitor news articles

Articles are available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/kazakhstan>.

### Recent country developments

Up-to-date articles are available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Kazakhstan>  
(password: freedom).