

# FINAL WWL 2019 COUNTRY DOSSIER

## YEMEN

### LEVEL 3/EMBARGO

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

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## Introduction

### Copyright Notice

### Introduction

World Watch List Yemen	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2019	86	8
WWL 2018	85	9
WWL 2017	85	9
WWL 2016	78	11
WWL 2015	73	14

*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 Yemen

### Link for general background information

BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14704852>

### Recent country history

Today's Yemen is a relatively 'young' country. Clan-based North Yemen and Communist South Yemen merged in 1990 after years of armed conflict. In the northern part of the country, there has been much tribal violence and fighting in recent years. The Houthi clan claims to be fighting government oppression and wants the restoration of Shia rule in the north of Yemen, although Yemen is mainly Sunni. Since the ousting of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2012, Yemen has seen political turmoil and sporadic violence. In the power vacuum, militants and rebels – including groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) - are fighting to gain control of territory.

In September 2014, protests by Houthis degenerated into fighting with rival forces such as "Islah", Yemen's main Sunni radical Islamic party. In March 2015, after taking over Yemen's capital airport in Sanaa, crucial government ministries and northern areas of the country, the Shiite Houthis forced President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi and his government into exile in Saudi Arabia. In July 2015, forces loyal to the government and southern militias regained control of Aden, backed by the troops and airstrikes of the Sunni Saudi-led coalition, which started in March 2015. Saudi Arabia started this military operation against the Houthis, partly in an attempt to counter Iran's influence in its 'backyard'. In September 2015 President Hadi returned to Aden. Ground fighting between Houthi-aligned forces and resistance groups backed by the Saudi-led coalition continued through 2016.

The [CIA Factbook](#) in its December 2018 update states: "In 2016, the UN brokered a months-long cessation of hostilities that reduced airstrikes and fighting, and initiated peace talks in Kuwait. However, the talks ended without agreement. The Huthis and SALIH's political party announced a Supreme Political Council in August 2016 and a National Salvation Government, including a prime minister and several dozen cabinet members, in November 2016, to govern in Sanaa and further challenge the legitimacy of HADI's government. Further attempts at peace have failed while neither side has made decisive battlefield gains, perpetuating the conflict and deepening the divisions between northern and southern Yemen. Amid rising tensions between the Huthis and SALIH, sporadic clashes erupted in mid-2017, and Huthi forces killed SALIH in early December 2017."

The ongoing civil war in Yemen is the result of several local and national power struggles, aggravated by a regional proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Yemen is currently the theatre of at least four intertwined political crises, involving a constellation of political actors and armed groups seeking political power, recognition and influence (Source: [The Project on Middle East Political Science, January 2018](#)).

### The religious landscape

Around 65% of the population are Sunni Muslim, primarily in the south and east and about 35% are Shiite located mostly in the northwest corner of the country. Christians are a tiny minority, most of whom are from a Muslim background.

Assisted by the chaos of civil war, Islamic militant groups have become more influential. Particularly the influence of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has grown further as it expands its territorial

control in southern Yemen. IS-affiliated groups are also present in the war-torn country and have been attacking both Shiite and government related targets since March 2015. Buildings where Christians or expatriates from Christian countries were operating have been targeted in the course of the fighting. For instance, in March 2016 a Catholic care home for the elderly and disabled was directly targeted by assailants connected to IS.

## The political landscape

As stated in the [BBC country profile](#): "Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi came to power in 2012, after Ali Abdallah Saleh stepped down in a bid to end protests at his long period of authoritarian rule. Mr Hadi briefly resigned in January 2015 and fled to Saudi Arabia when Houthi Shia rebels took over the capital, Sanaa. He returned for a short time to set up a temporary capital in the main city of the south, Aden, with the support of loyalist forces and Saudi-led troops. The Houthis claim that their revolutionary council in Sanaa, headed by Mohammed Ali al-Houthi, is the legitimate government, but the international community backs Mr Hadi."

## The socio-economic landscape

There is rampant unemployment and some [80% of the population](#) is in dire need of humanitarian aid. Prices for commodities like water and flour have risen immensely. In besieged cities the price increase has been 5000%. Supplies of electricity and water have discontinued in most areas. Even if the war stops, Yemen faces long-term challenges, including declining water resources, high unemployment, and a high population growth rate. Within the next two decades, Sanaa could run dry. The cultivation of the country's popular drug *qat* is mainly to blame for the increasing shortage of water. One third of Yemen's population is malnourished, including around [2.9 million women and children](#) who are acutely malnourished. Even before the war more than 45% lived below the official poverty line.

Throughout Yemen, tribal society remains very strong, and the government is a secondary institution to the traditional ways of tribal governance. The government is not likely to intervene in intertribal conflicts, even if tribes are physically harming or imprisoning members. Tribal law and custom prohibit members of the tribe from leaving the tribe. The punishment for this would often be death or banishment. One country researcher reports: "Islam is an overarching identity of all of the tribes in Yemen, and it is the tribe that often delivers retributive 'justice' for those who may seek to leave Islam".

## Concluding remarks

The war in Yemen has led to high levels of violence and lawlessness, a situation which is liable to increase the oppression of minorities, including Christians.

In its Yemen Country Profile, the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) does not foresee the conclusion of a peace deal in the near future, due to lack of common ground between the warring factions. Meanwhile the poorest country of the Middle East finds itself in the middle of a devastating humanitarian catastrophe. The country's humanitarian and economical condition is so bad that it will take years to ever recover. According to the BMI Research Group's Yemen Country Risk Report, Yemen is highly dependent on foreign aid and thus very vulnerable to external economic factors such as a drop in oil prices that would affect financial support for reconstruction from Gulf allies.

EIU analysts expect Islamic militant groups to remain a threat throughout 2017-21. Since radical Islamic groups are an important driver of the main persecution engine in Yemen - *Islamic oppression* -

this does not bode well for the religious freedom of Yemen's religious minorities, notably its Christians. The situation is particularly delicate as the majority of the Christian community consists of indigenous Christians from a Muslim background. On the other hand, amidst the insecurity of war, it is reported that the number of converts to Christianity is on the rise.

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

- Recent country history: CIA Factbook  
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ym.html>
- Recent country history: The Project on Middle East Political Science, January 2018  
[https://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/POMEPS\\_Studies\\_29\\_Yemen\\_Web\\_Jan.2018.pdf](https://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/POMEPS_Studies_29_Yemen_Web_Jan.2018.pdf)
- The political landscape: BBC country profile  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14704852>
- The socio-economic landscape: 80% of the population  
<https://www.unicef.org/appeals/yemen.html>
- The socio-economic landscape: 2.9 million women and children  
<https://www.apnews.com/5a4645766b414fe59b5f00ca3e543bd9>

## WWL 2019: Church History and Facts

### How many Christians?

Pop 2018	Christians	Chr%
28,915,000	a few thousand	-

Source: *Open Doors estimate for number of Christians 2018.*

### How did Christians get there?

Centuries before the advent of Islam, the Arabian Peninsula had considerable numbers of Jews and synagogues, Christians (probably mostly Nestorians) and church buildings.

There are different traditions about how Christianity came to the Arabian Peninsula. According to one tradition, a merchant from Najran (on the southern tip of Saudi Arabia) converted to Christianity during one of his trips to modern day Iraq at the beginning of the 5th century. Together with his family he then formed a house-church. Another tradition suggests that an envoy of the Roman emperor Constantius preached the Christian faith to the Himyarite king of South Arabia who as a result converted. Both traditions say that churches were built particularly – but not exclusively - in South Arabia, which includes modern day Yemen, where most Christians appeared to settle. After the arrival of Nestorianism, Christianity continued to grow and even flourished in the 5th century. This all changed with the conquest of Islam (7th -10th century), when Jews and Christians either converted to Islam voluntarily or under duress, and many others were expelled.

[Over the next centuries](#) the Arabian Peninsula became overwhelmingly Islamic and Christianity lost significance. For 13 centuries the historical role of Christianity in the region was forgotten and it was hard to imagine that any other religion could coexist with Islam in its birthplace. This changed in the 19th century after Britain made a series of treaties and set up a protectorate in the eastern part of the Arabian Peninsula. Christians started to enter Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and the UAE, and with the arrival of these expatriate workers, the first churches began to appear (with the exception of Saudi Arabia). At the end of the 19th century, the first Western missionary, a Scot, arrived in Yemen. In the following years, a medical ministry was set up which also opened the way for communicating Christian faith.

In the rest of the Arabian Peninsula as well, churches have played an important role in providing medical care and schools, especially in the pre-petroleum era. The oil boom in the 1970s led to an enormous expansion of local development, infrastructure and labor force in the Gulf countries, with more foreign workers arriving from Asia, Africa, other parts of the Middle East and the West. Taken altogether, there are now approximately more than 15 million foreign workers in the Gulf, of whom more than 3.5 million are Christians. However, the oil boom had a minimal impact on Yemen and due to the current civil war, hardly any Western expatriates are left in Yemen.

### What church networks exist today?

No reliable list of church networks is currently available. There are three official church buildings (two Roman Catholic and one Anglican) which are located in Aden in the far south. Due to the current civil war, these are damaged and not in use, but they had previously served the several thousand expatriate Christians (mostly from South East Asia, the West and Arabic countries) and refugees (mainly Ethiopian) living in the country. Apart from these official churches no church buildings are allowed. Nevertheless, discreet weekly services are held in private premises in some cities. Almost all Western expatriates have currently left the country for security reasons. The underground church which is

composed of a few thousand local converts to Christianity, constitute the majority of the Church in Yemen now. They form small home fellowships, encourage one another to build families that worship together and build a community that stands together in persecution.

## Religious context

No reliable list of religions is currently available. According to WCD statistics over 99% of the population are Muslim - around 65% are Sunni, and about 35% are Shiite.

## Notes on the current situation

- The current civil war revolves around the Sunni-Shia conflict, with Saudi Arabia and Iran involved too.
- Saudi's highest Islamic authority, the Grand Mufti, issued a fatwa in 2012 calling for the destruction of all Christian churches in the Arabian Peninsula, which necessarily includes Yemen. After legislators in Kuwait made an effort to pass laws prohibiting the construction of any new churches in 2015, the Grand Mufti repeated this call and said the destruction of all churches in the region was absolutely necessary and required by Islamic law.

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

- How did Christians get there?: Over the next centuries  
<https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/christianitys-claim-birthplace-islam>

## WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

### Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

Yemen scored 86 points in WWL 2019 (a rise of one point compared to WWL 2018) and ranks 8.

### What type of persecution dominates?

- **Islamic oppression:** The Constitution declares that Islam is the state religion and Sharia is the source of all legislation. Proselytization by faiths other than Islam is prohibited and Muslims are forbidden to convert to any other religion. Yemenis who leave Islam may face the death penalty. In some areas of Yemen, militant groups such as AQAP and Islamic State (IS) operate with considerable impunity or even in tacit collaboration with the state, especially in Hadi-government aligned areas.
- **Ethnic antagonism:** Yemeni society is strongly tribal and tribal elders often enforce law and justice according to their Islam-based traditions regardless of what the national Constitution or government says.
- **Dictatorial Paranoia:** Within the context of conflict, the survival instinct of warring parties is inevitably strong. This applies to both government and Houthi authorities. Nevertheless, reports during 2018 suggest that in Houthi-controlled areas, increasingly harsh measures have been taken by the Houthi administration against individuals or associations who are deemed by the ruling authority to be a threat.

### Who is driving persecution?

Yemeni Christians face considerable pressure from many different sides. Converts to Christianity suffer mostly from their extended family but also from tribal leaders and local imams, if their new faith is discovered. Within the context of war, the influence of Islamic militant groups has grown considerably and are important drivers of persecution against Christians. Government officials maintain a strict Islamic system that treats all nationals as Muslims. Houthi rebel groups (among others) have detained Christians for questioning. In many areas the Saudi-led military intervention has created power vacuums allowing groups like Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda affiliates to expand their operations, which has led to killings and abductions of both Yemeni Christians with a Muslim background and foreigners in previous reporting periods.

### What it results in

The Church in Yemen is composed mostly of Yemeni Christians with a Muslim background who need to live their faith in secret. They face persecution from the authorities (including detention and interrogation), family, and radical Islamic groups who threaten apostates with death if they do not re-convert. Tribal law prohibits members from leaving the tribe and the punishment for denouncing Islam can be death or banishment. Both male and female converts to Christianity married to Muslims risk divorce including losing custody of their children. Christians are suffering from the general humanitarian crisis in the country, but Yemeni Christians are additionally vulnerable since emergency relief is mostly distributed through Islamic organizations and local mosques, which are allegedly discriminating against all who are not considered to be pious Muslims.

## Violence

The situation in Yemen is very chaotic due to the civil war making violent incidents against Christians highly underreported and difficult to obtain.

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

Yemen	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	27	5	2	2
WWL 2018	01 Nov 2016 - 31 Oct 2017	0	24	1	0	1

*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

- Private worship has become particularly risky for Christians both in areas controlled by the Houthi rebels and in areas that were 'liberated' by Sunni forces supported by Saudi Arabia and its Western allies. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and IS operate freely in large parts of the country.
- At least 27 believers were mentally or physically abused as a result of their faith and the war situation.
- At least five Christian families had to leave their houses and be relocated in the country for fear of assassination for their faith and also for war-related reasons. Some of them returned to their homes later, others had to remain at another location for their safety. The average family in Yemen is composed of seven persons, so this has affected at least 35 people.
- One house-church was attacked and a Catholic cemetery vandalized at the end of 2017. Crosses and tombstones were vandalized, including those on the graves of the four nuns killed when a care-home was attacked in March 2016. A house and a business owned by Christians were taken from them in separate incidents - the house was confiscated and the business was forced to close down.
- Several Christians were detained for faith-related reasons.
- Serious pressure from family members caused a handful of isolated Yemeni converts to flee the country.

## WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

### Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

### Position on World Watch List (WWL)

With a score of 86 points, Yemen ranks 8th in WWL 2019, one position higher than in WWL 2018. The score rose by one point due to a slightly higher number of reported violent incidents against Christians during the WWL 2019 reporting period. Like other civilians, Christians are suffering greatly from the war including the increasing influence of Islamic militants, which adds to the already vulnerable position of indigenous Christians. Most expatriate and migrant Christians have left the country, leaving a Church now composed mainly of indigenous Christians with a Muslim background.

### Persecution engines

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

*Please note: 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 (Very strong):

The Constitution declares that Islam is the state religion and *Sharia* is the source of all legislation. Proselytization by faiths other than Islam is prohibited and Muslims are forbidden to convert to any other religion. Yemenis who leave Islam may face the death penalty. The ongoing conflict, political instability and weak application of the rule of law in many parts of the country, means that pressures faced by Christians and Christian converts in Yemen come principally from non-state actors - including family or tribal sources but also extremist groups. In both cases, application of Islamic values is a principal motivation - Islam is a key part of the identity of Yemeni tribes, while extremist groups such as al-Qaeda AP and Islamic State seek to implement a puritanical form of Islam. They are the main drivers of this persecution engine and have actively targeted and killed Christians.

#### Ethnic antagonism (Very strong):

Yemeni society is strongly tribal and government authority is often secondary to the traditional tribal governance. Islam is intertwined with ethnic identity. There are many areas in Yemen, where tribal elders enforce law and justice according to their Islam-based traditions regardless of what the national constitution or government says. Moreover, the government is not likely to intervene in inter-tribal conflicts, even if tribes are physically harming or imprisoning people. With the government having currently lost control over large parts of the country, its influence on the tribes has further diminished. Tribal law and custom prohibit members of the tribe from leaving the tribe or, in the case of women,

marrying out of the tribe, especially to a Christian; punishment for disobedience can be death or banishment. Some tribal chiefs have their own army. They are radical and anti-Christian. One political analyst sums up the situation well: "Islam is an overarching identity of all of the tribes in Yemen, and it is the tribe that often delivers retributive 'justice' for those who may seek to leave Islam."

### Dictatorial Paranoia (medium):

Yemen has been under a dictatorship for the majority of the past thirty-five years. While Yemen has not experienced as many atrocities at the hands of the dictatorship as other countries, strong force has been used both publicly and privately to maintain power. During the current reporting period this seemed to grow in intensity especially within the Houthi-controlled areas. Within the context of conflict, the survival instinct of warring parties is inevitably strong. Reports during 2018 suggest that in Houthi-controlled areas, increasingly harsh measures have been taken by the Houthi administration against individuals or associations who are deemed by the ruling authority to be a threat. This has included members of religious minority communities, including Christian converts.

### Drivers of persecution

Drivers of Persecution: Yemen	IO	RN	EA	DPR	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	VERY STRONG	-	VERY STRONG	-	-	-	MEDIUM	VERY WEAK
Government officials	Strong	-	-	-	-	-	Strong	Weak
Ethnic group leaders	Strong	-	Very strong	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Christian religious leaders	Very strong	-	Very strong	-	-	-	-	-
Religious leaders of other churches	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Violent religious groups	Very strong	-	-	-	-	-	Very strong	-
Ideological pressure groups	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Strong	-	Strong	-	-	-	-	-
One's own (extended) family	Very strong	-	Very strong	-	-	-	-	-
Political parties	Weak	-	-	-	-	-	Weak	-
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Strong	-	-	-	-	-	Very strong	Weak
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** are government officials, revolutionaries, non-Christian religious leaders, violent religious groups, citizens and family. Government authorities have imprisoned Yemeni Christians because of their faith, often giving other reasons (since they claim to be tolerant towards other religions). Houthi rebel groups (among others) have detained Christians for questioning. However they are mostly pre-occupied with power-related priorities. Other drivers are non-religious leaders like imams and sheiks who are leading village communities. They often take advantage of the fact that a high percentage of the villagers are illiterate and can be easily swayed to go against one of the community members in the village. If a villager is found to be a Christian this could trigger wider societal action leading to banishment or at least pressure to leave the community. In some areas of Yemen, militant groups such as AQAP and IS operate with considerable impunity or even with tacit collaboration with the state, especially in Hadi-government aligned areas. Local Christians are particularly vulnerable to radical Islamic groups, as are any others perceived to be 'apostates' by these groups. Community and family hostility or the fear of it is a major form of pressure faced by Yemeni Christians. Under widely-held community and family values, any member who brings shame on the community or family (for example: by leaving Islam) has to be dealt with in order to restore community/family honor.

**Drivers of Ethnic antagonism** are tribal and clan leaders, including tribe or family members (citizens). Tribal law and custom prohibit members of the tribe from leaving the tribe and punishment for disobedience can be death or banishment. The same applies to any tribe member leaving Islam, as *Ethnic antagonism* is blended with *Islamic oppression*.

**Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia** are government officials and rebel groups. In the context of civil war, government officials, Houthi rebels, al-Qaeda and IS affiliates will do anything to increase their territorial power. Although state institutions are weak, there have still been recent reports of state-perpetrated injustice against Christians. In particular, there are reports of the Houthi administration arresting Christians and members of other religious communities such as Bahai. Often there are a range of motives for such actions, one of which is the disapproval of non-Islamic religious beliefs. Also, militants belonging to AQAP and IS continue to target Christians in areas that have been "liberated" by Saudi-led Forces.

## Context

Clan-based North Yemen and Communist South Yemen only merged in 1990 after years of armed conflict. Still today, the separatist movement in the South remains strong and is fighting for independence. In the northern part of the country, there has been much tribal violence and fighting in recent years. The Houthi clan claims to be fighting government oppression and wants the restoration of Shia rule in the north of Yemen, which is mainly Sunni. Since the ousting of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2012, Yemen has seen political turmoil and violence. A Saudi-led coalition (composed of ten mostly Sunni Muslim nations) has been bombing Yemen from the air, destroying residential areas, infrastructure, hospitals and world heritage sites in attempts to wrest control from the Houthi rebels and restore the Hadi government. The Houthis are allegedly supported by Iran.

The influence of radical Islamic groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and IS-affiliated groups is growing, with the latter attacking both Shiite and government related targets. Church buildings or medical facilities where expatriate or migrant Christians were operating have also been targeted. Months long cessation of hostilities and peace talks have not led to agreement and meanwhile the conflict continues and deepens the divisions between northern and southern Yemen. As the conflict drags on, more countries risk being involved in the Saudi-Iranian battle for regional hegemony which will further sharpen sectarian fault lines in the Middle East.

Meanwhile, Yemen is facing a dire humanitarian crisis. According to new data was collected by an independent research group, Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) and reported by Middle East Eye on 29 October 2018: "At least 56,000 people have been killed in armed violence in Yemen since January 2016", a much higher figure than the often quoted number of more than 10,000 Yemenis killed since the start of the war in March 2015. In an article published on 21 November 2018, the BBC quoted leading charity Save the Children, which claimed that "an estimated 85,000 children under the age of five may have died from acute malnutrition in three years of war in Yemen". In a United Nations News Center press release published on 3 July 2018, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Chief shared her concern on the dire situation of children, who were routinely "taken out of school, forced to fight, married off, hungry, dying from preventable diseases," adding that "today, 11 million children in Yemen – more than the entire population of Switzerland – need help getting food, treatment, education, water and sanitation." The press release further mentions: "Since 2015, health facilities have been cut by more than half; 1,500 schools have been damaged by airstrikes and shelling; and at least 2,200 children have been killed with around 3,400 injured."

## Christian communities and how they are affected

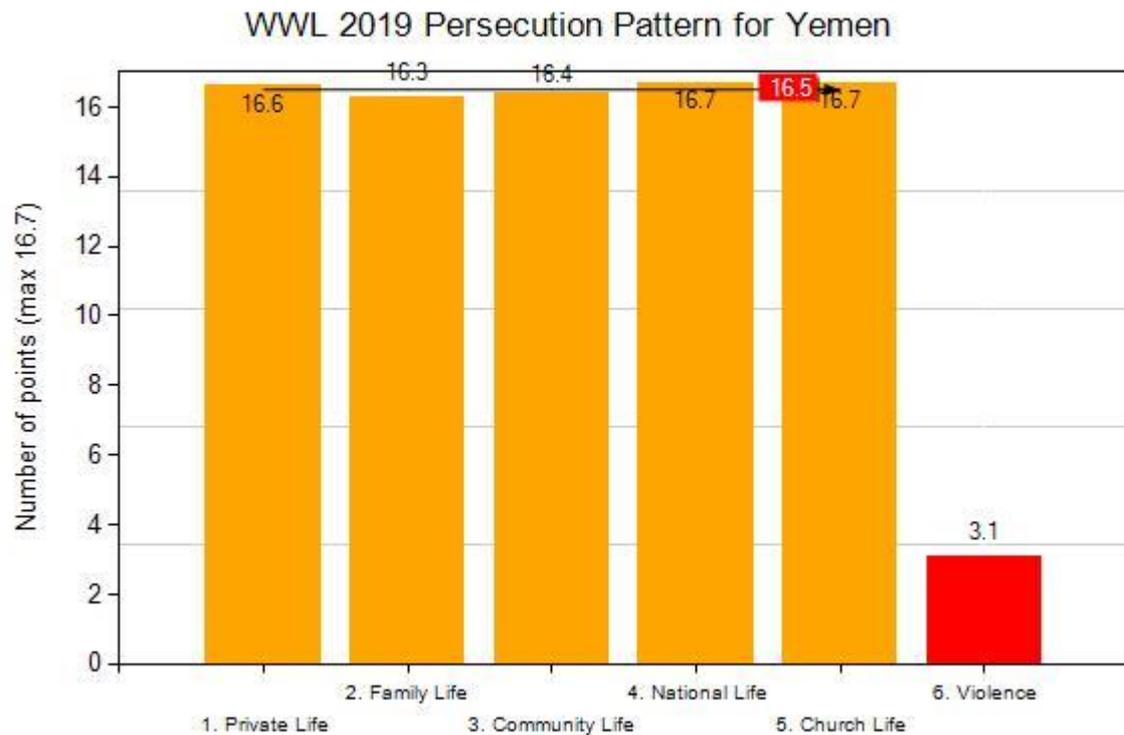
**Communities of expatriate Christians:** Previously, most Christians in Yemen were expatriate or migrant workers (from North Africa, the West, South and East Asia, or Arab countries) and refugees (mainly Ethiopian). The majority were Roman Catholics or Anglicans (with some Orthodox in the case of Ethiopian refugees). Virtually all Western expatriates have left the country for security reasons as a result of the devastating war. Migrant Christians, particularly from Africa and also from Asia remain in the country though many have left as well. In what is most likely a combination of racial and religious persecution, migrant Christians face harassment and discrimination from society at a community and national level, and even outspoken violence from radical Islamic movements. As their numbers have decreased considerably and the Church is now composed mainly of indigenous Christians, the community of expatriate Christians is not the focus of the WWL questionnaire.

**Historical Christian communities:** Indigenous historical Christian communities are not present in Yemen.

**Converts to Christianity:** At least 95% of the Yemeni Church is made up of converts from Islam. Although there are only a few thousand Yemeni Christians, there has been a growth in numbers which means that more local advice and support is available for new Christians than before. Vulnerability for converts remains very high throughout the country due to a combination of traditional family/community/tribal attitudes, the impunity with which radical Islamic groups are able to operate and the refusal of state or de facto state authorities to tolerate dissent through fear of even greater destabilization.

**Non-traditional Christian communities:** Indigenous non-traditional Christian communities are not present in Yemen.

## Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



The persecution pattern for WWL 2019 shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in Yemen continues to be at an extreme level (16.5), with a slight decrease compared to WWL 2018 (16.6). The extreme pressure is explained by the war and pressure on the indigenous church which is mostly composed of converts from Islam to Christianity.
- Pressure in all *Spheres of life* is at an extreme level. The *National* and *Church spheres* both scored the maximum possible (16.7), directly followed by the *Private sphere* with 16.6 points. This is typical for a situation in which there are mostly Christians with a Muslim background in a country with *Islamic oppression* as the main persecution engine, leaving no room for any open church activities or private worship.
- The level of violence against Christians saw an increase from 2.6 in WWL 2018 to 3.1 points in WWL 2019. Several Christians were reportedly detained for faith-related reasons and various converts were known to have been physically or mentally abused.
- The overall persecution in Yemen corresponds to the current chaotic and lawless situation of war, in which indigenous Christians are additionally vulnerable.

### Private sphere:

Christians with a Muslim background cannot openly practice their faith. Any impression to those around them that they may be Christians can have serious consequences. Private worship has become particularly risky for Christians in areas controlled by radical Muslims or areas that were "liberated" by Sunni forces. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and IS control large parts of the country.

**Family sphere:**

All Yemeni's are considered Muslims. For a Muslim family, it brings shame when one of its members leaves Islam. Converts to Christianity run the great risk of honor-killing or physical violence if their families or communities discover their faith. Open Christian weddings cannot be celebrated in Yemen and converts must marry under Islamic rites. Converts cannot have their children registered as Christians, and in school their children are obliged to attend Islamic classes. In the case of custody of children in divorces, Christians are likely to be excluded if family members are Muslims.

**Community sphere:**

All Christians are implicitly threatened by the Islamic society in Yemen, and in particular by AQAP and IS. This naturally deters Christians making their religion known in public in any way. Since conversion is officially considered to be illegal, if found out, Christians with a Muslim background are forced by the local Islamic community to report their conversion to the authorities. Female converts are still considered to be Muslims and are expected to wear a veil. They also run the risk of being forced into marriage or house-arrest if their new faith is discovered. In the current humanitarian crisis, converts from Islam are additionally vulnerable in their communities as emergency relief is mostly distributed through Muslim employees of secular organizations and local mosques, which are allegedly discriminating against all who are not considered to be pious Muslims. Also, there is a high level of nepotism. This is a serious threat to the survival of Christians and other non-Muslims.

**National sphere:**

Muslims have more rights than the followers of other religions. The country abides by the strictest interpretations of Islam. Leaving Islam to convert to another religion is forbidden by Islam and by state law. Converts may face the death penalty (though generally not implemented by the government but rather by radical Muslims, with the government turning a blind eye) if their new faith is discovered. Though focusing most of their attention on political events, government officials reportedly continued their efforts to intimidate Christians even amidst the chaotic war situation. Oppression has mostly been felt coming from Islamic militants who have had more freedom to operate. The insecurity caused by radical Islamic movements makes Yemen very unstable. Currently, Christians are suffering especially from lawlessness in the country and from Shiite rebels or groups affiliated with al-Qaeda or IS that are in control of large parts of the country. All Christians are believed to be under surveillance by radical Muslims and can become a specific target for militants.

**Church sphere:**

The three official church buildings (all located in Aden) which served expatriate Christians or refugees (mainly Ethiopian), have been damaged as a result of the war (including targeted attacks). There are no functioning church buildings left. As converts are not allowed to have their own gatherings, they meet in secret locations. Proselytism of Muslims is illegal; publishing and importing Bibles (including other Christian materials) in Arabic are next to impossible.

**Violence:**

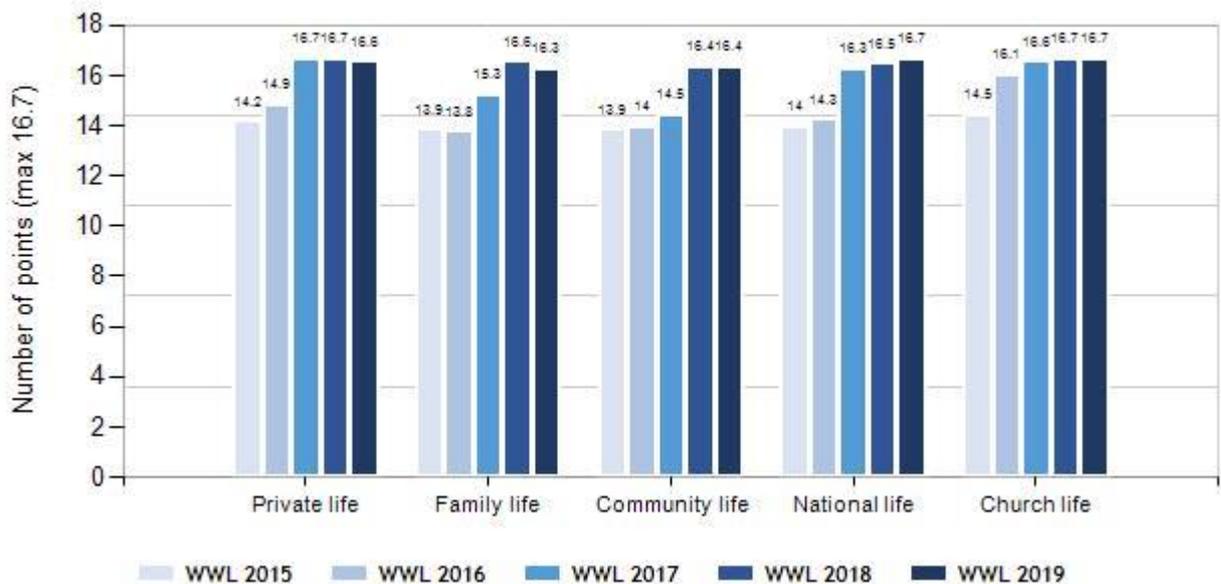
Several Christians were reportedly detained, converts were physically or mentally abused and several Christian families had to move to other places in the country - sometimes returning later- and a few believers reportedly left the country. Motivations for fleeing can vary from fear of assassination for their faith to war related reasons and are often a combination. The situation in Yemen is chaotic due to the civil war and this causes incidents targeting Christians to be highly underreported.

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

### 5 Year trends

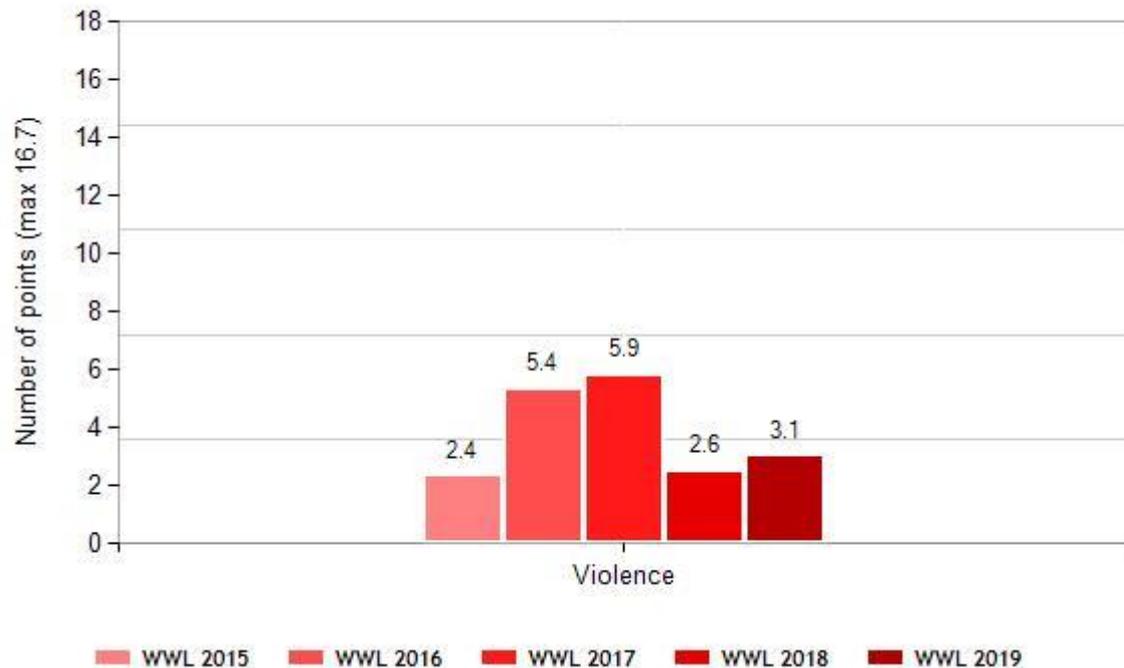
Pressure in all *spheres of life* has been on the increase since WWL 2015 (chart 1) and has now more or less levelled off at an extreme (sometimes maximum) level. As a result of the war, large groups of migrant and expatriate Christians left the country, leaving indigenous Christians as the main focus for WWL analysis from WWL 2018 onwards. This caused a rise in pressure scores in all *spheres of life* since converts experience the very highest levels of persecution, especially in the *family* and *community spheres of life*. The sharpest jump in scores for average pressure (chart 2) can be seen from WWL 2016 to WWL 2017, covering most of 2015 and 2016, which is explained by the start of the civil war in January 2015. This is also visible in the data for violence (chart 3), where there has been a distinct increase in reported violent incidents since WWL 2016. The relatively lower scores for violence in WWL 2018 and WWL 2019 do not mean the situation of Yemeni Christians has improved. In a chaotic situation of civil war many incidents go unreported. Also, it may also reflect that converts have adapted to the more dangerous situation on the ground, thus practising their faith in even more secrecy.

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



WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Pattern history: Yemen	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2019	16.5
2018	16.6
2017	15.9
2016	14.6
2015	14.1

## WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Profile for Yemen (Violence)



## Gender specific persecution

### Female:

In a culture where the oppression of women is normal, female Christians with a Muslim background are additionally vulnerable. They are exposed to the risk of rape, sexual harassment, forced marriage and imprisonment. Tribal law and customs do not allow them to marry a Christian; punishment for disobedience can be death, banishment, or confinement within the home. In a public case reported in local papers, a young woman whose faith in Christ was discovered was committed to an asylum for the mentally ill. Female converts are also likely to be married off to a Muslim if their conversion is known. The local community of converts is reacting to this situation by arranging marriages with other Christians of Muslim background. It is common for women to marry underage as there is no law to protect them against this. For a believing wife with a non-believing husband, if families press for a divorce on account of the wife's faith, it is likely that custody of any children will be granted to the husband or to other Muslim family-members regardless of the ages of the children. Ordinarily the mother would be granted custody until the age of puberty, but an over-riding factor will be the ability to provide an Islamic upbringing.

Female converts may also risk rape or sexual harassment. As such, female converts usually continue to wear the local Muslim dress for their own safety and security. In comparison to men, female seekers and new believers face greater limitations in accessing discipleship training, fellowship with other believers, and opportunities to get baptized —unless they have a close male relative who can facilitate their participation in these activities. This is because families closely monitor the activities of female members of the household outside the home, whereas men can come and go without giving an account of how their time was spent outside the home. Thus, socially accepted conventions and

behaviors keep women in a submissive role in society and at home, leaving them less ability to resist persecution than men.

#### **Male:**

Although women face greater access restrictions to opportunities for discipleship, fellowship, and baptism, men face a greater risk of martyrdom, imprisonment, kidnapping, torture and job loss. While women may be confined to the home, forced to marry a radical Muslim, beaten, or committed to an asylum for the mentally ill, they are less likely to be killed if their faith is discovered by family members or local authorities. This is due to an assumption that women are ignorant or mentally inferior, so they are considered less accountable for their error in judgement. Meanwhile men are more likely to be targeted by militant groups, imprisoned by the local authorities, and are generally more likely to face persecution in the public sphere. Since women are already restricted by their gender from participation in the workforce, workplace discrimination or persecution particularly affects male converts. This also affects their families, since men are usually the sole provider for the household. A man whose wife is not a Christian may be less likely to share his faith with others, since if he died as a result of his witness, his children would be raised as Muslims. Also, in the case of divorce, he would lose custody of his children.

## Persecution of other religious minorities

Other religious minorities facing persecution in Yemen are Bahai and Jews. Ismaili Muslims complain that they face discrimination. Radical Muslims consider Bahais to be infidels, others discriminate against them because of allegedly having connections with Iran, where the religion was founded in the 19th century. [Bahai believers](#) in Yemen are occasionally imprisoned, mistreated, and tortured, mostly by Houthi authorities. They also face pressure to recant their faith. At least 22 adherents of Bahai have been held by authorities in Sana'a since mid-September 2018. They face charges of apostasy – for abandoning the state-sanctioned religion - teaching the Bahai faith and spying; the latter is subject to the death penalty (See [UN News](#), 18 October 2018).

The tiny Jewish community is the only indigenous non-Muslim religious minority group and allegedly there are only 50 members left in the country. Most of them live in the capital Sana'a, which is controlled by Houthi rebels. According to Yemen's information minister, Moammer al-Iryani, Houthi rebels view the small remaining Jewish community as an enemy and are "[engaged in ethnic cleansing which includes seeking to rid Yemen of all Jews](#)". The minister said the Yemeni government is unaware of the fate of the country's remaining Jews.

Sectarian messages and anti-semitic statements continued to be printed, including in textbooks issued by Houthi authorities. Also, radical Islamic teaching was promoted in these textbooks. In a [Quranic culture book](#) for third graders, the words "America" and "Israel" are surrounded by the words: "Our enemy, the head of evil, and the biggest Satan". Finally, the slogan on the Houthi flag is self-explanatory: "God Is Great, Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse on the Jews, Victory to Islam."

## Future outlook

### **The political outlook:**

In spite of ongoing peace negotiations, there is no likelihood of a peace deal being reached between Saudi-led coalition forces and Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in the near future. According to comments by the [Economist Intelligence Unit](#) (EIU) in 2018, there is little common ground for negotiations: The rebel Houthis have little incentive to negotiate and Saudi Arabia does not accept having pro-Iranian

fighters at its borders. Even if a deal was agreed on, al-Qaeda is still present and the increasing calls for southern secessionism point to a continued conflict.

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

- **Islamic oppression:** Al-Qaeda is expected to remain a serious threat in the country for a long time to come due to the weak central security. Since Islamic militants (including the Shiite Houthis) are major drivers of *Islamic oppression* in Yemen, this does not bode well for religious freedom among Yemen's religious minorities, notably its Christians. Since the majority of the Christian community (affected by most expatriate Christians leaving the country) are converts from Islam, they will be facing increased danger in the future. However, amid the insecurity of war, it is reported that the number of converts to Christianity is on the rise.
- **Ethnic antagonism:** Nationwide, sectarian and tribal divisions are deepening which are an important barrier to peace and stability. The continuing conflict is likely to force people to rely on their own tribes even more, which as a result is likely to increase the levels of pressure on converts to Christianity.
- **Organized corruption and crime:** In the situation of war and anarchy, government corruption at all levels will undoubtedly continue and any expatriate Christians remaining in the country will continue to face the risk of kidnapping for ransom.

**Conclusion:**

According to a leader of a NGO active in the country, wherever the Saudi-led coalition forces have dominated or freed areas, the local Christians were often targeted by radical Sunnis as a consequence. Due to the rising levels of violence and lawlessness, the oppression of minorities in Yemen (including Christians) is liable to increase.

**External Links - WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics**

- Context: At least 56,000 people have been killed in armed violence in Yemen since January 2016  
<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/yemen-death-toll-five-times-higher-new-data-774808860>
- Context: killed  
<http://https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/06/key-facts-war-yemen-160607112342462.html%20>
- Context: an estimated 85,000 children under the age of five may have died from acute malnutrition in three years of war in Yemen  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-46261983>
- Context: press release  
<http://https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/07/1013802%20>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Bahai believers  
<http://http://www.worldatlas.com/articles/religious-beliefs-in-yemen.html>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: UN News  
<https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/10/1022762>

- Persecution of other religious minorities: engaged in ethnic cleansing which includes seeking to rid Yemen of all Jews  
<https://www.timesofisrael.com/yemeni-minister-says-fate-of-countrys-remaining-jews-unknown/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Quranic culture book  
<http://https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>
- Future outlook: Economist Intelligence Unit  
<http://country.eiu.com/Yemen>

## 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).