

# FINAL WWL 2019 COUNTRY DOSSIER

## AFGHANISTAN

### LEVEL 3/EMBARGO

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

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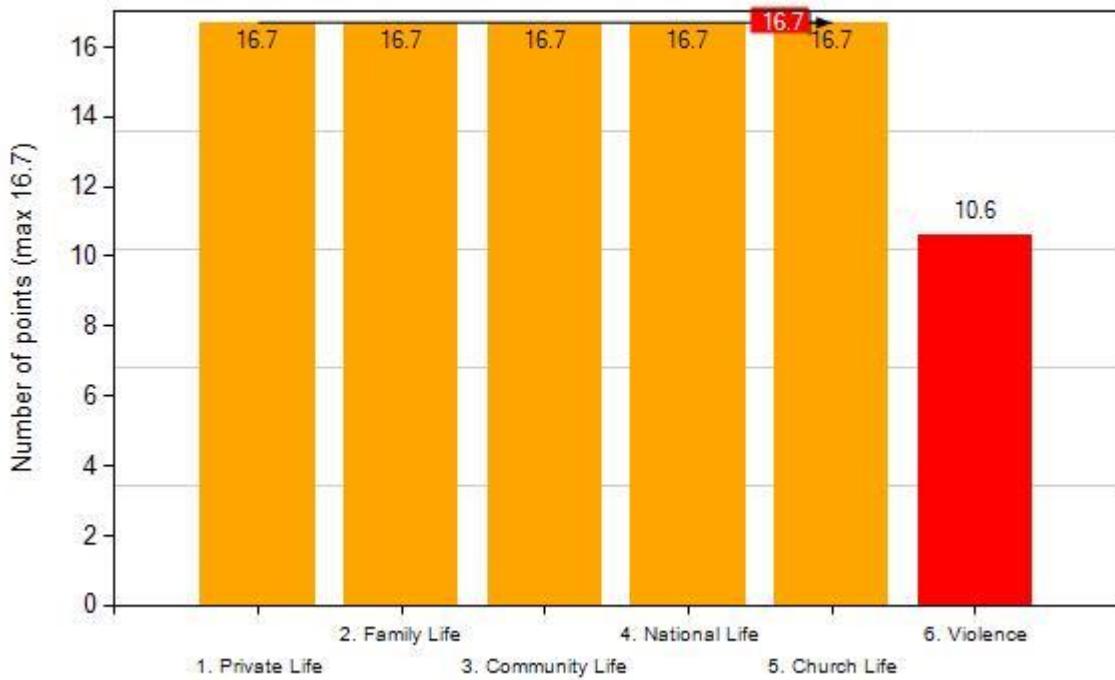
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## Introduction

### Copyright Notice

### Introduction

World Watch List Afghanistan	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2019	94	2
WWL 2018	93	2
WWL 2017	89	3
WWL 2016	88	4
WWL 2015	81	5

*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:**

1. 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 Afghanistan

### Link for general background information

See BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12011352>

### Recent country history

In 1996 the Taliban seized control of Kabul and imposed radical Sharia law until 2001 when they were ousted from power by the US-led international military invasion. In 2004 Hamid Karzai won the first presidential elections and in 2005 the first parliamentary elections were held for more than 30 years. In 2014 NATO formally ended its combat mission in Afghanistan. However, international troops continue to be based in the country and, following an announcement by the USA in 2017, numbers have been increased.

Elections in 2014 led to a political stand-off, which could only be solved when the former foreign minister and ethnic Tajik, Abdullah Abdullah, acknowledged his defeat and accepted Ashraf Ghani as the new president. Abdullah was then announced CEO of the country, a position nowhere to be found in the Afghan constitution. This compromise was called the "National Unity Government". This government proved to be shaky, inconsistent and challenged in multiple ways, but has survived. The next presidential election is scheduled for April 2019.

The elections which took place on 20 October 2018 did not change the status quo. They were challenged by internal and external factors: A short-term decision to use biometric voter identification systems led to many technical problems and there were attacks by the Taliban.

### The religious landscape

Officially there are no Christians in this 99% Muslim state, apart from international military staff, diplomats and NGO workers. Indigenous Christians (mostly those with a Muslim background) are in hiding as much as possible. 90% of Muslims in Afghanistan follow Sunni Islam, while 9.7% adhere to Shiite Islam. The Hazara tribe is predominantly Shiite, while the main ethnic group, the Pashtu, are Sunni. They dominate the political landscape, but are in need of such minorities as the Uzbeks and Tajiks to exercise power. There are very few Sikh, Hindu and Bahai in the country which do not have much more freedom than Christians, but their advantage is that they are not perceived as being Western and alien.

The security situation looks grimmer than ever due to the influx of foreign Sunni militants in the form of the Islamic State group (IS). The radical Islamic Taliban are also increasing in strength and their fighting units are present in more regions than in the last few years. At least half of the country's provinces are either ruled or contested by the Taliban. The relatively small group of IS-adherents call themselves "Islamic State of the Khorasan Province" and consist mainly of splinter groups of former Taliban. They have mainly targeted Hazara and other Shiites in an effort to sow further sectarian discord.

### The political landscape

Competing factions of radical Islamic groups as well as a weak and divided government (despite its name "National Unity Government") do not bode well for the future of the country. The quick consecutive changes in leadership of several radical Islamic groups (due to targeted killings) has not reduced their ability to execute attacks and harm government, national army and citizens.

Warlords representing ethnic factions influence the political scene. Even occasional peace accords with warlords – such as the one with the infamous Hekmatyar in September 2016, who is known for his very outspoken hostility towards Christians - will most likely change nothing for the country's security. The same goes for the brief Eid ceasefire between government and Taliban in June 2018. Afghanistan is still the country with the most landmines in the world, the level of crime is increasing, criminal gangs are active in various regions and kidnappings occur frequently.

The Taliban are once again an increasing threat to stability too. The brief capture of Northern Kunduz, at the end of September 2015, was a major blow to the government as it was the first provincial capital to be re-conquered by the Taliban since 2001. It showed as well that the Taliban are not just powerful in their strongholds in the southern province Helmand. Violent attacks across the country are increasing and civilians are paying the price for it, especially as Islamic State and the Taliban are competing with each other.

Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have made inroads into the country as well. This even went so far that the Taliban publically warned Islamic State (IS) to stay off their turf in June 2015. Nangarhar province turned out to be a stronghold for IS, although its actual numbers appear to be relatively small. However, it already poses a serious challenge for national and international security forces and carries out attacks with great brutality. This was acknowledged by US troops dropping its largest ever non-nuclear bomb in 2017 on an IS-hideout, killing at least eighty, many being militants from abroad.

## The socio-economic landscape

Afghanistan is in an uncomfortable position as it is a land-locked country and, due to decades of civil war, the infrastructure is not only in very bad shape, but is also limited in capacity. The country cannot currently take advantage of its rich minerals (and most likely oil and gas as well) as these commodities need foreign investment, which in turn needs stability and predictability. Even China, which is commodity-hungry and willing to take more risks than most other investors, remains cautious. One of the main economic problems Afghanistan faces is that illicit drugs like opium are much more lucrative than virtually any other crop. Compared to wheat, farmers can earn three times the amount of money with poppy production. Even when a considerable share has to be paid to Taliban networks, it is still highly profitable. Although recently dropping in terms of price and area, the opium trade still makes up around 3% of the equivalent of the country's licit GDP. The Taliban are heavily involved in drug production, estimations are that 70-80% of all drug trafficking gains end up in the Taliban's pockets. Afghanistan's main opium production hub, the southern province of Helmand, is home to around 50% of the country's area suitable for poppy cultivation and a stronghold of the Taliban.

The country is not only war-torn, but also torn between different ethnic groups which are strong in different parts of the country. It seems that all are aiming to secure their own position (whether the majority group, the Pashtuns, or other large groups like Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Aiman or Turkmen) and are not interested in the well-being of Afghanistan as a whole. Divisions occur along Pashtun tribal lines as well; President Ghani has been accused of favoring his own Ghilzai tribe, while sidelining the influential Durrani tribe. A famous Afghani saying illustrates this: "First my tribe, then my people and then the country". This attitude leaves the country with rough roads ahead, especially given the weakness of national security forces.

The term "civil society" is virtually unknown in Afghanistan, so pressure groups caring for social development, women issues, minorities or human rights can do little to influence the country's political development. Groups supporting the rule of law, participation in the political process or government accountability, are quickly suspected of being agents of the international community, furthering the

agenda of the West. These accusations do not only come from the government but also from society. This mindset makes it easy for any insurgents to mobilize a large number of the population to oppose "foreign occupiers" who are labeled as non-believers. This would seem to apply also to Western non-government organizations working in the country, including the few Christian ones. As USCIRF put it in their 2017 country report: "NGOs reported Muslim residents remained suspicious of development assistance projects, which they often viewed as surreptitious efforts to advance Christianity or engage in proselytization." This is one of the reasons why attacks against aid workers continue. Recent examples were two Christian women from Germany and Finland, working for Operation Mercy in Kabul, who were killed and abducted respectively in May 2017. On the other hand, according to a report published in May 2018, 66% of the Afghan government's budget depends on foreign aid.

## Concluding remarks

Life for most Afghans is a constant balancing act with little hope for improvement and an ever increasing level of insecurity. More than 50% of the population is younger than 20 years old and the high population growth only exacerbates the problems. Unemployment, poverty and inflation rates remain very high. Due to the lack of perspectives, many young people get involved in drug-trafficking or join militant groups. On the other hand, many people are fed-up with the violence coming from insurgent groups like Taliban or Islamic State and do not trust them, even if negotiations would start. People are longing for peace. Foreign aid will not sustain improvement as long as the problem of rampant corruption is not solved. The strong push by neighboring Pakistan to send back very large numbers of Afghan refugees, adds additional strain on social, health and economic structures.

## WWL 2019: Church History and Facts

### How many Christians?

Pop 2018	Christians	Chr%
36,373,000	thousands	0.0

Source: Open Doors estimate for number of Christians 2018.

### How did Christians get there?

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

In the 17th century, Armenian merchants came to Kabul and in time a small Christian community developed, but this Armenian community was forced to leave the country by 1871. Attempts at building a Protestant church in Kabul came to an end in 1973. Today, Christianity has been pushed underground completely. It is claimed that in the basement of the Italian embassy, there is still a legally recognized church, the only in the country. But it is not publically accessible and therefore only serves expatriate Christians.

### What church networks exist today?

For security reasons no WCD breakdown of church networks is shown here. Open Doors records the presence of both individual Christians and small groups, but there is no organized church (neither expatriate nor indigenous). Since conversion to Christianity is such a life-threatening decision, no exact numbers are published here. There are however several congregations of Afghan Christians abroad, as [The Guardian](#) reported in 2010.

### Religious context

For security reasons no WCD breakdown is shown here, but according to WCD statistics, more than 99% of the population is Muslim (up to 90% of them Sunni) and there are small groups of Hindus, Bahai, Buddhists and Christians in the country (among others). The two main languages are Pashtu and Dari (a Farsi dialect). The largest ethnolinguistic groups are Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Aimak, Turkmen, Baloch and others. The Afghan constitution mentions 14 different ethnic groups.

There are many ethnic tensions in Afghanistan, as the Pashtuns are often regarded as being too dominant, but even within the Pashtun community, there are countless rifts. Political cooperation is constantly affected by mistrust and the National Unity Government (forged by international powers in 2014) is no exception.

### Notes on the current situation

Afghanistan has always been a playing-field for its bigger neighbors; Pakistan, India, Iran, Russia and China all have interests at stake, as well as the countries supporting the international military presence, first and foremost the USA. Those interests not only deal with debated borders, illicit drug-trafficking and the spread of violent groups across Afghan borders, but also with a deeper-rooted mistrust against

all foreign influence. The government tries to make the best of the situation, looking for additional loans and trying to deal with complex diplomatic issues.

The growing influence of the Taliban and their increasing ability to contest more and more districts and provinces has underlined once more that Afghanistan does not lack radical groups which despise every Christian teaching and will not hesitate to attack everything perceived as Christian. Expatriate Christians remain a target for Islamic militants - even if their Christian faith is kept private, it is enough that they are employed by charities motivated by Christian faith. Although no expatriate Christians are known to have been killed for their faith in the WWL 2019 reporting period, the killing of one European Christian and the abduction of another in May 2017, both of whom had been working for a charity in Kabul, still goes to show how dangerous life is for all Christians in Afghanistan.

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

- What church networks exist today?: The Guardian  
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/dec/29/afghanistan-christian-converts>



## WWL 2019: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

### Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

### What type of persecution dominates?

**Islamic oppression:** The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan neither allows any Afghan citizens to become Christians nor recognizes converts as such. Conversion is seen as apostasy. The Taliban have also increased their control over parts of the country and have a growing influence.

**Ethnic antagonism:** People are deeply entrenched in caring for their families and tribes. If someone dares to turn from his tribe to embrace something new and maybe even foreign, this results in high pressure to make that person return to traditional norms.

**Organized corruption and crime:** Opium production has reached record levels. Everyone who is in the way of the drug lords will simply be pushed aside. In most cases, this does not happen to Christians alone, as they hide their faith as much as possible, but they are also affected as they do not have any people to turn to in order to seek help.

### Who is driving persecution?

Since Afghanistan is per constitution an Islamic state, all other religions are seen as alien. Government officials are hostile towards any signs of Christianity, as are ethnic group leaders, leaders of local mosques and ordinary citizens. Anyone leaving Islam is seen as betraying their tribal community. In most cases, conversion brings shame for the family and family members will do all in their power to bring the convert back to Islam or to atone for the shame. All kinds of Islamic vigilante groups are fighting for the honor of their religion and any deviation - even if only perceived - is highly dangerous.

### What it results in

All Afghan Christians are converts from Islam and are not able to live their faith openly. Very often there is only one possible outcome for exposed and caught Christians: They will be killed. Neither radical Islamic groups nor a convert's extended family show mercy in this respect. Converts are considered insane to leave Islam and some may end up in a psychiatric hospital and have their houses destroyed. The family, clan or tribe has to save its 'honor' by disposing of the Christian.

### Violence

For security reasons, no details on violence directed against Christians can be listed here.

### Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period

There are reports that several converts were killed in the WWL 2019 reporting period, but for security reasons no details can be published. Although no expatriate Christian was killed for his or her faith, Christian aid workers have been [targeted and killed](#) in the recent past (May 2017). Any visible acts of Christian worship are dangerous. As all religious 'changes' are noticed and reported, this often means that converts have to relocate; neighborhood pressure and the influence of the Taliban or Islamic State group is strong. If found even exploring any faith other than Islam (and especially if suspected of having converted), the penalty can be death and it depends on the family situation what the consequences are. Christians will be employed as long as it is believed they are Afghan Muslims. If

it is discovered that they are even only exploring Christianity (e.g. via websites in the internet), immediate action is taken to re-indoctrinate them until they and (any group involved) comply. This can mean torture.

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

- Examples of specific persecution in the reporting period: targeted and killed  
<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/05/german-aid-worker-killed-finnish-woman-kidnapped-kabul/>

## WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

### Introduction

Reporting period: 1 November 2017 - 31 October 2018

### Position on World Watch List (WWL)

In the WWL 2019 reporting period Christians in Afghanistan endured the same extreme levels of pressure as in North Korea. In terms of scoring, Afghanistan and North Korea only differ through a slightly lower score for violence in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the very high level score for violence reflects a further increase in insurgency – not only has the Islamic State group joined the Taliban as a violent Islamic player in Afghanistan, the latter also controls an increasing amount of the country’s territory. A second reason for the high score is that (for at least half of the reporting period) preparations for the elections in October 2018 led to a more volatile situation where allegiance to tribe, clan and religion were critical. This tense situation is not going to change with presidential elections planned for April 2019.

### Persecution engines

Persecution engines: Afghanistan	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	Weak
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Strong

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

#### Islamic oppression (Very strong):

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan neither allows any Afghan citizens to become Christians nor recognizes converts as such. Conversion is seen as apostasy and brings shame on the family and the Islamic community. Therefore, converts hide their new-won faith as far as possible. The Taliban and Islamic State group increased their control over parts of the country - according to a report in June 2018 by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, the insurgents control or are fighting to control [across 12 provinces](#) and out of 407 provinces 178 are either fully under Taliban control (59) or are contested (119). Thus they have a growing influence as shown by the high number of attacks and battles with government forces struggling for supremacy in various provinces. The new leadership of the Taliban, which is even more inclined to radical Islamic views, has enhanced its campaigns for controlling areas. Also, the extreme violence used by groups related to the Islamic State group (Islamic State in the Khorasan Province/ISKP) has translated into an even higher number of people being killed in attacks or displaced: According to UN figures, there were [5,122 civilian casualties](#) in first six months of 2018 (1,692 people killed and 3,430 injured). On top of this, Pakistan still threatens to send back more Afghan refugees, and refugees are being sent back from Europe as well.

Christians with an Afghan nationality are all converts with a Muslim background. If they are discovered, they face discrimination and hostility (including death) at the hands of their family, friends and community. Muslim religious leaders will most likely be the instigators and the local authorities can be involved, too. According to a survey published in November 2017, Afghan people display the [highest levels of confidence](#) in their religious leaders and in the media - far ahead of their trust in any politicians. More than 60% of respondents said they would welcome religious leaders being more involved in politics. In the southwestern and eastern parts of the country, this percentage was as high as 75%.

**Ethnic antagonism (Very strong):**

The concept of nation is alien to the Afghan way of thinking. One's own family comes first, followed by the clan and then the tribe – and all of these are much more important than the country. People are deeply entrenched in caring for their families, villages and tribes. If someone dares to turn from his tribe to embrace something new and maybe even foreign, this results in high pressure being exerted to make that person return to traditional norms. If this does not happen, such a person will be looked upon as a traitor of the community and hence excluded. This applies to all "deviations" but even more if someone turns to Christianity. The Christian religion is considered to be Western and hostile to Afghan culture, society and Islam. In this respect, conversion away from Islam is seen as treason. As the USCIRF country report 2017 puts it: "NGOs reported Muslim residents remained suspicious of development assistance projects, which they often viewed as surreptitious efforts to advance Christianity or engage in proselytization."

**Organized corruption and crime (Strong):**

The lack of exportable goods has led to a huge trade imbalance, causing the country to be in constant financial need. A stunning 80% of the GDP comes from the informal sector and so corruption and crime are omnipresent. This also affects Christians because they belong to the poor majority of society. One of the main economic problems Afghanistan faces is that growing illicit drugs like opium is much more lucrative than virtually any other crop; details are to be found in the [UN report](#) published in November 2018. The Taliban are heavily involved in drug production; estimations are that 70-80% of all drug trafficking profit is channeled into funding Taliban activities. The income from poppy cultivation not only funds armed militant groups, it also fuels corruption. Everyone who is in the way of the drug lords will simply be pushed aside, a practice which has intensified.

## Drivers of persecution

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

As Afghanistan is per constitution an Islamic state, all other religions are seen as alien to the country and consequently government parties and officials are hostile towards all signs of Christianity. This is even truer for ethnic group leaders, Islamic leaders and citizens. For most families a conversion brings shame, and the family will do much - in some cases everything necessary - to bring the convert back to Islam or to atone for the shame. The same is true for the wider community (neighbors and friends). The continuing Taliban insurgency, now joined and enforced by the rival Islamic State group, puts an additional pressure on the already hidden group of Christians. If discovered, they face almost certain death or immediate expulsion.

### Drivers of Ethnic antagonism:

The tribal community in Afghanistan is stronger and more important than the state. Everyone leaving this community, for example by changing his or her religion to Christianity, is seen as committing treason and in need of being brought back. The very same drivers already mentioned under Islamic

oppression are active here as well, since in Afghan culture ethnic and religious identity are regarded as being one and the same.

#### **Drivers of Organized corruption and crime:**

Criminal networks, insurgents and violent religious groups are all active in the very lucrative business of drug production and trafficking. Government officials also benefit from it directly or indirectly, by receiving bribes for looking the other way. Everyone who is seen as endangering this business or is simply in its way, is driven away by all means necessary.

## Context

Afghanistan has been a volatile region for centuries. It was ruled by Persians and gained independence as a state in 1709. The north-western part of the country is also known as “Khorasan”, a term which gained prominence when diverse militant groups pledged allegiance to the Islamic State group (IS), announcing the introduction of a “caliphate of Khorasan”. (Ancient Khorasan included parts of Iran and Pakistan as well.) These militants are fighting Afghan government troops in the north-eastern part of the country and follow a plan of deliberately attacking Muslim minorities such as the Shia Hazara, brutalizing this minority and sowing sectarian hatred. The three-day Eid ceasefire in June 2018 was ignored by IS who launched two large attacks during this period. Apart from that, Eid was widely celebrated and Taliban militants could be seen coming to the cities and celebrating the festivities [with their families](#), reflecting how people are longing for peace.

The Western concept of a nation state is alien to Afghanistan; loyalty belongs to the family, the tribe, the ethnicity, religion, but not to a political state. Every decision in the country therefore has to be seen through these multiple lenses. Having authority in Kabul does not mean having authority in the provinces. This is at least partly an explanation for the country’s complicated politics. The National Unity Government has not just faced many challenges, increasing rifts and cracks have emerged. However, it managed to stay intact for the elections in October 2018. What might happen after that (with presidential elections in May 2019) is totally open at the moment. One of the most contentious topics apart from the dire security situation was the introduction of an electronic ID card, the so called “e-tazkira”. Questions under discussion causing particular friction were whether the ID should contain a section on [ethnicity](#), and whether the ID should contain a line with the nationality “Afghan”. Another source for debate was Vice-President Dostum, an ethnic Uzbek. The [internal power struggles](#) within the government came to the fore in July 2017, when he was barred from returning to Afghanistan after receiving “medical treatment” in Turkey. He only [returned](#) to Afghanistan on 22 July 2018 and was immediately “greeted” by a suicide attack which failed to kill him.

Five high-profile suicide attacks within nine days in [January 2018](#) set the tone for 2018, which has been particularly violent. Bringing peace to the country’s war-weary civilian population is an uphill battle in the truest sense of the word. The targeted killing of militant leaders, whether Taliban or IS, does not seem to be a promising strategy. The same can be said of proposals made in September 2017 to establish [more official militias](#) to create a new “Afghan Territorial Army”. There is a plethora of different radical Islamic groups active in Afghanistan, including Taliban and the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), or smaller groups such as the Haqqani network. Although each have their own agenda, they are united in their efforts to harm and – if possible – topple the government. The trend of Sunni militants (especially ISKP) exploiting existing sectarian rifts continues.

Another ongoing challenge concerns the sources of finance used by all the various militant groups. Global Witness published a [report](#) in May 2018 describing how ordinary export goods (such as talc and chromium) provide financial backing for some Islamic militants in northeastern Afghanistan. Another important source of income are drugs like opium, especially for the Taliban. This is why they took every effort to gain as much influence over the southern province Helmand as possible, a region which is known as the cradle of the drug trade. The gains are not exclusively taken by the Taliban, however; government officials take their share as well.

## Christian communities and how they are affected

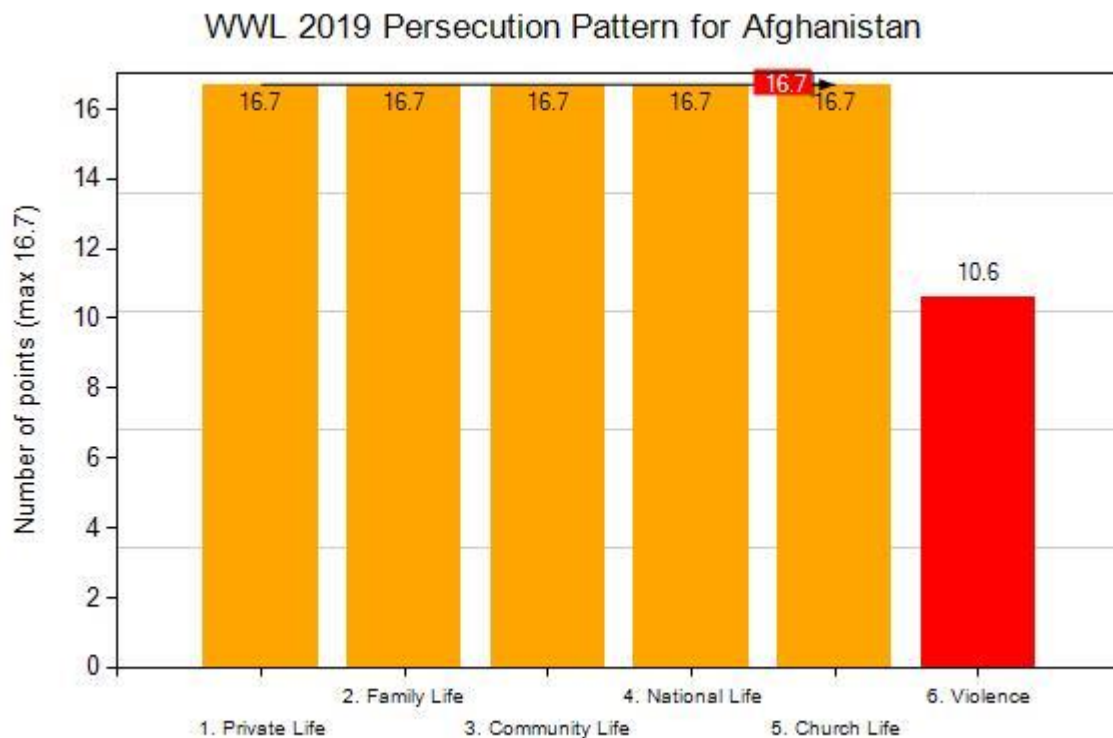
**Communities of expatriate Christians:** These are not included as a separate WWL category as they are so few, so protected and so isolated that they are hardly impacted by the country’s situation.

**Historical Christian communities:** These do not exist in Afghanistan.

**Converts to Christianity:** Christians from a Muslim background try their utmost not to be discovered by family, friends, neighbors or the wider community. Depending on the family, they may even have to fear for their lives. For them, living openly as a Christian is simply not possible - even the suspicion of being a Christian can bring severe persecution.

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

## Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence



The Persecution pattern shows:

- The pressure on Christians in Afghanistan remained at the maximum level of 16.7 for all *spheres of life*, reflecting the fact that it is impossible to live as a Christian publicly there. The country is increasingly challenged by Islamic militants, the Taliban controlling or contesting more and more

areas and Islamic State targeting minorities. The National Unity Government appears more fragmented than ever as presidential elections scheduled for April 2019 loom closer.

- While maximum scores for pressure in the *Family, Private* and *Community spheres* is typical for strictly Islamic countries, the pressure in the National and Church spheres points to a government relying on strictly interpreted Islamic rules and a basically tribal society (despite all promises to international bodies about making attempts to live up to human rights standards).
- The violence score increased from 10.0 in WWL 2018 to 10.6 points, which mainly due to more detailed reporting on incidents. Violence against Christians remains on a very high level, but the measures taken against converts depends on the family involved.

#### **Private sphere:**

The government's position (as well as that of the average Afghan in the street) is that Afghans cannot be Christian and that it is illegal to have any other faith than Islam. Therefore, converts always have to be very cautious as even the suspicion of having converted can lead to severe consequences like arrest and the destruction of homes. Families often hide their faith from their own children. As they can never know which members of their clan have been recruited by IS or Taliban, they are intensely cautious about whom they trust in regard to their faith. Social control is high and it is difficult to hide newly won Christian faith over a long period of time, especially if the convert has children. Additionally, converts are in a catch-22 situation as they do not want to send their children to a madrassa but cannot share about the new faith to their children either, because that is too dangerous. Meeting with other Christians demands acting with the utmost caution as well. Even in cities where more openness has developed over recent years, converts cannot enjoy any amount of freedom.

#### **Family sphere:**

In Afghanistan, Islam is the only religion under which anybody can be officially registered; as a result, everyone is registered as Muslim. Anything else is unacceptable and unthinkable. Registering a conversion is impossible. Baptisms are considered a crime punishable by death and therefore have to be done in secret. As most Christians will keep their conversion secret, they will be buried according to Islamic rites. If Afghans are discovered to have become Christians, their children will automatically be taken away and given to adoption by Muslim families. Those children will be harassed in their new family and at school. If a family succeeds in keeping their conversion secret, the children will have no option but to continue to attend madrassa teaching and are likely to grow up confused if they know about the faith of their parents. If a convert is discovered, the spouse is likely to be pressured into divorce and the convert will face the loss of custody of children and the loss of inheritance rights. Converts are sometimes sent to a mental hospital, since families believe that no sane person would ever leave Islam.

#### **Community sphere:**

Any convert discovered will lose access to community resources and healthcare. The pressure to attend mosques is high on everyone and a convert cannot opt out without raising suspicion. Communities exercise immense pressure to ensure allegiance and order and consequently watch and observe everyone. Whoever is seen as deviating is compelled to return to the mainstream religious and political views, be it by physical torture or by using occult practices (since many Afghans are superstitious). Christian parents also fear sending their children to school because they want to protect



them from false indoctrination and from revealing their hidden Christian identity. This causes all sorts of complications. If Christian converts are discovered, they will certainly be taken away for investigation and interrogation. These interrogations are intense, regardless of whether they are carried out by government authorities, the Taliban or IS.

#### **National sphere:**

Article 3 of the constitution, which states that no law shall contravene the tenets and provisions of Islam, leads to restrictions in many areas. Since the wording is flexible, it remains unclear what may be deemed as inappropriate and against Islam. Afghanistan is an Islamic Republic and does not allow any deviation from the Muslim faith. Accusations of conversion are equated with blasphemy and neither Christians (nor other religious minorities – including Muslim ones) enjoy freedom of religion. Everyone has to comply with Islamic, tribal and cultural demands. If Christian converts have to stand trial, it is officially not because of their faith, but due to other alleged crimes (e.g. due to treason by working with foreign intelligence agencies, murder or drug dealing).

#### **Church sphere:**

There is no publicly accessible church in Afghanistan. The only functioning chapel is placed in the basement of the Italian embassy in Kabul and only open for the small number of expatriates (mainly diplomatic and military staff) still working in the city. Any form of organized meeting noted by the Taliban or monitoring agencies receives high attention. Christian groups (no matter how small they are) have to be cautious about how they meet. Often they are watched and followed undetected until they meet with a bigger group or engage in some activity like Bible distribution. Then they are pulled in for interrogation. Christian materials cannot, of course, be imported legally and the internet is closely monitored. The internet is anyway not accessible in the more remote areas of the country.

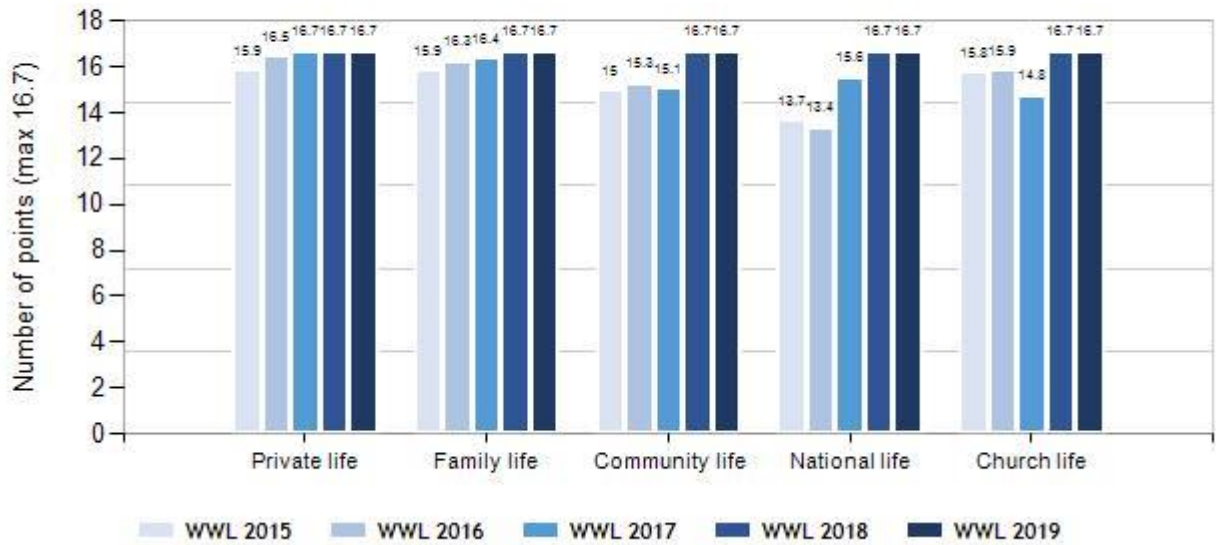
#### **Violence:**

Violence is at a very high level and there were reports of Afghan Christians being killed for their faith and of Afghans being killed just on suspicion of being Christian. No details can be made available for security reasons.

### 5 Year trends

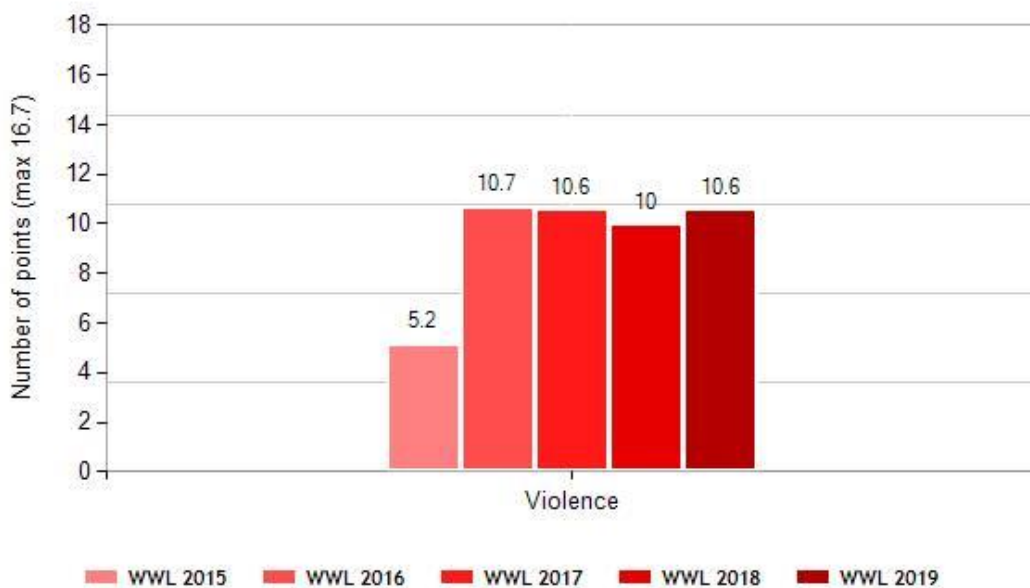
At the beginning of the five year period, there were still significant numbers of expatriate Christians in the country. Most of these have now left (except for diplomatic and military staff) and therefore this category has no longer been included in the scoring since WWL 2018. This caused the average pressure to rise - with increases in the scores especially for the Community, National and Church *spheres of life*. Being Christian in Afghanistan is now understood to mean being a convert, and a well-hidden one at that. For the last four reporting periods the level of violence against Christians has been stable at a very high level. It is very difficult to get verifiable information out of the country, particularly from the increasing number of contested areas.

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



WWL 2015 - WWL 2019 Persecution Pattern history: Afghanistan	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2019	16.7
2018	16.7
2017	15.7
2016	15.5
2015	15.3

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



## Gender specific persecution

**Female:** Persecution affects both men and women in Afghanistan. However, given the very weak role women play in Afghan society, women who convert to the Christian faith are prone to even more pressure and harassment than men. They can be sold into slavery or prostitution, forced to marry much older men, be deprived of food and water and healthcare, locked into rooms, beaten severely, burned or sexually mishandled. On the other hand, as conversions are kept as secret as possible, women are more likely to be able to live their new-found faith out of view and even pass their faith on to husband and family members. As this remains strictly within family boundaries, no outside pressure is to be expected.

**Male:** Men are the bread winners without whom the family is unable to be fed and kept healthy. Men and boys also become targets for militias seeking to coerce them into joining sides to fight. Boys are particularly vulnerable in a culture where young men can also be sexually abused by powerful men. Boys who join a militia commit their family's allegiance to that particular militia, leaving members of the community and families vulnerable to possible persecution for that decision. Converts must often find alternative sources of income in order to avoid being exposed by not taking part in religious practices in the market place.

## Persecution of other religious minorities

As mentioned above, Shiites are targeted by Sunni radical groups, especially ISKP, in an effort to increase and deepen already existing sectarian rifts, but the Muslim Sufi minority is victim to persecution as well. The July 2018 [attack](#) against the Sikh and Hindu communities in Jalalabad, killing 19, including the only Sikh candidate for parliament, illustrates that religious minorities are a special target for Islamic State militants.

## Future outlook

### The political outlook:

- **Electoral factors:** Afghanistan is facing a volatile and highly violent future, especially in the period between the October 2018 elections and the upcoming presidential elections in May 2019. The small Christian community also faces this difficult future. Observers see little hope for a negotiated peace with the Taliban, other insurgents and regional warlords. The National Unity Government is everything but united and it is hard to see how the elections results can be translated into stability, let alone bring any solutions to the multitude of problems the country is facing, given the political stand-off between different factions and ethnic groups. A good illustration was the [difficult replacement](#) of two provincial governors at the beginning of 2018 with Tajik and Turkmen ethnicity, respectively.
- **Social factors:** A [UNICEF country report](#) published in May 2018 showed what the dire situation means for civilians, especially for children: 44% of all children in the age between 7 and 17 are not attending school, 60% of whom are girls. The out-of-school rate has increased for the first time since 2002. It is hard to see how the next generation will have any perspective without education.
- **Military factors:** Insurgents have intensified their attacks and have control of an increasing number of districts all over the country. This is true even though the US and international forces have been building up their numbers of troops throughout 2018. It seems most likely that Afghanistan is going to see continued attacks and bloodshed. The fact that the International Committee of the Red Cross is [withdrawing completely from two northern provinces](#) of the country and is reducing

its presence in others (as announced in October 2017), is a clear and very worrying sign in this respect. The Taliban shocked both the Afghan government and the international community alike by [taking control of another provincial capital](#), Ghazni, for a few days in August 2018, showing their military power.

- **Geostrategic factors:** For the time being it is Pakistan (and maybe Iran) holding the keys to an overall solution in Afghanistan. The question of what to do about the hundreds of thousands of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) is currently a far more urgent issue and was referred to as a potential [powderkeg](#) by Irin News on 9 April 2018. The 600,000 refugees they did send back in 2016 and who mostly settled in the province of Nangrahar, overwhelmed Afghanistan's possibilities already. The prospect of more than [two million](#) refugees pouring back into war-torn Afghanistan, will not add to the country's stability.

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

- **Islamic oppression:** The small Christian community shares in all the difficulties the country faces and have an even more hard future as they are double vulnerable, adhering to the "enemy's religion". *Islamic oppression* driven by home-grown and foreign groups will doubtless remain the main engine of persecution of Christians in Afghanistan, next to family and society and the government and its different factions.
- **Organized corruption and crime:** As long as opium cultivation and trade makes up a significant part of the insurgent groups' budget and also fills the coffers of power-brokers and politicians, organized crime will flourish and anyone perceived as being in the way (including Christians) will face violent opposition.
- **Ethnic antagonism:** Afghanistan will continue to be a tribally driven society. Anyone not subscribing to his/her tribe's traditions - i.e. by following new ideas (including religion) - excludes him- or herself from the tribe's identity.

#### Conclusion:

An encouraging sign occurred in June 2018 when [3000 Islamic clerics](#) at a conference in Kabul publicly stated that the violent tactics used by Islamic militants have no basis in Sharia. However, it speaks volumes that this very gathering was itself attacked by a suicide bomber. There seems no way out of the vicious circles of violence, insecurity and poverty in the country. One of the big questions is how the government should best deal with the [Taliban](#) after the successful three day ceasefire in June at the end of Ramadan in June 2018. The Taliban do not want to be transformed into a political party; their priority is not to hold talks with the Afghan government but with the USA. That is why their main aim is to be officially recognized as party to the conflict. People are tired of the fighting and this was made clear as well by the the non-partisan ["Peoples Peace Movement"](#) which amazed and encouraged the general public throughout the country for many months in 2018, when about 120 Afghans of various ethnic and regional backgrounds initiated a high-profile 770-kilometre march lasting 37 days to the capital, Kabul, much reported about locally and internationally. It is, however, completely unclear – humanly speaking – where hope for an improved situation can come from, especially with the very violent ISKP entering the stage and the Taliban contesting more and more parts of the country. This is especially true for the small Christian minority in Afghanistan: Persecution is not going to decrease in the short term.

## External Links - WWL 2019: Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines: across 12 provinces  
[https://jamestown.org/program/taliban-demonstrates-resilience-with-afghan-spring-offensive/?mc\\_cid=944db91ba6&mc\\_eid=b8f233d4ea](https://jamestown.org/program/taliban-demonstrates-resilience-with-afghan-spring-offensive/?mc_cid=944db91ba6&mc_eid=b8f233d4ea)
- Persecution engines: 5,122 civilian casualties  
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-casualties/civilian-deaths-in-afghanistan-hit-record-as-suicide-attacks-surge-idUSKBN1K5078?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>
- Persecution engines: highest levels of confidence  
<https://asiafoundation.org/publication/afghanistan-2017-survey-afghan-people/>
- Persecution engines: UN report  
<https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/a-drop-from-peak-opium-cultivation-the-2018-afghanistan-survey/>
- Context: with their families  
<https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-eid-ceasefire-allowing-afghans-to-imagine-their-country-at-peace/>
- Context: ethnicity  
<https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-e-tazkera-rift-yet-another-political-crisis-looming/>
- Context: internal power struggles  
<https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-ankara-coalition-opposition-from-within-the-government/>
- Context: returned  
<https://www.rferl.org/a/afghan-vice-president-dostum-to-return-to-kabul-amid-torture-claims/29381984.html?ltflags=mailer>
- Context: January 2018  
<https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/five-questions-to-make-sense-of-the-new-peak-in-urban-attacks-and-a-violent-week-in-kabul/>
- Context: more official militias  
<https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/more-militias-part-2-the-proposed-afghan-territorial-army-in-the-fight-against-iskp/>
- Context: report  
<https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/afghanistan/talc-everyday-mineral-funding-afghan-insurgents/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: attack  
<http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Jalalabad,-ISIS-attacks-Sikh-and-Hindu-minorities:-19-dead-44314.html>
- Future outlook: difficult replacement  
<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-governor/second-afghan-governor-defies-president-ghani-idUSKCN1G20GK?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>

- Future outlook: UNICEF country report  
<https://www.unicef.org/afghanistan/sites/unicef.org.afghanistan/files/2018-05/afg-report-oocs2018.pdf>
- Future outlook: withdrawing completely from two northern provinces  
<https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/working-in-a-grey-zone-icrc-forced-to-scale-back-its-work-in-afghanistan/>
- Future outlook: taking control of another provincial capital  
<http://www.asianews.it/news-en/The-Taliban-offensive-continues:-hundreds-of-deaths,-including-civilians-44658.html>
- Future outlook: powderkeg  
[http://www.irinnews.org/feature/2018/04/09/conflict-spreads-chronic-displacement-becomes-powderkeg-afghanistan?utm\\_source=IRIN+-+the+inside+story+on+emergencies&utm\\_campaign=d07550eae6-RSS\\_EMAIL\\_ENGLISH\\_ALL&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_d842d98289-d07550eae6-15684673](http://www.irinnews.org/feature/2018/04/09/conflict-spreads-chronic-displacement-becomes-powderkeg-afghanistan?utm_source=IRIN+-+the+inside+story+on+emergencies&utm_campaign=d07550eae6-RSS_EMAIL_ENGLISH_ALL&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_d842d98289-d07550eae6-15684673)
- Future outlook: two million  
<https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/still-caught-in-regional-tensions-the-uncertain-destiny-of-afghan-refugees-in-pakistan/>
- Future outlook: 3000 Islamic clerics  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/04/world/asia/afghanistan-bombing-clerics.html>
- Future outlook: Taliban  
<https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/understanding-hurdles-to-afghan-peace-talks-are-the-taliban-a-political-party/>

## 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).