



# THE AMERICAN SPECTATOR

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## Today's Top Religious Persecutors: Open Doors Unveils Latest World Watch List

Doug Bandow

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The group Open Doors USA released its latest World Watch report last week, which tracks the countries that are the worst offenders of Christian persecution. There is a new top persecutor, which took over from longtime number one North Korea. The new winner, perhaps unsurprisingly, is Afghanistan. However, at number two, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea remains poised for a comeback next year. Another nine countries also are guilty of "extreme persecution."

The Taliban takeover worsened an already terrible state of religious persecution in Afghanistan. Open Doors explained: "Christian persecution is extreme in all spheres of public and private life. The risk of discovery has only increased since the Taliban controls every aspect of government—including paperwork from international troops that may help identify Christians." Even before August, noted Open Doors, it was "impossible to live openly as a Christian in Afghanistan. Leaving Islam is considered shameful, and Christian converts face dire consequences if their new faith is discovered. Either they have to flee the country or they will be killed."

### North Korea

Isolated and brutal, North Korea fell back to number two even though persecution actually *worsened*. Its very human leader, Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un, is treated like a near-deity, and he fears competition. Open Doors wrote: "North Korea has been at or near the top of the World Watch List for more than 20 years. That's because any North Korean caught following Jesus is at immediate risk of imprisonment, brutal torture and death."

### Somalia

Like Afghanistan, Somalia is a Muslim nation (readers might soon sense a pattern). It held steady at number three. Life for Christians is hard: "The small number of believers in Somalia are largely Christians who have converted from Islam. Christians are viewed as high-value targets by Islamic radical groups. Even when Christian converts are not targeted by extremists, they are intensely pressured by their family and community."

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## **Libya**

A wreck since 2011 when the U.S. and Europe pushed regime change with little thought as to what would follow, Libya retained the number four spot. The report stated: “When a person in Libya leaves Islam to follow Christ, they face immense pressure from their families to renounce their faith. Their neighbors and the rest of the community ostracize them, and they can be left homeless, jobless and alone. Targeted kidnappings and executions are always a possibility for believers.”

## **Yemen**

Another Muslim state in violent chaos, Yemen jumped two places to number five. All Yemenis are vulnerable to murderous attacks by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which are as apt to hit civilians as military targets. Unfortunately, Christians — who likely number in the low thousands — are uniquely vulnerable. “Pressure on converts from Islam is at the highest levels in every part of life,” Open Doors reported.

## **Eritrea**

Long known as the North Korea of Africa, which is not meant as a compliment, Eritrea stayed at number six. The political leadership has created a totalitarian system, hence the Korean comparison, and it doesn't like competition for the people's loyalty. The report explained: “Despite almost half the population identifying as Christian, believers in Eritrea continue to suffer extreme persecution, making it one of the hardest places in the world to follow Jesus. Christians not part of recognized denominations are at risk of severe persecution. Gatherings are raided and believers arrested. The conditions facing Christians in prison can be inhumane.”

## **Nigeria**

Nigeria rose from nine last year to seven. Muslim violence has reached horrific levels in this nation closely divided by religion. The report concluded: “Persecution in Nigeria is, simply put, brutally violent. In much of northern Nigeria, Christians live their lives under the constant threat of attack from Boko Haram, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), Fulani militants and criminals who kidnap and murder with few consequences. The violence is so bad it has begun to travel south, as well.”

The U.S. government under Biden has downgraded the religious aspect of the killing. However, responded Open Doors: “While all citizens of northern Nigeria are subject to threats and violence, Christians are often specifically targeted because of their faith—ISWAP and Boko Haram want to eliminate the Christian presence in Nigeria, and Muslim Fulani militants attack Christian villages specifically.”

## **Pakistan**

Pakistan came in at number eight, down two spots from last year. Despite the dip, it remains inhospitable to Christians: “In Pakistan, Christians are considered second-class citizens and are

discriminated against in every aspect of life. Church leaders can be arrested if they don't abide by the authorities' wishes. These arrests act as warnings to the Christian minority and intimidates them further. Violence against Christians continues to happen at extreme levels."

## **Iran**

Iran is thought to have nearly one million Christians and comes in at number nine, down one spot. Unfortunately, life has not gotten easier for believers: "The severity of persecution facing Christians in Iran remains largely unchanged. Converts from Islam are most at risk of persecution, especially by the government, and to a lesser extent, by society and their own families. Sadly, things may get worse following changes to the country's penal code, which further strangles religious freedom."

## **India**

India has a large Hindu majority but is thought to have the world's third-largest Muslim population, around 200 million, as well as nearly 69 million Christians. The world's second-most populous nation comes in at number 10, with high levels of private violence often ignored or abetted by the authorities. Open Doors wrote: "The persecution of Christians in India has intensified, as Hindu extremists aim to cleanse the country of their presence and influence. The extremists disregard Indian Christians and other religious minorities as true Indians and think the country should be purified of non-Hindus."

Nevertheless, the U.S. government has downplayed religious persecution in hopes of improving security ties with geopolitical adversary China.

## **Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabia came in at number 11, a notable jump from 14. Although relaxing some social strictures, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has ruthlessly crushed any criticism let alone opposition to his cruel and corrupt rule. Most infamously, Crown Prince "Slice 'n Dice" was responsible for turning the Kingdom's Istanbul consulate into an abattoir where journalist and U.S. resident Jamal Khashoggi was murdered and dismembered. Religious persecution also has worsened. Open Doors reported: "The majority of the Christians in Saudi Arabia are foreigners who temporarily live and work in the country. Christian foreign workers can be targeted for their faith, and all foreign Christians are heavily restricted from sharing their faith or gathering for worship—and any actions outside of the norm can lead to detention and deportation."

These are merely the worst of a very bad lot. Open Doors lists another 39 countries with "very high persecution." Like the preceding states, these tend to be Muslim and/or authoritarian. Following the Kingdom through number 20 are: Myanmar, Sudan, Iraq, Syria, Maldives, China, Qatar, Vietnam, and Egypt. As for numbers 21 to 30: Uzbekistan, Algeria, Mauritania, Mali, Turkmenistan, Laos, Morocco, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Colombia. Numbers 31 to 40 run: Central African Republic, Burkina Faso, Niger, Bhutan, Tunisia, Oman, Cuba, Ethiopia, Jordan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Completing the list at numbers 41 to 50: Mozambique, Turkey, Mexico, Cameroon, Tajikistan, Brunei, Kazakhstan, Nepal, Kuwait, and Malaysia.

President Joe Biden promised to make human rights a central issue of his administration. So far he has failed to deliver and has not used America's clout against even the most egregious offenders with whom the U.S. has influence, such as Saudi Arabia. He still has time to press friend and foe to respect the lives and dignity of their peoples.

Biden should emphasize religious freedom, the foundation of all others. A government that refuses to allow its people to respond to the transcendent is not going to respect their decisions in any other aspect of their lives, especially politics. Indeed, religious minorities act as the proverbial canary in the coal mine, demonstrating whether anyone's life, liberty, and dignity are protected.

Unfortunately, the world has far to go to respect this vital aspect of freedom of conscience. Combatting religious persecution is a job not only for the U.S. government but the rest of us. With its annual World Watch List, Open Doors has provided us with the ammunition to act.

*Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is the author of Beyond Good Intentions: A Biblical View of Politics (Crossway) and Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire (Xulon).*