



# Persecution of Christians

---

Julia Bicknell

## Religion Media Centre

Collaboration House, 77-79 Charlotte Street, London W1T 4LP |

[info@religionmediacentre.org.uk](mailto:info@religionmediacentre.org.uk)

Charity registration number: 1169562



- The first Christian killed for daring to follow Christ’s teachings – against those of both contemporary religious authorities and powers such as emperors, or later, governments – was Stephen, stoned to death in Jerusalem in 35or 36AD. Christ’s early followers were subject to persecution by Roman rulers such as Nero until about 313AD, when Roman Emperor Constantine’s Edict of Milan proclaimed that “no one whatsoever should be denied the opportunity to give his heart to the observance of the Christian religion”.
- Since then, Christianity has become the most widespread of all main global religions: it exists “underground” where it is strictly forbidden by state authorities such as North Korea, and in countries where the celebration of Christmas is officially banned, for example in Somalia. Even when, in 1967, Albania’s President Enver Hoxha declared that he had officially “abolished” the Christian faith, it was kept alive behind closed doors, and is now growing again.
- On 26 December 2018, the British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt announced that he would commissioned an independent [inquiry](#) into the global persecution of Christians “to map the extent and nature of the phenomenon; to assess the quality of the response of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), and to make recommendations for changes in both policy and practice”.
- The plight of Pakistani Christian Asia Bibi was one of the triggers for the inquiry. After almost 10 years in prison, most of them in solitary confinement on death row for “blasphemy”, Bibi’s long-delayed Supreme Court appeal acquitted her. The judge referred to a “feast of falsehoods” that meant her case should never have got to court. However, mob protests across Pakistan calling for her to die meant that Prime Minister Imran Khan, the former cricketer, was forced to keep her under house arrest for more than six months for her own safety after her acquittal. Calls for the UK to offer her asylum apparently led to an FCO focus on her case for the first time, despite the high-profile assassinations of two prominent politicians who had defended her, and the close ties between Britain and Pakistan.
- Jeremy Hunt’s inquiry was due to conclude its work by Easter 2019, but as its chairman, Bishop of Truro Philip Mounstephen, wrote in the interim report produced at the end of April 2019, “it rapidly became apparent that the scale and nature of the phenomenon simply required more time”. The inquiry is now due to conclude by summer 2019.
- In his interim report, Mounstephen said it “paints a grim global picture . . . The inconvenient truth is that the overwhelming majority (80%) of persecuted religious believers are Christians.” The author John Allen [wrote](#) that “[the] global war on Christians remains the greatest story never told of the early 21st century”.

- Finding that Christianity is the most persecuted religion in the world, the US-based Pew Research Center [concluded](#) that in 2016 Christians were targeted in 144 countries – a rise from 125 in 2015.
- The annual World Watch List, produced by the research unit of Open Doors International, which monitors 150 countries for how difficult it is to live as a Christian, showed that, in 2018, almost half (73) showed extreme, very high or high levels of persecution. A year earlier, it was 58 countries.
- The 2019 list estimates that worldwide, this affects about 245 million Christians, who experience discrimination and harassment from family and friends, from fellow villagers and work colleagues, from community councils and local government officials and from police and legal systems. Christian women and girls face more persecution pressure in family and social spheres; men and boys are more likely to experience the brunt of pressure from the authorities or militias.

## PERSECUTION REGION BY REGION

### Middle East and North Africa

- In the cradle of Christianity, the Arab-Israeli conflict has caused the majority of **Palestinian** Christians to leave their homeland: numbers have dropped from 15% to 1.5% of the population.
- More Christians in the Middle East belong to the ancient Coptic Orthodox Church than any other church: **Egypt** was mostly Christian for more than 1,000 years. They have experienced waves of persecution over the centuries, although there is also much peaceful co-existence.
- Egypt’s law requires all churches to be registered, but since its update in 2016, the rate of registration has slowed, leaving thousands of churches as “unofficial”. This leaves them vulnerable to community opposition, which at times leads to violent attacks on people and property. After this, the Christians are invited to a “conciliation” process, which Copt bishops can criticise as unfair because those in the minority feel pressured to reconcile with their attackers and to drop charges.
- Against this backdrop, extremist Islamists in northern Sinai vowed in 2017 to “wipe out” the Copts. Churches have been attacked at Christmas and Easter; other attempts have been foiled.

- As many as 80% of Christians in **Syria** have fled their homes since the start of the civil war in 2011, when estimates say there were 1.7 million Christians (8-10% of the population). Islamist opposition militias have increased the dangers to Christians already in the midst of war and conflict: the inquiry report estimates 450,000 Christians remain in Syria.
- In **Iraq**, 50% of Christians have been uprooted since 2006. Bashar Warda, the Chaldean Catholic Archbishop of Erbil, speaking recently in London, said that there were fewer than 150,000 Christians left in Iraq – down from 1.5 million in 2003 – even though thousands had returned to the north since Islamic State lost the territory it overran in 2014.

### Asia

- Fenggang Yang, a sociologist at Purdue University in Indiana, United States, believes that **China** could have nearly 250 million Christians by 2030; there are already more Christians than the 90 million members of the Communist Party. However, in 2018, the Chinese president Xi Jinping introduced new regulations, bringing China its worst religious repression in more than a decade; some even say since the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976. A focus on prohibiting children and youth from hearing religious teaching has seen nursery and Sunday schools shut, summer camps banned, and churches forced to place signs at the entrance forbidding anyone under 18 to enter.
- The high-profile trial of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, the Christian former governor of Jakarta, and his prison sentence for a faked-up charge of blasphemy, was evidence of rising religious intolerance in **Indonesia**. The triple-suicide attack against churches in Surabaya in May 2018, committed by one Islamist family, including girls as young as nine, shocked the country – which until recently was known for its “moderate” Islam.
- Nationalistic governments such as **India** and **Myanmar** continue to deny freedom of religion for their sizeable Christian minorities, sending the clear message that to be Indian, one must be Hindu, or to be Burmese one must embrace Buddhism. Militant Hindus see Christians as a threat to the nation because of their growth in numbers and strong presence in the tribal regions. Discrimination is also very common, based on the age-old caste system. It affects Christians all over India because most converts to Christianity come from the lower and “untouchable” (Dalit) castes. The same applies in Pakistan.
- Neighbouring countries, themselves majority-Hindu or majority-Buddhist, such as Nepal, **Sri Lanka** and **Bhutan** have found that appeals to national religious identity are a potent formula to boost their own position of power, especially in their rural regions.

## Africa

- In the north and Middle Belt of **Nigeria**, at least 3,700 Christians were known to have been killed for their faith in 2018, almost double the number in 2017. Villages have been abandoned by Christians, forced to flee as their armed attackers then move in to settle, with impunity.
- Since the European Union made it harder for migrants to arrive via the Mediterranean, an estimated 20,000 Christians from sub-Saharan Africa are stranded in **Libya**, making them particularly vulnerable to pressure or violence. Credible reports have been received of rape, slavery and abuse.
- Meanwhile, weapons from Libya are pouring into the sub-Saharan region, fuelling the lucrative human trafficking of migrants, many of whom are Christians. Increasingly sophisticated organised crime and drugs cartels stretch across sub-Saharan Africa. This poses one of the world's most potent security challenges, as weak governance, poverty and radical Islam increasingly collide.
- Almost 30 violent Islamist groups are known to be active in the region: most perpetrate violence in more than one country. Some of them continue to hold expatriate Christian aid workers as hostages in **Mali, Burkina Faso** and other countries. The so-called Islamic State in West Africa (linked to Boko Haram), based in northern Nigeria, shows the fluidity of violence across the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin, instigating attacks in four countries, including **Niger** and **Cameroon**.
- Instability, corruption, poverty, unemployment, and lack of governance feed into Christian persecution because states are either ineffective, or sometimes actively collude in it due to ethnic, tribal or political affiliations. Examples include the **Central African Republic** and the **Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)**. The Alliance of Democratic Forces, an insurgent group, has recently described the DRC as the "Islamic State Central Africa Province". However, Dr Francis Kuria Kagema, secretary general of the African Council of Religious Leaders, called [this](#) an "empty boast". Militant attacks in the region were killing people at the rate of two a day a year ago, and security concerns in the area mean that outbreaks of the deadly ebola disease there is hard to contain.

## Latin America

- Finally, in Latin America, in countries such as **Mexico** and **Colombia**, persecution mainly comes when church leaders challenge corruption, armed guerrilla groups and drugs cartels. They are individually killed.

*Julia Bicknell (@juliabicknell), a former journalist at BBC World Service and Daily Telegraph, and producer of 'Sunday' and documentaries on Radio 4, co-founded [www.worldwatchmonitor.org](http://www.worldwatchmonitor.org) in 2012 to focus on reporting the global Church under pressure*