

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2022

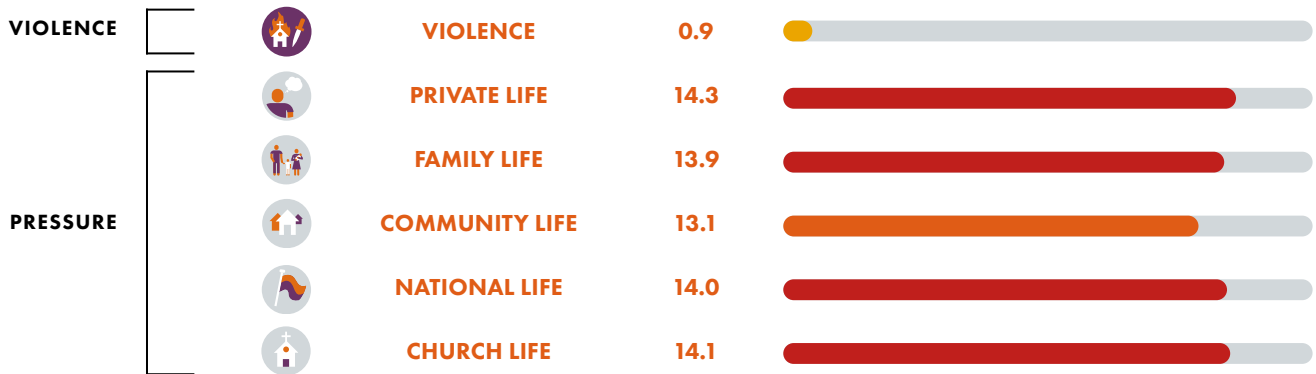
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**23**

## Mauritania



### LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).<sup>1</sup> Red = extreme level, orange = very high, yellow = high

## Key findings

Converts from Islam to Christianity face severe opposition from their own families and society. This restrictive environment makes it impossible for them to openly conduct religious services. Public expressions of faith by non-Mauritanian Christians (including migrants from sub-Saharan Africa and Asia) also carry the risk of being viewed as proselytization of Muslims, and can lead to imprisonment and deportation.

<sup>1</sup>World Watch Research measures pressure across all spheres of life as well as violence (full methodology [here](#) – password: freedom).

## Quick facts

### LEADER

President Mohamed Cheikh El Ghazouani

### POPULATION

4,908,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

10,900 (0.2%)<sup>2</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Islam

### GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic

Western influence and government hostility towards Christians, especially converts, is high. In theory, the punishment for leaving Islam is the death sentence, though there are no known examples of this being applied in recent

## How the situation varies by region

Tribal and family ties are especially strict in rural areas but even in the capital city, Nouakchott, the pressure on Christians can be high. Generally, the pressure is lower in the southern border region with Senegal. Violent Islamist groups, like al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), are particularly active in the eastern border regions of the country.

## Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	10,900	0.2
Muslims	4,873,000	99.3
Ethno-religionists	18,800	0.4
Agnostics	4,600	0.1

Source<sup>3</sup>

Mauritania is one of the world's poorest countries despite being rich in mineral resources. Culture is traditional and tribal at core. The continued practice of slavery is one of the [major causes](#) of social division and acrimony; white Moors and Berbers are of Arab descent, while most slaves, called Haratines or black Moors, are of ethnic African descent. Almost all political and economic power is in hands of the white Moors, which means the majority of society (70%) remains significantly marginalized. Violent Islamist militants are particularly active in the eastern border regions of the country. Kidnapping by militants or other criminal groups is a risk throughout the country, especially for foreigners.

The country's full name is the Islamic Republic of Mauritania; most Mauritania are Sunni Muslim. The influence of radical Islamic groups is becoming stronger. Christianity is viewed as a condemnable

## Who is affected?

### Communities of expatriate Christians

Roman Catholic expatriates from sub-Saharan Africa make up the largest group, followed by Protestants and Evangelicals also from countries south of Mauritania. There is a small Western Christian presence. African migrant Christians lead a precarious existence due both to ethnic prejudice and pressure related to the Islamic extremism in the country.

### Historical Christian communities

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.

### Converts to Christianity

Christian converts from a Muslim background are very exposed to targeted pressure and violence from Islamist groups, extended family and community. In this nomadic society, communal interdependence is necessary for survival. Converts lose their status in their community if their conversion becomes public knowledge, so most try to hide their faith.

### Non-traditional Christian communities

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.

<sup>2</sup>Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

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## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### Islamic oppression:

Non-Muslims experience violations particularly at the hands of society and Islamist groups. Large numbers of Mauritians have joined violent radical Islamist groups in north Africa as well as in Syria and Iraq. While the government attempts to counter Islamist militancy and extremism, it simultaneously tightened the apostasy and blasphemy law in 2018. Converts from Islam to Christianity suffer the most severe violations from family and society.

### Clan oppression:

Tribal and racial tensions are intertwined in this very conservative country. Conversion to Christianity is seen as 'dishonorable' to society and results in harassment or violence. Slavery continues to exist and is linked both to ethnicity and religion. The campaign against slavery has triggered a hostile reaction from Islamists in the country. Christian sub-Saharan Africans living in the country face a mixture of both religious and racial discrimination.

### Organized corruption and crime:

Tribal affiliation, religious and personal relationships are very important in Mauritanian society. Nepotism, clientelism and other forms of corruption are widespread. Criminal networks control most of the economy and journalists investigating corruption involving state authorities are often intimidated, detained and accused of defamation ([BTI Mauritania 2020](#), p.12). Christians have little hope of obtaining stable employment or earning an honest income in such a climate.

### Dictatorial paranoia:

Mauritania's government has been struggling to maintain stability and legitimacy. As such, reducing 'Christianizing' influences is often used as a political expedient to shore up government power and popularity. Christianity is often equated with Westernization and colonialism, and is viewed by the government as a foreign threat.

## How are men and women differently affected?

### **WOMEN**

Within Mauritania's tribal society, women are subject to the authority of fathers and husbands, making female converts the most vulnerable. They may be deprived of food, bullied, put under house arrest, or subject to caning and excruciating servitude. The presence of modern-day slavery makes ruthless detention and exploitation of female converts more likely – and very hidden. Most women do not have a choice in marriage and may be forced to marry a Muslim man. Married female converts can easily be divorced with no means to survive, and polygamy is still practiced.

- Denied access to social community/networks
- Denied food or water
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family/house arrest
- Trafficking
- Violence - physical
- Violence - psychological
- Violence - sexual

### **MEN**

Male converts to Christianity bring shame upon their family. They are likely to be ostracized, expelled from their home or physically abused. Some choose to flee; if conversion is confirmed, charges of apostasy can be brought against them in a religious court. Some have also been imprisoned for terrorism and cybercrime offences, charged for 'undermining national security by insulting Islam and threatening Mauritania's sacred principles'. Guilty verdicts can result in long prison sentences and high fines. A strong 'Arabization' movement means many sub-Saharan African Christians are pressured to leave or live very difficult lives.

- Denied access to social community/networks
- Economic harassment via work/job/business
- Forced out of home – expulsion
- Forced to flee town/country
- Imprisonment by government
- Violence - physical
- Violence - psychological

## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution score out of 100
2022	23	70.40
2021	20	71.34
2020	24	68.21
2019	25	66.92
2018	47	57.11

Mauritania's score decreased by one point from WWL 2021 to WWL 2022, due to a reduction in reported violence. However, the average pressure across all spheres of life remained extremely high due to the very severe pressure faced by converts from Islam to Christianity.

## Examples of violence in the reporting period

- During the WWL 2022 reporting period, at least one Christian has been arrested because of faith-related reasons.
- Several other incidents took place affecting both indigenous and foreign Christians in the country. However, no details can be provided due to security concerns.

WWL Year	Christians detained	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians internally displaced
2022	1	10	1
2021	4	10	3

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - see [here](#) for full results. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100 or 1000) is given which in reality could be significantly higher.



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### Private life

It is often risky for Christians to reveal their faith. Expatriate Christians, especially those from a sub-Saharan background, are likely to face discrimination and abuse if publicly identified as Christian. They may be accused of proselytism. Baptisms can only be carried out in secret and many converts from Islam are reluctant to be baptized; they fear discovery which may mean charges of apostasy are brought against them. Conversion from Islam is legally prohibited, and those perceived to be critical of Islam risk the death penalty. While this law is largely symbolic, it remains a significant threat to Christian converts from a Muslim background.

### Family life

All Mauritians and their children are automatically considered Muslim and registered as such. Christian children must attend Islamic classes at public school and are likely to face discrimination and harassment. Conversion to Christianity is grounds for divorce in Mauritania and a parent whose conversion becomes public may lose custody of their children.

### Community life

There is extreme communal pressure against anyone not following Sunni Islam. Violations can take the form of ostracization, social discrimination, economic exclusion or even violence. It is heightened by the fact that Mauritanian society is divided along ethnic lines and its economy and government are steeped in corruption and clientelism. Expatriate Christians from a sub-Saharan background are discriminated against because of both the color of their skin and their faith.

### National life

Mauritania has a criminal law that sanctions capital punishment for 'apostasy' and 'blasphemy'. Christians must operate carefully to make sure their words are not construed as criticism of Islam or the government.

### Church life

Due to the legacy of French colonial rule, only the Roman Catholic Church has legal status and is allowed to maintain public buildings. However, the Catholic Church does allow Evangelicals to use a space within the main church compound for worship in the diocese of Nouakchott. As proselytism is strictly forbidden, expatriate churches are not allowed to welcome a Muslim inside the church building, let alone integrate a convert from Islam to Christianity into their community.

## International obligations & rights violated

### Mauritania has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in the following international treaties:

1. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)
2. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)
3. Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)
4. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
5. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

### Mauritania is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- Mauritians who convert to Christianity face imprisonment and inhumane treatment while detained (ICCPR Arts. 7, 9 and 18)
- Female Christian converts face the threat of forced marriage to Muslim men, even before they become of age, to pressure them to renounce their faith (ICCPR Art. 23; CEDAW Art. 16 and ICESCR Art. 10)
- Christian children must attend Islamic religious classes at public school and face discrimination and pressure because of their faith (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)
- Christian converts are excluded from accessing communal resources and their businesses boycotted (ICCPR Art. 26 and ICESCR Art. 11)



# Situation of other religious minorities

There is a very small but growing Shia Muslim minority in Mauritania. The Mauritanian government has historically had warm diplomatic relations with Iran and was hesitant to target Shia Muslims. However, in 2018 a Shia religious center was closed down. Sunni religious leaders in the country have increasingly vocalized their denunciations of the minority group, calling for the government to impose restrictions.

Additionally, atheists face intense pressure. In February 2020, 14 human rights defenders were arbitrarily detained after hosting an ‘unauthorized meeting’ in a guesthouse. Ten activists were subsequently accused of ‘belonging to a group that promotes secularism’ and three of the activists were charged with ‘blasphemy’ under article 306 the Penal Code and remain in detention. (Source: [Humanists International](#), 25 September 2020).



## Open Doors in Mauritania

Open Doors is supporting the church in the North Africa through the following activities:

- Training
- Literature distribution
- Socio-economic development
- Advocacy

Open Doors raises prayer support for believers in difficult situations.

#### About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2021 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2022 reporting period was 01 October 2020 - 30 September 2021.
- The full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology, as well as the complete WWL 2022 ranking and reports, can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

*All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.*

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