

World
Watch
Research

Tunisia: Full Country Dossier

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OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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Introduction

World Watch List 2024

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	12.8	96	98	96	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	10.6	93	92	91	92	92
3	Libya	15.9	16.0	15.9	16.1	16.4	10.2	91	88	91	92	90
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.8	89	89	88	88	87
5	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	89	88	87	85
6	Nigeria	13.5	13.9	14.5	14.9	14.4	16.7	88	88	87	85	80
7	Pakistan	13.2	13.9	15.0	15.1	13.1	16.7	87	86	87	88	88
8	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	13.3	87	83	79	79	85
9	Iran	15.0	14.6	13.5	15.8	16.5	10.9	86	86	85	86	85
10	Afghanistan	15.7	15.9	15.2	16.3	16.6	4.6	84	84	98	94	93
11	India	12.2	12.6	13.3	14.8	13.2	16.5	83	82	82	83	83
12	Syria	13.4	14.3	13.9	14.3	14.2	11.1	81	80	78	81	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.8	15.7	16.6	3.3	81	80	81	78	79
14	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	12.8	15.1	15.6	79	76	70	67	66
15	Algeria	14.4	14.1	11.5	14.0	15.6	9.8	79	73	71	70	73
16	Iraq	14.2	14.4	14.0	14.8	13.9	7.8	79	76	78	82	76
17	Myanmar	12.2	10.6	13.4	13.7	13.0	16.1	79	80	79	74	73
18	Maldives	15.6	15.5	13.6	16.0	16.4	0.9	78	77	77	77	78
19	China	13.0	10.0	12.8	14.6	16.0	11.1	78	77	76	74	70
20	Burkina Faso	11.7	9.7	13.2	11.5	13.8	15.6	75	71	68	67	66
21	Laos	11.6	10.6	13.2	14.3	14.0	11.3	75	68	69	71	72
22	Cuba	13.2	8.7	13.8	13.3	15.1	8.7	73	70	66	62	52
23	Mauritania	14.6	14.2	13.8	14.2	14.2	1.3	72	72	70	71	68
24	Morocco	13.2	13.8	11.7	12.8	14.4	5.4	71	69	69	67	66
25	Uzbekistan	14.6	12.7	13.9	12.6	15.5	1.7	71	71	71	71	73
26	Bangladesh	12.4	10.6	12.5	10.8	10.4	14.1	71	69	68	67	63
27	Niger	9.4	9.6	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.9	70	70	68	62	60
28	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	70	68	66	68
29	Turkmenistan	14.2	12.3	13.6	13.9	15.5	0.6	70	70	69	70	70
30	Nicaragua	12.1	7.6	13.2	13.2	14.1	9.6	70	65	56	51	41
31	Oman	14.3	14.0	10.6	13.3	14.0	3.1	69	65	66	63	62
32	Ethiopia	9.9	9.7	12.6	10.4	12.1	14.4	69	66	66	65	63
33	Tunisia	12.3	13.2	10.2	12.4	13.8	6.9	69	67	66	67	64
34	Colombia	11.1	8.6	12.9	11.3	10.4	14.1	68	71	68	67	62
35	Vietnam	11.3	9.4	12.4	13.8	14.2	7.2	68	70	71	72	72
36	Bhutan	13.1	12.1	12.4	14.1	14.3	2.2	68	66	67	64	61
37	Mexico	11.5	8.5	12.5	11.1	10.6	14.1	68	67	65	64	60
38	Egypt	12.5	13.7	11.4	11.9	10.9	7.8	68	68	71	75	76
39	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.0	68	68	65	63	43
40	Qatar	14.2	14.2	10.5	13.2	14.4	0.6	67	68	74	67	66
41	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.9	67	67	66	64	56
42	Indonesia	10.9	12.3	11.5	10.2	9.7	11.5	66	68	68	63	60
43	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	8.0	13.1	15.9	66	65	65	64	60
44	Brunei	15.0	14.7	10.0	10.8	14.1	1.3	66	65	64	64	63
45	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.1	66	66	63	62	57
46	Tajikistan	13.8	12.6	12.3	12.9	13.4	0.6	66	66	65	66	65
47	Kazakhstan	13.3	11.8	12.1	12.8	14.3	1.1	65	65	64	64	64
48	Jordan	12.9	14.2	10.5	12.4	12.8	2.2	65	65	66	64	64
49	Malaysia	13.0	14.1	11.5	12.2	11.1	2.4	64	66	63	63	62
50	Turkey	13.0	11.5	11.6	13.2	11.4	3.1	64	66	65	69	63

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	12.4	63	64	63	62	61
52	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	14.4	62	63	61	58	55
53	Nepal	12.1	10.4	9.5	13.2	12.3	4.4	62	61	64	66	64
54	Kuwait	13.1	13.6	9.4	12.0	12.2	0.9	61	64	64	63	62
55	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	1.1	61	60	59	56	56
56	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	10.6	61	58	55	53	56
57	UAE	13.3	13.4	9.5	11.3	12.8	0.7	61	62	62	62	60
58	Sri Lanka	12.9	9.2	10.8	11.5	9.7	5.9	60	57	63	62	65
59	Azerbaijan	13.2	9.9	9.6	11.9	13.6	1.7	60	59	60	56	57
60	Palestinian Territories	13.1	13.3	9.7	10.7	12.1	0.9	60	60	59	58	60
61	Kyrgyzstan	13.2	10.3	11.3	10.5	12.2	1.3	59	59	58	58	57
62	Russian Federation	12.7	7.7	10.6	12.8	12.9	1.7	58	57	56	57	60
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	9.4	58	57	50	42	42
64	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	12.8	57	55	52	48	48
65	Bahrain	12.0	13.2	8.6	11.3	8.5	1.1	55	55	57	56	55
66	Honduras	7.9	4.7	12.2	7.3	9.9	12.6	55	53	48	46	39
67	Venezuela	6.0	4.4	11.1	10.0	10.8	10.7	53	56	51	39	42
68	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	8.9	52	49	44	43	41
69	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	7.2	52	48	43	47	45
70	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	8.8	15.9	52	51	48	47	48
71	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	52	51	46	43
72	Lebanon	11.0	10.2	7.0	6.1	6.6	7.2	48	40	11	-	35
73	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	3.7	47	44	44	43	43
74	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.6	46	46	43	43	44
75	Belarus	9.6	3.8	5.8	9.7	13.3	3.3	46	43	33	30	28
76	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	44	42	42	42
77	Ukraine	5.5	4.8	8.0	11.6	11.6	2.8	44	37	37	34	33
78	Israel	9.8	8.6	5.8	6.3	6.9	6.7	44	38	41	40	38

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Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. In order to reduce the length of these reference sections, a table containing links to regularly used sources can be found at the beginning of the “Keys to Understanding” chapter under the heading “Links for general background information”. Where one of these sources has been quoted in the dossier text, a quote reference is supplied as indicated in the second column of the table.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 1 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology can be found on the research pages of the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/> and on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom): <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>.

WWL 2024 Situation in brief / Tunisia

Brief country details

Tunisia: Population (UN estimate for 2023)	Christians	Chr%
12,152,000	22,200	0.2

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

Map of country



Tunisia: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	69	33
WWL 2023	67	36
WWL 2022	66	35
WWL 2021	67	26
WWL 2020	64	34

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Tunisia:	
Main persecution engines	Main drivers
Islamic oppression	Non-Christian religious leaders, One's own (extended) family, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Violent religious groups, Government officials
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials

Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.

Brief description of the persecution situation

A journalist [who has investigated](#) the situation of Tunisian Christians in depth states: "Tunisian Christians face discrimination and targeting that is often obscure and hidden to the public eye. It affects their day-to-day lives. Because of their Christian identities, many experience job insecurity, abandonment from family, friends and even fiancés; they are victims of verbal, mental and physical abuse." (Hwang P, *Underground - The plight of a religious minority living in a Muslim society*, April 2016)

Due to the factors mentioned above, most Tunisian converts to Christianity cannot worship openly and choose to hide their faith. The hostility and pressure they face from society at large makes it dangerous for them to share their faith with their family members, relatives, neighbors, friends or colleagues. They also have to be careful when gathering for worship and fellowship due to the risks any possible exposure would entail, while being monitored by the Tunisian security services.

In addition to the Tunisian Christians, there are also Sub-Saharan African Christians residing in the country. These Christians cannot openly proselytize, but their main problem is racial abuse, which strongly increased following [inflammatory comments](#) made by President Saied in February 2023 (VOA, 2 March 2023). Following his remarks, many lost their jobs, while others fled the country. Those remaining fear daily abuse (see below: *Recent history*).

Summary of international obligations and rights violations

Tunisia 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)

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

- Christian converts are ostracized and faced with opposition by their families, and threatened with divorce and loss of child custody (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christian children are harassed because of their parents' faith (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)
- Christians face restrictions in employment in the public sector and experience discrimination in the private sector (ICCPR Arts. 25 and 26, and ICESCR Art. 6)
- Christians face harassment and violence if they talk about their faith or engage in proselytization (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

During the WWL 2024 reporting period:

- Several house churches of Tunisian Christians were looted and attacked by community members.
- Several Tunisian Christians were publicly arrested and subsequently questioned about their activities by the police; this happened mainly outside of the capital, Tunis. Although no Christian has been prosecuted, these public arrests have a chilling effect, stigmatizing Tunisian Christians both in front of their families and communities.
- Several Tunisian Christians, mostly young women, were forcefully relocated, isolated and/or pressured to marry against their will. These cases happened in rural areas, outside of the capital, Tunis.
- Numerous other Tunisian Christians have been mentally or physically abused, with several being expelled from their communities and forced to relocate, mostly by family members.

Source: Open Doors Research - no further details can be provided due to security concerns

Specific examples of positive developments

- A series of Christmas and Easter TV programs were filmed and broadcast inside the country with some Tunisian Christians displayed openly.
- In January 2022, several leaders from a variety of faith communities, including Christians, signed a "National Pact for Co-existence", with the event receiving large coverage both in

Tunisia and the wider region ([BWNS, 22 February 2022](#) / [Attalaki, 1 February 2022](#)). However, the wider impact of the pact seems limited.

External Links - Situation in brief

- Brief description of the persecution situation: who has investigated - <http://underground.priscillahwang.com/>
- Brief description of the persecution situation: inflammatory comments - <https://www.voanews.com/a/racist-attacks-criticism-of-tunisia-s-president-mount-after-controversial-remarks/6987138.html>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cat.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Rights of the Child - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>
- Specific examples of positive developments: BWNS, 22 February 2022 - <https://news.bahai.org/story/1584/>
- Specific examples of positive developments: Attalaki, 1 February 2022 - <https://attalaki.org/index.php/2022/02/01/the-signing-of-the-first-charter-between-the-various-religious-groups-in-tunisia/>

WWL 2024: Keys to understanding / Tunisia

Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2022/23 Tunisia report	AI Tunisia 2022	https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/tunisia/report-tunisia/	3 July 2023
BBC News Tunisia profile - updated 15 February 2023	BBC Tunisia profile	https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-14107241	3 July 2023
Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2022 - covering 137 countries	BTI Tunisia Report 2022	https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/TUN	3 July 2023
CIA World Factbook Tunisia - updated 21 June 2023	World Factbook Tunisia	https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/tunisia/	3 July 2023
Crisis24 Tunisia report (Garda World)	Crisis24 Tunisia report	https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/tunisia	3 July 2023
Economist Intelligence Unit country profile 2023	EIU country profile Tunisia	https://country.eiu.com/tunisia	4 January 2024
FFP's Fragile States Index 2023 – covering 179 countries	FSI 2023 Tunisia	https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/	3 July 2023
Freedom House's 2023 Democracy index – covering 29 countries, Tunisia not included	Democracy Index 2023	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores	
Freedom House's 2023 Global Freedom index – covering 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2023 Tunisia	https://freedomhouse.org/country/tunisia/freedom-world/2023	3 July 2023
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023 report – covering 70 countries	Freedom on the Net 2023 Tunisia	https://freedomhouse.org/country/tunisia/freedom-net/2023	4 January 2024
Georgetown's Women, Peace and Security Index 2021/2022 – covering 170 countries	GIWPS 2021 Tunisia profile	https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/tunisia/	3 July 2023
Girls Not Brides Tunisia report	Girls Not Brides Tunisia	https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/tunisia/	3 July 2023
Human Rights Watch World Report 2023 - Tunisia country chapter	HRW 2023 Tunisia country chapter	https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/tunisia	3 July 2023
Internet World Stats available in 2023	IWS 2023 Tunisia	https://www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm#tn	3 July 2023
Middle East Concern – covering 24 countries - Tunisia profile	MEC Tunisia profile	https://meconcern.org/countries/tunisia/	4 January 2024
RSF's 2023 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2023 Tunisia	https://rsf.org/en/tunisia	3 July 2023
Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index – covering 180 countries	CPI 2022 Tunisia	https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/tunisia#	3 July 2023
UNDP: Human Development Report Tunisia	UNDP HDR Tunisia	https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/TUN	3 July 2023
US State Department's 2021 International Religious Freedom Report Tunisia	IRFR 2022 Tunisia	https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/tunisia/	3 July 2023
USCIRF 2023 covering 17 CPC / 11 SWL, Tunisia not included	USCIRF 2023	https://www.uscirt.gov/countries	
World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook Tunisia - April 2023	Macro Poverty Outlook 2023 Tunisia	https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/65cf93926fdb3ea23b72f277fc249a72-050042021/related/mpo-tun.pdf	3 July 2023
World Bank Tunisia overview – updated 30 May 2023	World Bank Tunisia overview	https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/tunisia/overview	3 July 2023

Recent history

For centuries, Tunisia has had a strategic position in the Mediterranean region. Its original capital, Carthage, was once the arch-enemy of ancient Rome, until it was completely destroyed at the end of the [Punic Wars](#) in 146 BC (Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed 5 July 2023). The Romans, the Byzantines, the Arabs and the Ottomans all included Tunisia as a province in their respective empires, until it became a French protectorate in 1883. Tunisia gained independence from France in 1956. The first president, Habib Bourguiba, introduced secular influences such as the emancipation of women (BBC Country profile). In 1987, President Bourguiba was replaced by President Ben Ali, who ruled Tunisia until he was ousted from power through the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011.

In 2011, an interim government took over and a new constitution was approved in January 2014; presidential and parliamentary elections followed in December 2014. A coalition of secularist and Islamist parties emerged from the elections, but the new government struggled to deal with both security and economic challenges. However, even more concerning was the [infighting](#) within the political parties, resulting in October 2019 with the election of a total outsider as president (The Washington Institute, 6 November 2018). While not giving clarity on many issues, newly elected President Kais Saied vowed to combat corruption and poverty. Saied is a professor of law and known to be conservative, although he did also [promise](#) to advance women's rights (Al-Monitor, 23 October 2019).

Parliamentary elections took place in October 2019 as well, with the Islamist Ennahda party winning most seats (52 out of the 217). Together, the Islamist parties occupied 81 of the 217 seats in parliament. Within less than two years, three different governments were formed, with the rapid changes in government leading to political instability. Meanwhile, the power and position of the president increased and on 25 July 2021, President Saied arbitrarily used that position and emergency powers in the Constitution to sack the Prime Minister and suspend parliament after violent protests had erupted against the government's handling of the COVID-19 crisis and the dire economic situation ([BBC News, 27 July 2021](#)). While the Ennahda party accused Saied of staging a coup, the Tunisian populace responded with indifference or even with joy, tired of a decade of political incompetence ([The Guardian, 27 July 2021](#)).

President Saied quickly consolidated his position, replacing the independent High Judicial Council in February 2022 with a self-appointed council to oversee the judiciary and sacking 57 judges in another move to end judicial independence in June 2022 ([France24, 13 February 2022](#); [France24, 2 June 2022](#)). In March 2022, Saied dissolved parliament after some parties tried to overturn his decrees ([The Guardian, 31 March 2022](#)). He further opened investigations against several political opponents and had several media figures and journalists arrested for a short period for their critical reporting on the president ([CPJ, 7 October 2021](#); [Africa News, 25 March 2022](#); [Al-Jazeera, 12 June 2022](#)).

The grand finale and the start of a new way of running the country took place with the constitutional referendum in July 2022, which turned Tunisia into a presidential republic with almost absolute power for the president. Despite winning with a landslide victory, the low turnout of about 30 percent, partly due to a boycott by the opposition, seems to suggest that only a fraction of society supports the president's move ([Al-Jazeera, 27 July 2022](#)). This was

further confirmed during the parliamentary elections in December 2022, when the record low turnout of only 11.3% severely undermined Saied's legitimacy ([DW, 30 January 2023](#)). Under the new Constitution parliament will only play a minor role - something many Tunisians are opposed to.

Saied continued his crackdown on the opposition and journalists in 2023 and 2024. Several opposition leaders as well as media figures were arrested in February 2023 ([ReliefWeb, 24 February 2023](#)). A key moment came in April 2023 with the arrest of main opposition leader Rached Ghannouchi, the head of the Ennahda party ([Al-Jazeera, 20 April 2023](#)). Despite widespread and global condemnation of his arrest, he received a one-year prison sentence in May 2023 ([Le Monde, 15 May 2023](#)). Further arrests and sentences followed in 2023 and 2024, with among others a one year suspended prison sentence for another opposition leader and the arrest of several journalists ([Al-Jazeera, 4 October 2023](#); Al-Jazeera, 13 December 2023)

President Saied received his strongest international rebuke yet after holding a racist inflammatory speech in February 2023, in which he accused Sub-Saharan Africans of coming to the country to bring "criminality and violence" and a plot "to change the demographic composition of Tunisia". ([African Business, 6 March 2023](#)). His comments led not only to a wave of violence against the relatively small Sub-Saharan African community in the country, but also to attacks on Tunisians of Sub-Saharan African descent ([Euronews, 14 March 2023](#)).

Political and legal landscape

Under the new 2022 Constitution, Tunisia has a presidential system with almost absolute powers for the president. The legislative part of the government consists of two chambers, with limited legislative powers. The prime-minister and the cabinet ministers are appointed by the president. A vote of no-confidence needs a two-thirds majority in both chambers, making it very unlikely to pass. Even if such a vote was to be held, the president can always avoid it by dissolving parliament instead.

Following the president's power grab in 2021, the Economist Intelligence Unit's (EIU 2022) categorization of Tunisia changed from 'flawed democracy' to 'hybrid regime' (in a ranking ranging from 'full democracy', 'flawed democracy', 'hybrid regime' to 'authoritarian state'). The FFP's Fragile State Index (FSI 2023) has Tunisia's 'cohesion indicators' scoring high, a reflection of how the previously ruling elite did not manage to build trust among the general population. The 27% difference in turnout between the 2014 parliamentary elections (69%) and the 2019 parliamentary elections (42%) would seem to prove this point. The even lower turnout for the 2022 constitutional referendum (30%) and for parliamentary elections (11%) would seem to suggest that the president has failed to increase levels of trust significantly. Hence, 'political indicators' show that state legitimacy remains contested even though other indicators, most notably 'human rights' and 'public services', show some signs of improvement.

The key challenge for the president is the necessary revitalization of the economy, especially due to the COVID-19 crisis and the (food and energy) crisis caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This will be absolutely necessary if the president wants to keep popular support since most Tunisian citizens have lost all faith in politicians and politics alike. In addition, although no major attacks have taken place of late, Islamic militant groups in the region remain a threat

([ISPI, 22 July 2022](#)).

The role of Islam

In a rather surprising move, the new 2022 Constitution does not name Islam as state religion, which is almost unique in the wider Islamic world. However, Article 5 states that Tunisia "belongs to the Islamic Ummah" and that the state is required to "achieve the purposes of Islam in preserving [people's] souls, money, religion, and liberty". In addition, the reference that Tunisia is a "civil state" has been removed. In practice, it seems up to the president to define the relationship between Islam and the state. Hence, it remains unclear how Freedom of Religion and Belief will further develop for Tunisia's Christians, with Article 5 sounding distinctly worrying.

Gender perspective

Although the 1973 ministerial decree prohibiting the marriage of a Tunisian Muslim woman to a non-Muslim has been abolished, the Personal Status Code still mentions as an impediment in Article 5 the marriage between a non-Muslim male and a Muslim female. In practice, Tunisian women still struggle to marry a (foreign) non-Muslim man, both due to social and local government opposition ([Al-Araby, 25 September 2018](#)). Tunisia was widely praised for withdrawing all of its reservations to the CEDAW Convention in 2014, which had previously given Sharia precedence in areas of conflict with the Convention ([OHCHR, 17 February 2023](#)). Despite this positive step, legal inequalities and de facto discrimination against women persist. While the country has a relatively high female parliamentary representation, reports highlight the lack of employment opportunities for women and ongoing societal discriminatory norms, reflected in the rather poor female labor participation rate ([World Bank Blogs, 23 December 2020](#)).

Furthermore, existing legislation on domestic violence is insufficient; whilst a 2017 law on violence against women was viewed as a landmark step, it did not comprehensively address domestic violence and the enforcement of the law has been widely faulted (HRW 2023 Tunisia country chapter). Marriage and divorce are governed under the Personal Status Code (2012) and afford men and women equal rights in most respects. However, only men are recognized as the head of the household or family (Article 23) and men retain guardianship of children following a divorce. In light of this, as well as the stigma surrounding divorce, many women choose to stay in abusive marriages. These legal inequalities can all be weaponized for the purpose of religious persecution.

Religious landscape

Tunisia: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	22,200	0.2
Muslim	12,092,000	99.5
Hindu	0	0.0
Buddhist	95	0.0
Ethno-religionist	0	0.0
Jewish	2,000	0.0
Bahai	2,500	0.0
Atheist	3,700	0.0
Agnostic	28,700	0.2
Other	200	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

According to World Christian Database 2023 estimates, 99.5% of Tunisians are Muslim, the majority being adherents of Sunni Islam, with most following the Maliki tradition. This is one of the largest groups within the Sunni tradition. A major center of Maliki teaching from the 9th to 11th centuries was in the Mosque of Uqba in Tunisia. Despite the French legacy of laïcité (French: secularism) among the urban and educated elite, Islam is very influential. As stated above (see: *Political and legal landscape*), although the new 2022 Constitution no longer recognizes Islam as state religion, it now states that Tunisia belongs to the Islamic Ummah.

Christianity and Judaism are the most significant minority religions, although the number of agnostics/atheists is greater than both, with more than 45% of the 18-29 years old claiming to be 'non-religious' (Arab Barometer, 15 February 2021). The number of Christians with a Muslim background are growing in number in Tunisia. This gradual growth of the Church has become noticeable since the 1990s. However, Christianity is regarded as a foreign religion by the government and there is no formal recognition of indigenous church communities (US State Department IRFR 2022 Tunisia). Tunisia's Christians from a Muslim background remain socially marginalized and are kept under surveillance by the security services.

There are also small Shia and very small Bahai and Jewish minorities in Tunisia.

According to Humanists International's Freedom of Thought Report (updated 28 October 2020):

- "The government subsidizes mosques and pays the salaries of imams. Local religious committees and imams must be approved by the religious affairs directorate. The president

appoints the grand mufti of the state. The government allows the Jewish community to worship freely and pays the salary of the grand rabbi. It also provides some security for all synagogues and partially subsidizes some restoration and maintenance costs."

According to Middle East Concern (MEC country profile):

- "Both expatriate and local Christian communities enjoy relative freedom in Tunisia, provided that they avoid activities that could be construed as proselytism. A potential source of threat is from Salafist organizations, though recent attacks have principally been on cultural and economic targets rather than against non-Islamic religious groups. The most significant challenge for local Christians is the family and societal pressure that is often faced by those who choose to leave Islam, though this only takes violent forms in extreme cases."

Within this context, both male and female converts face significant pressure if their faith becomes known. Women face the prospect of forced marriage and house arrest, whereas men may be subjected to physical attack, death threats and social isolation.

Economic landscape

According to the World Factbook Tunisia:

- **GPD per capita (PPP):** \$10,400 (2021 est.)
- **Unemployment:** 16.8% (2021), with youth unemployment being twice as high at 38.3% (2021)
- **Percentage of population below national poverty line:** 15.2% (2015 est.)

According to the [World Bank's Tunisia Economic Monitor - Spring 2023](#)

- **General outlook:** "Tunisia's economic recovery was slow in 2022 due to regulatory barriers to growth and rising global energy and food prices. The country's current account and fiscal deficits rose as a result, with GDP growth reaching 2.5 percent. Urgent reforms are needed to improve the business environment and strengthen competition."
- **Economy:** "Tunisia's economy has been affected by a variety of challenges, including a higher trade deficit and consumer subsidies. The country's limited access to international financing has made local financing of the debt challenging. In addition, Tunisia's inflation rate reached 10.4% in February 2023, the highest in over three decades, largely driven by rising prices for energy and food. These factors have put significant pressure on the economy, making it all the more urgent to implement reforms to promote sustainable growth."
- **Economic growth:** "Tunisia's GDP growth for 2023 is expected to be around 2.3 percent, subject to considerable variation depending on the progress of financing conditions and structural reforms. One critical reform is to phase out energy subsidies, which have become increasingly costly, averaging 2.1 percent of GDP over the past decade and jumping to 5.3 percent in 2022. ... However, it is crucial to minimize the impact of reform on vulnerable households by providing stable tariffs and transfers."

Reports from other sources

- The World Bank's [World by Income and Region report](#) (FY 2022) puts the Tunisian economy in the lower middle income category .
- FSI 2023 Tunisia shows that while 'Economic inequality' continued to decrease (although remaining at relatively high score), the 'Human Flight and Brain Drain' and 'Economy' indicators worsened, with the Economy indicator reaching a high score.
- The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU Democracy Index 2023) writes: "The president, Kaïs Saïed, secured public backing in a referendum in July 2022 for a new constitution that weakens parliament's powers in favour of the presidency. We expect the IMF board to approve a new, four-year US\$1.9bn financing programme in 2023 that is required to stave off a sovereign default, but disenchantment with economic conditions and high unemployment will grow. GDP growth will slow to 1.8% in 2023 as a recession in many European states weighs on activity, and inflation will remain elevated, at about 10%, but will be reined in later in the 2023-27 forecast period. The public finances and the current account will remain in deficit throughout the forecast period, and debt levels will stay high."

Despite Tunisia's initial successful transition from a one-party dictatorship to a multiparty democracy, its economy continued to struggle, with unemployment remaining steadily around 15% and youth unemployment being more than twice as high. Obviously, it did not help that Tunisia had 13 governments in 9 years, with three new governments between the October 2019 parliamentary elections and the suspension of parliament in July 2021 ([Carnegie Endowment, 28 March 2019](#)). The COVID-19 crisis had a major effect on the economy, especially since tourism sharply declined as a result of pandemic restrictions. An increasing number of Tunisians are even joining the Sub-Saharan migrants in seeking asylum in Europe ([VOA News, 29 December 2022](#)). A year after President Saied seized power, it still has to be seen whether he can improve the stability of the government and the economy. At present, many Tunisians hold the perception that the economy is crumbling, with recurrent scarcities of essential items such as food and medicines ([Reuters, 1 June 2023](#)).

Situation for Christians

Overall, Christians in Tunisia are also kept out of positions in the government and army. The coming years are likely to become even more difficult for Christians due to the struggling economic situation following the COVID-19 pandemic and the worsening food crisis caused by the Russo-Ukrainian war — about 54% of Tunisia's wheat imports come from Russia and Ukraine ([Al-Monitor, 29 July 2022](#)). Although the tourism sector is recovering from the effect of the COVID-19 restrictions ([Tourism Review, 10 April 2023](#)), it is likely that Tunisia's economy will continue to struggle ([Al-Jazeera, 1 June 2023](#)). Thus the lack of economic opportunities available to the younger generation has worsened. This in turn causes Tunisia's brain drain and the possibility of social unrest to grow.

Gender perspective

As of [2022](#), the labor force participation rate among females is 26.2% compared to 66.3% among males (World Bank Gender Data Portal 2023). Women are, in general, the most economically

vulnerable in Tunisia, due to patrilineal inheritance practices and limited work opportunities ([Georgetown 2019/20, p.15](#)). Non-Muslim women married to Muslim husbands may not inherit from each other by default, unless they pursue a legal judgment based on constitutional rights (US State Department IRFR 2022 Tunisia). In addition, the government classifies all children born from such marriages as Muslim and prohibits them from inheriting from their mothers.

Culturally, men are expected to provide an income, while women take care of the children. Male Christians can face pressure in their workplace or lose employment due to their faith; as the primary breadwinner this serves to destabilize their wider dependent families. Furthermore, male converts may also be denied their due inheritance. Female converts, on the other hand, may become destitute if forced out of the home upon discovery of their conversion.

Social and cultural landscape

According to the World Factbook Tunisia:

- **Main ethnic groups:** The majority of the Tunisian population (98%) are from Arab decent, with others having European (1%) or Jewish (1%) ancestry
- **Main languages:** The official language is Arabic, with French being widely spoken too. Tamazight, the official Berber language, is spoken as well
- **Population:** Tunisia has a population of around 11.975.000 people (2023 est.), with a growth rate of 0.63% (2023 est.)
- **Urban population:** In 2023, 70.5% of the population lived in urban areas, while the annual urbanization rate stands at 1.34%
- **Literacy rate:** 82.7% of the population can read and write; with a difference between men (89.1%) and women (82.7%) (2021)
- **Youth population:** The younger generation - up to 24 years of age - makes up 38% of the population, making it a country with a young population in need of (economic) opportunities.
- **Life expectancy:** 77.1 years on average; women (78.8 years), men (75.4 years)
- **Education:** Tunisia's citizens enjoy 15 years of schooling on average (2016)

According to the UNDP Human Development Report Tunisia:

- **Human Development Index (HDI) score and ranking:** Tunisia ranks #97 out 191 countries. The combined ratio of life expectancy, education and per capita income gives a high score of 0.731, making it one of the higher scoring countries in the wider region.
- **Gender inequality:** With a Gender Development Index (GDI) score of 0.931, women are disadvantaged in comparison to men. The GDI measures the differences in life expectancy, years of education and GNI per capita per gender.

Conservative Islam

Tunisian society is mainly conservative and Muslim, although there are differences between the (rural) south and (urban) north. Also influenced by links with France (for instance, when family members reside there), there is a strong liberal urban youth culture. Tunisian Christians, almost all of them from a Muslim background, remain side-lined and are discriminated against by family and society. Once their conversion becomes known, they face pressure to recant their faith and

might be threatened with divorce or with forced marriage to marry a Muslim. Converts from Islam to Christianity are also likely to be excluded from family inheritance and lose custody rights.

In April 2018, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief [reported](#) on Tunisia (World Watch Monitor, 23 April 2018). He concluded that "old laws and societal pressure pose the greatest challenges to religious freedom in Tunisia; a number of old laws, such as 'public morality concepts' and 'public order provisions', are used to enforce restrictions on, for example, food consumption during Ramadan."

According to Humanists International's [Freedom of Thought Report](#) (updated 28 October 2020): "Islamic religious education is mandatory in public schools. The courses on Islam take up roughly one hour per week and non-Muslims are able to request an exemption. The religious curriculum for secondary school students also includes the history of Judaism and Christianity. The state allows other religious groups to educate in private schools."

Gender perspective

In September 2017, Tunisia [overturned](#) the law that prohibited Muslim women from marrying non-Muslim men (BBC News, 15 September 2017). For converts from Islam to Christianity this was a particularly significant step. However, social opposition [prevents](#) implementation of the law in practice (The New Arab, 8 August 2018). In November 2018, the government proposed an amendment of the Personal Status Code, which would lead to gender equality regarding inheritance rights. However, the proposal [ignited a huge debate](#) as conservative Muslims regard it as being contrary to the Quran and Islamic law (Al-Monitor, 7 December 2018). President Saied is known to be an opponent of equal inheritance for women. According to BTI 2020, there is educational gender balance in Tunisia with more than 90% of both sexes being literate and more women than men entering higher education. However, women remain significantly under-represented in the workforce, particularly in higher positions, with a 23.8% labor force participation (UNDP Human Development Report Tunisia). This is an indication of the societal conservative views on marriage and motherhood. Violence within the domestic sphere rose during the COVID-19 pandemic; the Ministry of Women, Family, Childhood and Seniors reported a seven-fold increase of domestic violence reports during the national lockdown. A study published in October 2020 reported that psychological violence was the most frequent use of abuse ([Sediri et al, 17 October 2020](#)).

Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (IWS 2023):

- **Internet usage:** 69.4% penetration (December 2021 - most recent available at time of writing)
- **Facebook usage:** 71.6% penetration (January 2022) - a possible explanation for the higher number of Facebook users might be the popular use of Internet cafes to access the Internet.

According to [Napoleon Cat](#), in June 2023, 52.2% of Facebook users were male and 47.8% female.

According to the World Bank Tunisia data:

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 127.6 per 100 people. Reliable data on the gender gap in relation to technology access is lacking. According to a [2017 study by Middle East Media](#) (accessed 4 August 2021), there is a small gap in respect to smart phone ownership; 69% of men owned one compared to 61% of women. Recent statistics indicate that about 95% of women currently have access to cell phones (Georgetown, GIWPS 2021 Tunisia).

As reported by Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023:

- Tunisia is rated as "partly free".
- "Despite attacks against online expression following Tunisian president Kaïs Saïed's July 2021 seizure of extraordinary powers, Tunisia's internet freedom score has remained the highest in the Arab world. However, individuals risk prosecution for publishing online content that is critical of the president, security forces, or the government, and some users have experienced harassment in response to their online activity. Several laws criminalize online speech, and the newly enforced Decree Law 2022-54 imposes harsh penalties for speech-related offenses and expands state surveillance capabilities. The state of emergency was once again renewed in January 2023, granting government agencies the ability to access the contents of electronic devices without a court order. While government-ordered censorship is uncommon, an increase in misinformation and self-censorship has negatively impacted the reliability and diversity of online content."

Most North African countries, including Tunisia, are making rapid progress in technological development. The majority of the population in Tunisia has Internet access, although many (only) via their mobile phones.

Although the freedom of the press significantly increased after the Arab Spring revolution, the July 2021 seizure of power by the president has caused serious reasons for concern. Reporters without Borders (RSF 2023 Tunisia) ranks Tunisia #121, dropping from #94 in 2022, a further strong decrease from #73 in the 2021 index. According to RSF: "The political crisis shaking the country, and Saïed's uncertain commitment to press freedom, have had major repercussions. Since his inauguration as president in October 2019, the presidential palace has stopped receiving journalists, despite protests by the National Union of Tunisian Journalists (SNJT)", increasing "fears of a major setback for press freedom."

Christians in Tunisia, especially converts from a Muslim background, have to be careful when posting on social media, although threats often remain limited to online verbal abuse. Many Christians in Tunisia use a pseudonym when posting Christian material. Those who are too overtly active on social media risk being tracked down by the authorities or by Islamic radicals. However, with the rise of Internet access and social media, many converts to Christianity can now find fellowship online, even if they are alone and isolated (as was the case during the COVID-19 lockdown measures).

Security situation

In May 2023, a member of the security services opened fire during a Jewish festival at the popular tourist island of Djerba, killing five people - two Jewish pilgrims and three servicemen ([France 24, 12 May 2023](#)). The government downplayed the seriousness and the antisemitic nature of the attack in a bid to minimize any damage to the recovering tourism sector ([Al-Jazeera, 21 May 2023](#)). Nonetheless, this major attack serves as a reminder of the two large-scale attacks in Tunis in 2015, in which Islamic militants linked to the Islamic State group (IS) killed at least 60 tourists and civilians ([BBC News, 27 June 2015](#)). Additionally, In an antisemitic attack in 2022 on the Grand Synagogue in the capital, an assailant wounded two police guards ([Al-Arabiya, 24 June 2022](#)).

Such attacks raise concern about the extent of radical Islam's influence persisting in the country. Over the last decade, thousands of Tunisians went abroad to join IS forces and other Islamic militant groups. Many of them have returned from Syria/Iraq or have joined IS cells or other groups closer to home. The lawlessness in neighboring Libya is creating opportunities for them to maintain an active presence. It is clear that despite a 2021 report stating that "Salafist-jihadist ideology has faded from view in the country, including among the most vulnerable sectors of the population, who tend to identify more with gang culture than with martyrdom" ([ICG, 4 June 2021](#)), the jihadist threat remains at large ([ISPI, 22 July 2022](#)).

Between 2016 and 2022 there were no major attacks on civilians in Tunisia. Still, the security services [remained regular targets for attacks](#), with suicide bombers killing police officers in June 2019 and March 2020 ([New York Times, 6 March 2020](#)). A national guard was killed by a knife attack in September 2020 ([France24, 6 September 2020](#)) and a policeman was killed in June 2023 ([Arab News, 4 July 2023](#)).

Islamic militants seem to be mainly targeting the security services, so Tunisian Christians who keep a low profile are not likely to be attacked by violent Islamic groups. Nonetheless, the presence of such groups remains a threat and forces Tunisian Christians to be careful in their activities and on social media.

Sub-Saharan African migrants

In July 2023, public unrest occurred in Sfax, the second most populous city after the capital Tunis, after a Tunisian man was killed following altercations between Sub-Saharan African migrants and Tunisians. Subsequently, the security services expelled hundreds of migrants from the city. Some were transferred to the desert border area with Libya, where around 100 migrants died or went missing. Many Sub-Saharan African migrants were subjected to racial hatred and physical abuse following an incendiary speech by President Saïd in February 2023, in which he accused those migrants of crime and posing a "demographic threat" ([France24, 17 September 2023](#)).

Gender perspective

Nine women from an all-female group were sentenced for terrorist acts by the Criminal Chamber in Tunis in January 2023 ([Africa News, 12 January 2023](#)). The specific details of the charges and their implications were not provided in the report. Tunisian authorities disclosed that women

made up about a third of the 3,000 Tunisians that travelled abroad to join IS in Syria and Libya, either of their own volition or via coercion but international reports suggest this number may be much higher than estimated ([HRW, 12 February 2019](#)).

Trends analysis

1) End of the road for Tunisian democracy?

Tunisia is a country that is more advanced than most northern African countries in terms of civil liberties and democratic governance. However, President Saied's seizure of power in July 2021, followed by constitutional reforms giving him almost absolute powers in 2022 and the arrest of opposition leaders, has brought the young democracy on the brink of dictatorship. The Tunisian democracy was in a fragile state due to high unemployment rates and difficulties in implementing economic reforms necessary for economic growth. The call for a strong leader came in that sense as no surprise. However, it is possible that many will regret their choice in the long-term.

2) Ongoing tension between Islamist and liberal ideals

Given his powers under the new 2022 Constitution, the president will play a crucial role in shaping Tunisia's political culture. Within Tunisian society, there is a battle going on between (hardline) Islamists and moderate liberals. The last two rounds of parliamentary elections did not give a clear win to either side. For Tunisians in general and Tunisian Christians in particular, the president has caused some confusion as to where he stands in the question of religion: On the one hand he removed Islam from being an official state religion from the Constitution, but on the other hand added that Tunisia belongs to the Islamic Ummah and that the government must work "to achieve the goals of pure Islam" ([Reuters, 1 July 2022](#)). The president will probably give more clarity on this matter in due course and will appreciate the need not to alienate any segments of society. What the president's chosen direction will then mean for the Freedom of Religion and Belief for Tunisia's Christians remains to be seen, but the fact that state pressure has not decreased since July 2021 is a hint of what may lie ahead.

3) Society at large remains conservative

Regardless of the president's decisions, it is likely that Tunisia's Islamic society will remain mostly conservative and there is no indication that a majority of the population want to improve matters concerning Freedom of Religion and Belief. Hence it is not very likely that the situation for Christians in the country will improve in coming years.

External Links - Keys to understanding

- Recent history: Punic Wars - <https://www.britannica.com/event/Punic-Wars/Campaigns-in-Sicily-and-Spain>
- Recent history: infighting - <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/infighting-in-nidaa-tounes-a-danger-to-tunisi-as-democracy>
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WWL 2024: Church information / Tunisia

Christian origins

Tunisia has a very rich Christian history. The first reports on Christianity in Tunisia concerned the interrogation and martyrdom in 203 AD of two Christian women, Felicitas and Perpetua, in the city of Carthage. In that same city, three very influential Church Fathers lived, worked and died, namely Tertullian (160-230 AD), Cyprian (210-258 AD) and Augustine (354-430 AD).

The early church of Tunis was at times severely persecuted by Rome, especially under Emperor Diocletian, who ruled from 284–305 AD. It was one of the places where the Donatist controversy erupted in the 4th century concerning the appointment of leaders who had previously betrayed their Christian faith during persecution. It seems that the Amazigh ('Berber') Christians were, generally speaking, less forgiving than the urbanized Romans in Tunisia.

In 439 AD Carthage was conquered by Germanic Vandals. The Vandals tried to convert the urban Christians of Africa to their Arian version of Christianity. The Vandals sent the Catholic clergy into exile and expropriated their churches, and at times had Catholic leaders killed. In 534 AD the Byzantine Empire - representatives of Rome and of 'non-heretical' Christian faith - captured Tunisia again.

The Byzantines rebuilt fortifications and border defences and entered into treaties with the Imazigen ('Berbers). Nevertheless, for many decades security and prosperity were precarious and were never fully restored. Direct Byzantine rule did not extend far beyond the coastal cities. In 698 AD, Arab armies defeated the Byzantine forces at the Battle of Carthage and destroyed it. As in other countries in North Africa, the arrival of Islam significantly affected Church development, but Christianity managed to survive in Tunisia until the 11th century.

Christianity did not succeed in getting firmly established again until the 19th century when many French and other expatriate Christians came to the country under the political protection of France. The Roman Catholic witness grew considerably and an archbishop of Carthage was installed in 1884. Various other Christian organizations also began work: Anglicans in 1829, the North African Mission in 1881, the Seventh-day Adventist in 1905, Methodists in 1908, and in 1911 Pentecostals from the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee). After Tunisia's independence in 1956, the public life of the Church became more restricted; expatriates could worship without much difficulty but Tunisians converting from Islam to the Christian faith faced great opposition.

(For further details, see: Ross R K, Tadros M and Johnson T M (eds.), Edinburgh Companions to Global Christianity. Christianity in North Africa and West Africa, Edinburgh University Press, 2018, pp.45-51)

Church spectrum today

Tunisia: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	210	0.9
Catholic	17,800	80.2
Protestant	1,100	5.0
Independent	2,800	12.6
Unaffiliated	300	1.4
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
Total	22,210	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	900	4.1
Renewalist movement	2,500	11.3

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalist movement:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

The Roman Catholic Church is the largest officially recognized domination among the expatriate Christians in Tunisia. The Russian Orthodox and the Greek Orthodox Church, as well as the French Protestant and the Anglican church are also officially recognized by the government. All denominations have functioning churches in the capital Tunis and are mainly serving expatriate Christians residing in the country.

Tunisian Christians from a Muslim background are not officially recognized and do not have officially recognized church buildings.

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

Converts from Islam to Christianity have most to fear from their own family members and society. This is especially true in the south of the country, where the Islamic population is more conservative. Urban areas, and especially the capital Tunis itself, offer possibilities for converts to escape family pressure and live their faith in the anonymity of the big city.

Violent Islamic militants are active in the border areas to the south, in particular. They are likely to target any Christian, whether foreign or national, if the opportunity arises.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians: Expatriate Christians experience a relative amount of freedom, although public evangelism is not tolerated. Foreign Christians worshipping at the few international churches hardly encounter any problems.

Historical Christian communities: This category does not exist in Tunisia as defined by WWL Methodology.

Converts to Christianity: Converts with a Muslim background face various forms of persecution, e.g. from their family members. However, they (and others) are more or less free to seek and receive information about the Christian faith, particularly content posted online.

Non-traditional Christian communities: This category does not exist in Tunisia as defined by WWL Methodology.

WWL 2024: Persecution Dynamics / Tunisia

Reporting period

01 October 2022 - 30 September 2023

Position on the World Watch List

Tunisia: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	69	33
WWL 2023	67	36
WWL 2022	66	35
WWL 2021	67	26
WWL 2020	64	34

The rise of 2 points was caused by increases in pressure in all but the *Community sphere of life* and in a rise in the violence score from 6.5 points to 6.9. Among other things, there were more church attacks and arrests than in the previous reporting period. In July 2022, President Kais Saied consolidated his de facto coup via a constitutional referendum that returned Tunisia to one-man rule. The new Constitution is ambiguous regarding the Freedom of Religion and Belief. It is feared that the current high levels of government monitoring of Tunisian Christians will further increase in the future.

Persecution engines

Tunisia: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Not at all
Clan oppression	CO	Weak
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	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	Not at all

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.

Islamic oppression (Strong)

This persecution engine operates at different levels: At the family level, converts from Islam to Christianity are often opposed by family members in their decision to convert. There are cases of converts being locked up in their houses by their own families. At the social level, Islamic militants spread fear throughout the country. At the political level, Islamist political parties have lost influence after President Saied's takeover, but their ideas are still present. The links between some Islamist movements and organized crime should not be underestimated. They create unrest in Tunisian society and contribute to the increase of the already high levels of fear among Christians.

Dictatorial paranoia (Medium)

Since his power grab in July 2021, President Saied has shown no interest in sharing power with other state institutions. The new 2022 Constitution has weakened the role of the parliament significantly, while almost giving absolute powers to the president. The rights guaranteed under the Freedom of Religion and Belief will now directly be determined by the president. Saied is known to be socially conservative and seems to be becoming increasingly authoritarian, so it is likely he at least wants to monitor and control the Christian community. Because of his one-man rule, pressure on the political level is increasingly expected from his side rather than the Islamist parties.

Clan oppression (Weak)

Tribal aspects of society, especially outside major cities, particularly affect converts from Islam to Christianity. Turning away from Islam is not only seen as religious betrayal, but also as a betrayal of the (extended) family. Nevertheless, tribalism is less strong than in neighboring

countries due to a government campaign in the 1950s and 1960s directly aimed at combatting its influence.

Drivers of persecution

Tunisia: Drivers of persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	STRONG			WEAK				MEDIUM	
Government officials	Medium							Medium	
Ethnic group leaders				Weak					
Non-Christian religious leaders	Strong								
Violent religious groups	Medium								
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Medium								
One's own (extended) family	Strong			Weak					
Political parties	Weak								

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.

Drivers of Islamic oppression

- **Extended family (Strong):** The main driver of persecution for Christian Tunisians who have converted from Islam is their own (extended) family. They will put pressure on the convert to recant his or her new faith, or even abuse the convert. Spouses will be put under pressure to divorce the convert and any children can be taken away.
- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Strong):** Despite the country's reputation as being the most celebrated success story of the Arab Spring uprisings, radical Islamic teaching is widespread.
- **Ordinary citizens (Medium):** The local neighborhood is also a source of persecution for converts. This is particularly the case outside the major urban centers. Neighbors will often, for instance, exclude converts from social gatherings and are likely to cause converts to lose their jobs.
- **Violent religious groups (Medium):** The threat of activities by militant Islamic groups affects all categories of Christian communities in the country. Radical groups remain a significant threat, with thousands of Tunisians having joined radical Islamic groups (including IS) in past years.
- **Government officials (Medium):** The government and state apparatus can also be regarded as drivers of persecution since they deny registration and official recognition to congregations of Christians with a Muslim background.
- **Ethnic group leaders (Medium):** Family heads and other important members of the family put pressure on converts from Islam to Christianity to recant their faith.

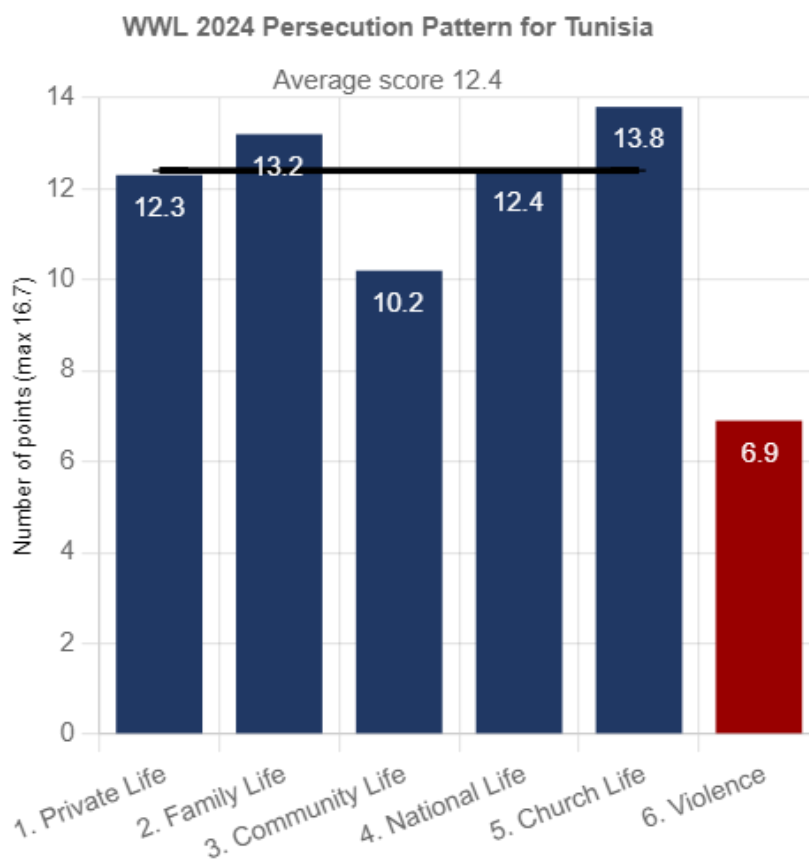
Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia

- **Government officials (Medium):** Given the president's authoritarian style, it is likely that the intelligence agencies will increasingly seek to control and monitor the churches and Christians alike.

Drivers of Clan oppression:

- **Extended family (Weak):** The (extended) family is the main driver. As the regional expert, Katia Boissevain, observed: "When a conversion is announced, or discovered, families feel they have been cheated and abandoned Stepping aside and choosing the Christian religion is not only a break with the social body, but also a break with the social rhythm (which is defined by Islamic traditions). Becoming Christian is interpreted by the others as a choice formulated against everything for which they have been raised" (in: *Algeria and Tunisia, Christianity in North Africa and West Asia, Edinburgh Companion to Global Christianity, Edinburgh University Press, 2018, p.47*).
- **Ethnic group leaders (Weak):** Family heads and other important members of the family put pressure on converts to return to Islam, in order to restore the family honor. Especially in rural areas, society encourages the upholding of traditional values and customs that make it difficult for converts to turn away from Islam.

The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2024 Persecution pattern for Tunisia shows:

- The average pressure on Christians is at a very high level (12.4 points), increasing from 12.1 in WWL 2023.
- The level of pressure is highest in *Church* and *Family life*. This reflects the difficulties converts from Islam to Christianity face, both within their own families, as well as in the public sphere, e.g. if they want to be baptized or register churches.
- The score for reported violence increased slightly from 6.5 points in WWL 2023 to 6.9 points in WWL 2024. According to reports, less Christians were forced to leave the country, but more (house) churches have been attacked by local community members.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2024 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

Block 1.1: Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another. (3.25 points)

Although conversion to Christianity is not prohibited by law, converts from Islam experience pressure from their families when their conversion is known at the private level. There are notable differences between rural areas and the country’s capital, Tunis, where the situation is comparatively better.

Block 1.4: It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (including expressions in blogs and Facebook etc.). (3.00 points)

The fact that many Tunisian Christians feel it is safer to use a pseudonym when posting Christian messages on social media is an indication of the pressure they are facing.

Block 1.5: It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols. (3.00 points)

Wearing and displaying a cross can lead to a variety of reactions. On top of the pressure from family, including the risk of discovery of their new faith in case of converts, there is also a (limited) risk of societal and governmental (i.e., police) harassment. Several incidents have been reported in recent years. There is no apparent risk for expatriate Christians, however.

Block 1.7: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with immediate family members. (3.00 points)

Most converts (especially young people) face some sort of opposition or rejection because of changing their faith. Especially for young converts, it is risky to be seen reading the Bible and difficult to find a place for prayer by themselves, let alone speaking about their faith with family members.

Block 1: Additional information

Especially young and recent converts from Islam to Christianity experience high levels of mostly family pressure, with (young) women generally facing higher risks than men. It is often difficult for them to pray and worship privately at home, while many prefer to read their Bibles online rather than owning a physical copy. At the same time, due to social stigma, it is often difficult for them to connect and share their faith with other Christians. Risks and pressures generally become less over time as converts find ways to rebuild relationships and receive support from other Christians, although for some, relief only arrives after they have been ostracized by their families. It is likely that a significant number of converts keep their faith a secret.

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

Block 2.6: Christian couples have been hindered in adopting children or serving as foster parents because of their faith. (4.00 points)

Only Muslims can adopt a child in Tunisia, with even expatriate Christians only being able to adopt in exceptional cases. No case of a successful adoption by expatriate Christians has been reported during the WWL 2024 reporting period.

Block 2.2: Registering the birth, wedding, death, etc. of Christians has been hindered or made impossible. (3.50 points)

Christian marriages often take place with Islamic rites, although exemptions are sometimes made by certain registrars. According to the law, a Tunisian Christian woman can marry a (foreign) Christian man. In practice, this is often still blocked. Registering a Christian name for a child of Tunisian Christian parents is often hindered or refused.

Block 2.5: Burials of Christians have been hindered or coercively performed with non-Christian rites. (3.50 points)

Funerals often take place on the same day as a person's death and a burial is considered a core family issue. Hence, even when a Tunisian Christian is known to have converted to Christianity, they are buried with Islamic rites. In addition, there is no Christian cemetery for Tunisian Christians. In the recent past, known Tunisian converts have been refused a place at a cemetery.

Block 2.12: Christian spouses of non-Christians have been excluded from the right or opportunity to claim custody of the children in divorce cases. (3.25 points)

Due to their conversion, several converts have lost custody of their children. More often, converts accept certain levels of pressure in order to avoid a custody conflict over the children, which they are most likely to lose.

Block 2: Additional information

It is difficult for Tunisian Christians to establish Christian family life in a clearly Islamic society. Baptism is the clearest sign of one's conversion to Christianity and hence a sensitive issue in Tunisian society. Public baptisms are sometimes carried out in the capital Tunis and other urban areas, but would be hindered in most parts of the country. If not the immediate family, at least

the wider family is Islamic, making it hard to raise a child in a Christian way, especially since Islamic religious education is mandatory in the schools. Although the curriculum is described as moderate and respectful to Christianity, children are taught that Christians are in error. Although the threat of divorce or disinheritance occurs more often than actually takes place, Tunisian converts are regularly confronted with such issues in the family context.

Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

Block 3.2: Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (this includes reporting to police, being shadowed, telephone lines listened to, emails read/censored, etc.). (3.50 points)

Monitoring happens frequently and Tunisian Christians are aware that their messages and calls are being intercepted

Block 3.13: Christians have been interrogated or compelled to report to the local vigilante/police for faith-related reasons. (3.50 points)

Police officers regularly question Tunisian Christians about their activities and even a simple request for a new passport can lead to detailed interrogation.

Block 3.7: Christians have been pressured by their community to renounce their faith. (3.00 points)

Converts receive threats from their families or the society around them when their conversion is known. Especially in rural parts of the country young female converts may be forced to marry a Muslim. There are also cases known of converts being expelled from their university, or who are not able to go to school because they have been turned out of their homes. Sometimes customers are told not to buy from shops run by a Christian. Hence, community pressure to recant their new faith is high for Tunisian converts.

Block 3.10: Christians have been discriminated against in public or private employment for faith-related reasons. (3.00 points)

Employment has been a major struggle for most Tunisian Christians. As converts, they either lose their jobs or cannot get hired because they lose all social connections (since family and friends will no longer help them find employment). Many Tunisian Christians therefore seek employment with foreign institutions to avoid such discrimination.

Block 3: Additional information

Levels of community pressure vary, with pressure generally being higher in the rural south of the country than in the urban areas, including the capital Tunis. Harassment can be avoided, but when Tunisian Christians are, for example, publicly active on social media, harassment is unavoidable. Especially during times of Islamic religious celebrations, like the month of Ramadan, pressure is felt most keenly.

Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

Block 4.1: The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (3.75 points)

The protection of the Freedom of Religion and Belief has not improved in the new 2022 Constitution. Although general terms still leave room for interpretation, the change from "Islam is the state religion" to "Tunisia is part of the Islamic Umma, and it is incumbent on the state alone to work to achieve the purposes of Islam (Maqasid Al-Shari'ah) in preserving the soul, honor, property, religion, and freedom" does not abode well. In addition, Article 2 of the previous constitution, noting that Tunisia is a secular state, has been dropped. Similarly, whereas the previous constitution included the protection of conscience and belief, the current one only protects "the freedom to practice religious rites" (Article 28).

Block 4.12: Christians, churches or Christian organizations have been hindered in publicly displaying religious symbols. (3.50 points)

Christians try to avoid drawing unwanted attention, especially from radical Islamic elements within society. Hence, only recognized (foreign) churches publicly display Christian symbols.

Block 4.8: Christians have been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public. (3.25 points)

Blasphemy remains illegal and Christians have to speak carefully in public, especially when it comes to criticizing Islam and proselytizing, which also applies to the expatriate Christian community. Nonetheless, there is generally more freedom of expression than in neighboring countries.

Block 4.10: Media reporting has been incorrect or biased against Christians. (3.25 points)

Media (newspapers and TV shows) have been spreading incorrect information about Christians and drawing a false picture of the Christian community. Christians are accused of converting for financial gain due to rich foreign Christians promising vulnerable Tunisians wealth and the possibility to migrate to a Western country. Christians are also accused of influencing under-age youth to become interested in Christian faith.

Block 4: Additional information

When dealing with the authorities, Christians are usually in a disadvantaged position. Underlining their vulnerable position is the fact that Christian converts are not likely to be treated equally in court, especially in cases involving family law. They are also vulnerable to abuse, as their families can in some cases act against them with impunity, especially in rural areas.

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

Block 5.2: It has been difficult to get registration or legal status for churches at any level of government. (3.75 points)

Tunisian converts cannot register their churches and no new church has been granted official registration since Tunisia's independence in 1956. This stands in stark contrast to the law that regulates mosques. Registered churches are allowed to operate freely but face practical difficulties, particularly relating to their property-upkeep, hiring staff and obtaining permission to publish and distribute Christian texts in Arabic.

Block 5.3: Christian communities have been hindered in building or renovating church buildings or in claiming historical religious premises and places of worship which had been taken from them earlier. (3.75 points)

Building new church buildings is almost impossible in Tunisia, both for the expatriate as well as for the Tunisian Christian (convert) community. Until now, Tunisian Christians make use of rented properties or house-churches, fearing that a visible church building would lead to increased social hostility.

Block 5.5: Churches have been hindered from organizing Christian activities outside church buildings. (3.75 points)

Public outside activities, even if performed by expatriate churches like the Roman Catholic Church, are discouraged by the government and generally no permission will be given, under the pretext of keeping public order. Processions that once took place publicly, are now celebrated in a less visible way, e.g. in the courtyard of a church.

Block 5.13: Churches have been hindered in importing Christian materials from abroad. (3.75 points)

With the exception of limited amounts of foreign-language, Christian material for the expatriate churches, it is not allowed to bring Christian materials (in Arabic) into the country. If found, these materials, including Bibles, will be confiscated.

Block 5: Additional information

Church life is severely hindered in Tunisia, especially for Tunisian (convert) Christians. Although conversion from Islam is not prohibited, in practice representatives of the government often act differently.

Violence

Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible, but since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as being minimum figures. The following points should be considered when using the data provided in the Block 6 table:

1. Some incidents go unreported because the Christians involved choose not to speak about the hostility being faced

Possible reasons for this may be:

- Doing so would expose them to more attacks. For example, if a family member is killed because of his/her faith, the survivors might decide to keep silent about the circumstances of the killing to avoid provoking any further attacks.
- In some circumstances, the reticence to pass on information may be due to the danger of exposure caused by converts returning to their previous faith.
- If persecution is related to sexual violence - due to stigma, survivors often do not tell even their closest relatives.
- In some cultural settings, if your loved one is killed, you might be under the obligation to take revenge. Christians not wishing to do that, may decide to keep quiet about it.

2. Other incidents go unreported for the following possible reasons

- Some incidents never reach the public consciousness, because no one really knows about it; or the incident is simply not considered worth reporting; or media coverage is deliberately blocked or distorted; or media coverage is not deliberately blocked, but the information somehow gets lost; or the incidents are deliberately not reported widely for security reasons (e.g. for the protection of local church leaders).
- In situations where Christians have been discriminated against for many years, armed conflict can make them additionally vulnerable. Christians killed in areas where fighting regularly takes place are unlikely to be reported separately. Examples in recent years have been Sudan, Syria and Myanmar.
- Christians who die through the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care (due to long-term discrimination) are unlikely to be reported separately. Christians are not always killed directly; they can be so squeezed by regulations and other oppressive factors that they die – not at once, but in the course of years. This often includes the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care, or exclusion from government assisted socio-economic development projects. These numbers could be immense.

3. The use of symbolic number

In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10*, 100* etc.) is given and indicated with an asterisk. A symbolic number of 10* could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100* could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1,000* could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*: Each could indicate much higher numbers, but WWL chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.

Tunisia: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire	WWL 2024	WWL 2023
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	0	0
6.2 How many churches or public Christian properties (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	6	4
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	7	5
6.4 How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons?	0	1
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	4	5
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	10 *	10 *
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	2	3
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	44	34
6.9 How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	5	7
6.10 How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	1	2
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	25	21
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	1	10

In the WWL 2024 reporting period:

- **Christians attacked:** Several Christians have been affected due to incidents involving (physical) abuse, forced marriage, rape and sexual harassment.
- **Christians arrested:** Several Tunisian Christian were shortly detained and interrogated about Christian activities. During interrogation, Christians are often accused of proselytization and having links with foreign organizations.
- **Christian buildings attacked:** Several (house) churches became the target of violence from community members.
- **Christian homes/shops attacked:** Several Tunisian Christians have been attacked inside their houses, often by family members.

- **Christians forced to leave:** Several Christians were forced to relocate inside the country because of family pressure.

5 Year trends

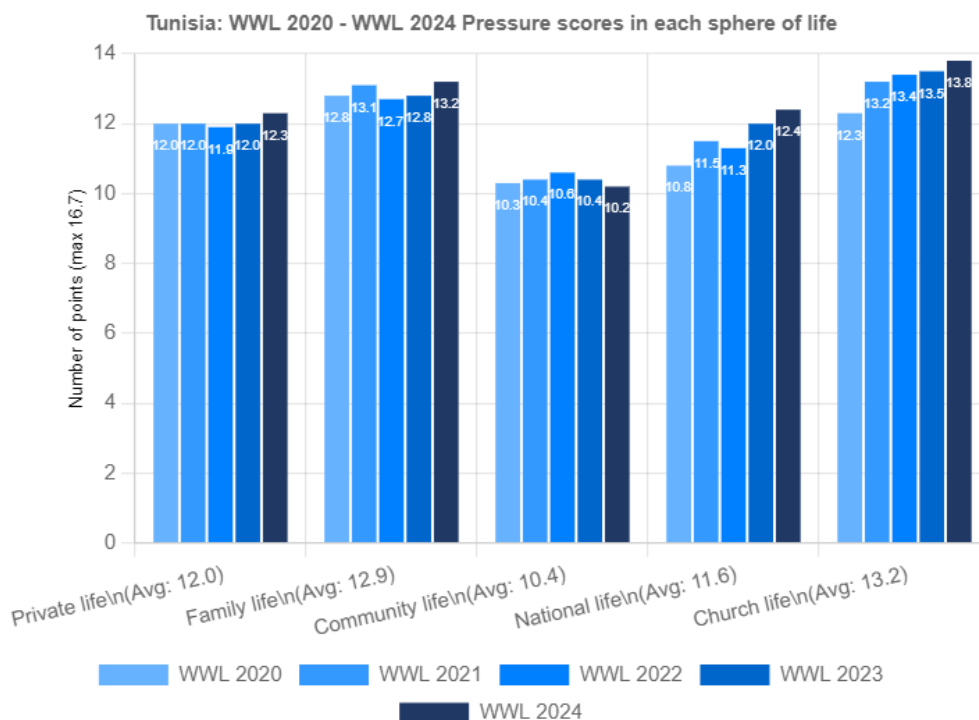
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

5 Year trends: Average pressure

Tunisia: WWL 2020 - WWL 2024	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2024	12.4
2023	12.1
2022	12.0
2021	12.0
2020	11.6

The average pressure on Christians has moderately increased over the last five years. Pressure has remained at a very high level and reflects the fact that after the Tunisian Revolution of 2011 the situation for Christians has not improved. The latest increases in pressure are mainly caused by Tunisia's return to autocracy.

5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life



The levels of pressure in *Private, Family and Community spheres of life* have fluctuated slightly but remained more or less stable over the last five reporting periods. The *National and Church spheres of life* are different in that they show a trend of increasing pressure, in line with the political situation becoming more tense.

5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



Tunisia's violence level is characterized by a significant number of incidents taking place in families and communities each year, but no killings or large scale attacks. A greater number of incidents were reported over the last four reporting periods (WWL 2021 - WWL 2024), causing the violence scores to enter the "very high" category.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	Denied inheritance or possessions
Political and Legal	Denied access to social community/networks; Denied custody of children; Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse; Forced divorce; Forced marriage
Security	Abduction; Forced to flee town/country; Incarceration by family (house arrest); Violence – physical; Violence – sexual
Social and Cultural	Violence – psychological; Violence – Verbal
Technological	-

Christian women and girls in Tunisia are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment and domestic violence. On Georgetown's '[Women, Peace and Security Index, 2023/2024](#)', Tunisia ranked 117th out of 170 countries.

[Reports](#) highlight the societal discriminatory norms and lack of employment opportunities that women face (World Bank Blogs, 23 December 2020). The culture is not generally respectful of women in practice, nor does it recognize women as leaders. Young women suffer from poor integration into economic life, a slowing down of recruitment in the public sector, and a significant disadvantage in terms of access to credit, land ownership and financial products. Further, the free movement of women and girls is also restricted. Tunisia had historically upheld policies that encouraged women's rights to political participation, such as a 2011 law that mandated gender parity among political participation. In 2022 however, President Kais Saied ushered in a new constitution that eliminated these policies as part of his broader undemocratic tendencies. Suppressing and silencing women's voices would seem to be political tactics to weaken democratic governance (Women, Peace and Security Index, 2023/2024). This gap in gender equality and the rollback of women's rights is also exploited as a means of religious persecution.

Converts from Islam face the greatest breadth of persecution if their faith is discovered. Women are more at risk in the traditional family context (since men have more freedom to express their own opinion). They may be physically beaten, expelled from their home, put under house arrest, threatened with death and/or rape. If already married, she will likely be divorced, have her children taken away and have her financial support withdrawn. Some Christian women have been separated from their children for prolonged periods due to disputes related to their new Christian faith. Single female converts on the other hand may be forced into a marriage with a Muslim man, especially when they get above a certain age, or are threatened with the possibility of no marriage prospects. A country expert stated: "In general, I would say that Christians are threatened with a refusal for marriage ... Christians have difficulty in finding a husband who is Christian and usually end up marrying the first man to show up". This is particularly common in rural areas. It is worth noting however, that Tunisia has committed to eliminating child, early and forced marriage by 2030 (Girls not Brides Tunisia).

The main source of persecution for women in Tunisia comes from the dominating male in the family: For a single female that would be the father, the brother or any other family member who follows in rank after that (uncle etc.); for a married woman that would be her husband or even fiancé. Female converts, especially in rural areas, have little chance of accessing either Christian community or Christian materials. For example, a girl may be kept in her room for months and targeted with physical violence for a perceived conversion to Christianity.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	Economic harassment via business/job/work access
Political and Legal	Forced divorce
Security	Forced out of home – expulsion; Violence – physical
Social and Cultural	Violence – psychological
Technological	-

New converts to Christianity – both male and female – are by far the most vulnerable group of Christians in Tunisia. Convert Christian men face intimidation, beatings and death threats. They bring shame upon their families by leaving Islam and can therefore be ostracized. Pressured by their families, Muslim wives may leave a Christian convert, and he may be denied inheritance or even access to his possessions. However, the severity of backlash following conversion depends on his social position and his political standing within his community. While Christian men may have been expelled from their homes when the family first learnt about their conversion, many have found that their families will quietly accept the conversion at a later point in time. Others however have been forced to permanently relocate, particularly away from rural areas.

Male converts also face loss of jobs and promotion and physical violence. When a man is persecuted, his family becomes vulnerable and lacks protection.

Persecution of other religious minorities

Attacks on Jewish community

The Jewish community was shaken by an attack in May 2023 on the ancient El Ghriba synagogue on the Mediterranean island of Djerba, the oldest synagogue on the African continent, during the annual pilgrimage, in which two Jewish pilgrims lost their lives (see above: Security situation). In October 2017, another attack took place following the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war, in which the tomb of 16th-century Rabbi Yosef Ma'aravi in southern Tunisia was heavily vandalized by a mob ([Le Monde, 24 October 2023](#)).

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2022 Tunisia):

- Bahai community:** Adherents of Bahai reported difficulties in practicing their belief as they are not officially recognized and cannot have their own place of worship. Although they have had some constructive dialogues with government officials in the recent past, the report notes: "The Baha'i community's efforts to establish an association remained ongoing at year's end [2022]. Following a 2020 court ruling in favor of allowing Baha'is to form an association, the General Prosecutor presented an appeal to the court referencing a nonpublic fatwa issued by the Grand Mufti in 2016, which stated that Baha'i Faith members were apostates and infidels and therefore should not be permitted to practice their faith. The appeal has remained pending since 2021." (p.9). In addition, "a Baha'i leader reported that Baha'is received threats of violence from members and religious leaders of the Muslim community after the issuance of the fatwa and after unsuccessful efforts by the Baha'i com-

munity to convince the Grand Mufti to rescind it."

- **Jewish community:** Prior to the May 2023 attack mentioned above, no such difficulties were reported by the Jewish community: "Jewish groups said they continued to worship freely, and the government continued to provide security for synagogues and partially subsidized restoration and maintenance costs. Government employees maintained the Jewish cemeteries in Tunis and Djerba but not those located in other cities, including Sousse and El-Kef. ... In accordance with government permits, the Jewish community operated private religious schools, and Jewish children were allowed to split their academic day between public schools and private religious schools or attend either type of school full-time" (p.12). However, some police harassment has been reported: "According to Jewish groups, police intermittently harassed Jews and discriminated against them in the south by enforcing stop-and-frisk measures."
- **Atheists:** "Some atheists from Muslim families reported receiving family and societal pressure to return to Islam or conceal their atheism, including, for instance, by fasting during Ramadan and abstaining from criticizing Islam" (p.13). Although Tunisia is one of the most liberal societies in the wider region, the Freedom of Thought Report lists several recent incidents regarding allegedly blasphemous posts, including the sentencing of Emna Chargui to 6 months in prison for "sharing a Facebook post that imitated the rhyme and format of some verses of the Quran to urge people to follow COVID-19 hygiene rules" ([Humanist International, 28 October 2020](#)).
- **Shiite Muslims:** Shiites are generally discriminated against and public figures have spoken out against Shia Islam in the past ([Al-Monitor, 16 September 2012](#), [IranWire, 11 March 2022](#)). According to the 2021 report, in February 2021, "the municipality of Dar Chaaban in Nabeul told Shia residents of a house to vacate the premises because the land permit authorized the property for habitation, not for religious services by members of the Shia community. The municipality demolished the building." (p.10).

Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

Islamic oppression

Society and culture, particularly in rural areas, remains opposed to Christian faith and activity and this has not been influenced by the political changes since 2011 so far. Tunisia's new 2022 Constitution on the one hand leaves out Islam as state religion, but at the same declares Tunisia to be part of the "Islamic Ummah" and obligates the government to "achieve a pure Islam". Interpretation of the new Constitution will strongly depend on the president and his attitude towards religious minorities. Saied is known to be conservative, making it unlikely that Tunisian Christians will receive more freedom in the short term. If he follows the traditional Islamic line and tries to appease Islamist sentiments, this could make life more difficult for Christians. Although less likely because it would not be in line with other countries in the "Islamic Ummah", he could also opt for a more moderate form of Islam, allowing religious minorities, including Tunisia's Christians from a Muslim background, to be (discreetly) active. Hence, it currently remains largely unclear what President Saied's plans are for the future of Tunisia and the country's Freedom of Religion and Belief.

Dictatorial paranoia

The president only recently established his one-man rule and this process has not yet fully crystalized. Hence, it is unclear how much space he will allow Tunisia's Christians. However, given his authoritarian style, it is likely that he will want Christian communities in Tunisia to be increasingly monitored and tightly controlled.

Clan oppression

The positive developments regarding women's rights and a more positive approach towards religious minorities among the moderate liberals could create a backlash among more conservative elements within society, who want their traditional Islamic customs and practices upheld.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: Women, Peace and Security Index, 2023/2024', - <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/WPS-Index-full-report.pdf>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: Reports - <https://blogs.worldbank.org/arabvoices/status-women-tunisian-society-endangered>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Le Monde, 24 October 2023 - https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/10/24/israel-hamas-war-vandalism-of-historic-synagogue-in-tunisia-shocks-jewish-community_6198078_124.html
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Humanist International, 28 October 2020 - <https://fot.humanists.international/countries/africa-northern-africa/tunisia/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Al-Monitor, 16 September 2012 - <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2012/al-monitor/shiites-in-tunis.html>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: IranWire, 11 March 2022 - <https://iranwire.com/en/world/71451/#>

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

As in earlier years, these are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Tunisia>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.