

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2022

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**36**

## Oman



### LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



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

## Key findings

Converts from Islam to Christianity are put under pressure from family and society to recant their faith. They can be expelled from their jobs and homes and face problems over child custody and inheritance. Expatriate Muslims converting to Christianity experience similar pressures as in their home countries, as they are often living within their own national or ethnic communities. Expatriate Christian communities are tolerated, but their facilities are restricted and Christian meetings are monitored to record any political statements and if any Omani nationals are attending. All religious organizations must be registered with the authorities.

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

## Quick facts

### LEADER

Sultan and Prime Minister Haitham bin Tariq Al-Said

### POPULATION

5,270,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

190,000 (3.6%)<sup>2</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Islam

### GOVERNMENT

Absolute Monarchy



## Context

| Main Religions | Number of adherents | Percentage |
|----------------|---------------------|------------|
| Christians     | 190,000             | 3.6        |
| Muslims        | 4,760,000           | 90.3       |
| Hindus         | 252,000             | 4.8        |
| Buddhists      | 26,600              | 0.5        |

Source<sup>3</sup>

The country is ruled by a monarch (Sultan Haitham bin Tariq since January 2020) and classed as authoritarian. The former monarch was credited with abolishing slavery, forging relations with the USA, bringing stability to the economy and election reforms.

According to [Middle East Concern](#), Islam is the state religion and forms the basis of legislation. There are severe sanctions for blasphemy against Abrahmic religions. The Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs closely regulates and monitors all religious activities, including Islamic. Religious leaders must be registered, and only approved messages can be given within mosques. Prior permission is required for publishing or distributing religious materials. Non-Muslim worship is only permitted on premises officially designated for that purpose.

Most Omanis practice a brand of Islam unique to Oman called Ibadism, which has been characterized as 'moderate conservatism', a mixture of austerity and tolerance. According to [experts](#), Ibadis do not

believe in violence against those who leave Islam and tend to tolerate Christians, leading to Oman being internationally presented as a model of tolerance and diplomacy. However, pressure on Omani converts from Islam to Christianity (and on expatriate Christians involved in proselytizing) remains very high. Most Christians are expatriates, concentrated in urban areas, come from The Philippines, India and Western countries.

## How the situation varies by region

Omani society is still very tribal. Social and family control, and thus pressure, is generally higher in rural areas, while urban areas offer the possibility for converts to live a more anonymous life.



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

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## Who is affected?

### Communities of expatriate Christians

There are several expatriate communities (including Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Protestant), located mainly in urban areas such as Muscat and Sohar in the north, and Salalah in the south. Their facilities are restricted in order not to offend nationals.

### Historical Christian communities

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

### Converts to Christianity

Converts to Christianity from Islam risk isolation and pressure to renounce their faith from family and society. They can also lose child custody as the law prohibits a father who leaves Islam from retaining paternal rights over his children.

### Non-traditional Christian communities

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



## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### Islamic oppression:

Converts to Christianity from an Omani Muslim background face the highest levels of pressure from family, who see conversion as betrayal of family honor and will likely expel converts from their home. For converts from Islam originating from elsewhere (such as Pakistan or the Levant), much depends on the response within their surrounding community in Oman. As long as they do not create unrest, they have less to fear from the Omani government, although their Omani employers can fire them, which would result in deportation if they could not find another job. Conversion is not recognized by the government and Omani converts have been interrogated by officials, commanded to stop meeting, and have faced legal problems and threats of losing their jobs and homes. Proselytizing is illegal and punishable under the law. No Christians have been officially prosecuted for proselytizing, but some have been expelled from the country without due process in recent years.

### Clan oppression:

Tribal values are blended with Islamic values; to be Omani is to be Muslim and to leave the faith is a dishonor and shame to family and society. Converts face the risk of being ostracized or subject to immense pressure to return to Islam.

### Dictatorial paranoia:

Oman has an authoritarian government which imposes criminal penalties for dissent and intimidates the media. Social media and phones may be monitored to suppress any government criticism.



# How are men and women differently affected?

## WOMEN

Women are in a vulnerable position in Oman’s conservative society, where fathers, husbands and male guardians exert significant control over their lives. Women have no voice in society, so are not expected to have their own religious opinions. It is extremely difficult for women to convert to Christianity, facing house arrest and being isolated from other Christians. Unmarried converts may also be pressured to marry a Muslim to force them to return to Islam. House maids, many of whom are Christian domestic migrant workers, experience sexual abuse and slave-like treatment.

- Denied custody of children
- Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family/house arrest
- Violence - physical
- Violence - sexual
- Violence - verbal

## MEN

It is very difficult for Muslim men to convert to Christianity in Oman. Converts risk social ostracism from families and communities. They are likely to lose the financial support of their families and the necessary connections to find or maintain a job in Oman’s network based society. This impacts dependent family members, as men are traditionally

their family’s breadwinners. If married, he will lose custody of his children and he might be divorced. Converts may also be exiled from their home, placing them in an extremely vulnerable position.

- Denied access to social community/networks
- Discrimination/harassment via education
- Economic harassment via work/job/business
- Travel bans/restrictions on movement
- Violence - verbal

## WWL 5 year trend

| WWL Year | Position on Open Doors World Watch List | Persecution score out of 100 |
|----------|---|------------------------------|
| 2022     | 36                                      | 66.06                        |
| 2021     | 44                                      | 63.47                        |
| 2020     | 42                                      | 62.05                        |
| 2019     | 44                                      | 59.24                        |
| 2018     | 46                                      | 57.22                        |

*Oman’s three-point increase from WWL 2021 to WWL 2022 was caused by rising pressure across all spheres of life. Christians, especially converts from Islam, came under higher pressure after the Omani government intensified its monitoring of Christians. The violence score also increased, due to several Christians being forced to leave the country.*



# Examples of violence in the reporting period

- At least one convert from Islam to Christianity suffered severe persecution from family members, and several other converts were interrogated by the authorities about their faith and activities.
- The pressure on the expatriate Christian community, on the basis of alleged proselytism, further increased under the new Sultan, resulting in several families feeling put under pressure to leave the country.
- Incidents where Christian migrant workers are targeted probably go unreported because it is in nobody's interest to go public with any details; the victim wants to keep his or her job and other actors (like the government) are not interested in recording such occurrences. It is difficult to discern whether mistreatment is due to a worker's Christian faith. It is estimated that thousands of expatriate Christians face abuse. According to a report by Amnesty International ('All Work No Pay', 2019), despite promises to improve labor conditions, thousands of migrant workers still suffer from labor abuses. In an earlier report ('My Sleep Is My Break', 2014), Amnesty International highlighted practices of (sexual) abuse especially among female migrant workers, many of whom are Christian.

| WWL Year | Christians abducted | Christians raped and/or sexually assaulted | Christians physically or mentally abused | Christians forced to flee their countries |
|----------|---------------------|--|--|---|
| 2022     | 1                   | 10   | 1  | 10  |
| 2021     | 0                   | 11   | 1  | 0   |

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

## Private life

Expatriate Christians who publicly talk about their Christian faith can be accused of proselytism which can lead to deportation. Oman is one of the few countries where Islam is the state religion, but conversion is not a crime if it is not done publicly. Given the tribal culture, however, a convert will be ostracized and lose all social security normally provided by the family.

## Family life

All children born to Omani parents, including converts to Christianity, are considered Muslim. Non-Muslim children cannot be exempted from compulsory Islamic classes within state schools. A convert husband will lose his right to custody upon divorce (this would not be different for a convert wife, but women in general do not have custody rights).

## Community life

Christians, especially converts and expatriates suspected of evangelism, are monitored by the government and society, who will inform the security services if they are aware of any 'suspicious circumstances'. They can be interrogated by the police. In a tribal society like Oman, employment

is often obtained via (family) relationships. Known Omani converts will not be able to get a job. Christian expatriate workers can experience discrimination. Their Christian faith is an extra vulnerability in this regard, although racism also often plays a negative role.

## National life

The Omani Constitution (Article 28) only guarantees the 'freedom to practice religious rites' under the condition that they 'do not ... contradict morals'. Hence, there is no freedom to convert from Islam to Christianity. Christians will try to keep a low political profile in order to avoid provoking a hostile reaction from government. Only Christian organizations offering a clear benefit to Omani society (such as a hospital) are welcomed.

## Church life

Churches apply self-censorship and are careful not to organize public activities or print large quantities of Christian material which would be interpreted as proselytism. The government would likely act against any church integrating converts. The publication, importing and distribution of religious materials are heavily regulated, churches are no longer allowed to use their own channels for importing Bibles.

## International obligations & rights violated

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

1. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)
2. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
3. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

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

- Children of Christian converts are forced to receive Muslim religious education and to participate in religious ceremonies and festivals that are not in line with their religious beliefs (CRC Art. 14)
- Female converts to Christianity do not have the option of marrying a Christian spouse, as women registered as Muslims are legally restricted from marrying a non-Muslim (CEDAW Article 16)



## Situation of other religious minorities

Hindus, Buddhists and non-Ibadi Muslims are relatively free to practice their beliefs. Other minorities struggle to register themselves with the government as procedures are not clear. Mosques are not allowed to let unlicensed imams preach and licensed imams must follow government-approved sermons. The government introduced these measures to avoid political discontent being expressed in the mosques.



# Open Doors in Oman

Open Doors raises prayer support for the believers and church in the Arabian Peninsula.



#### About this brief

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

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

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