

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

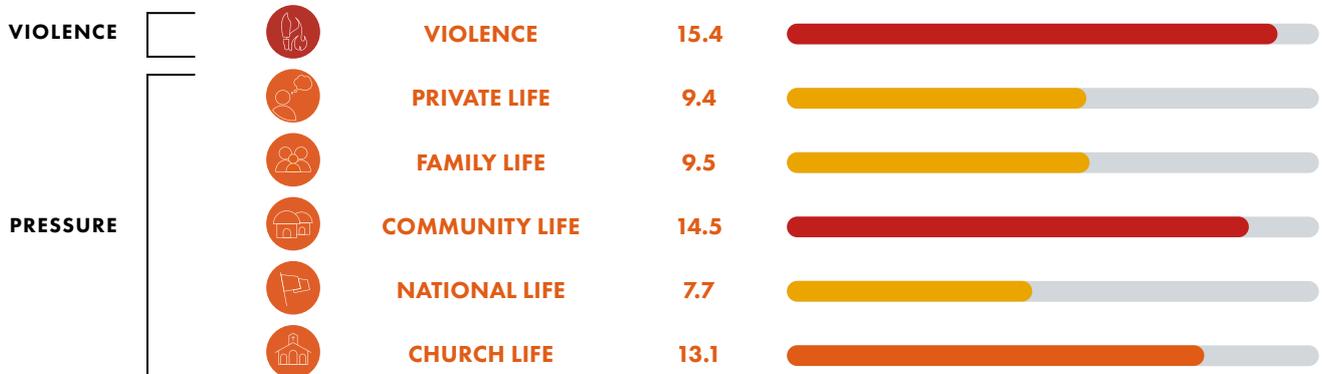
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**28**

## Niger



### 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).

## Key findings

The families of converts from Islam attempt to make them renounce Christianity, either by threats or use of force. The country is under increasing threat from jihadists, active in the west and south-east. In the areas effectively controlled by the jihadists, Christians face extremely challenging situations. Christians have been hindered from celebrating Christian weddings. Communal worship and meetings of Christians are conducted with caution in these areas due to the threat of violence from radical Islamist groups. The impact of jihadist ideology is manifested in the community turning ultra-conservative. As a result, Christians increasingly face discrimination in the public sector and are rarely able to secure employment within the local government services. Denying promotion to Christians is common practice. The legal process for registration of churches is long and arduous.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

President Mohamed Bazoum

### POPULATION

26,084,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

65,300<sup>1</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Islam

### GOVERNMENT

Semi-Presidential Republic



## Context

| Main Religions     | Number of adherents | Percentage |
|--------------------|---------------------|------------|
| Christians         | 65,300              | 0.3        |
| Muslims            | 25,076,000          | 96.1       |
| Ethno-religionists | 913,000             | 3.5        |
| Agnostics          | 14,300              | 0.1        |

Source<sup>2</sup>

Niger declared independence from France in 1960. Since then, the country has seen at least four military coups. However, since President Mahamadou Issoufou came to power in 2011, political and civil groups have been able to assemble peacefully, the situation for journalists and the freedom of the press has improved, and Niger is on the way to forming a multi-party democracy. In April 2021, President Mohamed Bazoum took over. One of his biggest challenges will be bringing the growing jihadist violence in the west and south under control. Since the beginning of 2021, Niger witnessed an uptick in jihadist violence especially in the tri-border region between Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso, with an estimated 300 people being killed in attacks in the first three months. Radical Islamist groups are opposed to the secular nature of the government. The country is battling against various radical Islamist groups: Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM); Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) on its northern western border with Mali; Boko Haram on its southern border with Nigeria.

Niger is a Muslim majority nation. Most Muslims in Niger are members of either the Tijaniya or Qadiriya Sufi orders, although Islamists seek to disassociate the population from Sufism and encourage Salafism.

Outside the bigger cities and in areas closer to the southern border of the country, Christians with a Muslim background are treated as outcasts by the local communities and at times face violent attacks. The attacks by Boko Haram and other radical Islamist groups continue to cause fear among the Christian community. Military confrontation between government troops and Boko Haram has caused many internally displaced people (IDPs) and a humanitarian disaster. Many Christians who have escaped the conflict live in IDP camps. Christian women and girls are vulnerable to abduction and sexual violence from extremist groups, whereas Christian boys are more prone to being recruited into the ranks of militant groups.

## How the situation varies by region

Areas outside the main cities, especially outside the capital city, are where Christians experience the most persecution. Due to the COVID-19 crisis, militants have been able to expand their sphere of influence.

<sup>1</sup> Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

<sup>2</sup> Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

## Who is affected?

### Communities of expatriate Christians

Expatriate Christians / missionaries face heightened danger and are at risk of abduction.

### Historical Christian communities

Both Protestant and Catholic churches belong to this category. They suffer from the rise in Islamic militancy in Niger and, in the past few years, have been attacked by armed groups such as Boko Haram in the departments of Diffa, near the border of Nigeria. Pastors and church leaders from these villages have been forced to flee to larger cities, fearing for their safety. Such incidents have also been observed in the department of Tillabéri. Many historical Christian communities in areas close to Nigeria live under fear of violent attack.

### Converts to Christianity

In some cases, the pressure on converts from Islam is particularly pronounced, especially in the private, family, and community spheres of life. Parents and relatives may oppose a family member's conversion to Christianity more than the government. Radical Islamic imams and teachers influence ordinary Muslim people to attack and chase away converts and any Christians found ministering to converts.

### Non-traditional Christian communities

Baptist, Evangelical, and Pentecostal groups are present in Niger and face pressure. This category faces the same kind of pressure as historical Christian communities. Compared to converts from Islam to Christianity, this group is less vulnerable to societal pressure.



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## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### Islamic oppression blended with Clan oppression:

In Niger, the Muslim population is 96.6% according to WCD 2021 statistics. For most of the population, Islam is regarded as being part of their ethnicity: if you are a Nigerien, you are a Muslim. Anything to the contrary is regarded as betrayal, which causes converts to Christianity in particular to face hostility from their Muslim family and local community if their faith is discovered. The secular nature of the state, which has always meant that state and religion are kept separate, is increasingly under pressure. Muslim religious leaders of the Izala group, a radical Islamic group originating in northern Nigeria, are active in Niger and threaten the freedom of Christians. Other Islamic pressure groups like the Tariqa ("the way" in Arabic – the Sufi way of approaching Allah) are active in certain parts of the country (e.g., in Maradi and Niamey). Izala and Tariqa create pressure on minority religions and on Muslims they consider to be deviating from Islam. Niger has a history of good relations between the majority of Muslim believers and the much smaller minority faiths. Nonetheless, Niger's battle against Boko Haram has stoked local intercommunal tensions and undermined the security and freedom of Christians in the country.

### Organized corruption and crime:

Ex-president Issoufou made it one of his main priorities to combat corruption within the government. Anti-corruption measures have now become law, targeting government officials, their family members and all political parties. In the same way, there are now laws to counter conflict of interest issues in awarding contracts, and the bribery of public officials by private companies is officially illegal. However, corruption is a problem in the judiciary and impunity is a serious challenge facing the country. Office-holders who break the law and engage in corrupt practices attract adverse publicity but are not adequately prosecuted. This situation affects society negatively, including the Christian population.

# How are men and women differently affected?

## WOMEN

Like many other countries in the Sahel, women and girls are vulnerable to abduction, rape and sexual abuse by extremist groups and others. Families often do not report instances of rape out of fear it will impact the victim's marriage prospects, and due to the attached stigma and shame. Female converts additionally face extreme hostility from their families and local communities. They can be divorced, denied custody of their children, forced into marriage with a Muslim man, and raped. Many have also been denied inheritance rights.

- Denied custody of children
- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Forced out of home / expulsion
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

## MEN

Male converts risk being rejected by their families, chased out of their family home, or put under house arrest. Christian men in Niger can also face dismissal from their jobs, or have their businesses boycotted by the Muslim community. As men are usually the financial providers, this leaves his family

vulnerable. Boys in particular risk abduction and forced recruitment into the ranks of militant groups.

- Abduction
- Economic harassment via work / job / business
- Forced out of home / expulsion
- Incarceration by family / house arrest
- Incarceration by the government
- Military / militia conscription / service against conscience

## WWL 5 year trend

| WWL Year | Position on Open Doors World Watch List | Persecution rounded score out of 100 |
|----------|---|--------------------------------------|
| 2023     | 28                                      | 70                                   |
| 2022     | 33                                      | 68                                   |
| 2021     | 54                                      | 62                                   |
| 2020     | 50                                      | 60                                   |
| 2019     | 58                                      | 52                                   |

*Niger re-entered the WWL top 50 countries with an increase of six points in WWL 2022. The rise was mainly due to the ongoing pressure and violence orchestrated by violent Islamic militants in the Sahel region. Since the WWL 2020 reporting period, the country has been experiencing a series of attacks by Islamic militants. There are also conflicts that have both religious and ethnic dimensions.*



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# Examples of violence in the reporting period

- A significant number of Christians have left their homes due to the threat posed by the jihadists. This threat is posed by the group alternatively known as the “Islamic State in West Africa” or “the Islamic State’s West Africa Province”, formerly known as Jama’at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da’wah wa’l-Jihad, as well as from Boko Haram, a terrorist organization based in north-eastern Nigeria and active in south-eastern Niger’s Lake Chad region.
- It has been reported that members of terrorist organizations in the western Tillaberi Region reportedly burned government-funded schools, telling villagers their children should not attend secular schools, and forced many villagers to flee their homes. Some of these schools were built by Christians.
- In the towns of Fantio and Dolbel in Tillaberi Region, jihadists set fire to Christian churches and properties.
- According to the [Global Terrorism Index 2022](#), Niger recorded the largest increase in terrorism deaths, increasing by 129% to 588 in 2021 while attacks remained consistent. The increased lethality is largely driven by the growing sophistication and organizational capabilities of Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). This is the highest terror-related death toll in the last decade. Civilians accounted for 78% of these casualties, resulting in Niger becoming the country with the third-highest civilian death toll in 2021.

| WWL Year | Christians killed | Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed | Christians physically or mentally abused | Christians internally displaced |
|----------|-------------------|--|--|---------------------------------|
| 2023     | 10*               | 30   | 100*                                     | 1000*                           |
| 2022     | 10*               | 20   | 43                                       | 1000                            |

*This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - for full results see the violence section of the Full Country Dossier. 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

Religion is considered a private matter by the state in Niger. However, the separation between religion and state has come under increasing pressure from radical Islamic groups such as the Izala group, who are opposed to the secular nature of the government. This adversely impacts the Christians in Niger, since the region is already very influenced by activities of Boko Haram and AQIM.

## Family life

Converts to Christianity can face extreme hostility from their families and local communities. They can be divorced, denied custody of their children, forced into marriage to a Muslim man, and raped. Christian parents can, by law, apply for custody of the children, but in practice, Christian parents fail to succeed. Many have also been denied their inheritance rights because of their conversion to Christianity. Other Christians do not face this form of persecution and are generally allowed to practice their faith in private.



### Community life

Christians with a Muslim background are treated as outcasts by the local communities and at times face violent attacks. Christians have been hindered from celebrating Christian weddings in border regions under Islamist control. Christians are not treated equally in the public sector, are rarely able to secure employment within local government services and are frequently denied promotion. Christian men in Niger can also face dismissal from their jobs because of their faith, or have their businesses boycotted by the Muslim community.

### National life

The attacks by Boko Haram, Islamic State group (IS) affiliates, and other radical Islamic groups continue to cause fear among the Christian community. The lack of security in the country has affected the Christian community significantly. As jihadists are targeting Christians as well as the state authorities, Christians must be careful to keep a low profile. Many Christians who have escaped the conflict are living in IDP camps in Bosso, Yebbi, Maiduguri, and Yola. There is also ongoing community violence.

### Church life

Communal worship and meetings of Christians must be conducted with caution due to the threat of violence from militant groups. Christians have occasionally been hindered from gathering for meetings, and the legal process for the registration of churches is very long and difficult.



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## International obligations & rights violated

**Niger 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)

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

- Christians can be harassed in the workplace and face discrimination because of their faith (ICCPR Art. 26)
- Christians often experience beatings and pressure to renounce their faith (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 10)
- Christian converts experience pressure and violence from their family and community to renounce their faith (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christians can face harassment and violence if they talk about their faith or engage in proselytization (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)
- Christian converts lose custody of their children and inheritance rights (ICCPR Art. 26)
- Churches face several obstacles to obtain permits for the construction of new buildings and to receive licenses for legal recognition (ICCPR Arts. 21 and 26)

## Situation of other religious minorities

According to the [US State Department \(IRFR 2021\)](#), there are no hindrances for specific faiths from the side of the government. However, Jehovah's Witnesses and Bahá'í, who are mostly present in major urban centers, do face the threat of violence from radical Islamic groups and have to tread carefully so as not to attract too much attention or provoke persecution.



Mariama, member of the Self-Help group, reading the Bible.

### Open Doors in Niger

Open Doors has been involved in Niger since 2011 through local churches and partners. Our vision for Niger is for Christians to understand persecution and respond to it biblically, enjoy greater economic stability, continue to reach out to others, have pastors that are servant leaders and are properly disciplined. Our programs include:

- Persecution preparedness training
- Economic empowerment programs
- Training in cross-cultural outreach and care for new believers
- Servant leadership training
- Discipleship training

#### 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: © 2023 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- 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 2023 ranking and reports - can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

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

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