



1969 – 2019

2019

# GLOBAL PRAYER GUIDE



Voice of the Martyrs

# USING YOUR GLOBAL PRAYER GUIDE

VOM's Global Prayer Guide was created to help you pray more specifically for our brothers and sisters in Christ who risk rejection, imprisonment and even death as they obediently serve the Lord on dangerous and difficult mission fronts.

The guide includes information on each of the Restricted Nations and Hostile Areas where VOM serves our persecuted Christian family members (see next page for explanation of Restricted and Hostile). VOM's Regional Directors, who serve persecuted Christians in the field, also provide brief updates throughout the guide on how God is moving in their particular region.

The Lord has given His followers the amazing privilege of helping advance His kingdom through prayer. Thank you for choosing to serve our persecuted brothers and sisters in this way.



**RESTRICTED NATIONS:** VOM uses the term 'restricted nation' to describe countries where government-sanctioned circumstances or anti-Christian laws lead to Christians being harassed, imprisoned, killed or deprived of possessions or liberties because of their witness. Also included are countries where government policy or practice prevents Christians from obtaining Bibles or other Christian literature. Christians in restricted nations often also experience persecution from family, community members and/or political groups, which VOM refers to as acts that are 'hostile' toward Christian witness (see below).

**HOSTILE AREAS:** VOM uses the term 'hostile area' to identify nations or large areas of nations where governments consistently attempt to provide protection for the Christian population but Christians are still routinely persecuted by family, friends, neighbours or political groups because of their witness.

#### **FIVE MAIN AIMS:**

- To encourage and empower Christians to fulfil the Great Commission in areas of the world where they are persecuted for sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
- To provide practical relief and spiritual support to the families of Christian martyrs.
- To equip persecuted Christians to love and win to Christ those who are opposed to the Gospel in their part of the world.
- To undertake projects of encouragement, helping believers rebuild their lives and Christian witness in countries where they have formerly suffered oppression.
- To promote the fellowship of all believers by informing the world of the faith and courage of persecuted Christians, thereby inspiring believers to a deeper level of commitment to Christ and involvement in His Great Commission.

Many details of our work are not shared for security reasons.

# GOD IS MOVING

## Among Asia's Muslims

Church planters among Muslims in Southeast Asia continue to see eternal fruit from their labours and sacrifice. Churches closed due to pressure on local authorities by Muslim radicals simply meet in the parking lot or street in front of their churches. When church planters are beaten, they continue their ministry in the next village, counting it a blessing to suffer for Christ. Even a suicide bombing has caused many Muslims to seek Him.

The government has closed some areas to missionaries and local church planters, but the Gospel still reaches Muslims in these areas through creative means such as websites, where thousands of Muslims have read and downloaded copies of the Bible in their own language. God sends many of these Muslims to universities where they hear the Good News, most for the first time, from Christian professors and fellow students who share despite the risks. The Christ-like, loving response of believers toward their persecutors is being used to soften hearts and open minds to the truth of the Gospel.





*"This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."*

—1 Timothy 2:3–4



# AFGHANISTAN

---

**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** The Gospel of Christ reached Afghanistan by the second century, but today there are no physical church buildings in Afghanistan. This ancient Central Asian country is full of cultural and religious opposition to the Gospel that, along with the serious lack of security, continues to greatly challenge all missions efforts. Though Christian faith was once more prominent in the country, most Afghans today have never heard the Gospel, do not know a Christian and have been raised since birth to pursue an unquestioned allegiance to Mohammed's teachings. Radical Islam paired with radical, tribal political ideologies makes it a very difficult arena for Christian presence and activity. Indigenous, near-culture Persian and expatriate believers are using every possible opportunity to see believers gathered, discipled and integrated into house churches. A unique unity exists among Christians labouring for the Gospel in Afghanistan. Church growth has been slow among the more than 50 unique people groups. However, there is significant Christian growth among the Hazara people, with some also coming to Christ among the other people groups.



**MAJOR RELIGION:** The country is 99.8% Muslim.

**PERSECUTOR:** Local and national governments are highly antagonistic toward Christians. Extremist groups, including the Taliban and ISIS, are active, and believers are persecuted by their families, friends and communities.

### WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN AFGHANISTAN:

Afghans who are followers of Jesus must hide their faith and cannot worship openly. All Christians worship in house churches. Evangelism is forbidden. Believers in Afghanistan gather in homes or other small venues. Christians or seekers are highly secretive about their faith, especially following a surge of arrests in recent years. Beatings, torture and kidnappings are routine for Christians in Afghanistan. Waves of Christians have emigrated to neighbouring countries in order to worship openly. Still, Afghan house churches continue to grow. A small number of Christians are martyred every year in Afghanistan, but this occurs largely without public knowledge. A small number of believers are also in prison, but imprisonment is not common. Christian converts from Islam are often killed by family members or radicals before any legal process takes place.



**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Since there are no churches or Christian bookstores in Afghanistan, Bibles are available only through underground ministry networks or in digital formats. There is little access to printed Bibles and the danger for owning one is extreme. Most believers do not have their own Bible, but online or digital formats are available and extremely helpful to believers and seekers. Ongoing Bible translation efforts are underway for some of the people groups within the country that do not have a Bible in their native language.

**VOM WORK:** VOM equips Afghan Christians by providing Bibles, TV and radio broadcasts, discipleship training, front-line worker support and other forms of practical and spiritual assistance, with special focus on outreach to persecuted women and widows of martyrs.

# ALGERIA

---

**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** The Berber people of Algeria are the country's original inhabitants. Today, they live mainly in Algeria's mountainous Kabylie area in the north, while Arabs inhabit the rest of the country. Christian faith has a long history in North Africa, especially among ethnic Berbers. The early church father Augustine of Hippo was believed to have been a Berber from Algeria. However, after invasions by Arab Muslims, much of Algeria's public Christian worship and witness has disappeared. Today, many Berbers in Algeria are rediscovering their Christian heritage. The church has been growing rapidly, and Algeria is home to one of the largest church congregations composed solely of Christian converts from Islam. Algerian Christians are reaching out boldly to their Muslim countrymen, which has increased persecution.

**MAJOR RELIGION:** Sunni Islam is the majority religion in Algeria.

**PERSECUTOR:** The government actively persecutes those who leave Islam. In addition, society creates hardships for Christian converts, and Muslims persecute their own family members who become Christians.





## WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN

**ALGERIA:** Algeria is a shining example of a growing church in North Africa. It is also a leader in the region for theological training and church development. Nearly all of the church growth has occurred within the Berber community.



Churches are allowed to meet freely in buildings, but in 2018 the government temporarily closed many church buildings and harassed congregations. Berber Christians, who are watched carefully, have gained a collective voice by joining under the umbrella of the Evangelical Protestant Association. Although sharing the Gospel with Arabs can cause serious problems, Berber Christians continue to share the Gospel boldly in and around al-Qaida camps in the country. Secret communities of Arab Christians exist throughout the country. It is not common for Christians to be imprisoned, but one believer was imprisoned for nearly a year in connection with a social media post. He received a presidential pardon in July 2017.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** There is a Bible Society in Algeria, but the printing and importation of Bibles is carefully monitored, limited and controlled by the government. Bible distributions are risky for the distributors and congregations involved. Bibles are often confiscated by government officials.

**VOM WORK:** VOM supports safe houses for believers expelled from their homes, literature printing and distribution, and front-line workers who reach out to Muslims.

# AZERBAIJAN

---

**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** As a former Soviet republic on the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan's churches developed in the wake of the Soviet Union's dissolution. Azerbaijan's economy is dependent on oil and gas but corruption and an authoritarian government have impeded economic growth. Poverty has been reduced in recent years, and the country's infrastructure is gradually improving.

**MAJOR RELIGION:** Azerbaijan is predominantly Shiite Muslim.

**PERSECUTOR:** Families are the biggest persecutors of Christians. Azerbaijan has a shame-honour culture in which those who leave Islam are considered to have brought shame on the family. The government also pressures Christians with heavy fines.

## WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN AZERBAIJAN:



For many years now, churches have been denied the ability to register as legal churches. Secret police attend every church meeting and sometimes raid “illegal” church meetings. In 2015, the government published a list of banned religious books that included the Old Testament. Those caught with banned religious literature are fined. Today, the government is tightening restrictions and often asking church leaders to

submit lists of members' names. Many pastors and leaders feel this is an attempt to gather information that will be used later against the members or pastors. Many Christians are faithfully sharing Christ with neighbours and family members despite possible fines and legal pressures.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Bibles are difficult to obtain. Churches can purchase them, but they cannot have them printed in the country.

**VOM WORK:** VOM brings Bibles, including children's Bibles, into the country and assists pastors and churches with legal matters.

# BAHRAIN

## DESIGNATION:

Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** This small island nation, which includes a mix of Sunni and Shiite Muslims, is connected to Saudi Arabia by a causeway and is frequently referred to as the “Saudi playground” because Saudis can leave their oppressive homeland and enjoy more freedom in Bahrain. While maintaining a distinctly

Muslim identity, Bahrain has experienced significant religious, political and economic division. This unrest, coupled with the faithful witness of Arab and immigrant Christian workers, has led to a season of openness and some response to the Gospel among those indigenous to Bahrain.



**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Bahrain is home to both Sunni and Shiite Muslims.

**PERSECUTOR:** Families are the main persecutors, but the government occasionally imprisons or harasses a new Christian.

**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN BAHRAIN:** Christian converts from Islam often lose their jobs, families and positions in society. However, some still gather to worship in secret.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Bahrainis have access to Scriptures through the Internet, bookstores and churches.

**VOM WORK:** VOM supports evangelists who work throughout the Arabian Peninsula and distributes Bibles and other Christian literature. We also support media ministries by following up with those who contact the ministry.



# BANGLADESH

**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** Bangladesh is one of the poorest countries in the world. Churches are careful when offering relief to the poor and needy because they do not want to encourage false conversions among people who accept Christ solely for economic benefit.



Bangladesh is a Muslim majority nation, but the government strives to remain secular. The government also actively fights extremism, which is prevalent. Many people in Bangladesh are learning more about Jesus and the Bible through YouTube channels. Reports indicate that more than seven million people have watched Christian videos using this technology.

**MAJOR RELIGION:** Islam is the majority religion in Bangladesh.

**PERSECUTOR:** Local Muslim authorities, radical Islamist groups and families persecute Christians.

**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN BANGLADESH:** Many Christian groups meet publicly, while others worship in unregistered churches. Some Christian Bangladeshi groups send out missionaries within their own country. When Muslims convert to Christianity, they are often forced out of their community.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Bibles exist in many languages found in Bangladesh, but they are hard to find. Although Bibles are legal, many are too poor to purchase one even if they could find it. There is a Bible Society of Bangladesh.

**VOM WORK:** VOM supports a safe house for those expelled from their community. We also support Bible distributions and evangelism training. VOM provides for the medical needs of those injured because of persecution. Village Outreach Kits bless rural pastors with basic necessities and resources for ministry.

# BHUTAN

**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** Until the 1980s, Bhutan was largely isolated from the rest of the world by its Himalayan geography, poor infrastructure and poor international relations. In 2008, the country adopted a multiparty constitutional democracy and implemented a new constitution that officially protects freedom of religion. Most Christians in Bhutan are of Nepali heritage; however, believers are focused on reaching ethnic Bhutanese people with the message of Christ. The few Bhutanese Christian leaders in the country need biblical and ministerial training.



**MAJOR RELIGION:** Most Bhutanese practise Tibetan Buddhism.

**PERSECUTOR:** Christians are persecuted by local authorities and by the village community.

**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN BHUTAN:** Christians make up only about 1.5% of the population. Many say that to be Bhutanese is to be Buddhist, and the king is considered to be the defender of the Buddhist faith. The government works covertly to discourage the spread of Christianity. Christians are viewed as followers of a Western religion. There are no church buildings in Bhutan. Christians often lose their jobs, are passed over for jobs or are not able to find jobs because of their faith. Many Christians must practise their faith in secret — burying their dead at night or deep in the forest in hidden locations and praying in public with eyes open to avoid attention.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Though small numbers of Bibles are allowed into the nation through legal means, the government has worked for decades to restrict widespread distribution. Bibles are smuggled into the country mostly from India.

**VOM WORK:** VOM provides Bibles and discipleship resources. We are also assisting students who will serve as local church leaders.

# BRUNEI

**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** Brunei is a Muslim majority nation, where the people live under the rule of a dynastic sultan. The law of the land is a version of Islamic Sharia. There are approximately 20 churches in the entire country and there are few opportunities for Bruneians to hear the Gospel. Oil wealth has ensured that most people have few material needs, but spiritual needs are great. Despite the risk, a few bold near-culture Christians and others continue to bring the light of the Gospel to this dark land.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Almost 80% of Bruneians are Muslim, and nearly all of the 9% who are Christians are ethnically Chinese.

**PERSECUTOR:** The government is the main persecutor of Christians.

## WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST

**IN BRUNEI:** While some historic churches exist in Brunei, no new church buildings are allowed. Christians make up 9% of the population, and there are approximately 20 legally registered church buildings in the country. In 2015, all Christmas displays were outlawed.

Churches are often afraid to reach out to Muslims because they are monitored closely by the religious police. Even inviting a Muslim to a Christmas celebration would be problematic. In the past, one believer was jailed for sharing his faith with a Muslim. Nevertheless, there are several secret believers who have been baptised in recent years.



**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Chinese residents of Brunei can get Bibles, but Bibles in the Malay language are illegal and are confiscated if discovered. No bookstores inside Brunei sell Bibles.

**VOM WORK:** VOM supports the work of evangelists throughout the country.



# CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

---

**DESIGNATION:** Hostile

**OVERVIEW:** Few countries in Africa have been more evangelised than the CAR, with 75% of the population identifying themselves as Christian. Many people are Christian in name only, continuing to practise animistic tribal beliefs and participating in unbiblical revenge killings against Muslims. These groups, who falsely identify as Christian, have banded together to form their own militia called the anti-Balaka. The anti-Balaka have committed atrocities just as the Muslim rebels have. Yet, a prevalent minority of biblical Christians (roughly 30% of the population) remains faithful and active. They are often the only entity caring for the hundreds of thousands who have been displaced in the country's conflict. While the CAR's civil war has presented opportunities for the church to display Christ's love to a ravaged nation, many churches feel ill-equipped to carry the burdens of their people and see little sign that war will end soon.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Approximately 50% of the population identifies as Christian.

**PERSECUTOR:** Christians who actively share their faith suffer intense violence at the hands of Muslim rebels.

## **WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN**

**REPUBLIC:** Because of the civil war between rebel groups identified as 'Muslim' and 'Christian', it is hard to separate religious persecution from political violence. There are, however, some clear cases in which believers have been specifically targeted for their Christian witness and other activities of biblical faith. In a four-week period in 2017, five pastors were murdered by Séléka rebels in targeted attacks designed to eliminate their witness for Christ. Reports of other churches and pastors being targeted have become common.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Bibles can be purchased in the capital city, but most people cannot afford them. They can be legally distributed.

**VOM WORK:** VOM is serving more than 45,000 Christians who were driven out of their villages and displaced.



*"We always thank God, the Father of our LORD Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people."*

*—Colossians 1:3–4*



# GOD IS MOVING

## in China

New government regulations designed to intimidate Christians and gain control of unregistered house churches have instead galvanised leaders' resolve not to submit their churches to communist party control. Larger congregations have already begun to meet in multiple small groups to make it more difficult for the police to stop them from worshipping. One leader told local authorities, "We will not stop meeting, so you can send one officer to watch this building or you can send twenty officers to watch twenty locations".

The government recently banned the online sale of Bibles. Nevertheless, VOM has still been able to distribute Bibles throughout the country. God has continued to provide the resources and to keep the door open for believers who do not have a Bible. Additionally, thousands of copies of a minority language Bible have been downloaded from the Internet all over China. In various other ways, the Word of God is going out across the country, to believers and unbelievers alike.

Missionaries, both local and foreign, continue to evangelise the lost and plant churches everywhere in China. Despite living under restriction at home, unregistered house churches are now sending out missionaries to many of the world's most difficult and dangerous mission fields.





# CHINA

---



**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** Explosive growth has characterised the church for at least the past 30 years. About 100 million Christians live in China, but only 30 million are affiliated with the government-authorised Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), the state church controlled by the communist government. The remaining 70 million worship in unapproved house churches. Despite continual pressure and oppression from the communist government, house church leaders refuse to compromise the Gospel and join government-approved churches. About 60% of believers in China live in rural areas. Few house church leaders have formal theological training or access to Bible study materials.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Because of decades of atheistic communist belief promoted by the government, most Chinese are non-religious, though about 20% are Buddhist and another 20% practise Chinese folk religion.

**PERSECUTOR:** The main persecutor is the government.

**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN CHINA:** Ten years ago, unregistered churches in China's 'house church' movement enjoyed a measure of acceptance by the government, but today things are much different. In February 2018, a new religious regulation led to increased government restrictions on unregistered churches. Hundreds of churches have been forced to close, pastors and church members have been arrested or detained and the online sale of Bibles is prohibited. A campaign to remove crosses from churches also continues in one province. Church leaders are under intense pressure to join the government-controlled church. If they refuse, the government often files false charges against them. In general, the farther Christians are from Beijing the more freedom they have. Authorities pressure Christian parents by refusing their children an education, and even the grandchildren of Christians are often denied schooling. It is illegal to teach religion to anyone younger than 18. There are 39 confirmed believers in prison, though more than 3,000 were arrested in 2017. Christians are often charged with participating in cults or with other spurious charges, such as "bad business practises" or "intent to undermine the state".

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Those living in rural areas have little access to Bibles and usually can't afford them even when they're available. Bibles can be purchased at bookstores operated by the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, the only state-sanctioned church, but rarely in bulk. VOM distributed Bibles in 25 of China's 31 provinces in 2017 and has delivered Bibles to every province over the years. Still, the average of 300,000 Bibles distributed each year makes only a tiny dent in the massive demand.

**VOM WORK:** VOM distributes Bibles in the least reached, most challenging areas of China. We distribute children's Bibles, which are illegal, as well as study Bibles for Christian leaders, which are both illegal and expensive. We also supply literature to groups that are reaching Muslims in China.

# COLOMBIA

---

**DESIGNATION:** Hostile

**OVERVIEW:** Many Christians in Colombia are taking great risks to share the Gospel with those living in some of the most dangerous places for Christians on earth. Taking the Gospel to these hostile areas often results in persecution from armed guerrillas and paramilitary forces. After voters rejected a peace agreement with the Marxist Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia (FARC) rebels in 2016, the government approved an agreement with the insurgents without public approval in 2017. Because of the agreement, various paramilitary groups in rural areas in the north and west have grown more active and violent.



**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Most Colombians identify as Christian but practise traditional forms of Roman Catholicism.

**PERSECUTOR:** Marxist guerrillas and paramilitary groups persecute Christians.

**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN COLOMBIA:** Pastors in Colombia's 'red zones' (areas controlled by militant groups rather than the government) say the peace treaty with the Marxist guerrillas exists in name only. While the guerrillas may have taken off their uniforms, they continue to oppress Christians and remain involved in the drug trade. Christians are targeted because obedience to God's Word will not allow them to join the violent factions (guerrillas or paramilitary groups) in their areas. In order to worship or travel, Christians in red zones must have permission from whichever group is currently in charge. Worship, evangelism and travel are dangerous.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Bibles are available but the remoteness, difficult terrain, poor security and lack of public transportation make it difficult for Christians in red zones to obtain Bibles.

**VOM WORK:** VOM supports front-line workers with various ministry tools and responds to violent persecution in the red zones.

# COMOROS

---

**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** The island nation of Comoros off the eastern coast of Africa remains one of the world's most restricted countries. The government openly welcomes tourists, and although resident foreigners are allowed freedom of religion, Comorians are not. For them, conversion from Islam is illegal. Sharing the Gospel and discipling new believers is also highly restricted and can lead to expulsion for foreigners and imprisonment for locals. Muslims who become Christians must meet in secret for study and worship. The oppressive environment and remote location of Comoros drastically limit the ability of churches and missions organisations to operate. Some Christian organisations are allowed, but they are strictly monitored and restricted to humanitarian projects. Despite these challenges, the Gospel continues to spread through the boldness of underground believers and secret distributions of biblical material.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Nearly 99% of Comorians are Muslim.

**PERSECUTOR:** Anyone who leaves Islam is heavily persecuted by family members and the government.

**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN COMOROS:** Believers must meet in small underground services and can only share their faith through one-on-one personal relationships. Every time believers gather to read their Bibles or speak about their faith they risk physical and societal persecution from their communities as well as imprisonment by the government. Recently, five believers who hosted a Christian debate in a private residence were imprisoned. In addition, all foreigners associated with an international church were expelled, and some locals were arrested after a children's Bible was discovered in boxes of toys for Comorian children.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Translating the Bible into the native languages has been slow and difficult, with only portions of the Scripture available in these languages after more than a decade of work.

**VOM WORK:** VOM helps equip believers to share the Gospel.



# CUBA

---

**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** Last year marked the first time in 59 years that a Castro was not leading Cuba. Despite the change in leadership, churches in Cuba face unrelenting pressure from the government, which remains committed to communism's atheistic beliefs and sees them as a threat to the revolution. When church leaders resist state teachings that are contrary to God's Word and disobey government restrictions on Christian witness, they are called in for interrogation. Since gathering in unregistered churches and constructing new church buildings continue to be banned, many churches continue to illegally build places of worship. In the past few years, the waning "spirit of the revolution" has been revived. Many have again become committed to the nationalistic, communist ideology championed by Fidel Castro and Che Guevara in the 1950s. Cubans remain poor, with the government seeking to control every aspect of life.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Most Cubans are atheists. A significant number of Cubans engage in superstitious and spiritist practises, including the Afro-Cuban religion of Santería.

**PERSECUTOR:** The government persecutes Christians.



### **WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN CUBA:**

Concern for its global reputation has caused the Cuban government to change tactics in regard to persecution. Christian leaders are often called into meetings with government officials or imprisoned for up to 48

hours to pressure them. Churches are demolished by hired gangs so the government can deny responsibility. Church buildings are seized, and no new church buildings have been legally built in the country since the revolution. Many believers meet in unsanctioned 'house churches,' often extensions of the pastor's home or shaded structures in the backyard. The church continues to grow through active evangelism, but some of the country's estimated 1 million believers have never owned a Bible. Though no Christians are known to be imprisoned in Cuba, many are so closely watched by the government that they are effectively under house arrest. In addition, Christians are often denied jobs and educational opportunities.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Though great strides have been made in Bible distribution in recent years, access remains restricted. Two years ago, Cuba allowed the legal purchase and sale of Bibles only to members of the ecumenical Protestant church organisation, but most Christian literature remains illegal. There are no Christian bookstores on the island. Bibles can cost up to a third of a worker's monthly income.

**VOM WORK:** VOM distributes Bibles and supports discipleship and evangelism.



# DJIBOUTI

**DESIGNATION:** Hostile

**OVERVIEW:** Djibouti is mainland Africa's third smallest nation. It is dominated by two majority Muslim groups, Afar and Somali, and is almost completely surrounded by Islamist countries. Despite this, Djibouti itself is not dominated by extremists. The capital city is home to several foreign naval bases, and many international aid groups operate out of the country. Even though Islam is the official state religion, the rights of Christians are generally respected, Bibles are legally available and there is no law preventing Muslims from converting. The nation seeks to protect its Muslim identity, and Christian organisations are not allowed to register officially.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Islam is the official state religion.

**PERSECUTOR:** Muslim converts to Christ may experience government oppression, but most persecution comes from converts' family or clan and the local Muslim community.

**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN DJIBOUTI:** The government tries to limit the spread of Christianity and the growth of evangelical churches by prohibiting public meetings and the construction of buildings for Christian activities. The only churches that are allowed to worship openly are French Protestant, Roman Catholic and Ethiopian Orthodox. Foreigners are granted religious freedom, but evangelism and discipleship of new believers are discouraged. Muslims who express an interest in Christ face the risk of persecution from family and friends, and those who convert are isolated, beaten and sometimes killed for abandoning Islam.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Bibles are available, but owning one in some communities comes with the risk of government harassment or violence at the hands of Muslim family members and the Muslim community.

**VOM WORK:** VOM supports a safe house.





# EGYPT

---



**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** Egypt is home to both the fastest growing population in the Middle East and the largest Christian population in the Arab world. It remains a strategic location for Christian activity across North Africa and the Middle East. There are many well-established evangelical churches and parachurch ministries focused on reaching both nominal Christians and Muslims with the Gospel inside Egypt. Several of these groups also send Arab missionaries across the region. Overt Christian activity can result in persecution, but there is much to be excited about as the church grows in Egypt and establishes a regional base of missionary activity.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Sunni Islam is the majority religion, but 10% of Egyptians are Coptic Christians.

**PERSECUTOR:** Various extremist groups operate in Egypt, including the Muslim Brotherhood and the self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIS). The government does little to prevent attacks on Christians and sometimes beats or imprisons those who are outspoken about their faith.

### WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST

#### IN EGYPT:

Egypt's Eastern traditional Christians, referred to as Coptic, enjoy the freedom to worship openly as long as they keep to themselves and do not engage



in evangelistic outreach to the Muslim majority community. Evangelical Christians face tremendous opposition from Islamists, including radical elements within the government. Christians sometimes struggle to receive proper medical care in Muslim-controlled hospitals and clinics. When Christians are attacked or kidnapped by Muslims, the government rarely provides protection or assistance. Christian converts from Islam face the most problems, including being expelled from their families, being divorced by their Muslim spouses, losing their children and losing their jobs. Additionally, because their government-issued identity cards identify them as Muslim, it is difficult for them to attend church, to marry, to register their children in school, to get a job or to emigrate elsewhere. Christians charged with apostasy or proselytising Muslims are generally imprisoned for a week or two, with a few notable exceptions.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Bibles in Egypt are readily available at Bible societies, churches and bookstores in a variety of formats, translations and languages. However, not all Egyptian Christians can afford a Bible, and high illiteracy rates make Bible distribution an ongoing challenge.

**VOM WORK:** VOM responds to widespread persecution needs, produces and provides Bibles and Christian literature, distributes Christmas Care Packs and trains pastors and other leaders.

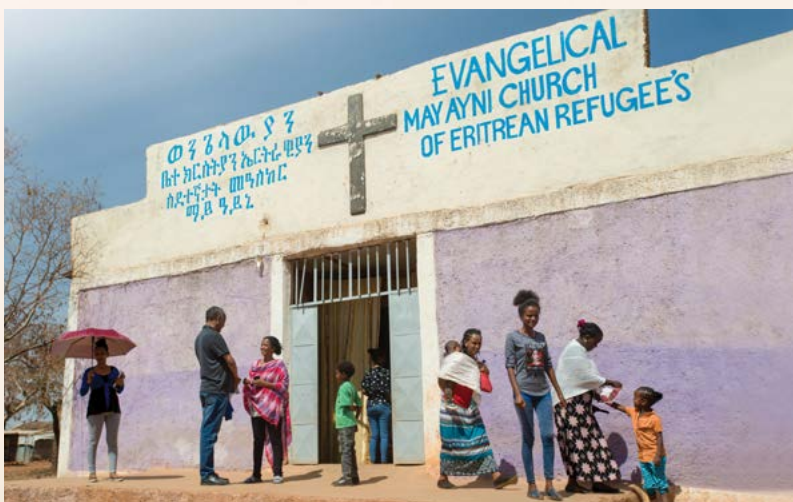
# ERITREA

**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** Located on the Red Sea, Eritrea is governed by a totalitarian regime that seeks to control every aspect of life. Some have compared Eritrea to the 'hermit kingdom' of North Korea, as it is one of the most secretive and isolated countries in the world. In 2002, the government outlawed every religion except Islam, Orthodox Christianity, Roman Catholicism and the Lutheran Church. All other religious groups are illegal, and the government heavily controls approved churches, including their messages. Years of communism, required military service and economic depression have forced many Eritreans, including evangelical believers, to flee the country. Despite these hardships, the underground church in Eritrea continues to grow due to the faithfulness of church leaders both inside and outside of the country. After a historic peace deal between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 2018, many Eritrean believers are hopeful change will eventually come to the country.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** The population is evenly divided between Christians and Muslims.

**PERSECUTOR:** The authoritarian government arrests, imprisons and harasses Christians.







**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN ERITREA:** Evangelical churches are highly persecuted and must meet secretly. The government actively seeks to infiltrate these underground churches and imprison their leaders. Over the past 16 years, hundreds of Christians have been imprisoned because of their faith. Around 300 believers are known to remain in prison, including several top leaders. Imprisoned Christians are not given a trial or allowed to see their families, many of whom do not know where their loved ones are imprisoned or even if they are still alive. Christians simply disappear and are assumed to be in government prisons. These prisoners of faith are sent to the strictest and most remote prisons. The conditions inside these prisons are some of the harshest in the world. The Christian prisoners are provided meagre rations, treated very poorly and, in some prisons, sometimes held in shipping containers in extreme desert conditions for years. Christian literature is also highly regulated, and evangelical believers who want Bibles must smuggle them in.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Bibles are available, but the government tracks each Bible sold.

**VOM WORK:** VOM supports the families of imprisoned Christians. We also get Bibles and Christian literature to believers inside Eritrea.

# ETHIOPIA

---

**DESIGNATION:** Hostile

**OVERVIEW:** The Gospel first came to Ethiopia in the first century AD. Despite its early origins, many Ethiopian Christians still face persecution. In heavily Islamic areas, like the Greater Somalia region in south-eastern Ethiopia, communities and families persecute Christians, and Muslims groups have used recent political unrest as an opportunity to launch attacks. Churches have been destroyed and Christians have been beaten or killed. Muslims have also launched massive Islamisation campaigns in Christian areas. In northern Ethiopia, some traditional Christians persecute evangelical believers. They tear down churches, physically assault them and deny them jobs and burial places. Freedom of religion is guaranteed in Ethiopia, and the government generally works to protect the rights of Christians. However, vestiges of communist rule lead authorities to monitor the activities of churches and Christian organisations, particularly those that are evangelical. Still, evangelical churches in Ethiopia continue to establish other churches and send missionaries to difficult areas.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Ethiopia is still a majority Christian country (42% Orthodox and 17% evangelical), but Islam is growing and Muslims now account for one-third of the population.

**PERSECUTOR:** Believers living in the north and in Greater Somalia face harsh physical and societal persecution, especially those who convert to evangelical Christianity from Islam or the Orthodox Church.

**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN ETHIOPIA:** Most Christians worship freely and openly. However, evangelicals sometimes face pressure to join the Orthodox Church, and Christian converts from Islam face great challenges and even death threats in Muslim-majority areas, particularly in the east and in refugee camps for Somalis.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Bibles are printed, sold and distributed in Ethiopia with no restrictions. However, in many rural areas they remain difficult to obtain.

**VOM WORK:** VOM provides Bibles to believers in persecuted areas and equips pastors working in difficult regions.

# GOD IS MOVING

## in South Asia

In South Asia, which includes countries like India, Bangladesh and Nepal, God is at work. His kingdom is advancing through the simple obedience of Christ's witnesses. These simple acts of obedience are like the mustard seed that Jesus refers to in Luke 13:18-19 "What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? It is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his garden, and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches." When this small seed is planted, it is unnoticed, growing very slowly until years later when it becomes a tree. The kingdom is advancing in South Asia as our brothers and sisters in Christ are obediently sowing the seeds of the Gospel through simple acts that may go unnoticed, yet one can almost see God's kingdom advancing one man, woman, boy and girl at a time. Here are a few examples:

In Bangladesh, God is teaching a mother how to lead her children to respond to persecution from their classmates. Quoting 1 Peter 4:1, which says, "Since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude ..." (NIV), she encouraged them not to hate but to love these children. God is working by encouraging a 12-year-old girl who is blocked from using the restroom at school all day long because she is from a Christian family. As her father explained the situation, he spoke





of teaching his daughter to forgive.

In Nepal, a father became angry that his wife and daughter had submitted their lives to Christ after hearing a pastor speak of freedom and peace. On the day they were to be baptised, this father held his teenage daughter captive, refusing to allow her to go to the ceremony. What is God doing in this situation? He lovingly spoke through the wife and daughter to this lost man.

A pastor in Nepal drives many hours to return to the village from which his family was expelled years ago for their faith. He continues to go there despite threats and intimidation. When they throw stones at his car, he prays for them, and in that moment the kingdom advances a little bit more in Nepal.

Hindu extremists burned down an Indian pastor's home. What is God doing? He told the pastor to put up a plastic tarp on the property and to stay. After all, why would he leave if God did not tell him to go? Those who burned the church see the commitment and the love of the pastor for the community and their hearts are convicted. And the kingdom advances again. God continues to encourage them, sustain them and bless them. That's what He is doing in South Asia.



# INDIA

---

**DESIGNATION:** Hostile

**OVERVIEW:** In 2018, Christians in India experienced an attack every 24 hours, a dramatic increase from past years. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) Hindu nationalist organisation has seen a 20% increase in membership and

an emboldened base aimed at further cementing India's Hindu identity among its great diversity of languages, cultures and religions. Although Prime Minister Modi has publicly said his government will not tolerate religious discrimination, his actions prove otherwise. Vague policies such as anti-conversion laws (opposing the conversion of Hindus to other religions) have passed in several Indian states,

and the push for a similar, federal law is gaining support. The state anti-conversion laws have long been used against pastors, church planters and evangelists. Conversely, reconversion ceremonies known as Ghar Wapsi, or 'homecoming,' to return Indians to Hinduism have become increasingly common. Despite greater government restrictions on Christianity, the church is growing. The most growth is among those with Hindu backgrounds who have a deep spiritual hunger.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** About 80% of Indians are Hindu. India is also the birthplace of Buddhism and is home to the second largest Muslim population in the world, comprising almost 170 million people. There are more than 27 million Christians in India, but this is only a 2% minority group within India's staggering population of 1.3 billion.

**PERSECUTOR:** The main persecutors are Hindu extremist groups, local governments and nationalist Hindus who seek to "purify" India by making it entirely Hindu (they view Christian converts as traitors to the homeland).



**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN INDIA:** An estimated 27 million Christians live in India, but that is only 2.1% of the population. RSS informants live in nearly every village and report on the activities of Christians, resulting in attacks and arrests. Christians in India are open and visible. When they are attacked, they often drop charges against their attackers to show forgiveness. Churches have been demolished and burned, worship gatherings have been disrupted, crosses in graveyards have been vandalised, Bibles and other Christian literature have been confiscated and burned, and more pastors are being beaten and jailed. Christians are often arrested and held for up to three weeks after being falsely accused of forcing Hindus to convert to Christianity. With assistance, they are usually able to post bail or show that the charges are unfounded.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Even though India has one of the largest Bible societies in the world, VOM regularly finds rural Christians in persecuted areas that have never had access to Bibles. Bibles remain unaffordable for many Christians who suffer severe poverty in Hindu and Muslim controlled areas, and the large population, remoteness of some rural regions and widespread illiteracy continue to pose challenges for Bible distribution.

**VOM WORK:** VOM responds to instances of persecution and supports persecuted pastors and their families. We provide Bibles, support front-line workers and provide Christmas Care packs to children living in some of the most hostile areas of India.





# INDONESIA



**DESIGNATION:** Hostile

**OVERVIEW:** Indonesia is the most populous Muslim country in the world, composing 13% of the world's Muslim population. There are five officially recognised faith categories in Indonesia: Islam, Hinduism, Catholic Christianity, Protestant Christianity and Buddhism. Confucianism/Daoism is also recognised. While most Indonesian Muslims practise an animistic version known as 'folk' Islam, proponents of radical Islamic ideology have encouraged and engaged in violence against Christians. This strategy has led many Muslims to question their faith and to be more open to the Gospel. Bold evangelists are taking advantage of this opportunity to share the Gospel, leading many Muslims to faith in Christ.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Indonesia is a majority Muslim country where many are proud to be Muslim, but few actually attend mosque or otherwise practise the religion. There are small Hindu, Buddhist and Christian minority groups.

**PERSECUTOR:** The main persecutors in Indonesia are extremist groups and hard-line Muslims, who in turn influence moderate Muslims. While the government does not persecute Christians, neither does it consistently defend their rights.



**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN INDONESIA:** Even though it is illegal to proselytise, it is legal for Muslims and others to convert to Christianity in Indonesia, and there is more openness to the Gospel than in other Muslim countries in Southeast Asia because Indonesians value harmony. Christians living in cities can worship openly. In rural areas, churches that actively share their faith face persecution from Muslims, local governments and the community. In some areas, small house churches of about 12 people are generally tolerated and allowed to meet openly. Muslims pay a price for converting to Christianity, and even in cities most Christian converts from Islam choose to attend churches outside their community. Those who openly share their faith face pressure from family members because their conversion to Christianity affects the family's social standing. Muslim families often disown children who come to Christ, sometimes even conducting symbolic 'funerals' for them. Foreigners who openly preach are required to leave the country. One Indonesian province, Aceh, has implemented Sharia. There are two known prisoners of faith: Basuki Purnama, who was sentenced to two years in prison in May 2017, and Abraham Ben Moses, who was charged with blasphemy.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Bibles are available in every city, but not in rural locations. It is not illegal to own a Bible, and the Indonesia Bible Society prints Bibles inside the country. However, many live in remote areas where Bibles are unavailable, and others can't afford to purchase one.



**VOM WORK:** VOM trains believers, assists with church planting efforts in difficult areas and provides a safe house for front-line workers under threat. VOM also distributes Bibles in the areas of

greatest persecution, where there are often no other sources for Bibles or other Christian materials.

# IRAN

---

**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** The Islamic Revolution of 1979, led by Ayatollah Khomeini, affected Iran more than any other event in modern history. It led to the establishment of the world's only country governed by an Islamic theocracy, now 40 years old. Today, many of those who committed their lives to Islamic rule are filled with despair. This disillusionment has opened new doors for the Gospel, which is sweeping across the nation via satellite TV and Internet, and growing house church movements. However, the government continues its attempts to thwart this move of God. Mature Christian leaders and pastors are often arrested and their families harassed, and some are left with no option other than to flee the country. The subsequent decline in mature leadership leaves house churches susceptible to false teaching. Christians inside and outside the country are working to strengthen and equip the church.



**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Iran is the only nation in the world whose official state religion is Shiite Islam. As the world's largest Shiite country, it actively seeks the expansion of Shiite Islam by supporting the relatively new Shiite government in Iraq and Islamist terrorist organisations in Syria and Lebanon. The country is at odds with Israel and the West, as well as many nations that practise Sunni Islam.

**PERSECUTOR:** Christians are persecuted by government authorities that have a network of informants in each city. Family, friends and community members sometimes also persecute Christians, especially when news of a conversion becomes public.

**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN IRAN:** The Iranian government is among the most oppressive regimes in the world. It is illegal to leave Islam, and Christians face the constant threat of imprisonment and being falsely charged with “acting against national security”. Christians are routinely fired from their jobs, and it is difficult for a known believer to find a new job. They also are often evicted from rented homes. Many Christians gather in secret fellowships and receive teaching through Christian media smuggled into the country and through satellite television programs, which broadcast the Gospel and discipleship teachings in Farsi. Several Christians are currently imprisoned, and many others are under house arrest awaiting sentencing.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Bibles are highly restricted. It is illegal to import them and illegal to have Bibles printed in the country. Since they are so difficult to obtain, Bibles are treasured by Iranian believers. Christians have developed creative ways to obtain Bibles and distribute them, including through websites, mobile phone cards and smartphone apps.

**VOM WORK:** VOM provides encouragement, support and training for former prisoners as they rebuild their lives. We also provide discipleship and leadership training for current and future Christian leaders. VOM is actively involved in distributing God’s Word to believers inside Iran.



# IRAQ

---

**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** The Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish people groups that compose the majority of modern-day Iraq have been in conflict with each other for centuries. In recent years, and especially at the hands of ISIS, tens of thousands of Christians have been forced to flee the country, leaving a small but bold and faithful remnant behind. For many of these Iraqi Christians, much of their day-to-day life is focused on survival and decisions about their future. After the 2014 ISIS invasion, Christians from around the region and around the world visited Iraq to bring relief and to encourage those who remained. Many have rejected Islam and become open to Christ for a variety of reasons, including the corruption and violence of both Sunnis (ISIS) and Shiites (Iraq's new government, backed by Iran). These circumstances provide a unique window of opportunity to share the Gospel with Iraqis searching for hope, truth and justice. Violence by ISIS has also led to a revival, as many traditional Christians have come to saving faith and become bold witnesses for Christ.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Iraq's population is divided between Shiite and Sunni Muslims. Iraq is home to the second-largest population of Shiite Muslims, after Iran. Iraq's Christian population has suffered severely at the hands of Islamists, decreasing from more than 1.2 million to less than 300,000 since the fall of the Ba'ath Party's rule (led by Saddam Hussein) in 2003.

**PERSECUTOR:** Christian converts from Islam are abused and rejected by their families. In addition, they may be killed or persecuted by tribe members, government authorities or extremist groups.







**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN IRAQ:** Northern Iraq is home to a sizable population of Christians, who are able to worship freely. Most of these Christians are from the ancient faith traditions that trace their roots back to the first century AD. Christian converts face extreme pressure from their families and some parts of Iraq are much more difficult for Christians than others. More than 1.2 million Christians remained in Iraq after the second Gulf War. However, some 15 years later, fewer than 300,000 Christians remain.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** ISIS and other Islamist groups destroyed every copy of God's Word that they found or captured, but because of the work of Bible societies and missions organisations, including VOM, more Bibles have been distributed since the rise of ISIS than destroyed. Today, the average Christian in Iraq can, with a bit of effort, find a copy of the Bible. Several formats are available, including audio Bibles and children's Bibles.

**VOM WORK:** VOM distributes Bibles in several cities, including audio Bibles for the illiterate and Bibles in minority languages. Additionally, we support thousands of displaced Christians through local churches. Bible translation into minority Kurdish dialects is ongoing.

# GOD IS MOVING

## in the Levant

The church has its very origin in the Levant (the geographic region that today includes Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and Israel). The entire region was blanketed with churches within the first few centuries of church history. These churches sent bishops to the great ecumenical councils of the early church where they contributed to many key doctrines on which the church stands today. But they lost their first love and fell away from God's Word, creating a vacuum that was quickly filled by Islam, which violently spread across the region in the seventh century. Churches were allowed to remain as long as they kept to themselves and did not evangelise Muslims.

For centuries, the churches of the Levant have largely abided by these status quo rules in the interest of survival, and unsurprisingly, few Muslims have come to Christ. However, in recent years, there has been a marked revival among traditional Christians. It is true that many have fled the area, leaving for the security of the West, but churches in the Levant are now also showing a renewed vigour and courage for outreach and evangelism to Muslims in their communities—even in the face of extremists, including al-Qaida and ISIS.





Exposure to wars and corruption at the highest levels of Islamic leadership have left many Muslims questioning their faith and searching for spiritual truth. Islamic ideology applied in its purest form has left nations and families in ruin. As a result, many Muslims have rejected Islam, and some have taken the next step by placing their hope and trust in Jesus Christ.

Churches are actively looking for seekers and sharing the Gospel with them. Sometimes, in God's sovereignty, this happens face to face, but evangelism is also happening powerfully via the security and anonymity that smartphones and social media provide.

A question now facing Christians in the region is how they might incorporate and equip these new believers to be full participants in their local churches. Authorities in these countries will not be happy with churches baptising and including Muslim converts in their membership and leadership structures. In many places, due to necessity or lack of a church, these converts are forced to gather in more secretive house church networks. Although there are complex challenges before Christian leaders in the Levant, all agree that this is an amazing 'problem' to have. Some pastors in the region have stated boldly: "The future of the church here is Muslim-born converts to Christianity."



# ISRAEL (Including the West Bank and Gaza)

---

**DESIGNATION:** Hostile

**OVERVIEW:** Israel is home to two very different and divided cultures and people. The decades-long conflict between Israelis and Palestinians over land, the status of Jerusalem and the status of Palestinian refugees remains one of the most volatile issues in the region. In the midst of this conflict, the Lord has grown His church among both Jews and Muslims. Interestingly, both



Jews and Muslims are instructed by their religion to reject Christ and hold the Gospel in contempt, and Christian activity is opposed by both groups. Despite this opposition, evangelical churches exist today that include both Jews who have accepted Christ as the Messiah and Arab Muslims who have placed their faith in Christ. Active ministry efforts among both groups involve Bible distribution, discipleship, evangelism, church planting and theological education. The Palestinian Authority maintains some control over the West Bank under Israeli federal authority, while the militant Hamas group exercises control in the Gaza Strip. Both groups are adamantly opposed to Christian activity and indoctrinate their populace to hate the West, Jews and Christians.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** The two major religions in Israel are Judaism and Sunni Islam, with Christians composing a very small minority.

**PERSECUTOR:** In Jewish communities, Jews who believe in Jesus (Messianic Jews) are at risk of persecution by radical, ultra-Orthodox Jews. They are also pressured by their families and some parts of the government. In Muslim communities, Christian converts from Islam face persecution from their families, society and the Palestinian government authorities.



**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN ISRAEL:** Christians in Israel experience pressure from all sides. They have a low social standing and little hope of job advancement. Christian converts from Judaism or Islam are commonly shunned by their families, and Muslim converts to Christ in the West Bank and Gaza face violence at the hands of their family members and local governments, which are run by the Palestinian authorities. They have trouble finding a place to live and keeping a job. Messianic Jews have difficulty finding places to worship and getting permits. Jewish anti-missionary groups, especially Yad L'Achim, sometimes protest outside their places of worship, cursing the Christians and vandalising their buildings.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Bible societies exist in both Israel and the areas controlled by the Palestinian Authority and Hamas. Christians are allowed to have Bibles, and they are easily obtained.

**VOM WORK:** VOM supports front-line workers in key regions, supports training for local churches and helps with Bible distributions. We also provide legal aid for Messianic Jews who are deprived of their rights.



# JORDAN



**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** Jordan has experienced an influx of refugees from neighbouring countries over the past 70 years, with nearly half the current population composed of refugees. Syrians began arriving in large numbers during their civil war, which began in 2011. The majority of Christian activity among Jordanian Christians in recent years has been focused on serving these refugees. Many local churches have been encouraged to see the eternal fruit of these extensive efforts. Having seen God work so powerfully among Arab Muslim refugees, Jordanian Christians are emboldened as never before to reach out to their Muslim neighbours.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Most Jordanians practise Sunni Islam.

**PERSECUTOR:** Christian converts from Islam are persecuted, sometimes violently in rural and tribal areas, by their families and extended clans.

**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN JORDAN:** Those born into Christian families are allowed to worship openly and are not required to wear Muslim clothing. However, evangelism and conversions are met with retaliation by Muslim neighbours, friends and family members. In some cases, the government secret police will get involved and side with the Muslims. Christian converts from Islam face the greatest problems; they struggle to keep jobs and sometimes their children are taken away. Tribal authorities often discipline those considered guilty of religious infractions. Jordanian Christians are constantly aware that the government could be monitoring their activities through technology or informants. When Christians are imprisoned in Jordan for apostasy, it is rarely made known to the public.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** A variety of Bibles are available through Bible societies and bookstores.

**VOM WORK:** VOM helps respond to the needs of Christian refugees. We also provide training for evangelical pastors.

# KAZAKHSTAN

---

**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** Formerly a republic of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan is one of the wealthiest Central Asian nations because of its mineral resources. Islam has experienced a revival since the fall of the Soviet Union, with many returning to what they consider the religion of their parents. Today Kazakhstan emulates its European neighbours, undertaking massive construction projects, enjoying a growing financial sector and moving away from the Russian Cyrillic alphabet to the Latin alphabet used by the Western world.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** The major religion in Kazakhstan is Islam, and there are also many atheists.

**PERSECUTOR:** The government and communities are the main persecutors but government persecution has been sporadic and inconsistent.

**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN KAZAKHSTAN:** Some churches worship openly, but they are closely watched. Raids on unregistered churches are common, and believers in attendance are fined. Kazakhs are used to Russian Orthodox Christians, but they are suspicious of those who hold services in the Kazakh native tongue. All religious activities must be registered with the government. Believers are commonly fined for distributing religious texts, discussing religion or holding worship meetings. Christian children are mocked at school. The families of Christian converts often beat them or otherwise publicly humiliate them. Unregistered churches must meet in private homes. In recent years, three Kazakh believers have been imprisoned on false charges. All three have been released.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Bibles are available, but they are unobtainable for many. Large churches often sell them. Rural believers must travel to cities to obtain a Bible.

**VOM WORK:** VOM provides Bibles and supports front-line workers in the most difficult regions.

# KENYA

---

**DESIGNATION:** Hostile

**OVERVIEW:** The country is predominantly Christian, especially in central and western Kenya. However, several tribal groups in the north remain largely unreached, and much of the coastal region is predominantly Muslim. Additionally, in the region known as Greater Somalia in north-eastern Kenya, 90% of the population is ethnically Somali and fervently Muslim. The spread of the Gospel in these areas, particularly in Greater Somalia and on the coast, is strongly resisted. In these areas, Christian missionaries from other parts of Kenya and converts from Islam are often attacked and killed. The Kenyan constitution grants every citizen freedom of religion, but local governments in resistant areas are led by Muslim officials who do little to protect the rights of believers.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Most Kenyans are Christian, but the Muslim population is growing.

**PERSECUTOR:** Islamic extremists are most active in the north and east, and their activities extend to Nairobi in the south. In the coastal areas, community members and local governments also persecute Christians.



## **WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN KENYA:**

Christians cannot openly discuss their faith in areas with a Somali majority or areas near the northern border without risking the loss of family, livelihood and community. There is a significant threat of violence against Christian converts in Somali areas. In eastern Kenya, al-Shabab terrorises Christians, bombing churches and killing believers. In Muslim-majority areas along the coast, Christians are socially rejected.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Bibles are available, but they are expensive and not always available in the dialects of each region.

**VOM WORK:** VOM supports the widows of Christian men killed in attacks. Our Bible distribution efforts focus on providing Bibles to children and those who speak minority dialects.



# KUWAIT

**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** Kuwaitis have amassed significant wealth due to their national oil reserves. As a result, few find it necessary to work. They generally outsource most of their work to foreigners in the country.

A portion of these foreigners have a heart to reach Kuwaitis with the Gospel, despite the risk to their jobs and residency status. Developing meaningful relationships with Kuwaitis can be difficult for expatriate workers, but they continue to labour diligently. A small number of Kuwaiti believers live in the country, though most came to faith outside the country. Several who had converted to Christianity in Kuwait faced brutal persecution and were forced to flee the country.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Nearly all Kuwaitis are Muslim. Foreigners have brought the Gospel to the country, but churches are allowed only on compounds reserved for foreigners.

**PERSECUTOR:** Christian converts from Islam are opposed by the government and their own families.



**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN KUWAIT:** Authorities in the country are opposed to Christian witnessing and conversion. The small handful of Kuwaiti believers focus on evading persecutors and keeping their faith secret. If discovered, they may be raped, beaten or killed, but the persecutors' first order of business is trying to force converts to return to Islam.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Access to Bibles is severely restricted. Most prefer to access Scriptures online because of the danger involved in owning a Bible.

**VOM WORK:** VOM aids those who have been persecuted and is involved in training local believers in evangelism and discipleship.

# KYRGYZSTAN

**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** Kyrgyzstan is one of the poorest former Soviet states in Central Asia. A significant portion of the population has left to work elsewhere, and life in Kyrgyzstan is filled with hardship. A ministry team that visited recently described the people as seemingly closed to the Gospel. But when the team was able to speak with people in small groups away from family or community, they were very open to the Good News.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Kyrgyzstan is a majority Muslim nation that returned to its perceived religious roots after gaining independence from the USSR.

**PERSECUTOR:** Christians are persecuted mostly by family members and neighbours. Imams in cities often refuse to allow Christians to be buried in cemeteries.



## WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW

**CHRIST IN KYRGYZSTAN:** Some churches worship openly, even in small towns, but being a Christian is difficult because of the Islamic culture. Beatings aren't uncommon, and the small Christian minority is generally oppressed by society. For example, buses won't stop for those known as Christians in small

communities, and they have difficulty getting jobs and even purchasing goods. Authorities recently released a believer from prison who had been falsely accused because of his faith.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Bibles are more accessible than in other Central Asian nations. They can be purchased at registered churches in larger cities, but they are expensive.

**VOM WORK:** VOM provides medical care to Christians injured in attacks and helps believers become self-supporting.

# GOD IS MOVING

## Among Buddhists in Laos, Myanmar (Burma) and Vietnam

by **Jonathan Ekman**, VOM USA's Vice President for International Ministry

A growing body of faithful evangelists and church planters is being raised up in Buddhist-majority countries. Buddhist monks often stir up communities and local governments to oppose these front-line workers and the churches they are planting, but the monks cannot stop the spread of the Gospel. The testimony of the persecuted believers in Laos, Myanmar (Burma) and Vietnam is that they will never return to their previous lives of fear and bondage within animistic Buddhism. God has used the faithfulness of these persecuted believers to change the hearts of Buddhist monks and government officials. He is building His church throughout the Buddhist world.

A growing number of Christians means there is an increasing need for Bibles. Thankfully, the Lord continues to answer the prayers of His people by sending Bibles to those who need them. Large-print Bibles for the elderly and study Bibles for pastors are making a difference in the lives of those who receive them and in the lives to whom they minister. We are excited to be investing in the lives of the next generation of believers in these areas through our ongoing work to produce and distribute children's Bibles in the primary languages of Laos, Burma and Vietnam.



# PRAY <sup>FOR</sup> THE PERSECUTED

CHIAPAS (MEXICO)

CUBA

VENEZUELA

COLOMBIA

TUNISIA

LEBANON

GAZA & THE WEST BANK

MOROCCO

ALGERIA

LIBYA

MAURITANIA

MALI

SENEGAL

GUINEA

SIERRA LEONE

LIBERIA

COTE D'IVOIRE

NIGERIA

## RESTRICTED AND HOSTILE

In some countries, government-sanctioned circumstances or anti-Christian laws lead to Christians being harassed, imprisoned, killed, or deprived of possessions or liberties because of their witness. Christians may also be prevented from obtaining Bibles or other Christian literature. Even in countries where governments do not actively oppose Christianity, believers suffer severe persecution from family, friends, neighbours, political and religious groups or rebels because of their witness.





These are areas being closely monitored by Voice of the Martyrs because of a trend towards increased persecution of Christians.

# LAOS

---



**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** The government-controlled Lao Evangelical Church is allowed to exist, but the communist government and Buddhist monks actively persecute Christians. Poverty, lack of infrastructure and mountainous terrain also make evangelistic outreach a challenge. Thanks to bold evangelists, the church continues to grow even as it experiences ongoing persecution.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Most Laotians consider themselves Buddhist, but they practise a syncretistic version of Buddhism mixed with tribal animism.

**PERSECUTOR:** Most believers are persecuted by family members or village authorities who are concerned that Christians offend the spirits. The central government persecutes Christians occasionally, but there are signs of improvement.

### WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW

#### CHRIST IN LAOS:

Christianity is viewed as an American religion or as a tool of the CIA to undermine the Laotian regime. Many Laotians also believe Christians anger the spirits. House churches and church buildings exist, but the vast majority do not have a trained pastor. In most villages, no church buildings are allowed. If village leaders notice that a house church is growing, they will try to stop it. Christians have difficulty providing for themselves and their families. They often are unable to get jobs, most of which are through the government. Christians commonly are denied medical treatment, education and other social services. There are no open Bible schools in the country. The Lao Evangelical Church is the only government-recognised church. Lao believers are often arrested and held for up to a week. Longer periods of imprisonment are becoming less common.



#### ACCESS TO BIBLES:

Bibles are not sold in bookstores. Government-sanctioned churches sell Bibles, and other organisations bring Bibles in with legal permission. It is usually not a problem to bring one or two Bibles across the border, but Christians encounter problems when they bring in large amounts of Bibles or distribute them in larger numbers.

**VOM WORK:** VOM distributes Bibles, prints literature and provides audio devices loaded with Scripture and other Christian materials, particularly in minority languages. VOM also responds to persecution incidents by relocating evicted families inside Laos, providing food and other immediate needs, and providing additional help on a case-by-case basis.

# LEBANON

**DESIGNATION:** Hostile

**OVERVIEW:** There is a unique openness to the Gospel among Arab Muslims in Lebanon who have suffered greatly because of the war in Syria. Because Lebanon has a significant Christian population and is not a Muslim country, it has become a haven for persecuted believers throughout the region. More than 1 million Syrian refugees have entered the country over the past seven years, increasing Lebanon's population by nearly a quarter, and they have not always been welcomed with open arms. Despite the hardships, many of the evangelical churches of Lebanon have not only welcomed but also cared for the emergency needs of Syrian refugees, who have limited resources and few rights in the country. As a result, over the past few years, many Syrian Muslims have heard the Gospel message multiple times. Lebanese churches distribute Bibles and Christian literature alongside food and other necessities. Many Muslim refugees have been brave enough to attend home Bible studies and church services to learn about Christ. Significant numbers have placed their faith in Christ, been baptised and become active in local churches as they try to witness to other Syrian Muslims.



**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Muslims, evenly divided between Sunni and Shiite, are a slight majority, while Christians make up a large minority group. There is a small Druze minority, a secretive monotheistic faith that sometimes persecutes Christians.

**PERSECUTOR:** Various extremist groups, including Hezbollah in the south and other Shiite regions, actively persecute Christians. Islamic extremist cells affiliated with ISIS, al-Qaida and other groups are active near the Syrian border. In rural communities, Christians are persecuted by their tribes and families.



**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN LEBANON:** Lebanon has a reputation of being a free country and is highly westernised in urban areas. Those who are Christian by birth are allowed to worship openly. Christians face ongoing harassment from the Muslim majority, such as denial of land acquisition and increased tax rates. More severe forms of persecution occur when believers share their faith or when Muslims come to Christ. Christian converts from Islam are persecuted mostly by family and the community.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** A variety of Bibles are available through Bible societies, local churches and bookstores.

**VOM WORK:** Because Lebanon has become a refuge for Christian converts from other countries fleeing persecution, and because of persecution within Lebanon itself, VOM supports many persecuted believers in Lebanon in a variety of ways. VOM also helps meet the basic needs of Christian refugees. We partner with local churches to provide them with Bibles as well as medical and education assistance. We also support a broad network of evangelists and church planters in frontier areas and support training for Christian leaders.



# LIBYA

---

**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** Libya remains in chaos following the outbreak of revolution and overthrow of its dictator in 2011. Today, three opposing governments vie for control. The conflicts have severely damaged the country's infrastructure and have made Gospel work in the country extremely difficult. A dozen missionaries have lost their lives over the last century, and evangelical work in the country is ruthlessly opposed. Christians are a small minority in Libya (less than 3% of the population), but their number continues to grow despite persecution and a volatile political environment.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Nearly all Libyans are Muslim.

**PERSECUTOR:** Extremist groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood and the self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIS), operate throughout the country. Friends and family also severely persecute converts.

**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN LIBYA:** Life is difficult in Libya, and the difficulties are compounded for Christian converts from Islam. There are few believers in Libya, and it is extremely difficult for them to practise their faith openly. Christians are rejected by their Muslim family and friends. They are beaten, fired from jobs and sometimes killed. It is unknown whether any Christians are imprisoned in Libya, but it is considered likely.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Access to Bibles is severely restricted, and they are brought into the country with extreme difficulty and risk. Christians in Libya take great risks just to own a Bible, including digital formats used on smartphones and computers.

**VOM WORK:** VOM supports an online church that enables believers to gather for fellowship and teaching from the safety of their homes. We also support several evangelists and church planters.

# MALAYSIA

---

**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** Malaysia has three major ethnicities: Malay (60%), Chinese (30%) and native tribes. The Malays are the most powerful group in the country, and being Muslim is an important part of their identity. Most Christians are from the tribal and Chinese people groups, and most churches experience relative freedom as long as they do not evangelise the Malays.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Malaysia is a majority Muslim country, but it also has a significant Buddhist population.

**PERSECUTOR:** The government severely punishes converts.

**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN MALAYSIA:** While Christianity is not illegal, Christians are marginalised by the ruling Muslim ethnic group and have difficulty acquiring building permits for new churches. Many churches work in the languages of Mandarin, Tamil and English, but not in the Malay language. While there are some large churches in Malaysia, they are reluctant to evangelise for fear of government retaliation. No Malay churches meet openly, and it is illegal for Malays to convert to Christianity. Christian converts who are caught are confined to 're-education camps' that use brainwashing techniques, torture and propaganda to force them to return to Islam. A small number of Malay believers worship in non-Malay churches, but it can cause problems for the church if they are discovered. Most Malay-background Christians keep their ethnicity a secret from their church. Many indigenous people have come to Christ in eastern Malaysia, which is separated

from peninsular Malaysia and shares a border with Indonesia.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** It is illegal for Malay people to have a Bible, and Bibles are largely unavailable outside Christian majority areas.

**VOM WORK:** VOM supports front-line workers and Malay Christians.



# MALDIVES

---

**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** The Maldives is one of the most restricted nations in the world, with fewer than 10 known believers. Any Maldivian who follows Christ must remain secret or face arrest or expulsion from the country. After having the same leader for more than 30 years, the Maldives is considering democratic reforms. The elected president resigned in 2012 under heavy pressure. The Maldivian government seeks to eliminate or greatly minimize outside influences on their cultural identity. While tourism is a major source of income, tourists are confined to resorts in an attempt to protect the small population from outside influence.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Islam is a defining characteristic, and all Maldivians are required to be Muslim.

**PERSECUTOR:** The government is the main persecutor, with some family persecution.

## **WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN THE MALDIVES:**

Christians must worship in secret. They gather in homes, placing pillows against door thresholds and windows so no one can hear them. Some Maldivians and other Christians living outside the country share the Gospel with those inside the country in various ways. The oppressive anti-Christian environment makes the Maldives one of the world's most challenging regions for Christian work.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** It is illegal to import Bibles, but some Maldivians access the Scriptures through Bible apps or the Internet. Translation of the Bible into Dhivehi, the main language of the Maldives, is ongoing, but the work has been difficult and slow because of the small number of Christian converts.

**VOM WORK:** VOM uses creative, secretive methods to share the Gospel inside the Maldives. We also support outreach to Maldivians in India and are assisting in the recording of God's Word in the national language.



# MALI

**DESIGNATION:** Hostile

**OVERVIEW:** Once an Islamic cultural centre, Mali is a poor but growing country that remains nearly entirely Muslim. Although missionaries arrived in the early 1920s and have worked in most areas of the country, less than 1% of Malians are Christian today. Small congregations of believers faithfully continue to worship in towns that are known to be centres of jihadi activity. Several missionaries have been kidnapped in Mali or have been kidnapped and brought to Mali from neighbouring countries since 2016. Most of these are still in captivity today. In 2017, threats by jihadi groups led some mission agencies to pull teams from the country.



**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Most practise animism or Islam, or both.

**PERSECUTOR:** Extremist groups persecute Christians in Mali.

**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN MALI:** During the 2012 civil war, believers fled to the south as extremist groups in the north sought to create an Islamic state. Churches and pastors' homes were destroyed, but believers were usually not otherwise harmed. Christian converts from Islam face harassment from family members and society. There are open and active churches in the north, but some believers are leaving for the south as the situation worsens. One pastor was forced to leave after receiving several significant death threats; his wife is still dealing with related trauma. A few evangelists have been imprisoned for short periods after being accused of proselytising.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** It is difficult to access Bibles.

**VOM WORK:** VOM provides Bibles, pastor training and safe houses for persecuted Christians.

# MAURITANIA

---

**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** Mauritania is among the world's poorest countries and also has a significant corruption problem. Located in the Maghreb region on Africa's western coast, it is an Islamist country with three distinct people groups: Fulani, White Moor and Black Moor. Slavery still exists within tribal groups, with black Christians commonly subservient to Arabs. There are churches in Mauritania, but they are relatively new and need leadership development and training. In 2009, an American missionary was martyred in Mauritania, and many mission agencies subsequently pulled their workers from the country. Some Christian workers, however, are starting to return. Mauritania has been staunchly Islamic for more than 1,000 years, and the training needs among indigenous leaders as well as security risks for both native Christians and foreign missionaries remain obstacles to reaching Muslims with the Gospel.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Mauritania is nearly 100% Muslim.

**PERSECUTOR:** Families, tribes, communities and the government persecute those who leave Islam in Mauritania.

**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN MAURITANIA:** Fewer than 150 believers are known to live in the country, and only foreigners can worship openly (indigenous believers must meet secretly). All indigenous Christians converted from Islam, which is illegal. Jobs are difficult to obtain in the poor economy, especially for Christians. Believers have been arrested in the past.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** It is extremely difficult for Christians to get Bibles, which must be hand-carried into the country at great risk. No Bibles are printed in the country, and the importation of Bibles is restricted.

**VOM WORK:** VOM supplies audio Bibles, provides training for Christians and supports the underground church.

# MOROCCO

---

**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** Morocco is ruled by a monarch who is purportedly a direct descendant of the prophet Mohammed and intends to govern the nation with Islamic principles. Although the North African country has experienced 1,400 years of Islamic oppression, Morocco's original inhabitants, the Berbers, were not Muslim. Islam was brought to the country by invading Arabs in the eighth century. Today, less than 1% of the population is Christian. The growth of Christianity has been slow, with a major setback occurring in 2010 when hundreds of missionaries were forced out of the country. With the rise of digital technology and social media, more Moroccans are coming to faith.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Nearly all Moroccans are Sunni Muslim.

**PERSECUTOR:** The government is the main persecutor. Family, friends and communities also persecute Christian converts.

**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN MOROCCO:** There are no church buildings in Morocco. Bible distributions and missionaries are not allowed in the country. Fearful of government informants, believers are cautious to trust one another and connect with other believers. It is difficult to find fellowship, but networks of underground churches have developed in recent years. Most believers have not had access to God's Word or discipleship. A number of Christians have been imprisoned on charges of apostasy or proselytising.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** About 35 million people live in Morocco, but only a few printed Bibles exist in the country. It is difficult to get

a Bible, but believers access Scripture through creative methods like digital files on SD cards, which they can use on their mobile phones and tablets.

**VOM WORK:** VOM supports various forms of outreach and provides aid to new converts.



# MYANMAR (BURMA)

---

**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** Christian faith in Burma traces its roots to the missionary efforts of Adoniram Judson, who arrived in 1813 with his wife, Ann. The Judson Bible is still the standard translation used by churches. Most Christians are from the Chin and Karen tribal groups, with very few of the majority Burmese coming to faith. Many Bible schools exist throughout the country, and indigenous church planters and missionaries boldly proclaim the Gospel. The church is growing despite widespread persecution by the government and the Buddhist majority. The Burman ethnic majority dominates and oppresses the other tribal groups. While political change has been much discussed in recent years, only superficial change has occurred. The military still effectively controls the country. UN sanctions have been dropped, but the average citizen has not been positively affected.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Most Burmese tribal members are Buddhist, while the Chin and Karen people groups are nominal Christians. Rohingya Muslims are a small but significant group that has suffered devastating human rights violations at the hands of the military government.

**PERSECUTOR:** Buddhist monks, in cooperation with government officials, are the major persecutors in Myanmar, but local officials and tribal militias also persecute Christians. Families and villagers who practise animism often persecute those who convert to Christianity.







**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN MYANMAR:** The widespread, long-running civil war directly affects Christians when they are targeted for attack by the warring factions. Villagers with animistic beliefs take vengeance against Christians, claiming they are angering the local spirits. Church gatherings and church buildings are allowed in most of the country, but tolerance varies from state to state. Active believers who share their faith face difficulties. Within tribal groups, families oppose conversion and new believers are subject to close government monitoring. Recently, Buddhist monks have actively opposed new Christian converts and evangelists. In general, pastors are detained for a few days at a time.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Bibles can be purchased and owned, but most people are not able to afford them. While bookstores in large cities sell Bibles, they are unavailable in many regions.

**VOM WORK:** VOM provides materials for the growing church, distributes Bibles and provides training for Christians.

# NEPAL

**DESIGNATION:** Hostile

**OVERVIEW:** According to Christian leaders in the country, the government of Nepal is taking a stronger stand against religious conversion. Despite the 2015 constitution guaranteeing religious freedom, Parliament passed a bill in 2017 criminalising conversion to Christianity. In 2018, the prime minister and other government officials publicly said anyone found changing their religion will be expelled from the country. In addition, any charity organisations engaged in preaching will be shut down. In June 2018, two foreign nationals living and operating a business in Nepal were deported because of their religious activities. Christian communities are small but outspoken.



**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Nepalis are divided between Hinduism, Buddhism and animism.

**PERSECUTOR:** Families, communities, Marxist groups and Hindu groups pressure Christians, who also experience some government interference.

**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN NEPAL:** There is a small, visible Christian community in Nepal, but they are now being pressured by a movement to create a pure Hindu nation. Marxist groups, another significant force within Nepal, also persecute Christians. Christians face harassment and beatings from local Hindus. Four Christians were arrested and convicted of witchcraft after praying for a mentally ill woman in 2016. However, their convictions and five-year prison sentences were later overturned, and they were released.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Bibles are legal, but many people cannot afford them. Distribution is difficult in mountainous areas.

**VOM WORK:** VOM distributes Bibles, trains pastors and provides Christian literature and tools for evangelism.



*"To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfil every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power. ..."*

—2 Thessalonians 1:11



# GOD IS MOVING

## in Africa

Africa continues to face a myriad of challenges. Constant political instability, artificial borders and tribal conflicts keep the region continually in flux.

Additionally, after decades of focus on Africa by missions groups, many agencies are experiencing missionary fatigue. Many feel that Africa has been largely reached and they should move on to other areas. Mission agencies are diverting resources to more pressing areas with fewer reached people, and they are abandoning holistic ministry that encompasses health care and education in a region that desperately needs help from the larger Body of Christ.

Islam is only too happy to address the needs of Africa as a method to expand its territory. Taking advantage of political instability and weakening mission efforts and needs, an especially radical version of Islam is moving across the continent at an alarming rate. Middle Eastern countries, especially Saudi Arabia, are pouring money into their own missionary activities such as education, business and healthcare. They are also funding radical groups across the continent.

In general, many in the West, particularly Americans, are





apathetic toward the continent and its issues. Most people have heard of ISIS, but few know the Fulani, Boko Haram, al-Shabab, al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb or any of the other myriad of terrorist groups active in Africa. Many became aware of Boko Haram's activities in Nigeria when the group kidnapped more than 200 schoolgirls from Chibok in 2014, but international interest faded fast, and many of our Christian sisters who have been abducted by Boko Haram have never been recovered.

Islamisation and persecution are rampant in Africa, but within what may seem like a discouraging landscape, God is at work. Both persecution and the rise of radical Islam are causing traditional Christians in Christian-majority countries to become more serious about their faith. These issues are unifying the church across denominational backgrounds and inherently correcting false teaching.

As our Christian brothers and sisters are threatened by Islam, they have been more diligent to search God's Word to provide a defence for their faith. There is a renewed interest in apologetics.

The brutality of radical Islam is also pushing Muslims to question their faith and providing ripe opportunities for the church to share the Gospel. For example, militant Muslim Fulani herdsmen have become the leading persecutors of Christians in Nigeria, but in the midst of their repeated attacks on Christian villages, Fulani people are simultaneously coming to faith in unprecedented numbers.

God is using African Christians to inspire us in the West. They are powerful examples of what it means to suffer faithfully for Christ.



# NIGERIA

---

**DESIGNATION:** Hostile

**OVERVIEW:** Nigeria is sharply divided along religious lines with a Muslim-dominated north and a majority-Christian south. There are more than 80 million professing Christians in Africa's most populous nation, the fruit of both pioneer mission work and the return of freed slaves who carried the Gospel with them to the continent from Europe following the abolition of slavery in England in 1833.



Foreign missionary activity in the Muslim majority north has declined significantly over the past 10 years as a result of the emergence of the Islamic militant group Boko Haram. Based in the north, Boko Haram is affiliated with al-Qaida and has also aligned itself with the self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIS). Although Boko Haram appears to have weakened in the north-east, it is believed to be the source of increasing attacks on Christian villages by a group of militant Fulani herdsman, a tribe known for its adherence to strict Islam. They have attacked Christian villages for many years, and in the last two years they have committed more acts of extreme violence against Christians than any other group globally. Muslims in the north want to create a separate country governed by Sharia. The majority Christian population in the south are seemingly unaware or unconcerned about the immense persecution against their brothers and sisters in the north.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** The nation is divided between Christians and Muslims, with most Christians in the south and most Muslims in the north.

**PERSECUTOR:** Boko Haram militants and Fulani Islamic militants work together to target Christian villages for destruction.

**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN NIGERIA:** Nearly all Christians in north-eastern Nigeria have lost family members to Boko Haram and Islamic militant Fulani violence. Entire congregations have been displaced, and many pastors have been forced to leave the region. Being active in the church looks much different than it did 15 years ago. Today, it takes great courage and faith to openly worship and serve Christ. Thousands of Christians remain in camps designated for internally displaced people. With few schools able to function because of the violence, families are concerned about their children's education. Life is a constant struggle, and in some places it's even difficult to find food. Famine in the north has resulted from ongoing jihadi activities: Farmers aren't working because of their fear of attack, food shipments are stolen and Fulani Christians are often detained for short periods in community prisons based on Islamic Sharia.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** While Bibles are plentiful in the south, there is a great need for them in the north. Many Bibles have been lost in attacks and as people are displaced. Most people don't own Bibles, and even if they were available few in the north could afford them.

**VOM WORK:** VOM supports widows who have lost husbands in Islamist attacks and trains and equips pastors in the north. We also provide study Bibles, New Testaments and other Christian discipleship literature to believers.





# NORTH KOREA

---



**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** Due to the communist government's secretive nature, little is known about the current status of Christians inside North Korea. Pyongyang, the capital, was known as the 'Jerusalem of the East' in the early 1900s because of its 2,000-plus churches. The communist government depends on *Juche* (the North Korean religion that requires worship and subservience to the Kim family) to maintain stability, and Christianity is considered subversive. Anyone discovered to be a Christian (or, in many cases, discovered to have had contact with Christian ideas) is considered an enemy of the state. The Gospel is still proclaimed in North Korea through various creative means, including shortwave radio and bold evangelists who risk their lives smuggling materials into the country.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Religious freedom is non-existent, and the government claims all North Koreans follow the *Juche* religion.

**PERSECUTOR:** If discovered, Christians face harsh persecution from the government and from members of the community. In general, all North Koreans fear being accused of acting benevolently toward an "enemy of the state".



### WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN NORTH KOREA:

Christians are sent to concentration camps, where they are starved, overworked and tortured. North Koreans have a saying: Whenever two or three people are gathered together, one of them is a spy. This is true even in family settings, as children are taught to spy on their parents from a young age. Therefore, North Korean Christians must be extremely careful in what they say, what they do and how they pray; all must be done in secret. When a Christian is discovered, the government punishes the entire family. Despite the threat of persecution and heavy social pressure, Christians in North Korea hold firmly to their faith. For example, one North Korean defector told VOM that her mother continued to shelter orphans even after they stole from her. Christian and secular analysts estimate that about 30,000 Christians are suffering in prison and labour camps.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** It is very dangerous to own a Bible in North Korea. Owning even a few pages of a Bible can result in detention in a concentration camp, but there are still secret ways to obtain one. Most North Koreans have found that memorisation is the safest way to keep God's Word.

**VOM WORK:** VOM provides Bibles via balloon launches, broadcasts Christian teaching over a special radio network and ministers to North Koreans wherever they are found.



# OMAN

---

**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** The government of Oman granted permission for the construction of two Christian compounds in the sultanate. But foreign Christians working in Oman are forbidden from sharing the Gospel with Omanis. Very few Omani Christians live in the country, and most are known to the government.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** More than 99.9% of the population is Muslim.

**PERSECUTOR:** Family members pressure those who convert from Islam to Christianity.

**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN OMAN:** The few known Christians of Omani background must worship in absolute secrecy and maintain their Islamic identity in public. Foreign Christians are permitted to meet, but they are not allowed to meet in homes or to evangelise other Omanis. Both the Omani church and expatriate Christians face the dilemma of whether to obey the government or to obey the commands of Christ.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** The Bible Society is allowed to sell Bibles and Christian literature inside the country, but Bibles cannot be sold to Omanis. There is only one Christian bookstore, in Oman's capital, but Omanis can easily access digital and audio Bibles online.

**VOM WORK:** VOM provides Christian materials to workers for distribution inside the country and helps with the training of local believers in evangelism and discipleship.



# PAKISTAN

---



**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** Pakistani churches include believers from diverse faith backgrounds, including both traditional and evangelical denominations. All Pakistani Christians face difficulty, discrimination and persecution because of their Christian identity. Evangelicals take great risks to witness to Muslims, baptise converts and gather them into churches, and many Christians are working tirelessly to equip, encourage and educate Christian youth. Some Christians are bold in evangelising and distributing God's Word in radical Muslim neighbourhoods and cities, some of which are home to extremist groups like the Taliban. Many Christians belong to the lower castes of society and are forced to work long hours, focusing on providing for their family. This makes Bible study and other Christian activities difficult.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** The majority of Pakistanis are Sunni Muslim, but there are also sizable Sufi Muslim and Hindu populations, as well as an oppressed Christian minority.

**PERSECUTOR:** Pakistanis of Christian heritage are widely persecuted by society. Family members, radical groups like the Taliban, and the government also persecute Christians.

### WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN PAKISTAN:

Because of Pakistan's blasphemy laws, Christians are at constant risk of being falsely accused of blaspheming Islam, the Koran or Mohammed, and they receive harsh punishments when convicted. Street evangelism is legal under Pakistani law, and several bold evangelists take advantage of the



opportunity to share the Gospel publicly. Many Christians live together in closed neighbourhoods known as colonies, which provide a measure of security. Still, several large-scale attacks have occurred in these colonies recently, including during Christmas 2017 and Easter 2018. In general, Christians are trapped in a cycle of poor education and poverty. Many are employed as indentured servants in brick kilns or tree nurseries, as street sweepers and as sewage workers. A few Christians have been imprisoned for long periods, while many others cycle in and out of prison charged under the country's blasphemy laws.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Bibles can be legally printed and distributed in Pakistan. However, some Muslim groups oppose the Bible. Those living in rural, tribal and mountainous areas have little access to God's Word.

**VOM WORK:** VOM provides outreach in difficult areas, training for local pastors and evangelists, and immediate aid to persecution victims. VOM also supports distributions of God's Word in various formats.



# PHILIPPINES (Mindanao)

**DESIGNATION:** Hostile

**OVERVIEW:** In the Muslim-majority southern island region of Mindanao, where VOM works, Muslim groups and the government have engaged in a longstanding conflict over the Muslims' desire to form an independent Muslim state. Recently the Muslim groups, such as Abu Sayyaf and Maute, have pledged allegiance to ISIS to gain financial help and foreign fighters. Muslim extremists routinely threaten Christians, often driving them out of Muslim majority areas, and many pastors and believers have been killed. However, a significant number of believers remain in these dangerous areas and faithfully share their faith.



**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** The Philippines is predominantly Roman Catholic. Many Muslims, Christians and animists live on Mindanao and surrounding islands, with Protestant churches scattered throughout the region.

**PERSECUTOR:** In the Mindanao region, Christians are targeted by both Muslim and communist rebels.

## **WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN THE PHILIPPINES:**

In the Mindanao region, attacks on Christians are sporadic and unpredictable, creating an environment of constant tension for Christians. When conflicts break out, government forces respond. In some areas, the government has ceded control to Islamists, and Christians' rights are not protected in those areas. Churches are legal, and many Bible schools throughout the Mindanao region produce graduates who return to share the Gospel in their local community.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Bibles are available in cities, but expensive.

**VOM WORK:** VOM responds to attacks on Christians and provides tools and training for front-line workers.

# QATAR

---

**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** The few Qatari believers living inside the country must worship in absolute secrecy, while Christians who are not citizens must worship in a government-controlled compound known as 'Church City'. Qatari citizens are not allowed to visit Church City. Ninety % of the country's population is composed of foreign workers, and roughly 10% of the workers are Christian, mostly Filipinos, Indians and Lebanese.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Nearly all native Qataris are Muslim, and most are Sunni Muslim.

**PERSECUTOR:** The government persecutes those who leave Islam.

**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN QATAR:** Converting to Christianity means losing everything, and the small number of Qatari believers must gather for teaching or worship in absolute secrecy. Although sharing the Gospel with Muslims is strictly forbidden, some Christians still take great risks to evangelise Qatari citizens.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Qataris can easily access the Bible through the Internet, and some travel to Bahrain to purchase Bibles. It is not illegal to own a Bible but being discovered with one would cause immediate problems within the family.

**VOM WORK:** VOM provides support to Christian converts from Islam.



# SAUDI ARABIA

---

**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** The birthplace of Mohammed is home to some of Islam's wealthiest and most devoted followers. However, in the past decade, some of the population has developed a mistrust of Islam and its leaders. TV programs and websites targeting Saudi audiences, as well as social media, travel abroad and exposure to faithful Christians outside and inside the country, have introduced Christ to many. Numerous Saudis have taken what they learned and compared it side by side with Islam, resulting in some feeling deceived by and extremely disappointed in Islam. Therefore, Saudis are more open to the Gospel now than ever before. Many are labouring to reach Saudis but many more workers are needed.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** The majority of the population is Sunni Muslim, with a small population of Shiites.

**PERSECUTOR:** Families, the government and society at large persecute Christians.

**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN SAUDI ARABIA:** Saudi Arabia is one of the world's worst persecutors of Christians. The government delivers converts to Christianity to their families, assuming they will be killed according to the country's strict interpretation of Islamic law. Non-Muslims cannot be granted Saudi citizenship, and non-Islamic places of worship are not permitted. One church is allowed, but it is exclusively for foreigners. Christians are more likely to be killed by a family member than to be imprisoned.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** It is illegal to possess a Bible, and the risk of being caught with one deters most believers from trying to obtain a printed copy. However, many Saudis are accessing the Scriptures online and through various technologies.

**VOM WORK:** VOM helps seekers who express an interest in Christianity through various media and provides aid for some Christian converts from Islam.

# SOMALIA

**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** Most Somalis believe that to be Somali is to be Muslim, so those who come to Christ are seen as denying their religion as well as their entire nationality. After years of drought and civil war, more Somalis live outside Somalia than in it. Somalis believe that any place where groups of Somalis are located is Somalia and is governed by Somali law. Therefore, any Christian missionary or convert in a Somali community anywhere in the world faces severe persecution regardless of the national laws. However, the dispersion of Somali people has also created unique opportunities for the Gospel to spread among the Somali people. They are now more accessible and there are more Somali believers today than ever before. Many of these Somali Christians are passionate about sharing their faith with their people.



**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Most Somalis are ardently Muslim.

**PERSECUTOR:** The al-Shabab terrorist organisation and other Islamist groups persecute Christians. Family members also persecute Christians, because they see conversion as betrayal.

**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN SOMALIA:** There are no church buildings in Somalia. It is extremely dangerous to be a Christian there, but the number of secret believers may be larger than we know. Because there is little trust between people, believers do not reveal themselves. Christians, when discovered, are immediately killed by al-Shabab. Christians are more likely to be killed by a family member than to be imprisoned.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Bibles are illegal, and there is almost no access to the Scriptures in Somalia.

**VOM WORK:** VOM equips secret believers inside Somalia and supports those who carefully share their faith inside Somalia.



# GOD IS MOVING

## in Latin America's Regions of Communist Oppression

The pressure on our brothers and sisters living under communist oppression in Colombia, Cuba and southern Mexico is increasing, but they are standing strong in the Lord. Church leaders in Cuba are unified across denominations in an unprecedented way. We see inspiring unity in prayer and purpose in fellowship as they hold interdenominational meetings to publicly stand together in Christ's name and for God's glory.

In southern Mexico, there is renewed effort to plant new churches in communities that face daily threats of violence from drug cartels and Marxist guerrillas, and this is happening with great faith and joy amid persecution that has driven thousands of them from their homes.

In the Colombian red zones where Christians suffer extreme violence at the hands of Marxist guerrillas, God is moving through bold and faithful believers, and God allows us to be an answer to their prayers when they cry out to Him for help. Christian widows weep and thank God when we meet with them to explain that everything they have lost will be replaced in full because their brothers and sisters in Christ around the world care and will stand with them in prayer and practical support. Front-line workers boldly stand up to guerrilla commanders in order to deliver Bibles to areas where travel is restricted.

Every chance I get, I pray with pastors serving in these difficult areas. My simple request that the Lord will help them continue to stand strong in the face of opposition is ordinary, but the encouragement this simple prayer brings them is extraordinarily powerful in each instance.

The joy and perseverance of these believers—grounded in their eternal hope in Christ—is an inspiration to all of us.

# SOUTHERN MEXICO

---

**DESIGNATION:** Hostile

**OVERVIEW:** Southern Mexico, where VOM works, has a high concentration of indigenous minority groups that maintain a separate identity and speak indigenous languages. Christians in these areas understand the power of the Gospel and the importance of reaching out to others, and when they reach a new area with the Gospel, the result is usually persecution by village religious leaders. It is common for evangelists, pastors and missionaries to travel several hours or days in order to reach the different minority communities. Even with persecution, the number of Christians has steadily increased.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Most people in southern Mexico practise a syncretistic blend of ancient pagan practises and Catholicism.

**PERSECUTOR:** Both syncretistic Catholics and armed Marxist rebels routinely persecute Christians.

## **WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN SOUTHERN MEXICO:**

Christian converts are rejected by their community and often are forced from their homes and villages. They lose jobs, inheritance and land. Those who remain in their community are marginalised, partly because they don't participate in pseudo-religious celebrations sanctioned by priests that feature drunkenness, debauchery and pagan religious rites. Many areas in southern Mexico are only 3% evangelical Christian.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** There is little access to Bibles in small, isolated communities. Bibles in indigenous languages can also be difficult to find.

**VOM WORK:** VOM distributes high-quality Bibles in Spanish and indigenous languages and provides help to those displaced from their communities.



# SRI LANKA

**DESIGNATION:** Hostile

**OVERVIEW:** The island nation of Sri Lanka, off the eastern coast of India, is still rebuilding from a civil war that ended in 2009. The government has put significant efforts into resettling those displaced during the conflict between the majority-Buddhist Sinhalese population and the Hindu Tamil separatists. There are strong churches in the country as well as parachurch organisations that provide Bible training, theological education and mission training. Churches in Sri Lanka are actively sending missionaries to other countries in South Asia.



**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Sri Lanka remains a nation divided. Hinduism is prevalent in the north, while Buddhism dominates the south.

**PERSECUTOR:** Buddhist monks are the primary persecutors, stirring up communities against the Christians who live among them. Hindus also oppose evangelism and conversion to Christianity.

**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN SRI LANKA:** Christians can openly gather and worship in Sri Lanka. Recently, however, the government stated that churches must be officially registered. When Buddhists in local governments feel threatened, they sometimes attack a pastor or his home. Strong Christian leadership programs as well as missions-sending agencies exist throughout Sri Lanka.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** There is a Bible Society in Sri Lanka, and Bibles are readily available.

**VOM WORK:** VOM supports training for missionaries, pastors and church planters.

# SUDAN

---

**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** When majority Christian South Sudan gained independence from Sudan in 2011, Christians living in the north found themselves a significant minority in a country that intended to Islamise the nation and implement Sharia. However, for decades prior to South Sudan's independence, the government of Sudan attacked the conflict areas along Sudan's border with the South in order to exterminate Christians from those areas. Persecuting Christians in Sudan has only continued. The Islamic government, led by President Omar al-Bashir, expelled Christian missionaries in 2012 and increased its persecution of Christians, including demolishing church buildings in Khartoum and bombing schools, churches and hospitals in the Nuba Mountains region. While many Christian leaders have had to flee the country, they are still finding creative ways to spread the Gospel inside Sudan.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Sudan is mostly Sunni Islam with a small Christian population.

**PERSECUTOR:** The Sudanese government arrests, imprisons, intimidates and tortures Christians.







**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN SUDAN:** In Sudan, you can be a Christian and attend church openly, but you cannot evangelise. Muslims cannot convert to Christianity. Christians in South Kordofan state and the Blue Nile region have been under attack for decades. Churches, schools, homes and fields have been bombed and destroyed. There is little medical care and little food because farmers have been unable to work their fields due to bombing. In Khartoum, the government is systematically destroying church buildings and pressuring church members. Three prisoners were released in 2017 after much international attention. The government regularly detains and imprisons Christians, as it has since the 1970s. Short-term detentions as a form of harassment are becoming more common than long-term imprisonments.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Instability and a complete lack of infrastructure make it impossible to obtain a Bible in South Kordofan state and the Blue Nile region. In addition, most Christians are too poor to afford one.

**VOM WORK:** VOM provides clean water, medical care, Bibles and support to believers living in South Kordofan state.

# SYRIA

---

**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** Syrian Christians' lives have been severely disrupted since the civil war began in 2011. Between 750,000 and 1 million Christians have fled the country. In the same period, many Muslims have come to Christ. Churches in Syria have been a beacon of hope and a source of peace for Syrians of all backgrounds throughout the war. Syrians come to the church for a number of reasons: out of desperation, in search of food, in search of meaning and truth, and many times with questions about the hope that Syrian Christians have. The news that neighbouring host countries may send Syrian refugees home brings optimism for Syrian believers, because those who came to faith in nearby countries could return and strengthen local churches.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Syria is majority Sunni Muslim with a 10% Christian population.

**PERSECUTOR:** Islamist groups seek to drive Christians out of Syria, and the government wants to control churches. Specific cases of persecution are not common, but there is a general hostility toward Christians. The ongoing civil war makes it difficult to determine whether Christians are being targeted for territorial reasons or for reasons related to their faith.





**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN SYRIA:** Syria was once known for its religious tolerance, relative to most nations in the Middle East. However, Christians there now face the same problems Christians experience throughout the Middle East: the loss of jobs, homes, social standing and family relationships. Those born into Christian families are allowed to worship in church buildings as long as they do not evangelise, but Christians who evangelise face opposition from both extremists and the government. Churches struggle to meet the needs of the overwhelming number of displaced people. Still, some Christians have chosen to stay in the country to serve others, despite the danger and harsh conditions.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** A variety of Bibles in multiple formats are available through Bible societies and bookstores. However, access and distribution have become difficult and dangerous in many areas.

**VOM WORK:** VOM helps meet displaced Christians' basic needs. We also provide training seminars for evangelical pastors who continue to serve inside the country.

# TAJIKISTAN

**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** Over the last ten years, most churches in Tajikistan have had their registration revoked, and they now meet in secrecy. Because it is the poorest former Soviet republic, many pastors and church leaders are leaving the country to work in Russia in order to support their families. The majority of the population is younger than 30, and the country lacks basic infrastructure. General corruption and the opium trade compound its difficulties.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Most Tajiks are Sunni Muslim.

**PERSECUTOR:** Christian converts from Islam are persecuted by family members, and the government harasses unregistered churches.

**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN TAJIKISTAN:** New Christian converts receive the harshest treatment. Believers are beaten and abused, and women are especially targeted for abuse by older brothers and fathers. Christians are often summoned to appear at the local secret police office. Churches meet openly, but informants attend every service. It is illegal to teach children about any religion. In 2017, Pastor Bakhrom Holmatov was arrested for possessing “extremist literature”; he had a copy of Josh McDowell’s *More Than a Carpenter*.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Bibles are available only in select cities. Most people cannot access or afford a Bible.

**VOM WORK:** VOM provides resources for evangelism and ministry tools for believers conducting outreach.





# TANZANIA

**DESIGNATION:** Hostile



**OVERVIEW:** The government generally protects Christians from persecution; however, the country has large Muslim regions with long traditions of Arab influence. In these areas, Christians can face persecution. The islands of Zanzibar and Pemba were once ruled by Oman, and after their independence they were annexed by Tanzania with the agreement they would be allowed to remain semi-autonomous. Christians on these islands face harsh persecution. Like many countries in Africa, there is a concerted effort by Arab countries to Islamise Tanzania by establishing Muslim businesses and schools throughout the country as well as electing Muslim officials into office and passing laws favouring Islam. The local churches in Tanzania are working to spread the Gospel in difficult and unreached areas.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** The population is about half Christian and half Muslim, but only about 8% of the Christian population attends church. The Zanzibar archipelago region is 99% Muslim.

**PERSECUTOR:** Christians are persecuted by community members in Muslim-majority areas.

**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN TANZANIA:** Christians can freely practise their faith but are oppressed and harassed in predominantly Muslim areas. Persecution ranges from family pressure to violent threats to the burning of churches and homes. On Zanzibar Island, the local government is trying to quietly close churches, prevent new ones from starting and force pastors to leave. On Pemba Island, persecution is more overt; Christians are violently attacked. In Muslim majority areas, Christians, especially converts, are often ostracised and prevented from obtaining jobs.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Bibles are readily available but are too expensive for many Christians.

**VOM WORK:** VOM supports Christians who are attacked or rejected because of their faith and provides Bibles.

# TUNISIA

---

**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** Tunisia has a rich Christian history. It produced the notable church fathers Tertullian and Cyprian and the Christian martyrs Perpetua and Felicity. The third Council of Carthage ratified the New Testament canon in Tunisia in AD 397. However, today Christians make up less than 1% of the population. Since the Arab Spring uprising, which began in Tunisia, the country has become increasingly democratic, becoming the first government in North Africa to seek to protect religious freedom. But even with a rich Christian history and increased religious freedom, the Gospel is opposed by many Muslims and has been slow to take root in modern Tunisia.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Most Tunisians are Muslim.

**PERSECUTOR:** Christian converts from Islam experience persecution from their communities, family members and co-workers. Extremists in neighbouring countries also exert influence.

**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN TUNISIA:** The government is still learning how to properly protect religious freedom in a culture dominated by Islam. Although it is illegal for families to persecute family members who leave Islam, it still happens. If parents report a child who has become a Christian, police may arrest the child out of habit even though changing religions is no longer illegal. Churches function openly, and Christian converts from Islam are free to worship in them. However, open evangelism or proselytising remains illegal. In remote areas, severe persecution continues. Muslim families feel ashamed by family members who leave Islam.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Bibles have been available in the past, but the last Christian bookstore in the country has closed. It is possible to distribute small numbers of Bibles and ship Bibles with official permission.

**VOM WORK:** VOM supports training and resources for front-line workers.

# TURKEY

---

**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** Despite the central role of Turkey's church in the New Testament, evangelical believers today number only in the thousands in this highly Gospel-resistant, Islamic country of more than 80 million. Turks are proud of their country, which has rapidly industrialised and modernised. Yet their love for country is so fused with their love of Islam that it is assumed that all Turks are Muslim, and it is inconceivable for a Turk to be a Christian. Christians are often characterised in the Turkish press as western imports who don't belong.

By God's grace, Christians still have some degree of freedom to worship together. Efforts have been underway for many years to strengthen and mature the leadership of the few Turkish churches, and Turkish believers boldly use all major media platforms to share the Gospel with their fellow Turks. Ongoing changes to Turkey's system of government, which includes growing Islamist sentiment, will likely increase the pressure on the small Christian community.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Most Turks are proudly Muslim and hold the faith as a core part of their nationalist identity, even if they aren't devout.

**PERSECUTOR:** Believers face a range of challenges, most often from family, but extending to neighbours, employers and the government.





*Turkey continued*

**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN TURKEY:** Pastors have been targeted in sophisticated assassination plots. In 2007, two Turkish believers and a missionary were brutally murdered. Their killers' trial drags on, more than a decade later. There is a huge stigma against becoming a Christian in Turkey, and Christian converts from Islam face stiff opposition from all sides. Believers face opposition from their families, communities and government. Many believers lose housing and jobs. American Christian Andrew Brunson was imprisoned in Turkey for more than a year and a half, and he was recently released.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Bibles can be legally printed in the country, but there are few distribution points. Many churches are involved in Bible distribution. However, Christians in remote areas of Turkey have less access to Bibles.

**VOM WORK:** VOM distributes Bibles and works with local churches to support and encourage their efforts throughout Turkey.



# TURKMENISTAN

---

**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** Turkmenistan is a profoundly restricted country. There are only eight Protestant churches in this country of 5.6 million people. Commitment to Islam is growing among the population. In spite of restrictions, the Gospel is being proclaimed regularly through satellite television and personal testimonies. The country has prospered economically because of its natural gas reserves and access to the Caspian Sea. Due to a long history of dictatorship, Turkmenistan remains closed and isolated. Schoolchildren swear an oath of allegiance to the government every morning.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Most Turkmen identify as Muslim.

**PERSECUTOR:** The government persecutes evangelical Christians.

## **WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN TURKMENISTAN:**

Churches meet openly, but they are closely monitored. Many Christians live under the reality that their home could be raided at any time by the authorities searching for Christian literature. Some families worship together in secret. If the government hears of a Turkmen coming to Christ, the new believer faces immediate pressure. It's also difficult for believers to travel out of the country for Christian training or encouragement. VOM has helped families of imprisoned pastors in the past.



**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** A Turkmen Bible was recently published, but it is difficult to obtain.

**VOM WORK:** VOM distributes Christian literature throughout the country.

# UGANDA

---

**DESIGNATION:** Hostile

**OVERVIEW:** Uganda has the reputation of being one of the most Christianised countries in Africa. Many churches or organisations choose it as a destination for short-term trips and mission projects due to its ease of access and welcoming atmosphere. It remains a strongly Christian nation, with high church attendance. However, Uganda's unique history makes it particularly vulnerable to the influence of Islam. During the 1970s, Uganda was ruled by a dictator named Idi Amin. At one point, Amin visited fellow dictator Muammar Gaddafi in Libya. Gaddafi inspired him to make Uganda a member of the Organisation of Islamic Countries and begin to Islamise the country. Many of the policies Amin put into place continue to influence society and government today. Uganda's parliament even recently passed Sharia banking, which gives zero interest loans to Islamic projects. Arab countries also continue to invest large amounts of resources into furthering Muslim interests within the country. As a result of this, radical Islam's influence has grown by more than 7% in the last three years, and many Christians within the majority Muslim border regions are facing severe persecution, especially those who convert

from Islam. Despite this, evangelical churches in Uganda are trying to educate others on what is happening and rise up against the threat of Islam. Many churches are training their leaders how to evangelise Muslims and care for those who become Christians. Members within these churches in Muslim majority areas have even become full-time caretakers for persecuted believers.



**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Uganda is a majority Christian country.

**PERSECUTOR:** Persecution comes from Islamists within communities, especially along the eastern, south-western and northern borders.

**WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A CHRISTIAN IN UGANDA:** Christian converts from Islam face family pressure and harassment from their Muslim communities. A number of young people who converted to Christianity have been severely beaten and injured by parents or community members. Pastors and churches have been attacked, and some converts have even been killed after their faith became known. The children of families who leave Islam are no longer welcome at school. In some places, laws are passed to limit the spread of Christianity or appropriate church land.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Bibles are available in urban areas, but most in rural areas do not have access or the financial means to obtain them. Also, the rural areas of Uganda consist of many unique tribal dialects, with a large portion of the older population being illiterate.

**VOM WORK:** VOM supports the distribution of Bibles and audio Bibles in areas with a heavy Muslim influence. It provides assistance to believers who have been attacked, threatened or ostracised because of their conversion to Christianity. VOM is also sponsoring persecution conferences in central Uganda to make Christians there more aware of what is happening and to empower churches and pastors to continue standing against Islam while caring for Christian converts from Islam.



# UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** The Christian population in UAE is between 10 and 15% of the total population, but these Christians are nearly all foreign workers living and working in the country. There are very few known Christians among the native Emirati Arabs. Christian churches have been allowed in the country with an understanding they will not evangelise Muslims or undermine the local government. Many of these Christians do not want to jeopardise their jobs or living arrangements in the country and are content to keep their faith to themselves when they interact with Muslims in their places of work, especially Emiratis. It can be difficult for foreigners to get close relationally to Emirati families. Other Christians living in the country are intentional about sharing their faith and have had great success with other migrants living in UAE (Persians, Afghans, South Asians, etc). Very few indigenous Emiratis have come to faith inside their homeland.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Most Emiratis are Sunni Muslim.

**PERSECUTOR:** The government is the main persecutor of Christians.



## WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES:

Only a few native Emiratis have converted to Christianity from Islam, and they face pressure from both their families and the government.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** The people of UAE have easy access to the Bible through the Internet or the various churches for expatriates throughout the country.

**VOM WORK:** VOM provides support to Christians from a Muslim background and supports follow-up work for the many media ministries reaching into the country from abroad.



# UZBEKISTAN

---

**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** Uzbekistan's new president seems to be leading the country into a time of greater religious freedom. Restrictions on churches and Christian organisations have eased. However, it is still illegal



to distribute evangelistic literature in public. There are several Christian denominations in Uzbekistan, and denominational leaders report there is growing unity among the churches. The leaders are focusing on equipping and training a new generation of Christian leaders to serve the church.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Most Uzbeks in this former Soviet republic practise Sunni Islam.

**PERSECUTOR:** The government fines Christian converts from Islam, and families often reject family members who become Christians.

**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN UZBEKISTAN:** When someone becomes a Christian, persecution begins immediately. Christians are thought of as extremists. They face massive fines and detention for 'illegal religious gatherings'. Orthodox churches meet openly and legally, but most evangelical Christians meet in unregistered groups. Uzbekistan once routinely imprisoned Christians, but the government now favours short detentions and substantial fines for economic reasons.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Bibles are difficult to obtain. Some Christians don't even want a printed copy because of the risk involved in owning one. Even those discovered with a digital Bible on their smartphone are immediately arrested and interrogated.

**VOM WORK:** VOM distributes Christian literature and provides pastors and evangelists with transportation for use in ministry work.

# VIETNAM



**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**OVERVIEW:** Vietnam has a repressive communist government, which actively persecutes Christians. While Christianity is legal, the government still sees it as a threat. Minority tribal groups, such as the Hmong, typically face the most violent and harsh forms of persecution. Churches continue to grow even while experiencing overt as well as subtle forms of persecution.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** Most Vietnamese practise ancestor worship, which is often blended with Buddhism.

**PERSECUTOR:** Local authorities persecute Christians in rural areas, and members of tribal groups are not allowed to leave their traditional religion. Christian converts are also persecuted by family members.

**WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN VIETNAM:** New Christians are often evicted from their homes and villages, especially in tribal areas where local authorities exercise broad discretion. The government recognises the Evangelical Church of Vietnam as well as churches aligned with the Assemblies of God and other denominations. Officially recognised churches are expected to report their activities and teachings to the government. All churches face government opposition when they evangelise outside church walls or attempt to conduct community events. Non-recognised churches, which cannot be officially registered, are in violation of the law. Within rural and tribal areas, existing believers can often meet openly, but new believers are targeted for harsh persecution. Christians are often denied social services, utilities and schooling in an attempt to pressure them to reject Christianity.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** It is legal to own a Bible, but distribution is difficult in rural areas, especially in large quantities.

**VOM WORK:** VOM provides training for pastors and believers. We also distribute Bibles to tribal Christians and provide tools for front-line workers.

# YEMEN

---

**DESIGNATION:** Restricted

**BACKGROUND:** The people of Yemen have suffered greatly since the start of their civil war in March 2015, but the Gospel has flourished greatly during this time. Yemeni Christians have become more proactive in their outreach efforts, though they still face extreme danger even for being identified as a Christian. As such, they must reach out in creative ways that are both bold and wise. Small numbers of Yemenis are being added to the body of Christ weekly, and there are many seekers as interest in Christian media grows. Most regions of the country now have at least one follower of Christ residing there.

**MAJOR RELIGIONS:** About 99% of Yemenis are Muslim; about one-third are Shiites and the rest are Sunnis.

**PERSECUTOR:** Persecutors include the government, Islamic extremist groups, communities, tribes and families of Christian converts. Al-Qaida is prominent and active.



## WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A CHRISTIAN

**IN YEMEN:** Converting to Christianity from Islam is a crime punishable by death, and families consider it extremely shameful for a family member to become a Christian. Christian converts face harassment, the possibility of losing jobs and family relationships, and potentially

death. Christians worship secretly in homes or in small groups outdoors.

**ACCESS TO BIBLES:** Printed Bibles can be found in Yemen, but they are difficult to obtain. However, Yemenis can freely read the Bible online. In addition, digital copies can be downloaded to their smartphones or computers.

**VOM WORK:** VOM supports indigenous believers who reach out to their community and provides relief to some Christians who are suffering as a result of the war. We also support various forms of media that make God's Word more accessible inside Yemen.

## NOTES ON OTHER AREAS OF CONCERN

These are countries where VOM's field leaders have reported incidents of persecution. Some occur in pockets of the country, while others are isolated and infrequent. We are monitoring these countries for trends and developments.

Because of the rapid spread of militant Islam, VOM has responded to attacks in these African nations and we are carefully monitoring them:

**Cameroon**  
**Chad**  
**Democratic Republic  
of the Congo**

**Mozambique**  
**Niger**  
**Senegal**

VOM workers are also watching recently enacted laws in Russia that, though they were purportedly created to combat Islamic extremists, could potentially be used to restrict Christian worship and outreach.

Venezuela is another area of concern, as the authoritarian government is hostile toward Christian outreach and Marxist guerrillas operate freely along its border with Colombia.





# Download the **VOM** **APP**

Staying up to date with the persecuted church has never been easier than with the VOM App.

Free audiobook *Tortured for Christ* exclusive to the VOM App

Download the app to gain exclusive access to the audio files of our classic book, *Tortured for Christ*, by VOM founder Richard Wurmbrand.



