

CHRISTIANS ON THE RUN

The Global Persecution of Christians

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 2026

Somalia • Nigeria • Afghanistan

The first part of a global series



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Research

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Editorial responsibility

Nordic Observatory for Religious Freedom (NORF)

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Disclaimer

This report is intended to document patterns of religious persecution affecting Christian communities worldwide. The findings are based on documented evidence available at the time of publication. Responsibility for interpretations and conclusions rests solely with the authors. GAI was used to cross reference data sources, generate sections and create graphics

Foreword

The conception of this report grew from a simple but distinct observation: around the world, people belonging to religious minorities are still today denied the freedom to determine their own path of religion or belief.

For millions of people, freedom of religion or belief is not an abstract principle of international law given by anonymous politicians. It concerns something deeply personal for each individual: the freedom to believe, not to believe, to change one's religion, or to practise one's faith without fear. Yet for many, that freedom does not exist.

People are pressured or forced to adhere to a religion they have not freely chosen. Others face discrimination, exclusion and threats because of their beliefs. In the gravest cases, people are abducted, subjected to sexual violence, displaced or killed because of their religious identity or because they have chosen a faith different from that expected of them.

What particularly concerned us when we began this work was that these injustices are not simply a collection of sporadic or unrelated incidents.

The evidence examined in this report points instead to recurring patterns of persecution produced by multiple, often overlapping drivers. Some appear across very different societies: weak institutional protection, impunity, extremist violence, restrictive legal environments and societal hostility. Others are rooted in particular national, regional, historical and political circumstances.

Understanding that distinction matters.

If persecution is systemic, documenting individual incidents is not enough. We must also seek to understand the structures that allow those incidents to occur repeatedly, identify those responsible for preventing them, and examine why protection so often fails.

This first NORF Annual Report is a beginning.

Part I focuses on Christians in Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan. The three countries are profoundly different, and the forms of persecution documented within them are different as well. They should not be reduced to a single narrative. What they share is that fundamental freedoms which many of us take for granted can carry extraordinary personal risk for those who attempt to exercise them.

Our ambition is to bring greater light to these injustices through careful, independent and transparent research; to give greater visibility to people and communities whose experiences may otherwise remain hidden; and to provide evidence that can be used by policymakers, researchers, civil society and others working to protect Freedom of Religion or Belief.

We cannot give a voice to people who already have one. But we can help ensure that those whose voices are suppressed, ignored or impossible to hear are not absent from the evidence.

And we can document.

Because without documentation, violations can be denied. Without evidence, responsibility can be avoided. And without sustained attention accountability is very unlikely.

That is why NORF begins its work with a simple commitment:

We document today so that accountability remains possible tomorrow.

Daniel Dasic

Founder & Chairman

Nordic Observatory for Religious Freedom (NORF)

Copenhagen, August 2026

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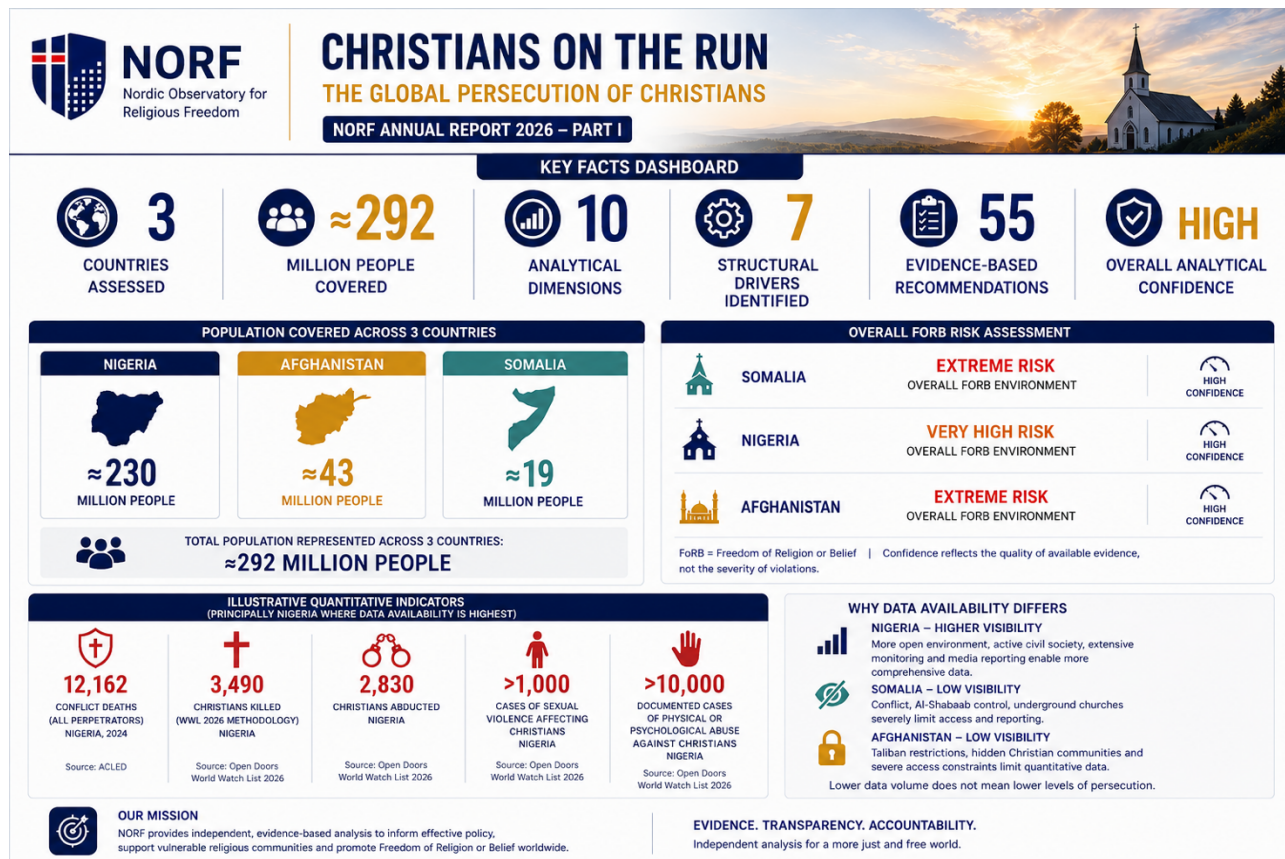
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Executive Summary

NORF Annual Report 2026 – Part I

Christians on the Run - Executive Summary at a Glance



This inaugural Annual Report by the **Nordic Observatory for Religious Freedom (NORF)** presents a comparative assessment of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) and the persecution of Christian communities in **Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan**. Together, these countries represent three distinct but complementary models of persecution: state collapse and extremist governance (Somalia), constitutional protection undermined by insecurity and weak implementation (Nigeria), and institutionalised religious repression under Taliban rule (Afghanistan). Applying a common analytical framework across all three case studies enables systematic comparison while preserving each country's unique historical, political and social context.

Purpose of the Report

Freedom of Religion or Belief is recognised as a fundamental human right under international law. Yet millions of people continue to experience discrimination, violence and persecution because of their religion or belief.

The purpose of this report is not merely to document individual violations, but to identify the structural conditions that enable persecution to persist. Through comparative analysis, the report seeks to support policymakers, researchers and international organisations with transparent, evidence-based assessments capable of informing more effective protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief. The report follows the NORF analytical architecture, moving from conceptual foundations and methodology through empirical country assessments, comparative analysis and evidence-based recommendations.

Research Question

This report addresses the following research question:

To what extent are Christians among the most persecuted religious communities globally, and what explains the observed patterns?

The comparative assessment supports the conclusion that **Christians constitute one of the world's most severely persecuted religious communities in several contemporary conflict-affected and politically restrictive environments**. Across Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan, the evidence consistently documents severe and persistent violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief. Although the manifestations of persecution differ between countries, the analysis demonstrates that these violations are systematic rather than isolated and arise from enduring structural conditions rather than temporary crises.

The report further concludes that persecution cannot be explained by religious identity alone. Instead, severe violations emerge where restrictive legal frameworks, weak institutions, armed non-state actors, political instability, societal intolerance and widespread impunity reinforce one another over time. Comparative analysis identifies these recurring structural drivers across all three case studies, although each country exhibits its own distinctive combination of risk factors.

The Scale of the Challenge

The three countries examined represent approximately **291 million people**.

- **Nigeria:** approximately **230 million inhabitants**
- **Afghanistan:** approximately **43 million inhabitants**
- **Somalia:** approximately **19 million inhabitants**

The available evidence demonstrates severe restrictions on Freedom of Religion or Belief across all three countries. However, the **quantity of documented data differs substantially**, reflecting differences in access, security conditions and the visibility of Christian communities rather than differences in the severity of persecution.

Nigeria – A Highly Documented Conflict Environment

Nigeria provides the most comprehensive quantitative evidence because of comparatively greater access for researchers, extensive conflict-event databases and active national and international monitoring organisations.

The report documents:

- **12,162 conflict-related deaths** recorded during 2024.
- **3,490 Christians killed** under the Open Doors World Watch List 2026 methodology.
- **2,830 Christians abducted.**
- **More than 1,000 documented cases of sexual violence** affecting Christians.
- **More than 10,000 documented cases of physical or psychological abuse** against Christians.

These figures illustrate both the broader national security crisis and the disproportionate impact experienced by Christian communities in several regions of the country.

Somalia – Extreme Risk with Limited Quantification

Somalia presents one of the world's most restrictive environments for Christians. Large areas remain inaccessible because of prolonged conflict and Al-Shabaab control, while Christians are largely forced to conceal their identity. Consequently, the limited availability of quantitative data should **not** be interpreted as evidence of lower levels of persecution. Rather, it reflects severe constraints on independent monitoring and the clandestine nature of the Christian community. NORF therefore assesses Somalia as an **Extreme FoRB Risk** environment with **High overall analytical confidence** based on systematic evidence triangulation.

Afghanistan – Hidden Communities Under Institutionalised Restriction

Afghanistan presents similar methodological challenges. Since the Taliban returned to power in August 2021, constitutional and institutional protections for Freedom of Religion or Belief have effectively disappeared. Christians survive almost exclusively as underground communities of converts, making reliable statistical reporting exceptionally difficult. Consequently, NORF's assessment relies on carefully corroborated qualitative evidence supported by multiple independent sources rather than comprehensive incident datasets. Afghanistan is assessed as one of the world's most restrictive environments for Freedom of Religion or Belief, with **High overall analytical confidence** despite limited numerical reporting.

Principal Findings

The comparative assessment identifies five overarching conclusions.

Persecution is structural rather than incidental.

Across all three countries, violations arise through the interaction of legal restrictions, institutional weakness, insecurity and societal hostility rather than isolated events.

Freedom of Religion or Belief reflects broader governance quality.

The most severe FoRB violations consistently coincide with weak rule of law, limited institutional accountability, shrinking civic space and deteriorating governance.

Legal protection alone is insufficient.

Nigeria demonstrates that constitutional guarantees do not necessarily translate into effective protection where implementation remains weak and insecurity persists.

The most severe persecution is often the least measurable.

Hidden Christian communities in Somalia and Afghanistan illustrate a central methodological challenge: limited quantitative data frequently reflects restricted access and clandestine populations rather than lower levels of persecution.

Comparative analysis strengthens policy relevance.

Applying a common analytical framework across three diverse countries reveals recurring structural drivers that would be less apparent through individual country studies alone.

Methodological Contribution

A principal contribution of this report is the introduction of the **NORF analytical framework**.

Rather than relying on a single dataset or monitoring organisation, the report systematically integrates evidence from United Nations mechanisms, USCIRF, the U.S. Department of State, Open Doors, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, ACLED, the World Bank, V-Dem, Pew Research Center and other recognised sources. Every major conclusion is based on evidence triangulation and accompanied by an explicit confidence assessment.

Throughout the report, five methodological principles are applied consistently:

- evidence precedes interpretation;
- multiple independent sources are systematically triangulated;
- legal protection is distinguished from implementation in practice;
- structural drivers are analysed alongside documented incidents; and
- confidence assessments communicate the quality of evidence rather than the severity of violations.

Policy Implications

The report demonstrates that effective protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief requires long-term structural engagement rather than reactive crisis management.

Accordingly, NORF recommends that governments and international organisations:

- strengthen implementation of international FoRB obligations;
- integrate FoRB into conflict prevention and peacebuilding;
- improve independent monitoring and evidence collection;
- strengthen accountability for serious violations;
- protect high-risk religious communities through context-specific interventions; and
- invest in institutional capacity capable of sustaining long-term protection.

These recommendations are derived directly from the comparative empirical findings presented throughout the report.

Looking Forward

This publication represents the **first edition of the NORF Annual Report** and should be understood as the beginning of a long-term programme of comparative research on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Future editions will expand geographical coverage, strengthen longitudinal monitoring and refine the analytical framework as additional evidence becomes available. The objective is to establish an increasingly robust international evidence base capable of supporting policymakers, researchers, civil society organisations and international institutions in protecting Freedom of Religion or Belief worldwide.

Final Message

Freedom of Religion or Belief cannot be protected without reliable evidence.

Reliable evidence depends upon transparent methodology.

Transparent methodology depends upon systematic and independent documentation.

We document today so that accountability remains possible tomorrow.



OUR PURPOSE

Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) is a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of democratic, just and peaceful societies. Yet millions of people continue to face violence, discrimination and repression because of their faith.

NORF provides independent, evidence-based analysis to inform effective policy and strengthen protection for all.



OUR RESEARCH QUESTION

To what extent are Christians among the most severely persecuted religious communities globally, and what explains the observed patterns?

Our analysis shows that Christians are among the most severely persecuted religious communities in several conflict-affected and politically restrictive environments.

Persecution is driven by a combination of interlinked structural factors rather than a single cause.



THE THREE COUNTRIES IN FOCUS

SOMALIA

EXTREMIST VIOLENCE + SOCIETAL PRESSURE
Al-Shabaab and clan-based enforcement create severe risks for Christians.

NIGERIA

MASS VIOLENCE + INSTITUTIONAL FAILURE
Armed groups target Christian communities amid weak security and impunity.

AFGHANISTAN

STATE-IMPOSED RESTRICTIONS + SOCIAL REPRESSION
The Taliban's rule imposes severe restrictions on religious freedom and practice.



FIVE KEY FINDINGS



1. SYSTEMATIC, NOT ISOLATED

Violations include killings, abductions, detentions, restrictions on worship, discrimination and displacement.



2. LINKED TO GOVERNANCE

Severe FoRB violations coincide with weak rule of law, limited accountability and shrinking civic space.



3. LAW ALONE IS INSUFFICIENT

Constitutional guarantees do not ensure protection without effective institutions and enforcement.



4. HIDDEN COMMUNITIES ARE UNDER-REPORTED

In hostile environments, many Christians hide their faith. Data reflects minimum verified levels of persecution.



5. COMPARISON REVEALS PATTERNS

Different contexts, similar drivers. Comparative analysis produces stronger evidence for action.

SEVEN STRUCTURAL DRIVERS OF PERSECUTION



OUR METHODOLOGY



MULTIPLE SOURCES

ACLED + V-Dem
UNHCR + World Bank
Pew + USCIRF
Open Doors



VALIDATION & TRIANGULATION

Cross-checking data for accuracy and reliability



ANALYSIS & COMPARISON

Quantitative indicators + qualitative evidence



EVIDENCE-BASED CONCLUSIONS

Transparent findings with confidence assessments

Evidence always precedes interpretation. Every finding is supported by documented sources and confidence levels to ensure transparency and credibility.



FIVE PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS



1. STRENGTHEN FoRB OBLIGATIONS

Ensure laws and policies align with international FoRB standards.



2. PROTECT VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES

Implement context-specific measures to protect high-risk religious communities.



3. IMPROVE ACCOUNTABILITY AND JUSTICE

Investigate, prosecute and hold perpetrators accountable for all violations.



4. STRENGTHEN MONITORING AND DATA

Invest in independent monitoring, documentation and early-warning mechanisms.



5. INTEGRATE FoRB INTO POLICY

Integrate FoRB into conflict prevention, humanitarian and development efforts.



FINAL MESSAGE

Persecution is not inevitable. It is the product of human choices—and it can be prevented.

**WE DOCUMENT TODAY
SO THAT ACCOUNTABILITY REMAINS POSSIBLE TOMORROW.**



THIS IS THE FIRST EDITION OF NORF'S ANNUAL REPORT. Future editions will expand coverage, strengthen longitudinal analysis and refine our methodology.

INDEPENDENT. EVIDENCE-BASED. NON-PARTISAN.

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Primary sources include:

- United Nations
- USCIRF
- US Department of State
- Open Doors
- Aid to the Church in Need (ACN)
- Human Rights Watch
- Amnesty International
- Pew Research Center
- ACLED
- V-Dem Institute
- World Bank
- Fragile States Index
- International IDEA
- Academic literature