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Suggestions for an appropriate use of World Watch List data (2020)

by Christof Sauer¹ (with assistance by Frans Veerman)²

20 Suggestions in brief

The World Watch List of Open Doors and its underlying statistics are among the most quoted – and sometimes misquoted or misunderstood – instruments for measuring the discrimination or persecution of Christians and violations of religious freedom. The following suggestions and explanations are meant to contribute to a better understanding of the World Watch List (WWL) and to help to objectify the discussion on the numerical assessment of persecution.

1. It is vital to carefully consider the **background and context** of the various statistics in order to see clearly what they mean and what they do not mean.
2. Even though there are many scores and statistics presented in the WWL, the authors rightly emphasize that it is ultimately about **real human beings** and about their fate, and in this case specifically about **Christians**.
3. The WWL uses the expression „**persecution**“ for a **wide range of phe-**

nomena, which includes pressure as well as violence and which reflects the everyday experience of the local Christians.

4. The **reporting period** of the WWL does not correspond to the calendar year. The current WWL 2020 refers to the time from 1 November 2018 to 31 October 2019.
5. The number of **Christians affected by persecution** presented in the WWL 2020 (260 million) is a minimum and does not reflect the total figure for the global situation.
6. The number presented in the WWL of **Christians killed in connection with their faith** in the reporting period equally does not reflect a total figure for the global situation but is a minimum number for the Top 50 countries on the World Watch List and further 23 countries scoring “high levels of persecution”.

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² Frans Veerman, Managing Director of World Watch Research, the research division of Open Doors International, has critically scrutinized the theses drafted by Christof Sauer and contributed non-public details and factual information. He along with other members of his department also recommended corrections.



7. The significance of the ranking of the countries on the World Watch List must not be overestimated.

8. The score of a country is more meaningful than its ranking. Comparisons should always be based on scores.

9. If the score of a country has changed, one first has to rule out reasons like a corrected assessment or better accessibility of information before one can claim a factual change in the real situation.

10. Any attempt at measuring religious freedom or persecution can ultimately lead to no more than an **approximation to reality**. This equally applies to the methodology of the WWL, however meticulously it has been developed.

11. For an understanding of the situation of individual countries and for an interpretation of their scores it is indispensable to consult the **detailed country dossiers**.

12. The situation in one and the same country is usually not uniform geographically and in its effect on different groups.

13. The World Watch List has a non-linear scale.

14. The situation of strongly affected categories of Christians influences the country score disproportionately when the different categories of Christians are not affected equally. This is true even if some of the affected groups only make up a small or even marginal part of the Christian population by absolute numbers.

15. The criterion of violence against Christians contributes only one sixth of the potential persecution score a country can receive. This capping comes by

design to ensure that the variety of types of pressure on Christians would not be overlooked.

16. The scale for scoring violence and casualties is particularly sensitive for **low numbers of cases**. This is due to the fact that scoring of acts of violence does not happen on a linear scale, but decreases exponentially and is capped.

17. It is nearly impossible for a country to reach the maximum score of 100 points. This has to do with the fact that the WWL assesses a variety of different persecution phenomena, which do not occur all in one country simultaneously. Hardly anywhere does full-scale violence and maximum pressure in all spheres of life occur simultaneously.

18. The 50 countries annually listed on the WWL do not display the overall global picture but rather illustrate the worst cases that were identified among the countries assessed by means of the WWL methodology.

19. Because of all the reasons mentioned above, decisions whether or not to reach out to Christians in certain countries must not be based exclusively upon the rankings or the scores of these countries on the WWL. Such decisions should particularly not be solely based on the inclusion of countries in the top ten or among the top 50 of the WWL.

20. The original and most in-depth sources concerning all details of the World Watch List are to be found in World Watch Research documentation on www.opendooranalytical.org.

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Detailed Explanation

The World Watch List of Open Doors and its underlying statistics are among the most quoted – and sometimes misquoted or misunderstood – instruments for measuring the discrimination or persecution of Christians and violations of religious freedom.

From 2011–2013, the author (as an independent expert) assisted World Watch Research, the research unit of Open Doors International, in the improvement of the data gathering methodology of the World Watch List. Since 2014, he coordinates the annual audit of the results of the World Watch List by the International Institute for Religious Freedom.

Overall, the World Watch List is a useful tool for understanding discrimination and persecution of Christians, on the condition that it is understood correctly and – within its limitations – used appropriately. The following suggestions and explanations are meant to contribute to a better understanding of the World Watch List (WWL) and to help to objectify the discussion on the numerical assessment of persecution.³

1. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT OF STATISTICS

It is vital to carefully consider the background and context of the various statistics in order to see clearly what they mean and what they do not mean.

This should be obvious, but when people quote or criticize the WWL one can repeatedly observe shallow reading, misunderstandings and misinterpretations, and an “overburdening” of numerical data and comparisons. Appropriate usage or criticism would only quote these figures and comparisons in the context of their intended meaning and carefully discern the referential framework.

2. THE STATISTICS POINT TO PEOPLE

Even though there are many scores and statistics presented in the WWL, the authors rightly emphasize that it is ultimately about real human beings and about their fate, and in this case specifically about Christians.

Such a focus on Christians is justifiable, since this kind of data-gathering requires a lot of effort and the means and personnel are limited. Experience also demonstrates that comprehensive religious freedom reports that cover multiple or all religions or worldviews can only give limited attention and space to specific groups. In comparison to most other regularly issued country-based religious freedom reports, the WWL achieves the greatest depth and density of information on Christians, and this is due specifically to its strict focus. It is therefore not necessary that any given persecution report includes all different worldviews. Reports exclusively or mainly focusing on specific groups also have their significance.

³ This is the third revised edition, completed on 15 January 2020.



In the WWL's accompanying country dossiers⁴ there is a brief section highlighting, where members of other religions or none also suffer from discrimination and persecution. To access more details about other groups it is possible to consult additional reports such as those of the "Humanists International" regarding humanists, atheists, rationalists, secularists, agnostics and free thinkers.

3. PERSECUTION INCLUDING BOTH PRESSURE AND VIOLENCE

The WWL uses the expression „persecution“ for a wide range of phenomena, which includes pressure as well as violence and which reflects the everyday experience of the local Christians.

This includes legal, administrative and societal restrictions of religious freedom, violation of religious freedom by state and non-state actors as well as faith-related discrimination that presents no or less *serious* violation of religious freedom according to human rights standards. Examples of the latter also include pressure and harassment in daily life, such as not being able to talk about one's faith within the immediate family without being at risk or ostracized by family members because of a different faith or because of being in touch with other Christians. Additional examples are: Harassment of Christian children at school because of their parents' faith, disinheritance or pressure to divorce after conversion to the Christian faith, psychological pressure and abuse, social pressure regarding faith-related dress codes, as well as non-governmental surveillance. Discrimination in employment and access to basic social care also fall into this category.

⁴ World Watch Research provides 25-page dossiers for over 70 countries at the Open Doors Analytical website: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/country-dossiers/>.

4. THE WWL REPORTING PERIOD

The reporting period of the WWL does not correspond to the calendar year. The current WWL 2020 refers to the time from 1 November 2018 to 31 October 2019.

This is important, as any incidents on or after 1 November 2019 will not be part of the WWL 2020 evaluation, although these incidents may very likely be in the reader's mind as they may have been mentioned in the latest media reports at the time of publication of the WWL. In addition, one commonplace rule is repeatedly forgotten by users of the WWL: One should never quote numerical data without its corresponding time reference! Any given statistics of incidents or situations need to refer to a clearly defined period of time or date.

5. THE NUMBER OF PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS

The number of Christians affected by persecution presented in the WWL 2020 (260 million)⁵ is a minimum and does not reflect the total figure for the global situation.

It only refers to the countries researched by Open Doors and that are part of the Top 50 countries where it is most difficult to live as a Christian. In all those countries an "extreme", "very high" or "high level of persecution" has been identified.⁶ It is a careful estimation, which happens country by country and only takes into account the portion of Christians in that country presumably affected by such level of persecution.

6. THE NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS KILLED

The number presented in the WWL of Christians killed in connection with their faith in the reporting period equally does not reflect a

⁵ The exact sum of calculations is 258 926 400.

⁶ In WWL 2020 an additional 23 countries with a "high level of persecution" outside the Top 50 have been identified which would add another 53 516 700 Christians affected, bringing the total to 312 443 100 Christians.



total figure for the global situation⁷ but is a minimum number for the Top 50 countries on the World Watch List and further 23 countries scoring “high levels of persecution”.⁸

The numbers are assessed country by country. Wherever it is possible to access information, it is based on documented individual cases and only those are considered where faith-related reasons are a plausible cause and where a minimum of details are known. In countries where it is not possible to access such information because of the order of magnitude and the volatile situation, the WWL gives a conservative estimate based on indirect evidence. The same applies to the numbers of attacks on public Christian buildings or the destruction thereof and other acts of violence.

7. WWL COUNTRY RANKING

The significance of the ranking of the countries on the World Watch List must not be overestimated.

Comparing the position to the previous year only makes sense when there is a strong variation that verifiably does not exclusively stem from the change of score of other countries, better intelligence, or from other factors.

In addition, any statements about changes or even trends have to be made with great care. Changes of scores or rankings from one year to the next do not yet constitute a trend. This would need consideration over a longer peri-

⁷ In the previous cycle an attempt to provide a global assessment was made, adding data from the Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians in Europe (<http://www.intoleranceagainstchristians.eu/advanced-search.html>) and other sources which together added 22 casualties to the global total.

⁸ There were at least 2983 Christian casualties recorded or estimated in the reporting period of the WWL 2020. In WWL 2019 there were 4305, in WWL 2018 there were 3066, in WWL 2017 there were 1207, and in WWL 2016 there were 7106 Christian casualties recorded. The 23 “Persecution Watch Countries” are countries that score 41 or more points and are not on the WWL Top 50.

od of time with methodological conditions remaining constant. An attempt at this has been made by newly introducing the section “5 year trends” in the country dossiers.

8. WWL SCORE MORE MEANINGFUL THAN RANK

The score of a country is more meaningful than its ranking. Comparisons should always be based on scores.

For example, Algeria rose from rank 22 in WWL 2019 to rank 17 in WWL 2020 but only scored 3.9 more points than in the previous assessment cycle. A similar movement is true for Morocco (35 to 26) and Qatar (38 to 27) with 3-4 points more.

9. WHEN A COUNTRY SCORE HAS CHANGED

If the score of a country has changed, one first has to rule out reasons like a corrected assessment or better accessibility of information⁹ before one can claim a factual change in the real situation.

For example, in WWL 2020 there were changes (+/-2) in the scores of 19 countries among the TOP 50, of which 3 changes were reportedly due in part to scoring improvements (Iraq) or the reassessment compared to a neighboring country (Qatar, Oman).

10. NO MORE THAN AN APPROXIMATION TO REALITY

Any attempt at measuring religious freedom or persecution can ultimately lead to no more than an approximation to reality. This equally applies to the methodology of the WWL, however meticulously it has been developed.

⁹ A change in the information situation or unavailability of deeper research were indicated as influences on some scores of the WWL 2020 in 7 instances among the TOP 50 countries of the list. For example in Afghanistan and Yemen it was very hard to collect verified information.



The score for each country is based on an extensive assessment of a number of factors from five different spheres of life and different means of violence. The main concern is to make a variety of very different phenomena comparable with each other. Changing the weighting of these factors in this model would result in somewhat different scores. In addition, a possible margin of uncertainty of +/- 2 points (maximum) and +/- 0.5 points (minimum) needs to be taken into consideration. Furthermore, the index is purposefully designed to underestimate situations, when there is no precise and verifiable information provided by the respondents to the questionnaire. Consequently, an improvement in the quality of information available might lead to a rise in a country score.

11. COUNTRY DOSSIERS INDISPENSABLE FOR UNDERSTANDING

For an understanding of the situation of individual countries and for an interpretation of their scores it is indispensable to consult the detailed country dossiers.

The detailed country profiles are based on the critical analysis of the field research, the assessments of experts, further in-house research and a multitude of external reports, publications and media reports, and their documentation fills hundreds of pages.

12. COUNTRY SITUATIONS USUALLY NOT UNIFORM

The situation in one and the same country is usually not uniform geographically and in its effect on different groups.

The different categories of Christians are usually affected differently. While historical Christian communities might be tolerated and even embraced, non-traditional Christian communities and communities of converts could be persecuted intensely.

In addition, there might be vast differences depending on the geographical area. Sometimes, the religious demography and composition of different parts of the same country would mean that persecution could be very high in a particular part of the country and much lower in other parts. There might also be a dramatic contrast between big urban centres and rural areas. Variety and contrast of situations is particularly strong in countries with large populations and territories.

13. NON-LINEAR SCALE

The World Watch List has a non-linear scale.

This means that when one country scores twice the number of points on the WWL than another country, it does not mean that persecution is twice as strong or frequent in that country. The strength of the WWL lies in discovering and describing situations of discrimination or persecution against Christians which are particularly frequent, intense, diverse and widespread.

14. STRONGLY AFFECTED CATEGORIES OF CHRISTIANS

The situation of strongly affected categories of Christians influences the country score disproportionately when the different categories of Christians are not affected equally. This is true even if some of the affected groups only make up a small or even marginal part of the Christian population by absolute numbers.

The WWL is particularly sensitive to the situation of converts¹⁰ and of comparatively younger Christian churches and groups (like evangelical or Pentecostal churches as well as

¹⁰ It is likely that the number of known converts would be much higher if societal and government pressure against conversion (and against making conversions public) would be lower.



renewal movements within traditional churches).

15. VIOLENCE AGAINST CHRISTIANS

The criterion of violence against Christians contributes only one sixth of the potential persecution score a country can receive. This capping comes by design to ensure that the variety of types of pressure on Christians would not be overlooked.

Due to such a differentiated assessment it is possible to produce separate rankings for violence and even individual elements of violence, as well as for the countries with the highest pressure.

16. SCALE FOR SCORING VIOLENCE

The scale for scoring violence and casualties is particularly sensitive for low numbers of cases. This is due to the fact that scoring of acts of violence does not happen on a linear scale, but decreases exponentially and is capped.

The capping takes effect as soon as a certain threshold is reached, namely 10 cases for casualties, attacks on churches or incidents in any other violence category. Therefore “mass phenomena” always score the same number of points regarding violence even if the situation in one country is far more serious than in another.

One also has to consider that the methodology does not put the frequency of such violent incidents in relation to the number of Christians in a country. Therefore – as can be expected – among the countries more susceptible to violence, those with a larger Christian population potentially will reach the maximum score faster and more easily than countries with a small general population or a minimal Christian population.¹¹

¹¹ WWL 2020: Highest score in violence among the top 50 in relation to the rounded number of Christians: Nigeria

In all cases, the factual basis is transparent because the absolute figures can be reviewed in the charts showing minimum numbers of 10 out of the 12 distinct violence phenomena (such as casualties, attacks against churches or sexual violence – the latter mainly against women).

17. THE MAXIMUM SCORE

It is nearly impossible for a country to reach the maximum score of 100 points. This has to do with the fact that the WWL assesses a variety of different persecution phenomena, which do not occur all in one country simultaneously. Hardly anywhere does full-scale violence and maximum pressure in all spheres of life occur simultaneously.

For that reason even the nations at the top of WWL 2020, North Korea (94) and Afghanistan (93), do not reach the maximum score.

18. THE 50 COUNTRIES LISTED

The 50 countries annually listed on the WWL do not display the overall global picture but rather illustrate the worst cases that were identified among the countries assessed by means of the WWL methodology.

The limitation of the publicized list to 50 countries constitutes an artificial capping. Open Doors is currently investigating a total of 110 countries in depth, and watches out for early warning signs in all countries and terri-

16.7/93Mio, Pakistan 16.7/4Mio, Egypt 16.1/16.2Mio, Burkina Faso 15.6/5.2Mio, Central African Republic 15.6/3.6Mio; lowest score in violence: Bhutan 0/30k, Mauritania 0.2/10k, Brunei 0.6/55k, , Qatar 1.1/220k, Maldives 0.7/a few thousand. However this does not apply to the following countries with a low Christian population that score high in violence nonetheless, e.g.: Mali 13.7/461k, Libya 11.3/36k, North Korea 11.1/300k, Afghanistan 10/thousands, Somalia 9.4/hundreds, Algeria 9.3/129k, Niger 9.3/62k; equally it does not apply to certain countries with a high Christian population and yet a low score in violence: Kazakhstan 1.7/4.8Mio and Malaysia 1.5/3Mio.



tories of the world. Open Doors also publishes details about the countries causing most concern beyond the top 50 listed.

19. DANGER OF “LOPSIDED DECISION CRITERIA”

Because of all the reasons mentioned above, decisions whether or not to reach out to Christians in certain countries must not be based exclusively upon the rankings or the scores of these countries on the WWL. Such decisions should particularly not be solely based on the inclusion of countries in the top ten or among the top 50 of the WWL.

If a donor would stop supporting Christians just because their country dropped out of the top ten, this would be a misguided conclusion based upon lopsided decision criteria. It is also contrary to Christian values if a country receives no or only little attention by Christians simply because the country ranks lower than others or is not listed in the top 50. Christian solidarity is required for Christians under pressure for their faith in all cases, independent of the degree of severity. Moreover, advocacy that succeeds in preventing the worsening of a less extreme situation must also be considered a meaningful intervention.

20. OPEN DOORS ANALYTICAL WEBSITE

The original and most in-depth sources concerning all details of the World Watch List are to be found in World Watch Research documentation on www.opendoorsanalytical.org.¹²

¹² The published documentation for WWL 2020 amounts to almost 2,000 pages if the country dossiers for the Persecution Watch countries are taken into account. Over 100 pages deal with the methodology in detail. Available at: Open Doors International/World Watch Research Unit, World Watch List 2020 Documentation (Compilation of all main documents; Country Dossiers), January 2020, www.opendoorsanalytical.org (password: freedom). This is currently the most extensive publicly accessible

For those who want to thoroughly understand the WWL or to critically engage with it, it is indispensable to revert to this information. It does not suffice to remain at the level of the information processed for the general public by the various national offices of Open Doors. In case of doubt it is the original source that counts. This is where the most complete, most detailed and most current information is to be found. Too frequently, critics ignorantly and often erroneously claim a lack of transparency or methodological reflection because they do not make the effort of reading all available information and looking up the original source.

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information available.