

Persecuted Church: Algeria

Every month our ministry chooses a different country where Christians are being persecuted and we commit to pray for them, as you can see in the sidebar here on our website. The country we are praying for in July is Algeria. Much of the information regarding persecution in Algeria that I've included here comes from Open Doors USA's World Watch Research *Algeria: Country Dossier* (WWR, <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/WWL-2020-Country-Dossier-Algeria.pdf>).

Country Background

Algeria is the largest country in Africa, situated along the northern coast and extending down into the Sahara Desert. About 4/5 of the land area is consumed by the Sahara Desert, and so most of the population resides in the north, closer to the coast. Nearly 60% of the population is Algerian Arab (Arab mixed with local ethnicities) due to invasions in the 8th and 11th centuries. The second largest ethnic group is the Berber population, the people indigenous to Algeria. Over 42 million people live in this nation.

It is estimated that 98% of the Algerian population is Muslim. Within this group, there is a tension between conservative groups and those who tend more toward secularism. There are around 129,000 Christians in Algeria (.3% of the total population). This makes them the third-largest religious group, behind Muslims (98%) and Agnostics (1.4%).

Early Christianity was present in Algeria by the 2nd century. Previously, Rome had taken over the Berber kingdoms which lay along the coast. The famous church father Augustine was bishop of Hippo Regius, which is the modern city of Annaba, Algeria. The influence of Christianity in this region began to change after the invasion of Muslim fighters from the 7th century on. Algeria would in time become part of the Ottoman Empire, although certain areas were controlled by Spain.

In 1830, France began to take over Algeria. This process took 17 years, resulting in a substantial amount of damage and loss of life. The violence of the French rule and the lack of mutual understanding between the rulers and the ruled led to a hostile situation. Some estimate that 1/3 of the native population was killed through war, famine, and disease which resulted from ruling policies. After WWII, Algeria sought greater amounts of autonomy. This was not established to the satisfaction of the Algerians, and nationalist groups became more radical. The Algerian War of Independence began in 1954. Finally in 1962 negotiations resulted in Algeria's independence.

In the wake of French rule, factionalism abounded. Different groups and figures vied for control. There were some gradual steps toward democracy under the control of Chadli Benjedid, who relaxed some of the socialist policies of the previous administration. However, this was accompanied by other problems, such as droughts, high unemployment rates, and high foreign debt. A rising sentiment of

Islamic fervor began, influenced in part by the 1979 Iranian revolution, and exacerbated by the domestic problems described above. The Islamic Salvation Front formed as a political party and in 1991 looked like it had enough support to become the majority party. As a result, the army suspended elections and chose the president themselves, resulting in a civil war between the army and various Islamic and revolutionary groups. President Abdelaziz Bouteflika took important steps toward peace, but even into the 2000s a number of Islamic groups still put up armed resistance.

In 2011, Algerian citizens protested in what has been called the Arab Spring. While in Libya and Egypt the protests had significant effects, this was not the case in Algeria. The government was able to ride out the protests and agreed, at least nominally, to address unemployment, food shortages, and housing problems. Bouteflika had abolished term limits in 2008 and remained president even after he suffered a serious stroke in 2016 and thus rarely made public appearances. Many suspected that the elections had been rigged and that someone else was running the government. Nevertheless, some concessions were granted and term limits reinstated. When it was announced that Bouteflika would run for re-election once again in 2019 despite the constitutional reform instituting term limits, there were once again protests. The most recent election in December 2019 was likewise contested. Tens of thousands of protesters took to the streets, angry that the candidates all represented the interests of the old guard and claiming that the elections were rigged. The new president, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, was a close associate of Bouteflika, and many people believe that he will simply continue the old ways of governing.

As can be seen from this brief history, Islam is an important factor in the persecution of Christians today, as is government corruption.

Persecution

Most of the Christians in Algeria are converts from Islam. They face persecution from their immediate and extended family, who will try to pressure them into renouncing their conversion. They may also be pressured to conform to Muslim traditions and perform Islamic rites. WWR says, "Family members are the driving force behind most of the persecution of converts to Christianity. Persecution includes, but is not limited to, (physical) abuse, banishment, house arrest (mostly in the case of women), forced divorce, inheritance loss and loss over custody of the children." There is a strong sense of honor in families and clans, and one person converting from Islam is seen as shameful to the entire family/community. In this regard, the danger to Christians is highest in rural areas, which tend to be aligned with a more conservative implementation of Islam.

The constitution grants religious freedom in general, but there are laws which limit non-Muslim religious activities. No religious activities can take place which might "shake the faith of a Muslim" or tempt them to convert to another religion. [A Human Rights Watch report](<https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/10/24/algeria-crackdown-protestant-faith>) explains, "Under Ordinance 06-03, proselytizing by non-Muslims is a criminal offense and carries a maximum punishment of 1 million dinars (US\$8,347) and up to five years in prison for anyone who "incites, constrains, or utilizes means of seduction tending to convert a Muslim to another religion; or by using

to this end establishments of teaching, education, health, social, culture, training...or any financial means.” For this reason, Christian materials are heavily monitored and restricted. Individuals, especially known Christians, are regularly monitored by the police and by the community to make sure they are not violating this and other religious rules.

Non-Muslim religious buildings need to be registered with the government, but many have complained that their requests for approval go unanswered or are rejected arbitrarily. A law passed in 2006 makes it necessary for non-Muslim places of worship to be registered with the government. Since this law was passed, no new churches have been allowed to form, and many have been shut down for operating without permission. Especially notable was the closing of the largest Protestant church in the nation, the Full Gospel Church, with police officers injuring several worshippers in the process. Christians who protested against this shutdown were arrested, but later released. The government has also refused to renew the Protestant Church of Algeria’s status as a legally recognized association, despite the necessary paperwork being submitted. Many Christians meet in house churches, but these are illegal assemblies.

Apostasy is not illegal in Algeria, but because evangelism is illegal converts may be questioned as to who led them to convert. Additionally, someone who converts to Christianity will likely be fired or discriminated against in other ways if their faith becomes public knowledge. Women who convert may be married off to a Muslim man at her family’s discretion, or if already married she may be forced into a divorce with access to her children revoked.

Slimane Bouhafis, a convert to Christianity, was arrested in 2016 and sentenced to five years in prison for insulting Islam. He had made several posts on Facebook which were deemed offensive and opposed to the Islamic religion. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/09/07/algeria-3-year-sentence-insulting-islam> However, he received a presidential pardon after serving 18 months of that sentence. While it is technically not illegal to declare that one is Christian, it is risky because this could very easily be interpreted as blasphemy or evangelizing, which are illegal. Even if such behavior is not prosecuted, those who are vocal about their Christian faith will likely face violence and harassment from those in their family and community. For this reason, Christian symbols are not displayed openly.

Other religious minorities also face persecution. The Ahmadiyya sect of Islam faces similar problems as Christians due to their status under the law.

Although Algeria’s recent past has been marked by violence, as of now the national security is fairly stable. The police and military are well-trained and, despite the obstacles to defending a border in the desert, have been successful in keeping Islamic militants at bay. Nevertheless, extremist preachers often spread a message which can stir up hatred against Christians and other religious minorities. As VWR says, “Violent Islamic militants do not have a wide support base among the people, but Islam holds a firm grip over the country, also due to the growth of the Salafist movement.”

Due to the history of the region and the violence which is associated with the western influence of the French, Christianity (which is seen as a western influence) is distrusted by many. Most Christians are in the Kabyle region and are ethnically Berber. This is an ethnic group that had already experienced discrimination even before some of them had begun converting to Christianity. It is the growth of Christianity among this ethnic group which has proved to be relatively fertile ground for evangelism.

How to Pray

Here are some specific ways you can pray for Christians in Algeria:

- Pray that Christians in Algeria will be encouraged and protected despite the harsh difficulties they face.
- Pray for an end to corruption in Algeria.
- Pray that Christians will extend the love of Messiah to each other and to their neighbors.
- Pray that ministries such as Open Doors and Voice of the Martyrs will be successful in providing Bibles to believers.
- Pray that those who are sharing their faith will be protected and successful.
- Pray that religious freedom will prevail in the nation.
- Pray that Algerians (including the persecutors) will come to know the truth and receive salvation through Yeshua.