



Reports

Ronald Boyd-MacMillan and Dennis P. Petri

VID shows Sub-Saharan Countries are
the Epicentre of Modern Martyrdom

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International Institute
for Religious Freedom



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**Internationales Institut für Religionsfreiheit
Institut International pour la Liberté Religieuse
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The IIRF has a global presence with academic and advocacy partners on all continents. We perform original research and in collaboration with our partners. The IIRF is also a “meeting place” for all scholars that take an interest in religious freedom.

We understand Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) as a fundamental and interdependent human right as described in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. In line with CCPR General Comment No. 22, we view FoRB as a broad and multidimensional concept that needs to be protected for all faiths in all spheres of society.



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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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The global landscape of religious persecution has witnessed a devastating surge in recent years, with Christians bearing the brunt of violent attacks across various regions. In the new Violent Incidents Database, funded by Global Christian Relief and conducted by the International Institute for Religious Freedom, four of the top five countries with the most killings of Christians during the 2022–2023 period are in Africa, dominated by Nigeria, but followed by the DCR (#2), Mozambique (#4), and Burkina Faso (#5). Only India at #3 breaks the African stranglehold with the bloodletting in Manipur particularly in May of 2023. This emphasizes the urgent need for international attention and concerted efforts to address this crisis.

Said a Christian pastor based in Jos, Northern Nigeria, “I was born in 1960, and we had always experienced discrimination and persecution from our majority Muslim neighbours, but I never thought that it would break out to the extent it has now. The past ten years have come as a terrible shock even to Christians in the area used to ‘trouble for the Gospel.’”

Nigeria emerges as the epicenter of Christian persecution, recording a staggering 7,321 killings during the period. The menace is primarily fueled by Islamic extremism, with long-standing groups like Boko Haram launching relentless attacks against Christians. The escalating violence underscores the urgent need for intervention to protect the Christian population. The most recent example is the massacre of 140 Nigerian Christians over the Christmas 2023 holiday by suspected Fulani militants.

The Sahel region, often referred to as the world’s most violent religious fault line, serves as a battleground where Christianity clashes with Islam. The 10th parallel has become a deadly boundary, witnessing an unsettling proximity between the world’s two major missionary religions. The clash intensifies as Islamic extremism takes center stage, leading to a surge in violence against Christians. Outside Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mozambique, Burkina Faso and Chad are African hotspots of Christian persecution.

Top 10 killings of Christians (2022–2023)

	Countries	Killings
1	Nigeria	7,321
2	Democratic Republic of the Congo	286
3	India	137
4	Mozambique	104
5	Burkina Faso	83
6	Myanmar	40
7	Mexico	27
8	Honduras	21
9	Chad	17
10	Colombia	16

Since 2012, the Sahel region has experienced a spike in violence attributed to the incursion of Middle Eastern extremist groups, including Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. In countries like Mali and Burkina Faso, newer entities such as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have significantly displaced Christians from the northern regions. The entry of these well-armed and organized extremist groups has exacerbated the existing challenges. These groups have claimed responsibility for several attacks against Christians in the region, such as the kidnapping and killing of an Italian priest and a Canadian nun in Burkina Faso by AQIM, the abduction and execution of a Swiss missionary in Mali by ISWAP, and the murder of a French aid worker and two local guides in Niger by IS militants.

Local analysts highlight the changing dynamics in the region, emphasizing the superior weaponry and organizational capabilities of newer extremist groups. These entities, better armed and more adept at organizing criminal enterprises, pose a significant challenge. Moreover, the perpetual recruitment of individuals, particularly those in the 17–24 age group, is fueled by socio-economic challenges, including inadequate education and employment opportunities. Many young people in the region are lured by the extremist groups with promises of money, power and glory, or coerced by threats of violence and intimidation. Some of them are also radicalized by online propaganda and indoctrination.

This phenomenon has attracted the attention of global policy makers. Demographically there are only thirty countries in the world where the median age is under twenty years old, according to the 2020 CIA Factbook, and twenty-eight of them are in Africa. By UN estimates, those African countries have a combined population of 855 million, projected to grow to 1.29 billion by 2023, but crucially 261 million will be between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four. In Nigeria alone, by 2030 nearly 54 million will be in this age group. As a global mission executive based in the region said – under condition of anonymity – “the fact is that we have millions of young people with little education and no jobs, who find that their only option to make some money and have a family is to join an extremist group.” The region will remain the perfect recruitment ground for extremist and insurgent movements unless greater inroads can be made into the provision of education and jobs for this crucial cohort. PWC’s Blair Shepard and his megatrends monitoring team called this the most urgent world challenge: “... there are more than one billion youth under twenty years old living in underdeveloped countries who need education now and a job in the next ten years – if we do not address this question immediately, the likely consequences are dire.”

Top 10 killings all religions (2022–2023)

	Countries	Killings
1	Nigeria	10,415
2	Israel	1,209
3	Mali	780
4	Democratic Republic of the Congo	481

5	Burkina Faso	380
6	India	139
7	Pakistan	129
8	Afghanistan	120
9	China	104
10	Mozambique	104

Extending the analysis to killings of those in other religions, Nigeria continues to dominate the list, with 10,415 killings, while other nations African nations such as Mali, the DRC, Burkino Faso dominate. However, Israel is a shock #2 on the killings list with the massacre of 1,209 Jews in attacks from Hamas on October 7th. The coordinated attack by Hamas militant shouting Allahu Akbar during the slaughter proved the attack was in part religiously motivated. This massacre shocked the world and represented the greatest number of Jews killed in a single day since the Holocaust.

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The global landscape underscores the widespread nature of religious persecution and the urgent need for a coordinated international response. Some of the other countries where Christians have faced deadly violence in the period include Afghanistan, where the Taliban takeover has endangered the lives of the small Christian minority, China, where the government has intensified its crackdown on underground churches and arrested several pastors and believers, and India, where Hindu nationalists have attacked and killed Christians for allegedly converting others to their faith.

The statistics from 2022 and 2023 paint a grim picture of the persecution faced by Christians globally, particularly in the Sahel region. The clash between Christianity and Islam, intensified by the influence of Middle Eastern extremist groups, demands immediate attention. It is imperative for the international community to unite in condemning religious persecution and working towards sustainable solutions. Only through collective efforts can we hope to alleviate the suffering of persecuted Christians and uphold the principles of religious freedom on a global scale.

It is true that martyrdom affects a small minority of Christians when one considers that 2.4 billion people on the planet are Christians, or two in every six people. And there is little in the Violent Incidents Database to confirm figures in the past that martyrdoms of Christians run at around 100,000 per year. While the VID represents a significant undercount because of its adherence to use only public sources, martyrdoms do not run at that level, and indeed the total of Christians killed for the 2022–23 period is 8,136. Yet it must also be said that martyrdoms particularly of prominent Christians change unpromising circumstances and often boost church growth. For example, the murder by police of 36-year-old Polish Catholic priest Fr Jerzy Popieluszko in 1984 released such a wave of revulsion it contributed to the fall of Soviet communism in 1989. Figures in the more modern church era include the likes of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Germany), Oscar Romero (El Salvador), Janani Lowum (Uganda), Vincent Machozi (DRC), Annelena Torelli (Somalia), Romolo Saune (Peru) to mention a few. Said

a prominent Christian in Niger, “When someone dies for their faith, everyone wakes up to their own worth afresh in the eyes of God, for Jesus himself came to die for them, and those who continue to die for the name testify to the true worth and joy of life itself.”

The Violent Incidents Database records killings and other categories of violence against religious groups, but it must be remembered that the nature and context of these incidents varies greatly. Even though we may qualify all religious people killed as “martyrs”, we recommend caution with their interpretation.

The Violent Incidents Database documents killings and various forms of violence targeting religious groups, yet it’s crucial to acknowledge the considerable variation in the nature and context of these incidents. While we may broadly categorize all religious individuals killed as “martyrs,” it is advisable to approach their interpretation with caution. The motivations and implications can differ significantly and acts of violence against religious groups can occur in various socio-political contexts. For example, some incidents might involve targeted violence against religious individuals due to personal disputes rather than systemic religious persecution. Understanding the broader context is crucial for accurate interpretation.

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