

## Heightened concerns by Christians in turbulent Middle East



The latest developments in the strife-plagued Middle East have generated intense concern by the region's remaining Christian communities, which for decades have faced official persecution and targeting by Muslim fundamentalists and armed insurgents. Heightened concern comes in the wake of the killing of top Iranian general Qasem Soleimani in a targeted US drone strike on Jan. 3 at Baghdad airport. Christian clerics and hierarchs have expressed concerns that persecution against their flock will intensify, especially in theocratic Iran, where the expression of faith in Jesus Christ and outward signs of Christianity entail significant risks. Iran, a predominately Shiite Muslim country, is in an unenviable ninth place on a list of the most dangerous countries for Christians worldwide, according to the organization [open.doorsusa](http://open.doorsusa.com).

An estimated 800,000 Christians live in the ancient land, known for millennia as Persia, essentially a small minority in a country of 82 million. Official and unofficial persecution against Christians in Iran has been well-documented since 1979, with attacks by extremists not uncommon.

Moreover, the act of apostasy for a Muslim in Iran can be punishable by death, or with a long prison sentence as "...crime against national security".

Further to the east, as of Feb. 1, religious groups in the People's Republic of China will have to adhere to new and stricter state regulations, with each religious service to necessitate state approval.