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## Algerian government allows three churches to re-open in June, but now closes another



*The keyhole of a closed down church sealed with wax in Riki. (Photo: World Watch Monitor)*

In Algeria, the relief of the Protestant minority at the recent re-opening of three churches a month ago has been cut short, after another church was closed last week.

On Wednesday (11 July), the building used by a Protestant church in the small town of Riki (8km from Akbou), in the north-east province of Bejaia was sealed off by police, on the grounds that it does not comply with the 2006 ordinance governing non-Muslim worship.

Churches and individual Christians in Algeria have faced increased harassment in recent months, raising concerns that these pressures signal a “coordinated campaign of intensified action against churches by the governing authorities”, according to Christian advocacy group Middle East Concern.

Since November 2017, [six churches and a day nursery have been closed down](#), as World Watch Monitor has reported. A number of other churches have also received notifications to close down immediately.

However, a month ago, three of the churches – in Oran city, Ain Turk (30km west of Oran), and El Ayaida (35km east of Oran) – were told they could reopen.

The three others remain closed: ones in Ait-Mellikeche (Bejaia province) and Maatkas (Tizi Ouzou province) were [ordered to close](#) on 26 May, while in March, the village church in Azagher, also near Akbou, was [forced to stop all activities](#).

So, in total, four churches are now closed.

Esaid Benamara, pastor of the Riki church, told World Watch Monitor that the decision is “purely and simply unjustified” because the authorities are aware of its existence since 11 August 2017.

The church applied to join the umbrella organization, the Protestant Church of Algeria (l'Église Protestante d'Algérie, EPA) in September 2017. However, given the current pressure, any new EPA membership has been frozen. This has forced the church in Riki to operate without an official authorization, pending its regularization.

EPA had been officially recognised by the government since 1974. But in 2012 new laws meant that it had to re-register.

Despite meeting all legal requirements and applying for re-registration in 2013, the EPA is yet to receive a response, meaning, technically, it lacks official legal status.

[In May, three EPA leaders were in the UK to ask that its leaders request the Algerian government to stop its current crackdown on its Christian minority.](#)

The pastors want to ensure that Christians are provided for under Algerian law, that the laws are respected and implemented and that Algeria fulfils its commitment to freedom of religion or belief as stated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

On Sunday, the UK's new Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Lord Ahmad, told the BBC that on his recent visit to Algeria, its Minister of Religious Affairs had told him about the re-opening of the three churches 'after the FCO minister Alistair Burt had raised the issue in a constructive and collaborative manner'. But Ahmad re-iterated that 'it's not just about opening churches, it's also about ensuring safety & security for the congregations.' The pastors are lobbying for the de-regulation of places of worship, official recognition for the EPA, an end to anti-proselytism laws, and freedom to import Christian materials.

The delegation started its tour in the USA with officials from the Vice-President's office.

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## **Algerian 'happy to be free at last' after jail sentence and fine for carrying Christian items**

World Watch Monitor (10.07.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2JcfXxG> -An Algerian Christian given a jail sentence and a fine for carrying a Bible and other Christian items has been acquitted.



*Idir Hamdad (Photo: World Watch Monitor)*

Idir Hamdad, 29, had been convicted in absentia on 28 September 2017 (though he only learned about this five months later) and given the maximum sentence of six months in prison, as well as a fine of 20,000 DA (roughly \$175).

On 3 May 2018, a court in Dar-El-Beida, an eastern district of the capital Algiers, overturned the prison sentence but upheld the fine for "importing unlicensed goods".

Hammad, who is involved in children ministry with the *Église Protestante du Plein Évangile* (The Full Gospel Protestant Church, also known by its French acronym EPPETO) in the eastern city of Tizi Ouzou, was first arrested in April 2016 as he returned home from attending a workshop abroad.

He was detained at the airport in Algiers, the capital, and subjected to lengthy police interrogation, as [World Watch Monitor reported](#).

Hammad was accused of carrying in his bag a few gift items with Christian inscriptions – crucifixes, keyrings and scarves.

But on Monday, 9 July 2018, the court dropped the charges against him. (Though on 4 July, he had been informed by the court that the prosecutor had appealed, asking for a harsher sentence.)

In its verdict, the court in Dar-El-Beida found that Hammad was prosecuted "simply because he converted to Christianity, and what he was carrying was only gifts".

Therefore the court pronounced his "total acquittal" and asked the public treasury to pay charges and costs related to the prosecution.

"I am happy to be free at last," Hammad told World Watch Monitor. "I no longer have to travel all the way to Algiers, about 200km, to present myself before the judge and to answer false and unjustified accusations."

Salah Chalah, the pastor of the Full Gospel Church in Tizi Ouzou, welcomed the verdict, saying it was the result of "the mobilisation of our friends and brothers through their prayers and diplomatic pressure".

"However, this doesn't mean that all our problems are resolved," said Chalah, who is also the Vice-President of the Protestant Church of Algeria (EPA). "Hence it's important to remain vigilant until the Church in Algeria can get its full registration and becomes a social reality with which the authorities must contend."

Churches and individual Christians in Algeria have faced increased harassment in recent months, raising concerns that these pressures signal a "coordinated campaign of intensified action against churches by the governing authorities", according to Christian advocacy group Middle East Concern.

In March, two Christians were each fined 100,000 dinar (US\$900) by a court in Tialet, about 300 kilometres southwest of Algiers, for carrying over 50 Bibles in their car. Their case dated back to March 2015, but was revived almost three years later.

Previously, on 19 December 2017, three other Christians were arrested in Chlef, 200km northwest of Algiers, for carrying Christian literature. They were taken to the police station, where they were investigated at length.

[Six churches and a day nursery were also closed down](#) in recent months, as World Watch Monitor reported. The most recent closures were on 26 May, when churches in Ait-Mellikeche (Bejaia province) and Maatkas (Tizi Ouzou province) were [ordered to close](#). In

March, the village church in Azagher, near the town of Akbou (Bejaia province), was [forced to stop all activities](#). A number of other churches have also received notifications to close down immediately.

The authorities have accused them of operating without permission, despite their affiliation with the legally recognised EPA, the main umbrella of Protestant churches in Algeria.

But three churches closed down by authorities in the northern province of Oran were recently told they could reopen. The three churches, located in Oran city, Ain Turk (30km west of Oran), and El Ayaida (35km east of Oran), were closed between November 2017 and February 2018.

[On 10 June, two of the three churches were allowed to reopen](#) following a notification issued by the governor of Oran province. The one in El Ayaida was reopened ten days later, on 20 June.

The three churches in Ait-Mellikeche, Maatkas and Azagher are still closed.

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## **Algerian pastor 'amazed' as three churches reopened**

World Watch Monitor (13.06.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2LNMYBT> - Three churches recently closed down by authorities in Algeria's northern province of Oran were permitted to re-open on Sunday, 10 June.

The three churches, located in Oran city, Ain Turk (30km west of Oran), and El Ayaida (35km east of Oran), were closed between November 2017 and February 2018.

On Sunday, the three churches were allowed to re-open following a notification issued by the governor of Oran province.

Rachid Seghir, who is the pastor at the main church of Oran city, told World Watch Monitor about the moment he received the notification.

"It was about 1pm when I got a call asking me to get to the police station as soon as possible, without giving further details," he recalled.

"I first informed some church members, before heading to the police station which is about 300 metres away from the church in Oran."

At the police station, Pastor Seghir was handed a notification to sign.

"It was hard to believe, as I was not expecting such a positive surprise!" said Pastor Seghir, who could barely hide his emotions. "Honestly, I have not understood anything that happened: I had read the notification and understood it correctly, but I remained amazed. 'Maybe it's just a trap,' I thought."

The pastor then left the police station and went directly to the church to share the news with some church members, as he continued to reflect on the event.

Recalling how events had unfolded since November last year, the pastor said: "First we were notified that we have to regularise our situation according to the safety regulations, or we will have to close our premises in three months – something which was impossible

for us. Then, one month later they came and sealed off the doors of the church. And now they are notifying us that we can reopen and carry out our services in peace.”

Just 45 minutes after he was first called to the police station, three officers in uniform came and removed the seals from the church’s main door, without making any comment.

In their notification, the local authorities also did not provide any reasons justifying their change of stance.

The document only stipulated “the place of worship belonging to the Protestant church located at Abane Ramdane street will be re-opened”, and that state services, including the police, “will work towards the implementation of this decision”.

Later, Pastor Seghir received two other notifications regarding the churches in Ain Turk and El Ayaida.

“The procedure was identical to the first one,” he explained. “And it was such a surprise for me, as well as for all our brothers and sisters in Christ. We were asking ourselves the same question: ‘Should we trust them?’”

“We are very pleased to be able to resume our activities without fear of new threats. We hope that all churches can be regularised and able to work in peace and freedom. Such a thing can only be beneficial to the image of the country,” he added.

L’Eglise Protestante d’Algerie, the umbrella organisation linking 45 Protestant churches in Algeria (EPA), has welcomed the decision to reopen the three churches.

In a statement issued yesterday (12 June), the EPA expressed its gratitude to “all those who, in one way or another, through their support, have made this happy event possible”.

However, the EPA decried the initial decision to close the churches, saying: “These three churches have been arbitrarily closed down by the authorities for several months, having prevented their members from worshiping God freely, and this is in clear disregard of the Algerian Constitution and human rights.”

The grouping called on its supporters “to maintain the pressure, until all decisions to close places of worship in Bejaia and Tizi Ouzou are lifted”.

In all, six churches and a day nursery had been closed since November. The most recent closures were on 26 May, when churches in Ait-Mellikeche (Bejaia province) and Maatkas (Tizi Ouzou province) were ordered to close. In March, the village church in Azagher, near the town of Akbou (Bejaia province), was forced to stop all activities. A number of other churches have also received notifications to close down immediately.

The three churches in Ait-Mellikeche, Maatkas and Azagher are still closed.

The government accused them of not complying with safety regulations and of operating without permission. But the EPA denied the accusations, stating that the government is simply implementing the 2006 law of regulating non-Muslim worship, which stipulates that permission must be obtained before using a building for non-Muslim worship, and that such worship can only be conducted in buildings which have been specifically designated for that purpose.

But in practice, the authorities have failed to respond to almost all applications from churches for places of worship, including churches affiliated to the EPA, which was



officially recognised by the government from 1974 until 2012, when new laws meant it had to re-register.

Despite meeting all the legal requirements and applying for re-registration in 2013, the EPA is yet to receive an official government response, meaning, technically, it lacks official legal status.

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## **Three Algerian churches allowed to reopen after protest campaign**

Barnabas fund (12.06.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2JK4whF> - Three Algerian churches, which had been closed by officials in the north-western district of Oran, have been allowed to reopen.

Two churches, L'Oratoire in Oran city centre, and a village church in Layayda, were closed in February, after authorities claimed they did not have state approval. A third church in Ain Turk has been closed since November over claims its bookshop had been used to "illegally print gospels and publications intended for evangelism".

The Algerian Protestant Churches Association, which has been campaigning against the closures, said the governor of Oran signed off on their reopening on 11 June 2018. "This is a reopening without conditions. Praise the Lord," said a Barnabas contact. "We are grateful for your unwavering support in prayer."

The association, which represents 45 churches, spoke out about an apparent increase in discrimination against Christians this year, after Algerian authorities launched a committee to carry out "safety inspections" of churches.

Algeria's Ministry of Religious Affairs claimed the churches were sealed off because they did not have approval and therefore did not "meet standards required of a place of worship." Claims church representatives vehemently denied.

This week, security services were removing the seals and handing the churches back over to their leaders and the local Christian community.

The number of Algerian Christians is estimated to be in the high tens of thousands. Christians are free to worship in Algeria, but church buildings must have official recognition, which can be difficult to obtain. Since November 2017, Christians have faced increasing persecution from the authorities, including the closure of their churches, police searches, and prosecutions for carrying Bibles or Christian materials.

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## **Two more Protestant churches closed down by government**

World Watch Monitor (29.05.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2IYNDUj> - The authorities in Algeria have closed down two more Protestant churches, amidst growing pressure on the country's Christian minority.

Over the past weekend, police sealed off two churches in the north-eastern province of Kabylie, where much of the growth in the Church is happening.

One church is in Ait-Mellikeche, a district of Tazmalt, in the Bejaia region (200km east of Algiers, the capital). It was established in 2005, and more than 200 attended its weekly service. It affiliated to the main umbrella organization for Protestant churches, Eglises Protestantes d'Algerie (EPA), in 2007.

The notice to close the church was unexpected, as one of its leaders – who wants to remain anonymous – told World Watch Monitor:

“The officers came in on Friday morning. They simply sealed off the main entrance without a prior notice, as was the case before with other EPA-affiliated churches.”

Moreover there is no notification explaining the reasons behind the closure.

Yesterday (28 May), some leaders of the church went to police in Bejaia in an attempt to understand the authorities' motives and to try to get them to lift the closure measure.

But “We were sent back empty-handed” one told WWM.

“The police told us to send a request to the Prefet of Bejaia, the only one who can do something since he was the one who ordered the closure”.

The other church to be closed this past weekend is in Maatkas town, 20 km from the main city of Tizi-Ouzou, 100km east of Algiers. Again, the order came from the Prefect, this time of Tizi-Ouzou.

The church of Maatkas is a nascent community, which gathers sixty members for its weekly service. It's not yet affiliated to the EPA.

One of its leaders, again on condition of anonymity, told World Watch Monitor that the closure was not justified.

He said he got a call from a police officer saying: “I'm calling to inform you that we have received an order to close your church”.

On Saturday morning, a group of police officers sealed off the main entrance of the building. They also ordered the church leaders not to open until further notice.

The Algerian government has been criticised for discrimination against the country's Christian minority. Churches and individual Christians have faced increased restrictions in recent months, raising concerns that these pressures signal a “coordinated campaign of intensified action against churches by the governing authorities”, according to Christian advocacy group Middle East Concern.

In addition to church closures, individual Christians have faced legal harassments in recent months, as [WWM has reported](#).

On 18 May, [EPA called on the Algerian government to lift its measure for closing down churches](#), and to give equal treatment to the Christian minority, as stated by the constitution:

“As full citizens, we call on the highest authorities in the country to ensure that all the fundamental rights of the citizen are protected, regardless of their religious affiliation.”

EPA had been officially recognised by the government since 1974. But in 2012, new laws meant that it had to re-register. Despite meeting all the legal requirements and applying for re-registration in 2013, the EPA is yet to receive an official government response, meaning, technically, it lacks official legal status.



Last month, three pastors from Algeria visited the USA, UK and France to ask that their leaders lobby the Algerian government to stop its current crackdown.

Mustafa Krim, Ali Khidri and Youssef Ourahmane, representing EPA, wanted to ensure that Christians are provided for under Algerian law, that the laws are respected and implemented and that Algeria fulfils its commitment to freedom of religion or belief as stated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

They are lobbying for the de-regulation of places of worship, official recognition for the EPA, an end to anti-proselytism laws, and freedom to import Christian materials.

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## **Protestant churches in Algeria call on government to treat them fairly**

World Watch Monitor (23.05.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2x8uvxx> - The organisation linking 45 Protestant churches in Algeria, l'Eglise Protestante d'Algérie (EPA), has called on the Algerian government to lift its measure for closing down churches, and to give equal treatment under the Maghreb country's constitution.

"As full citizens, we call on the highest authorities in the country to ensure that all the fundamental rights of the citizen are protected, regardless of their religious affiliation", said EPA, in a statement on 18 May.

Since November, four churches have been closed down: three churches – all affiliated to EPA – in Oran and one in Akbou.

A number of other churches have received notifications to close down immediately.

EPA had been officially recognised by the government since 1974. But in 2012 new laws meant that it had to re-register. Despite meeting all the legal requirements and applying for re-registration in 2013, the EPA is yet to receive a response, meaning, technically, it lacks official legal status.

EPA denounced this as an "injustice" against its communities. It said "the churches located in Ain-Turk, Layaida, and Oran-city, were sealed off as directed by the Prefet of Oran, respectively on 17 November 2017 and on 27 February 2018, at the same time as two women's association – thanks to the mobilization of civil society – have been authorized to re-open their doors. But strangely not the Christian religious associations" in the statement signed by the President of EPA, pastor Mahmoud Haddad.

The Algerian government has been criticised for discrimination against the country's Christian minority. Churches and individual Christians have faced increased restrictions in recent months, raising concerns that these pressures signal a "coordinated campaign of intensified action against churches by the governing authorities", according to Christian advocacy group [Middle East Concern](#).

EPA's statement coincided with the celebration of the UN International Day of Living Together' (on 16 May) an initiative launched by NGOs, including the Alawiyya Sufi Association, led by Algerian-born [Sheikh Khaled Bentounes](#), involved in interfaith dialogue.

That initiative is also supported by Algerian authorities. EPA recalled that President Abdulaziz Bouteflika has recently insisted on the need for Algerians to live together peacefully, without 'exclusiveness' or 'exclusion'.

Still, some "Algerians, because of their Christian faith, continue to be victims of bullying and prosecution for the mere fact of being in possession of a Bible", points out EPA.

On 16 May, a court in Tiaret, about 300 kilometres southwest of the capital, Algiers, upheld a verdict against a church leader for transporting Bibles.

Noureddine Belabbes, 30, was found guilty of proselytising and fined 100,000 Algerian dinars (c. US\$ 860) and legal expenses.

His case goes back to March 2015, when, while travelling with another Christian, his car was pulled over by the police, as [WWM reported](#).

They were then arrested and their case was referred to a prosecutor. In December 2017, they were each sentenced to two years in prison and a 50,000 dinar fine (c. \$450).

But at their appeal hearing on 8 March, the judge overturned the jail sentences, instead giving them suspended sentences of three months each. However, their fines were doubled.

On Monday (18 May), as this decision was again confirmed, Noureddine said he will not again appeal the decision. "I am tired. The police keep monitoring all our movements. I do not want to inflict more pain on my family than that; I have chosen to pay the fine".

On 3 May, a court in Dar-El-Beida, an eastern district of the capital Algiers, overturned a prison sentence, but upheld a fine, against [another Christian convicted for carrying a Bible](#) and other Christian items.

Idir Hamdad, 29, had been convicted in absentia on 28 September 2017 (though he only learned about this five months later) and given the maximum sentence of six months in prison, as well as a fine of 20,000 dinars (roughly \$175).

His case dates back to April 2016, when he was arrested at the airport following a complaint by the customs office.

World Watch Monitor understands that the men were convicted under Algeria's 2006 law regulating non-Muslim worship, which forbids the printing, storing and distribution of materials intended to "shake the faith" of a Muslim.

Last month, three pastors from Algeria were in the UK to ask that its leaders lobby the Algerian government to stop its current crackdown on its Christian minority.

Mustafa Krim, Ali Khidri and Youssef Ourahmane, representing EPA, wanted to ensure that Christians are provided for under Algerian law, that the laws are respected and implemented and that Algeria fulfils its commitment to freedom of religion or belief as stated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

They met government ministers and parliamentarians in Westminster before continuing on to France and to speak to senior EU officials.

The pastors are lobbying for the de-regulation of places of worship, official recognition for the EPA, an end to anti-proselytism laws, and freedom to import Christian materials.

The delegation started its tour in the USA where they met officials from the Vice-President's office.

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## **Conviction, sentencing of Christian in Algeria 'ridiculous,' attorney says**

Morning Star News (04.05.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2KM082D> - A court in Algeria yesterday withdrew a six-month prison sentence but upheld a fine on a convert from Islam for carrying Christian literature and some crucifix-shaped keychains into the country, sources said.

Idir Hamdad was fined 20,000 Algerian dinars (US\$172) plus customs expenses after a judge at the court in Dar el Beida, on the outskirts of Algiers, ruled he was guilty of importing unauthorized items without a license, his attorney said. Notice of a six-month prison sentence and fine had been delivered to his home on March 4 stating that he had been convicted and sentenced en absentia on Sept. 28, 2017, the lawyer said.

"To condemn a Christian...with about 20 keychains, including four or five bearing crucifixes, and six scarves, to be sentenced by the justice of our Algeria following a seizure at customs, is ridiculous in view of Article 365 of the Code of Customs," attorney Sadek Nadjib told Morning Star News, adding that carrying the items did not violate Algerian customs law.

Hamdad's attorney, a Muslim, said he had expected complete acquittal since there was no basis for the charges.

Hamdad and witnesses who attended a court hearing on April 12 said the judge, a woman without head covering (hijab), appeared very surprised at how little the facts of the case supported the charges. Hence he and his defense attorney were surprised when the charges were not thrown out entirely yesterday, they said.

### ***Pressure to Renounce Christ***

Customs officials had stopped Hamdad, a 29-year-old convert who put his faith in Christ in 2002, upon his arrival to Houari Boumediene Airport in Algiers from Jordan on April 29, 2016; the items in question had been donated to him by a church in Amman, Jordan.

"After they opened my luggage, suddenly I found myself surrounded by multitudes of police and customs officers," Hamdad told Morning Star News. "The customs officer began to gesticulate in all directions to attract attention. And I, still in astonishment, still did not understand what was happening to me."

One after another, sometimes at the same time, the officials peppered him with questions, he said.

"It fell on me like a rain: 'Are you a Christian? Where do you come from? Who gave you these objects? And those Christian books, who gave them to you? Who is it for?'" he said.

Two police officers grabbed him and forced him to follow them out of the international terminal to the national terminal, where they held him for eight hours without food or water, he said.

"In this quarantine, the representatives of the law did not fail to abuse their authority to insult me," he said. "They had repeatedly tried to persuade me to renounce my Christian faith and return to Islam: 'If you renounce now your Christianity and you do the chahada [Islamic conversion creed], we will let you leave right away, and there will be no prosecution against you.'"

At the end of this interrogation, they confiscated the items and released Hamdad early in the evening, he said.

Pastor Salah Chalah, head of Protestant Church of the Full Gospel of Tizi-Ouzou (EPPETO), saw the influence of Algeria's controversial Law 03/2006, commonly known as Law 06/03, in the case. The 2006 law stipulates prison terms of up to five years for anyone who uses any means to "intended to undermine the faith of a Muslim."

"We can see again the sword of Damocles [Law 06/03] come down on us in this verdict today," he told Morning Star News. "We must work for its amendment by all possible legal means that the Algerian law offers us, while hoping for the goodwill of the authorities of our country as well as common sense. The amendment of this law will contribute to the emancipation and the realization of the individual freedoms enshrined by the Algerian constitution."

Another Christian, Nourredine Belabed, was sentenced on March 8 to a fine of 100,000 dinars (US\$868) and a suspended three-month prison sentence under the 06/03 law and awaits appeal in Tiaret.

Algeria ranked 42nd on Christian support organization Open Doors' 2018 World Watch List of the countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian.

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## **Church-run nursery ordered to close**

World Watch Monitor (24.04.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2KpLTR5> - Authorities in Algeria's north-eastern city of Tizi-Ouzou, in the Kabylie region, have closed down a day-care centre for Christian children.

The Early Childhood Home was established more than 10 years ago by Église Protestante du Plein Évangile (The Full Gospel Protestant Church), also known by its French acronym EPPETO.

EPPETO is the biggest church in Algeria. It welcomes 1,200 members for its weekly services and oversees 15 other smaller churches in the region.

On 17 April, the pastor of the church was summoned to the Central Police Station, where he was given a notification (issued by the Governor of Tizi-Ouzou region) to seal the door leading to the care centre, which is located on the premises of his church.

The authorities accused Pastor Salah Chalah of "unlawfully" running the centre, which has been ordered to remain closed "until the situation is administratively settled".

This came after the centre was initially asked to close three weeks beforehand, on 25 March, following a visit by the Directorate of Social Action (DAS), accompanied by security forces.

Around 20 children, aged between one and five, used to attend the centre, under the supervision of four teachers, who are also members of EPPETO.

Pastor Chalah has expressed his dismay at the decision, telling World Watch Monitor the centre had no commercial purposes.

"Since it was established 14 years ago, the care centre has never been threatened by authorities, though the church premises have been inspected on a regular basis by the intelligence agency," he said.

"The centre only exists to teach Christian values to our children in their early childhood, because in neighbouring nurseries, the teaching of the Quran and Islamic values form an integral part of the official curriculum."

[Islamic values are taught in all schools](#) from early childhood in Algeria, including the recourse to Arabic as the main language of teaching in all subjects, which used to be taught in French.

In a 2016 article published by the French Magazine [Le Monde](#), a group of Algerian scholars pointed out the influence of Salafist and extremist groups in imposing Arabic as the sole language of instruction in public schools.

"Those who think that the Arabic language is a sacred language, or even the sacred language by excellence, they are nothing less than followers of foolishness," wrote the scholars.

They said this has led to ignorance among children, with far-reaching consequences.

### **Administrative hassles**

This is not the first time that a day-care centre for Christian children has been targeted by local authorities in Tizi-Ouzou.

Exactly one year ago, in April 2017, [the authorities refused to grant a permit](#) to set up a childcare facility to a Christian woman, despite her five years' experience in childcare management.

The applicant had met all the conditions required by law, and set up a facility which could accommodate up to 80 children.

But her application was declined, without explanation. Many believe that the authorities rejected the application on religious ground, as she was known to be a Christian.

The woman took legal action in an attempt to revert the decision and demand compensation for her losses (estimated at equivalent to \$20,000). The case is still pending.

### **Background**

Algeria's churches have faced growing pressure in recent months. Since November four churches have been closed down: three in Oran and one in Akbou, as [World Watch Monitor reported](#).

A number of other churches, including EPPETO, have received notifications to close down immediately.

The authorities have accused them of operating without permission, despite their affiliation with the legally recognised EPA (Église Protestant d'Algeria), the main umbrella of Protestant churches in Algeria.

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## Algeria closes fourth church in four months



*Interior of a church in Tizi Ouzou (photo credit: World Watch Monitor)*

By Abdelaziz Bouteflika

World Watch Monitor (22.03.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2I43trM> - Another church has been closed down in northern Algeria, as pressure against Christians intensifies in the Maghreb country.

The village church in Azagher, near the town of Akbou, was forced to stop all activities on 2 March. The church had been running for over six years.

Two weeks earlier, on 18 February, the leaders of the church had received a notification that they must close their church within 15 days.

The notification stated that the church building, "which was originally intended for the poultry business", did not meet the standards required by law in order to host a public meeting. It pointed to the lack of a second exit or fire extinguisher.

It also said the fact the church had a foreign pastor (he is from the Democratic Republic of the Congo) contradicted a 2008 law "concerning the conditions of entry of foreigners into Algerian territory and their residence, as well as their movements".



The church is the fourth forced to close in the past four months. The three others were in or around the town of Oran, 600km west of Akbou. Unlike the church in Azagher, the three other churches were all affiliated to the EPA, Algeria's main Protestant-church body, officially recognised by the government since 1974.

Of the EPA's 45 churches, 25 have received notifications to comply with safety standards in the past few months.

Advocacy group Middle East Concern said earlier this year that the closures were part of a "coordinated campaign of intensified action against churches by the governing authorities".

But the Algerian Minister of Religious Affairs denied discriminating against the country's Christian minority. Mohamed Aissa told Ennahar TV earlier this month that the churches "did not meet the standards required of a place of worship".

"The institutions that were closed have been closed down because they were built without complying with the regulations of the Republic," he said, adding that if a building lacks emergency exits, it must be closed, "even if it is a mosque".

"When a place of worship is built without any notice showing it's a place of worship, which may enable the state to protect it, this place must be closed," he added.

In response, a spokesperson from the EPA told World Watch Monitor "the government is simply implementing the 2006 law of regulating non-Muslim worship. This law is a Sword of Damocles suspended above the churches. It is the legal instrument that the government uses to silence the Church. The purpose of this law is precisely to curb the activities of churches and to control them".

The law stipulates that permission must be obtained before using a building for non-Muslim worship, and that such worship can only be conducted in buildings which have been specifically designated for that purpose.

But in practice, the authorities have failed to respond to almost all applications from churches for places of worship, including churches affiliated with the state-approved EPA.

In view of the authorities' failure to respond to applications, it has become standard practice for churches to rent premises and inform the local authorities that they have done so.

A local church leader, who wanted to remain anonymous, told World Watch Monitor the government "does absolutely nothing to help Christian communities to afford an adequate place of worship". He added that it is almost impossible for Christian communities to buy their own plot of land because it is so expensive.

As a result, all Protestant churches, affiliated with the EPA or not, are forced to rent premises, while those who rent their properties to a church also face threats and intimidation from the authorities, making it even more difficult for Christian communities to find a place to meet.



## Algeria government criticised over heavy fines for transporting Bibles



(photo credit: World Watch Monitor)

World Watch Monitor (16.03.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2GHbmUE> - The Algerian government has once again been criticised for alleged discrimination against the country's Christian minority, this time by handing large fines to two brothers for carrying over 50 Bibles in their car.

Prosecutors claimed the Bibles were to be used for proselytism, though the brothers said they were for church use only.

The Protestant Church of Algeria (known by its French acronym, EPA) issued a statement to the press denouncing the "intimidation" of Nouredine and Belabbes Khalil. This follows the recent closure of several of the denomination's churches.

The EPA is a federation of 45 Protestant churches, mostly in Algeria's northern coastal region, officially recognised by the government in 1974.

The two men were each fined 100,000 dinar (US\$900) on 8 March by a court in Tiaret, about 300 kilometres southwest of the capital, Algiers.

The brothers' case goes back to March 2015, when their car was pulled over by the police. They were arrested for carrying 56 Bibles, and interrogated about where the books came from and what they were going to do with them.

They said the Bibles were for their church community, which Nouredine leads, so the police released them and returned the books. However, the case was later referred to a prosecutor and the legal action against them commenced.

In December 2017, they were each sentenced to two years in prison and a 50,000-dinar fine (\$450). But at their appeal hearing on 8 March, the judge overturned the jail sentences, instead giving them suspended sentences of three months each. However, their fines were doubled.

World Watch Monitor understands that the men were convicted under Algeria's 2006 law regulating non-Muslim worship, which forbids the printing, storing and distribution of materials intended to "shake the faith" of a Muslim.

There have been several similar cases in recent years that have been frozen. There are concerns that these cases will now be revived.

The EPA has assigned a group of lawyers to help the two men make a further appeal against the 8 March verdict.

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## **Sentencing of pastor adds to uptick in persecution in Algeria**



*(Photo credit: Wikipedia)*

### **Rights advocates fear coordinated campaign against Christianity**

Morning Star News (12.03.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2GvN4gg> - In the latest of a rash of persecution incidents in Algeria, a judge on Thursday (March 8) sentenced a pastor to a fine and a suspended prison sentence under a law that prohibits causing Muslims to doubt their religion, sources said.

In Frenda, Tiaret Province, pastor Nordine B. was ordered to pay a fine of 100,000 dinars (US\$868) and received a three-month suspended prison sentence, the pastor confirmed to Morning Star News in an email.

Prosecutors had sought a six-month prison sentence and a fine of 50,000 dinars (US\$434), another Algerian pastor confirmed to Morning Star News in an email. His name is withheld for security reasons.

"The pastor of the church of Tiaret was convicted of proselytism," the pastor said. "He will appeal, so the verdict is not final."

Algerian News outlet *Algerie Part* last week reported a Christian leader as saying the charge against Pastor Nordine was ridiculous, as the only evidence police presented was the fact that he was carrying Christian books.

The charge was based on Algeria's controversial Law 03/2006, commonly known as Law 06/03, according to *Algerie Part*. The prosecutor's requested prison sentence and fine, like the judge's actual prison sentence and fine, was less than that stipulated by the 2006 law, which calls for a prison term of two to five years and a fine of 500,000 to 1 million dinars (US\$4,343 to US\$8,687) for anyone who "incites, constrains, or utilizes means of seduction tending to convert a Muslim to another religion, or using for this purpose the institutions of education, health, social, cultural, or educational institutions, or other establishment, or financial advantage; or makes, stores or distributes printed documents or films or other audiovisual medium or means intended to undermine the faith of a Muslim."

Christian leaders say the charge was unconstitutional, citing the Algerian constitution's Article 42, which guarantees freedom of belief, opinion and worship.

"The situation for Christians here is very critical," the unnamed pastor in Algeria told Morning Star News by email. "We ask, why this relentlessness of the authorities on us?"

### ***Rash of Persecution***

The case follows several instances of harassment of churches and Christians in the past three months that has raised concerns of a government campaign against Christianity, according to advocacy group Middle East Concern (MEC).

In Oran Province in northwest Algeria, the unnamed church pastor told Morning Star News that three churches have been closed. On the pretext that they didn't have state approval, police sealed shut a church in Oran city and a church in nearby El Ayaida on Feb. 27, he said, adding that another area church in Ain el-Turk was closed on Nov. 9.

"Officials gave us a period of three months to regularize our situation, but they did not respect this deadline," the pastor told Morning Star News. "The same day I received the forms to file to register as an association, the police were ordered to seal the two places of worship in Oran city center and El Ayaida."

Authorities later came to a site where members of the Oran city center church were worshipping and stopped the service, he said.

"We filed a letter of appeal at the level of provincial security services, and we informed them that the church registration file is ready," he said. "It is expected that the judge will give the order for a general meeting, but so far there has been no response."

A Christian-owned bookshop in Oran city also was forcibly closed in November, and police visited a church training center in Boudjemaa, in Kabylie Region, and stopped activities, MEC reported.

"The affected churches are all affiliated with the legally recognized Protestant Church of Algeria [l'Église Protestante d'Algérie, or EPA)," MEC reported. "EPA questions the motives behind the inspection visits and believes that the accusations leading to the church closures have been unfounded."

The World Evangelical Alliance's Religious Liberty Commission said in a press statement that Algerian authorities in November formed a committee from various agencies to inspect churches for compliance with safety regulations, but that it is also questioning whether churches have permits for religious activities.

"The committee has accordingly ordered several churches, two Bible schools, and a Christian-owned bookshop to close down," the Feb. 26 statement read, adding that the restrictions have also led to an increase in arrests of Christians.

"We call on the government of Algeria to ensure that the religious freedom of Christians is safeguarded in accordance with international law," said Godfrey Yogarajah, deputy secretary general of the WEA. "We also call on the government, in keeping with the country's constitution, to take all steps necessary to guarantee the freedom of worship for all religious groups in the country."

### **Arrests**

In December three Christians from Tizi Ouzou were arrested in Chlef, 200 kilometers (124 miles) northwest of Algiers, where they were to meet colleagues at a café, MEC reported.

"Police entered the café, found they were in possession of Christian literature, and took them to the police station, where they were investigated at length by the national gendarmerie," MEC reported. "A local newspaper known for its hostility to Christians described the incident as a 'foiled evangelism attempt,' falsely accusing the Christians of working under the cover of humanitarian activities and of alluring young Muslims to convert by means of financial and travel inducements."

The three visitors were released but could face proselytism charges, MEC said. That same third week of December, two churches in Kabylie Region's Bejaia Province received a visit from officials from the municipality, the ministry of religious affairs, the fire brigade, the national gendarmerie and the intelligence department, according to MEC.

The officials told church leaders the visits were inspections for safety regulations. The two buildings are used by eight congregations.

In the southern Algerian town of Ouargla, another church received an order from the provincial governor to cease all religious activities following a building inspection on Dec. 14, MEC reported. Officials said the church lacked authorization to use the building for worship and failed to comply with safety requirements. They told church leaders to obtain permission from the ministry of religious affairs.

The officials said that worship activities at the church, which has been active for 10 years, can resume only three months after obtaining permission, according to MEC.

Algeria's population of 35.4 million people is more than 97 percent Muslim and .28 percent Christian.

## **Deportation**

In December Algeria also deported a French Christian without explanation. Louis Martinez of the French Reformed Church had left Algeria on a trip and was returning on Dec. 13 when authorities stopped him at the Oran airport and deported him, according to MEC.

Martinez and his wife had lived in Algeria for several years and had just been issued a new residency permit valid for 10 years, according to MEC.

Manager of a private French-language school, Martinez was known as a close friend of a local church.

"The authorities gave no reason for his deportation," MEC reported. "His wife was subsequently able to settle their family and business affairs in Algeria and has recently also left the country. Algerian church leaders note that this deportation is consistent with a wider pattern of denial of visas for church visitors, which seems to be part of a policy whereby the Algerian authorities are restricting the ability of Algerian churches to partner with outside entities."

Algeria ranked 42nd on Christian support organization Open Doors' 2018 World Watch List of the countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian.

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## **Algerian pastor decries church closure**

World Watch Monitor (05.03.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2tjyxkP> - The leader of a Protestant church in Algeria's north-western town of Aïn Turk (15km from Oran city) has denounced the closure of his church four months ago.

Youssef Ourahmane founded the House of Hope church more than 20 years ago – in 1997 – but on 9 November, 2017, the local authorities closed down the church, claiming it had been used to "illegally print Gospels and publications intended for evangelism".

The police notification also stated that the church didn't have state approval.

But Ourahmane, speaking on a video shared with World Watch Monitor, said the closure of the church was based on "false accusations".

"God has done an amazing work through this ministry," he said. "Unfortunately, the 'enemy' [the Devil] has not been happy. All these years he tried by all means to stop us, to slow us.

"But we believe that God is in control. He will not allow any hair to fall, without his will, from our head."

Ourahmane also called on fellow Christians around the world to pray for his church.

Two other churches – L'Oratoire (The Oratory) in Oran's city centre, and a village church in Layayda (about 40km from Oran) – were also sealed off by police last week.

The police notifications again stated that the churches didn't have state approval.



Since December, 25 out of the 45 churches affiliated to Algeria's main Protestant Church body – the Protestant Church of Algeria (known as EPA, its French acronym) – have been visited by a committee of officials from the Ministry of Religious Affairs, national gendarmerie, intelligence department and fire brigade.

The churches were informed that the visits were aimed at checking compliance with safety regulations, and they were given three months' notice.

They were also advised to seek permission from the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

On 21 February two churches (among the 25 which received notifications) in the city of Tizi Ouzou, in the eastern province of Kabylie, were asked "to cease all religious activities immediately".

EPA leaders called the closures "unjustifiable". They noted that all the affected churches are affiliated with the EPA, which has been officially recognised by the government since 1974.

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## **Two more churches closed, others threatened**

World Watch Monitor (01.03.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2Fo4ddg> - Local authorities in Algeria's north-western city of Oran have closed two more churches amidst growing pressure on Christians in the Maghreb country.

The two churches – L'Oratoire (The Oratory) in Oran's city centre, and a village church in Layayda (about 40km from Oran) – were sealed off by police on Tuesday, 27 February.

The police notification stated that the churches didn't have state approval. The decision is not the first of its kind in Oran.

On 9 November 2017, another church in the town of Aïn Turk (15km from Oran) was also closed. The authorities claimed the church had been used to "illegally print Gospels and publications intended for evangelism".

Since December, 25 out of the 45 churches affiliated to the main Protestant Church body in Algeria – the Protestant Church of Algeria (known as EPA, its French acronym) – have been visited by a committee of officials from the Ministry of Religious Affairs, national gendarmerie, intelligence department and fire brigade.

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EPA leaders called the closures "unjustifiable". They noted that all the affected churches are affiliated with the EPA, which has been officially recognised by the government since 1974.

On Saturday 24 February the EPA called for a week of prayer and fasting for the nation. In light of the increasing pressure, the World Evangelical Alliance has also called on the

Algerian government “to ensure that the religious freedom of Christians is safeguarded in accordance with international law”.

Godfrey Yogarajah, Deputy Secretary-General of the WEA and head of its Religious Liberty Commission, added: “We also call on the government, in keeping with the country’s constitution, to take all steps necessary to guarantee the freedom of worship for all religious groups in the country.”

### ***Growing pressure***

Other forms of restriction have been also reported in recent weeks in Algeria.

On 13 December 2017, a French Christian, resident in Oran for several years, was denied re-entry to the country.

Pastor Louis Martinez, in his sixties, is affiliated with the French Reformed Church. He and his wife had been running a private French-language school.

According to Christian advocacy group Middle East Concern, Pastor Martinez was stopped at Oran Airport and asked to submit his residency permit, which had been recently issued and was valid for ten years, and then informed he must leave Algeria.

The authorities gave no reason for his deportation, MEC said. His wife was subsequently able to settle their family and business affairs in Algeria and has recently also left the country.

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## **‘Intensified campaign’ against Algeria’s churches**





**The Cathedral of Algiers. (Photo: World Watch Monitor)**

World Watch Monitor (03.01.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2Eeci1u> - Churches and individual Christians in Algeria have faced increased restrictions in recent months, raising concerns that these pressures signal a “coordinated campaign of intensified action against churches by the governing authorities”, according to Christian advocacy group [Middle East Concern](#).

On 19 December, three Christians were arrested in Chlef, 200km north-west of the capital, Algiers. According to MEC, they were visiting from the north-eastern town of Tizi Ouzou and had arranged to meet a contact at a café.

“Police entered the café, found they were in possession of Christian literature, and took them to the police station, where they were investigated at length”, MEC said.

“A local newspaper, known for its hostility to Christians, described the incident as a ‘foiled evangelism attempt’, accusing the Christians of working under the cover of humanitarian activities and of alluring young Muslims to convert by means of financial and travel inducements.”

MEC said the three Christians were released but “may face charges of proselytism”.

During the same week, two churches in the province of Bejaia, in the north-eastern region of Kabylie, were reportedly visited by a committee of officials from the ministry of religious affairs, fire brigade, national gendarmerie and intelligence department.

"The churches were informed that the visits were to check compliance with safety regulations," Mec said. "The two buildings host meetings of eight church congregations in Bejaia. The result of the inspection is pending."

In Ouargla in the south of Algeria, another church, which has been active for ten years, reportedly "received an order from the provincial Governor to cease all religious activities" following a buildings inspection on 14 December.

"Leaders were accused of lacking authorisation to use the building as a place of worship, and of failing to comply with safety requirements," MEC said. "They were advised to seek permission from the ministry of religious affairs, and [told] that worship activities can only recommence three months after obtaining such permission."

Previously, in November, a church and Christian-owned bookshop in the north-western town of Aïn Turk, near Oran, were forcibly closed, as World Watch Monitor reported.

According to MEC, another church training centre in Boudjemaa, in the Kabylie region, was visited by the police and has since halted its operations. The leaders are to be investigated next month.

"The affected churches are all affiliated to the Protestant Church of Algeria [l'Église Protestante d'Algérie, or EPA], officially recognised in 1974," MEC reports. "The EPA questions the motives behind the inspection visits, and believes that the accusations leading to the church closures have been unfounded."

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