

Table of Contents

- ***Op-ed: Extreme violence, self-identification and religion***
 - ***Anti-Semitism is back, from the left, right and Islamist extremes. Why?***
 - ***Attacks by White Extremists are growing. So are their connections.***
 - ***Open Doors 2019 World Watch List debated at the House of Lords***
 - ***One in three Christians face persecution in Asia, report finds***
-

Op-ed: Extreme violence, self-identification and religion

By Willy Fautré, *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

The Ummah is torn apart by a theological war. Groups of proponents of a literalist reading of the Qu'ran, who have left their historical lands in the Arabic Peninsula to take power in other Muslim majority countries, do not hesitate to resort to extreme acts of violence and terrorism. The originally intra-Muslim theological competition has become a political and geo-political war in which most of the victims are Muslims.

To a certain extent, a similar situation existed in Christianity at the time of the Protestant Reformation. The theological conflict between Catholics and Protestants got highly politicized and geo-politicized and led to long wars and conflicts on the European continent. The victims were Christians.

It is in the name of Islam that jihadists wage their war on any battlefield in the world. They assert themselves as Muslims while most Muslims opposed to violence deny them this self-identification.

Ahmadis say they are Muslims, but in Pakistan laws criminalize this claim. Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons say they are Christians but mainline Christian Churches do not recognize them as Christians.

It is not the task of human rights organizations, political leaders, journalists or other observers to say who are true Muslims and who are not true Muslims. Self-identification is an internal issue for any group.

The claim that because jihadists resorting to extreme violence and perpetrating crimes against humanity claim to do it in the name of Islam, they should not be considered Muslims, is specious.

The Catholic Church in the past blessed crusades and wars, practiced torture against so-called heretics and Protestants referring to the Bible to justify their actions. Protestant iconoclasts in the past destroyed paintings and statues in Catholic churches and justified their actions with the Bible in their hands. Should those Christians be denied self-identification as Christians now with our 21st lens? Despite their use of violence, nobody has ever cast doubts on their self-identification.

Anti-Semitism is back, from the left, right and Islamist extremes. Why?

By Patrick Kingsley

The New York Times (04.04.2019) - <https://nyti.ms/2G5IF3I> - Swastikas daubed on a Jewish cemetery in France. An anti-Semitic political campaign by Hungary's far-right government. Labour lawmakers in Britain quitting their party and citing ingrained anti-Semitism. A Belgian carnival [float caricaturing Orthodox Jews](#) sitting on bags of money.

And that was just the past few months.

The accumulated incidents in Europe and the United States have highlighted how an ancient prejudice is surging in the 21st century in both familiar and mutant ways, fusing ideologies that otherwise would have little overlap.

The spike is taking place in a context of rising global economic uncertainty, an emphasis on race and national identity, and a deepening polarization between the political left and right in Europe and the United States over the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.

"There's an ideological pattern that is common," said Günther Jikeli, an expert on European anti-Semitism at Indiana University. "The world is seen as in a bad shape, and what hinders it becoming a better place are the Jews."

Anti-Semitism has become a section of today's political Venn diagram where the far right can intersect with parts of the far left, Europe's radical Islamist fringe, and even politicians from America's two main parties.

That confluence is new, experts say, as is the emergence of an Israeli government that has sidled up to far-right allies who praise Israel even as they peddle anti-Semitic prejudice at home.

"It creates a landscape that is very confusing and where things are more blurry than in the past," said Samuel Ghiles-Meilhac, an expert on Jewish history at the Institut d'Histoire du Temps Présent, a government-funded research group in France.

Polling suggests that anti-Semitic attitudes may be no more widespread than in the past, particularly in Western Europe, where Holocaust remembrance has become a ritual for most governments.

Despite this, bigots have seemingly become more brazen, creating a climate that has made anti-Semitism far more permissible and dangerous.

In recent decades, Western anti-Semitism has tended to trace the contours of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, spiking and ebbing in correlation with spasms of violence between the two sides. But since the 2014 war in Gaza, researchers say, anti-Semitic incidents have remained at high levels.

"And that's kind of worrying because it means it has become normal to act in anti-Semitic ways," Mr. Jikeli said.

Those include acts of violence. In 2018, France reported a 74 percent spike over the previous year in anti-Semitic incidents, with more than 500 incidents, including the [murder](#) of a Holocaust survivor in her own home. President Emmanuel Macron called it the worst level of anti-Semitism since World War II.

In Germany over the same period, violent anti-Semitic attacks — 62 of them — rose by 60 percent, while all anti-Semitic crimes rose almost 10 percent to 1,646, according to government statistics.

Around Europe, where the popularity of the far right has been boosted by economic uncertainty and fears over migration, almost 90 percent of Jews believe that anti-Semitism has increased in their country in the last five years, according to [surveys](#) by the European Union.

For decades after World War II and the Holocaust, anti-Semitism was mostly consigned to the political fringes, which is no longer the case. It is now more widely harnessed for political ends, experts say.

“Today, mainstream European and North American politicians, even presidents, premiers and prime ministers, don’t hesitate to flirt with or embrace overtly anti-Semitic messages and memes,” said David Nirenberg, dean of the Divinity School at the University of Chicago and an expert on Jewish history.

“This electoral utility of anti-Semitism feels new to me, newly flexible, and therefore newly dangerous,” Mr. Nirenberg added.

Far-right parties often portray Jews as a cosmopolitan threat to national identity, especially in regions where the stereotype has been used historically. In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orban has been able to present the Jewish billionaire George Soros as a secret instigator of Muslim immigration.

In Poland last month, a far-right newspaper sold inside the Parliament ran a front-page headline saying “How to spot a Jew,” alongside a condemnation of a historian who researches Polish complicity in the Holocaust.

On the far left, some politicians have associated Jews with the failings of capitalism and conspiracies about supposed control over the global economy. Those complaints are now heard on the fringes of the Yellow Vest movement in France.

President Trump himself embodies the contradictions of the moment. [Mr. Trump has openly courted white nationalists](#), saying they include “[some very fine people](#),” even as they marched in the style of the Ku Klux Klan, gave stiff-armed Nazi salutes and chanted slogans like “Jews will not replace us.”

During his campaign, he attacked Hillary Clinton with a Twitter post that included her image, a Jewish star, and a pile of money.

At the same time, the president has boasted close relations with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and offered full-throated support to Israel, including moving the United States Embassy to Jerusalem, even absent progress toward a settlement with the Palestinians.

That more strident support has now been greeted with more strident opposition, most obviously from Representative [Ilhan Omar](#) of Minnesota, one of the first two Muslim women elected to Congress.

She has been widely condemned for what critics called her peddling of anti-Semitic stereotypes — for which she publicly apologized. Ms. Omar also was criticized for what was widely interpreted as questioning American Jews' allegiance to the United States, and for remarks that some construed as referring to the undue influence of Jewish lobbies, interpretations she denies.

The use of similar tropes by members of the Labour Party in Britain has prompted several Labour lawmakers to resign in protest. They are also common talking points in extremist Islamist circles.

"When French Muslims attack Jews in Paris or Marseille," said Mr. Nirenberg, of the University of Chicago, "it is because Islamist discourse has taught them to understand not only the situation of Palestinians, but also the global status of Islam and even their own poverty and marginalization in France, as in some way caused by Zionists and Jews."

But data, particularly from [Germany](#), suggests that most contemporary anti-Semitism is nevertheless primarily still perpetrated by the white, far right, who are often also virulently anti-Muslim.

"It cheapens the very right struggle against anti-Semitism for Islamophobic bigots to weaponize it in their campaigns," said H.A. Hellyer, a nonresident expert on Islam and the Middle East at the Atlantic Council, a research group.

"One needn't agree with Congresswoman Ilhan Omar to recognize that she is being targeted primarily as a black, Muslim, hijab-wearing woman, and by many people whose records on combating bigotry and discrimination, or calling it out in their own ranks, are abysmal," Dr. Hellyer added.

It is unsurprising to find a resurgence of anti-Semitism at a time of prolonged political and economic instability, historians and analysts say, when citizens from many different political and cultural traditions are grasping for easy explanations for sudden and complex injustices.

Just as Jews were a ready-made scapegoat during previous eras of anxiety about the pace of social change or global economic trauma, so are they again today, said Stefanie Schüler-Springorum, the head of the Center for anti-Semitism Research in Berlin.

"Globalization and especially the crisis of 2008 have strengthened a feeling of being at the mercy of mechanisms that we do not understand, let alone control," Ms. Schüler-Springorum said. "From there it is only a small step to classical conspiracy theories, which have always formed the core of anti-Semitism."

That step is even smaller in the social media age. Rumor and conspiracy theories have always played a role in stoking anti-Semitism. Today, the speed at which lies can spread, because of the internet, is without precedent.

The increasingly hard-right Israeli government led by Mr. Netanyahu is a point of divergence for the different strands of contemporary anti-Semitism.

Far-right political figures like Mr. Orban have drawn close to Israel, while leftist anti-Semites revile it. But both do so for the same reason: They perceive Israel as a country that has done its best to preserve its ethnic and religious character at the expense of a Muslim minority.

The main difference is that Mr. Orban, the prime minister of another small country fighting to preserve its ethnic identity, sees this as a virtue, whereas leftist critics of Israel, such as the supporters of the British Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, largely do not.

Both left and right “have the same image of Israel,” said David Hirsh, a sociologist at Goldsmiths College, University of London, and a critic of Mr. Corbyn who campaigns against the academic boycott of Israel.

“Corbyn says that Israel is a uniquely belligerent human-rights-abusing state that defends its purity at all costs against Muslims,” he said. “And I suspect that people on the far right have exactly the same picture of Israel — that it is a belligerent country that defends itself against Muslims.”

For critics of Mr. Netanyahu, this also explains why the leader of the world’s only Jewish state might find common cause with a far-right leader like Mr. Orban, despite the latter’s anti-Semitic leanings.

Mr. Netanyahu and Mr. Orban share an approach to domestic politics: an antipathy for liberal voices, a discomfort with Muslim minorities and a willingness to work with the far-right.

Like Mr. Orban in Hungary, Mr. Netanyahu has introduced legislation that targets civil society organizations that receive significant funding from overseas. His government has forbidden non-Jews to exercise the right to self-determination, and [removed Arabic](#) as an official Israeli language.

Recently, Mr. Netanyahu engineered an electoral pact with [a racist party from the far-right fringe](#) who could help him retain power in a general election later this year.

“I don’t believe that Netanyahu really wants a State of Israel with no Arabs, but I believe he does want a State of Israel where the position of Jews is so dominant and secure that it would never have to consider having to be a Western-style liberal democracy without an ethno-religious character,” said Derek Penslar, a professor of Jewish history at Harvard University.

“There is an aspiration for ethnocracy,” added Mr. Penslar. “It doesn’t mean there are no other ethnic groups — but only one group truly rules.”

And though the relationship between Mr. Netanyahu and Mr. Orban may troublesome in the Jewish diaspora, it may not be so troubling for Israelis themselves, said Yossi Shain, a professor of political science at Tel Aviv University.

Mr. Orban supports Israel’s right to exist, whereas his critics are perceived by some Israelis “to demean Israel’s nationalism and right to exist,” said Mr. Shain, the author of a forthcoming book addressing the subject.

“And for Israelis, that is the core of anti-Semitism in the modern era.”

Attacks by White Extremists are growing. So are their connections.

Full report with statistics and charts at <https://nyti.ms/2WM6sfY>

By WEIYI CAI and SIMONE LANDON



NYT (03.04.2019) - <https://nyti.ms/2WM6sfY> - New York Times examined attacks perpetrated by anti-immigrant extremists, anti-Muslim extremists, neo-Nazi extremists, right-wing extremists, anti-Semitic extremists, neo-fascists, white extremists, anti-Arab extremists, the Ku Klux Klan, anti-Sikh extremists and extremists. They also examined attacks on migrants and refugees, places of worship and religious figures, and attacks on black people, Hispanic people and Hindus.

The analysis by The New York Times of recent terrorist attacks found that at least a third of white extremist killers since 2011 were inspired by others who perpetrated similar attacks, professed a reverence for them or showed an interest in their tactics.

Targeting Muslims

About a quarter of white extremist attacks in Europe targeted Muslims and mosques. These attacks increased significantly starting in 2015 along with a wave of xenophobic violence reacting to the migrant crisis.

Attacks in North America Are More Deadly In North America, the ideologies of older white supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan have mixed with anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiment and the fresh-faced fascism of the "alt right" to give rise to a more lethal terror.

Attacks on Places of Worship

There were at least 38 attacks that targeted places of worship, like churches, synagogues and mosques across North America.

Until last year, the deadliest of these attacks in the United States were a shooting at a Sikh temple in Wisconsin in 2012 and a shooting at a black church in South Carolina in 2015.

Online Radicalization

An attacker who voiced his hatred of women and people of color in a manifesto before killing six people in California in 2014 signaled a new type of terrorist. The Southern Poverty Law Center, which monitors hate groups, called the attacker the "first alt-right killer." Several more attackers who fit this profile killed over the next few years.

Rising Violence

Then in 2017, attacks jumped in a tense post-election political environment. Nine of these proved deadly.

Preliminary 2018 data for the United States shows five additional deadly white extremist attacks, including mass shootings at high schools in Florida and Texas and at a Pittsburgh synagogue.

Full report can be read on the following link; <https://nyti.ms/2WM6sfY>

In a manifesto posted online before his attack, the gunman who killed 50 last month in a rampage at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, said he drew inspiration from white extremist terrorism attacks in Norway, the United States, Italy, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

His references to those attacks placed him in an informal global network of white extremists whose violent attacks are occurring with greater frequency in the West.

An analysis by The New York Times of recent terrorism attacks found that at least a third of white extremist killers since 2011 were inspired by others who perpetrated similar attacks, professed a reverence for them or showed an interest in their tactics.

The connections between the killers span continents and highlight how the internet and social media have facilitated the spread of white extremist ideology and violence.

In one instance, a school shooter in New Mexico corresponded with a gunman who attacked a mall in Munich. Altogether, they killed 11 people.

One object of fascination for the Christchurch killer and at least four other white extremists was Anders Behring Breivik, the far-right extremist who killed 77 in a bombing and mass shooting in Norway in 2011.

Mr. Breivik's lengthy manifesto offered a litany of grievances about immigration and Islam - and the attacks became a model for future ones.

"I think that Breivik was a turning point, because he was sort of a proof of concept as to how much an individual actor could accomplish," said J.M. Berger, author of the book "Extremism" and a research fellow with VOX-Pol, a European academic initiative to study online extremism.

"He killed so many people at one time operating by himself, it really set a new bar for what one person can do."

Shortly after the Norway massacre, a prominent American white supremacist named Frazier Glenn Miller wrote on a white supremacist forum that Mr. Breivik had "inspired young Aryan men to action." Mr. Miller opened fire on a Jewish retirement home and community center in Kansas a few years later, killing three.

Mr. Breivik was not the only mass killer to inspire copycats. The Christchurch shooter also paid tribute to a Canadian man who opened fire inside a Quebec City mosque in 2017, writing his name on one of the guns used in his attack.

That Canadian gunman read extensively about Dylann Roof, the American who killed nine worshippers at a black church in South Carolina in 2015.

At least four white extremist killers made statements online praising Elliot Rodger, a racist and misogynist who targeted women in a 2014 spree, before carrying out their own attacks.

All these attacks occurred amid a surge of white supremacist and xenophobic terrorism in the West that has frequently targeted Muslims, immigrants and other minority groups, the Times analysis found.

The analysis was based on data from the Global Terrorism Database and identified nearly 350 white extremist terrorism attacks in Europe, North America and Australia from 2011 through 2017, the latest year of available data. We also examined preliminary data on attacks in the United States in 2018.

The database is a project of the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism at the University of Maryland. It relies on news reports and other records to capture episodes that meet its definition of terrorism: the use of violence by a non-state actor to attain a political or social goal.

Over this period, white extremism - an umbrella term encompassing white nationalist, white supremacist, neo-Nazi, xenophobic, anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic ideologies - accounted for about 8 percent of all attacks in these regions and about a third of those in the United States.

Erin Miller, who manages the database, said the increase in white extremist terrorism parallels a rise in hate crimes and bias episodes in the West and that deadly attacks are occurring more often.

"There's a common framing of far-right terrorism or domestic terrorism as being 'terrorism lite' and not as serious," she said. "It's an interesting question given that far-right attacks can be quite devastating."

The Global Reach of White Extremism

There were five white extremist attacks in Australia from 2011 through 2017, all of which were attacks on mosques and Islamic centers. There were no such attacks in New Zealand during that same period.

Then the massacre of worshippers at two mosques in Christchurch on March 15 - the deadliest shooting in modern New Zealand history - helped put the global nature of white extremism into relief.

Experts say the same broad motives are at play whether the target is a mosque in Perth or an asylum seekers' shelter in Dresden or a synagogue in Pittsburgh. Attackers who identify as white, Christian and culturally European see an attack on their privileged position in the West by immigrants, Muslims and other religious and racial minorities.

The difference now is that it is easier than ever for extremists to connect both domestically and across continents, according to Mr. Berger, the "Extremism" author. The entry point for radicalization is less narrow than it was during earlier waves of white

supremacist action, when finding ideological fellow travelers typically required meeting in person.

In recent years, Europe has seen a surge in far-right and xenophobic violence amid an influx of migrants and refugees from conflicts in the Middle East and Africa.

"This is a particularly strong wave," Mr. Berger said, "and I think it's being fueled by a lot of political developments and also by the sort of connective tissue that you get from the Internet that wasn't there before that's really making it easier for groups to be influenced and to coordinate, or not necessarily coordinate but synchronize over large geographical distances."

Heidi Beirich, director of the Southern Poverty Law Center's Intelligence Project, said that given these international connections, it's important to reconsider the nature of the threat. "We conceive of this problem as being a domestic one," she said. "But that's not the case."

The challenge for law enforcement will be to buck a sometimes myopic focus on Islamic extremism as the only driver of international terrorism.

It may also require rethinking the legal framework for what constitutes terrorism: from violence that arises from a command and control structure to a looser definition that can account for a wider range of violent actors who share a common ideology.

"They don't see themselves as Americans or Canadians, very much like the Christchurch killer didn't see himself as an Australian; he saw himself as part of a white collective," Dr. Beirich said.

"It has never been the case that these people didn't think in a global way. They may have acted in ways that looked domestic but the thinking was always about building an international white movement."

Open Doors 2019 World Watch List debated at the House of Lords

House of Lords Hansard (23.01.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2HDBa8n>

Question asked by Lord Harries of Pentregarth

To ask Her Majesty's Government what steps they are taking in response to Open Doors' 2019 World Watch List of the 50 countries where Christians face the greatest persecution.

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon) (Con)

My Lords, the Government are deeply concerned about the severity of violations of the freedom of religion or belief in many parts of the world. We regularly raise our concerns at ministerial and senior levels. To ensure that the United Kingdom is supporting Christians in the best possible way, my right honourable friend the Foreign Secretary has commissioned an independent global review into additional practical steps the Government can take to support persecuted Christians. The aim is for this review to make an initial report by Easter.

Lord Harries of Pentregarth (CB)

I thank the Minister for his reply and I very much welcome what the Government are doing, particularly through the Foreign Secretary. The right of people to freedom of religion or belief is absolutely fundamental, whether they are Muslim, Hindu or atheist, but does the Minister not agree that there is a particular crisis affecting Christians at the moment, with the number of countries in which Christians are suffering persecution at a very high level, having doubled in the past year? Does he not agree that it is particularly dismaying that India should now appear at number 10 on this list, just below Iran and above Syria? India has a very good constitution and sound laws, but because of the rise of nationalism, these laws are simply not being enforced. Will he convey to the Indian Government our deep dismay that India should appear on this list at all, let alone at number 10?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon

My Lords, I agree with the noble and right reverend Lord on the issue of persecuted Christians. Around the world today 245 million Christians in 50 countries have been identified as suffering persecution of varying levels. As the noble and right reverend Lord said, that has doubled over the last four or five years. Clearly, action is needed. This does not preclude the fact that we will continue our efforts, and it is right that we stand up for all persecuted communities around the world, including those of no faith. He mentioned India specifically. India is the largest democracy and has an inherent, vibrant and strong rule of law. I assure noble Lords that we will continue to make representations to all countries, including India, to ensure that equality and justice for all citizens in India are upheld according to its own constitution.

Baroness Berridge (Con)

My Lords, I too welcome the inquiry and the acknowledgment of the scale of the persecution. One practical step that the Government took was to create the Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement scheme to enable people to come to this country. However, the recent figures released show that in the second quarter of last year, only 0.08% of the people who came to the UK from Syria were Christians, despite over 11% of that population pre-civil war being Christians and being targeted by IS. Will my noble friend the Minister please meet with his colleagues at the Home Office to investigate the reason for this apparent disparity in the figures? Will he then communicate the reason clearly to the UK Christian community, who are left with reports from NGOs and even the Times saying that the Government are operating a discriminatory policy against Christians?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon

First, I assure my noble friend that there is no discrimination against Christians or indeed anyone of any faith. However, she does bring to light an important issue about the situation in Syria. I am acutely aware of the challenges being faced by Christians in Syria and which continue to be faced in Iraq. We have seen appalling crimes committed against the Christian communities, as well as others. The major challenge that remains for Syrian Christians is the exodus of anyone from Syria who is of the Christian faith. My noble friend raises an important point about the Home Office scheme. I will certainly raise that with Home Office colleagues. But I assure my noble friend, and, indeed, all noble Lords, that we remain absolutely committed to ensuring that we stand up for the rights of people of all faiths and none, be it domestically or internationally.

Baroness Brinton (LD)

My Lords, in order to develop an appropriate policy to help persecuted Christians and other religious or belief groups, it is vital to have accurate data about them. Can the Minister say whether Her Majesty's Government have made any progress in developing a database across government that tracks violations of freedom of religion and belief, and other important data about religion or belief minorities?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon

My Lords, the noble Baroness raises a very important point. It is certainly something that I have been looking at very closely since my appointment last summer as the Prime Minister's Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief. There are many sources that we currently utilise to determine the level of persecution of different communities around the world. Equally, we have strong partnerships with representatives and leaders of different communities around the world. But her case for having a comprehensive database is a valid one, and certainly we will be looking to see how we can validate data that is provided by communities and organisations such as Open Doors, to ensure that it is verifiable and that we can share it with key partners to ensure that the issues of persecution can be addressed.

Baroness Nye (Lab)

The Minister will know that the Burmese army responsible for the Rohingya genocide is also targeting other ethnic communities, including the 1.6 million Christians in Kachin State, as outlined in the watch list. The International Development Select Committee report stated that,

“there may be a fundamental problem with the peace process that the UK is supporting”.

Will the Minister say how government support for UK-Burma trade takes into account these deeply held concerns about the Burmese military's involvement in these human rights abuses, which surely amount to crimes against humanity?

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon

My Lords, we are all acutely aware of the tragic plight of the Rohingya community, and the noble Baroness rightly points out other persecuted minorities in Burma. I assure her that not just bilaterally but with key partners and most clearly through international co-operation at the United Nations, we have raised this issue consistently. I believe we have seen progress, at least in the framework of MoUs which have now been signed between the Burmese Government, the Bangladeshi Government and organisations including the United Nations. On the specific actions that have been taken, the noble Baroness will be aware that the United Kingdom, working with European partners, has raised the issue of targeted sanctions against leaders of the military, and they have been extended to other members of the Burmese military. We continue to look at this. Ultimately, we hope for the safe, secure and voluntary return of the Rohingya community and other persecuted minorities, but we are a long way from that being a reality.

One in three Christians face persecution in Asia, report finds

Threat levels rise in China amid crackdown and India enters top 10 for first time

By Harriet Sherwood

The Guardian (16.01.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2ARc7bX> - The persecution of Christians in China is the worst it has been for more than a decade, with at least 50 million people expected to experience some form of repression this year as the government tightens its controls over religious worship, according to a global monitoring body.

The crackdown on religion in China is part of a pattern of increasing Christian persecution across Asia over the past five years, Open Doors said in its 2019 World Watch List, which ranks 50 countries. One in three Christians face high levels of persecution in Asia, with India entering the top 10 for the first time.

Open Doors estimates that 245 million Christians worldwide face high levels of persecution this year, up from 215 million last year.

The publication of its annual league table comes three weeks after Jeremy Hunt, the UK foreign secretary, ordered an independent, global review of the persecution of Christians of all nationalities. The review will make recommendations on the practical steps the UK government can take to support those under threat.

Persecution against Christians is rising across Asia, with India and Pakistan among countries with extreme levels of repression

North Korea tops the World Watch List for the 18th year in a row, with 10 other countries categorised as having “extreme” levels of persecution. Countries that have moved up more than 10 places in the list in the past year include China, Algeria, Central African Republic, Mali and Mauritania.

China has risen from no 43 on last year’s list to 27 in 2019. Henrietta Blyth, the chief executive of Open Doors UK and Ireland, said: “In China, our figures indicate persecution is the worst it’s been in more than a decade – alarmingly, some church leaders are saying it’s the worst since the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976.”

There are an estimated 93 million to 115 million Protestants in China and about 10 million to 12 million Catholics. Most belong to unregistered churches. If the rate of growth continues, China is expected to have the world’s largest Christian population by 2030.

In the past year, the Chinese government has tightened its control on religious worship, shutting down hundreds of unofficial churches, detaining pastors and worshippers, removing crosses from buildings, banning the online sale of bibles and increasing the surveillance of congregations. Last month, the celebration of Christmas was banned in some schools and cities.

“There is a very strong control agenda combined with a new era of digital surveillance,” said Ronald Boyd-Macmillan, the head of strategy and research at Open Doors.

He said persecution was being driven by three factors: the strong ideological leadership of China’s president, Xi Jinping, the government’s unease over the growth of Christianity, and the harnessing of technology as a repressive tool.

In September, the Vatican signed a provisional deal with Beijing on the appointment of Catholic bishops, aimed at a rapprochement in diplomatic relations. However, critics denounced it as a betrayal, with Cardinal Joseph Zen, the former archbishop of Hong Kong, saying the consequences would be “tragic and long lasting, not only for the church in China but for the whole church because it damages credibility”.

India, the world’s largest democracy, rose to 10th place on the list, having been 28th five years ago. Open Doors said ultra-nationalism was behind the increase in violent attacks by Hindu extremists on Christians and churches.

“It’s shocking that India – the country which taught the world the way of ‘non-violence’ – now sits alongside the likes of Iran on our World Watch List. For many Christians in India, daily life is now full of fear – totally different from just four or five years ago,” Blyth said.

The report also highlights the rise in gender-specific persecution, saying Christian women are subjected to sexual violence, rape and forced marriage in the top five countries on the list.