

World Watch Research

# Djibouti: Background Information

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## Copyright and sources

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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## Map of country



Djibouti: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
1,152,000	12,300	1.1

*Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024*

## Recent history

Djibouti became independent from France in 1977. After years of civil war (1991-2000), the first free multi-party elections took place in 2003. However, the ruling party has effectively gained control of all levels of power and the country no longer has an electoral democracy. President Guelleh, who first came to power in 1999, was re-elected for a [fifth term in April 2021](#), winning over 98% of the votes (Al-Jazeera, 10 April 2021). The main opposition group boycotted the election.

Djibouti is a country of contrasts. On the one hand, it has made considerable progress in developing its port, economy and banking sector, making it attractive for foreign business and military investment. On the other hand, it is likely that Djibouti will continue to face challenges such as serious unemployment, a severe lack of skilled workers, chronic drought and food insecurity, high electricity costs and underdeveloped government institutions. This mix of factors is already leading to poverty and political tension; a need is felt for more inclusive governmental policies, a more equal distribution of revenues across the population, an improved energy infrastructure and a significant decrease of corruption within the ruling elite. In Djibouti, these issues, as seen across many parts of Africa, are compounded by the country having a large youth population, which is particularly affected by the high unemployment. It is expected that the trends described above will lead to a continuation of repressive actions keeping Djibouti society in line with elite interests.

In the geopolitically charged region of the Horn of Africa, Djibouti stands as a unique confluence of global military interests, hosting five foreign military bases from world powers like the USA, France and China, as well as other nations like Japan and Italy. The country's strategic importance is magnified by its proximity to key shipping routes and volatile regions, making it a coveted location for military outposts. The establishment of a Chinese military base in 2017 marked a watershed moment, intensifying the arena of global superpower rivalry right in Djibouti. This has turned the small nation into a crucible where competing geopolitical ambitions are constantly jockeying for influence and operational advantage, thereby increasing its own strategic value but also its vulnerability to the shifting dynamics of international relations.

### The February 2023 election

As reported by [International IDEA](#) (accessed 21 March 2024):

- "In 24 February [2023], Djibouti held a parliamentary election, and in a result that was widely anticipated President Ismaïl Omar Guelleh's ruling coalition, the Union for the Presidential Majority (UMP), received 94 per cent of the vote. This vote share translated into 58 of the National Assembly's 65 seats (up from 57 in 2018), with the remaining 7 seats won by the Djibouti Union for Democracy and Justice, the only opposition party to contest the elections. The result maintains Guelleh's control over the National Assembly, which has been dominated by the party he leads, the People's Rally for Progress (latterly through the UMP) since independence in 1977. Djibouti's main opposition parties boycotted the election, calling it 'a sham.' However, international observers from the African Union and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) characterized the poll as free and fair. Notwithstanding reports of low voter turnout from the local media and election observers, the government reported it to be 75.9 per cent (up from 61.8 per cent in 2018)."

## Political and legal landscape

According to the [Freedom in the World 2024 Djibouti report](#), Djibouti is rated "Not Free," with a score of 24 out of 100, reflecting severe restrictions on political rights and civil liberties. The report highlights:

- **Authoritarian governance and political suppression:** Djibouti is ruled by President Ismail Omar Guelleh, who has been in power since 1999 without term limits. The ruling Union for a Presidential Majority (UMP) maintains a dominant position through authoritarian means, severe-

ly restricting the opposition's ability to operate. The February 2023 legislative elections were largely boycotted by opposition parties, resulting in a predictable victory for the UMP, which won 58 out of 65 seats. The opposition's limited participation and the lack of genuine electoral competition underscore the oppressive political environment.

- **Restrictions on civil liberties and media freedom:** Civil liberties in Djibouti are heavily restricted, with the government exerting tight control over the media and suppressing dissent. Journalists face harassment, arbitrary arrest, and censorship, particularly those affiliated with opposition outlets. Human rights groups face significant challenges, including harassment and deportation of international observers. The government also limits freedom of assembly, often using violence to disperse protests and arrest participants.
- **Discrimination and inequality:** Discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities, as well as women, is pervasive. The ruling Issa group dominates government positions, marginalizing other communities like the Afar. Women face significant barriers in political and economic spheres, with legal quotas for representation not effectively enforced.

### Gender perspective

Djibouti's political and legal landscape is additionally restrictive towards women and girls, in part as Sharia law forms the basis for family and personal status laws. Women are only allowed to marry a non-Muslim man if he converts to Islam (Family Code, Article 23), and whereas a husband has the right to divorce his wife unilaterally, she can only seek one under specific circumstances (Article 39.2). Djibouti lacks a comprehensive law that addresses violence against women, and whilst the 1995 Penal code criminalized acts of violence, it does not have a separate law that specifically addresses domestic violence ([UNFPA, Djibouti: Gender Justice and the Law, 2018](#)).

On a positive note, Djibouti has low rates of child marriage (5%) compared to other countries in the region ([Girls Not Brides Djibouti](#), accessed 26 September 2024) and saw a 15% increase in female representation in parliament in the February 2018 election, after a 25% quota was introduced in advance of the election ([Georgetown, Women, Peace and Security Index 2019/20, p.38](#)).

## Religious landscape

Djibouti: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	12,300	1.1
Muslim	1,125,000	97.7
Hindu	460	0.0
Buddhist	0	0.0
Ethnic religionist	0	0.0
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	1,000	0.1
Atheist	420	0.0
Agnostic	12,800	1.1
Other	0	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

As outlined by the [US State Department IRFR 2023 Djibouti](#):

- Islam is the state religion but the Constitution provides for religious freedom. Non-Sunni religious minorities - including Christians - have at times been treated unfairly. 94% of the population is Sunni Muslim. The Ministry of Islamic and Cultural Affairs oversees religious matters and has authority over mosques and private Islamic schools. Imams are civil service employees of the ministry.
- "Norms and customs discouraged conversion from Islam. Muslim and Christian religious leaders noted traditional social networks often ostracized converts from Islam."
- "Following a rejection of a request to open a second Ethiopian Orthodox church in late 2022, the government did not register any other Christian or non-Christian groups during the year [2023]."

## Economic landscape

Djibouti is one of the poorest countries in the world. It imports 90% of the food it needs, which makes it highly dependent on international market prices. Moreover, the country has few exports and the majority of its imports come from France. Another large contributor to the nation's GDP comes from the rent of military bases to foreign powers (see below: *Security situation*). Djibouti's port, long considered the primary gateway for Ethiopia's international trade, faces increasing challenges as Ethiopia explores alternative trade routes. The detente between Ethiopia and Eritrea in mid-2018 was a significant development that offered Ethiopia other maritime options, thereby putting financial

pressure on Djibouti's main source of income. Additionally, Ethiopia is looking towards the south, as Kenya plans to build a railway from Lamu to Moyale, further diversifying Ethiopia's trade routes. Ethiopia also has the option of using ports in Sudan, further complicating Djibouti's economic landscape. These developments could potentially compel Djibouti to adopt alternative or even destabilizing strategies to maintain its economic and regional relevance.

As Ethiopia broadens its trade horizons, Djibouti is tasked with recalibrating its economic, diplomatic, and strategic initiatives to maintain its position in an increasingly competitive regional and global context. In 2024, Ethiopia's efforts to lease a port from Somaliland have sparked concerns in Djibouti, as this move threatens to undermine Djibouti's economic stability and its pivotal role as Ethiopia's main access to the sea. Djibouti currently earns substantial fees from Ethiopian port usage, and the potential shift in Ethiopia's reliance towards a Somaliland port could lead to significant economic losses for Djibouti. This development has introduced latent tensions between the two countries, tensions that could escalate if Ethiopia proceeds with its plan to build and operate a port in Somaliland. If successful, Ethiopia's strategy would deal a considerable blow to Djibouti's economy and influence in the region.

The World Bank's "[Djibouti Digital Economy Diagnostic](#)" report, released on May 15, 2024, provides an in-depth analysis of the current state and future prospects of Djibouti's digital economy. Despite significant progress in developing digital infrastructure, Djibouti still faces challenges such as limited ICT investments and barriers to the affordability and accessibility of digital services. The report highlights the government's commitment to overcoming these challenges through initiatives like the establishment of the Multisectoral Regulatory Authority of Djibouti and the Ministry of Digital Economy and Innovation.

According to the [Africa Development Bank](#) 2024 report for Djibouti, Djibouti's economic outlook can be summarized under four key thematic aspects:

- **Economic growth and sectoral contributions:** Djibouti's GDP growth surged to 7.3% in 2023, driven primarily by the revival of port activities and the transport sector. Services continued to dominate the economy, accounting for around 85% of GDP, while industry and agriculture contributed 14% and 1%, respectively. Inflation decreased significantly, from 5.2% in 2022 to 1.3% in 2023, mainly due to a slowdown in global food prices.
- **Fiscal and external balances:** The budget deficit improved from 1.4% of GDP in 2022 to 0.5% in 2023, thanks to increased grants. However, the tax burden remains low at an estimated 11% of GDP. Djibouti's public external debt stabilized at around 76% of GDP between 2022 and 2023. The current account surplus also saw an improvement, rising from 17.9% of GDP in 2022 to 21.2% in 2023.
- **Challenges and risks:** While the economic outlook for Djibouti remains favorable, with projected GDP growth of 6.2% in 2024 and 6.6% in 2025, several risks could undermine this trajectory. These include potential disruptions in port traffic due to instability in neighboring Ethiopia, geopolitical tensions, challenges in repaying external public debt, and the ongoing impacts of climate change.

According to the [Heritage Foundation's 2024](#) Index of Economic Freedom:

- Djibouti's economic freedom score is 55.8, ranking it 105th out of 184 countries globally and 14th out of 47 in the Sub-Saharan Africa region. The score has decreased by 0.3 points from the pre-

vious year, reflecting ongoing challenges.

- Djibouti's economy is classified as "mostly unfree," with significant systemic weaknesses in the protection of property rights, judicial effectiveness, and government integrity. The regulatory environment is poorly institutionalized, and labor laws are inefficient and complex. Additionally, the country faces high unemployment, with 28.4% of the population unemployed, and an inflation rate of 5.2%. Public debt stands at 40.4% of GDP, and foreign direct investment inflows remain limited, further constraining economic growth.

### Gender perspective

As highlighted by UN Human Development Indicators ([UNDP Human Development Report Djibouti](#), data updates as of 13 March 2024), women and girls remain economically disadvantaged in Djibouti, primarily due to Sharia rules of inheritance (whereby daughters typically receive half the amount that sons receive), as well as reduced employment opportunities compared to men. According to [Georgetown's 2019/20 Women, Peace and Security](#) Index (p. 34), Djibouti scores particularly low in relation to financial inclusion for women.

### Social and cultural landscape

According to the [World Factbook Djibouti](#) (accessed 27 September 2024) and [UNDP Human Development Report Djibouti](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **Main ethnic groups:** Somali 60%, Afar 35%, other 5% (mostly Yemeni Arab, also French, Ethiopian, and Italian)
- **Main languages:** French (official), Arabic (official), Somali, Afar
- **Urban population:** 78.4% (2022)
- **Rate of urbanization:** 1.56% (2020-2025 est.)
- **Population growth rate:** 1.97% (2022 est.)
- **Median age:** 24.9 years (male: 23 years; female: 26.4 years) (2020 est.)
- **Expected years of schooling:** 6.8 years
- **Literacy rate, adult (15 years and older):** Data not available
- **Employment to population ratio (15 years and older):** 54.0%
- **Unemployment, total (% of the labor force):** 10.3%
- **Unemployment, youth (ages 15-24):** 20.8 years
- **Human Development Index:** Djibouti ranked 166th out of 189 countries with a value of 0.524
- **Life expectancy at birth:** 67.1 years (65.3 according to CIA Factbook 2022 est.)

According to the [UNHCR Djibouti Operational Update](#) (29 February 2024):

- **Refugees:** As of 29 February 2024, Djibouti hosts over 31,500 refugees and asylum-seekers mainly from Somalia, Ethiopia, Yemen and Eritrea.

According to the US State Department's [2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices](#):

- **Human rights:** Among the problems relating to human rights issues are: The use of excessive force, including torture; harsh prison conditions; arbitrary arrests and prolonged pretrial detention; denial of fair public trials; interference with privacy rights; harassing, abusing, and detaining government critics; restrictions on freedoms of speech, assembly, association and religion.

- "The governing coalition included representatives of all the country's major clans and ethnic groups, with minority groups also represented in senior positions. Nonetheless, there was discrimination based on ethnicity in employment and job advancement. The Somali Issas, the majority ethnic group, controlled the ruling party, the Union for a Presidential Majority, and shared political power with the Afar ethnic group. There were multiple rival subclans, and discrimination based on ethnicity and clan affiliation remained a factor in business and politics."

### Gender perspective

Within Djibouti's patriarchal, Islamic context, women and girls traditionally assume subordinate roles within the family and society, whereas men take up the position of head of the household. Domestic abuse is believed to be widespread, but rarely reported publicly. Rather, violence in the domestic sphere is often dealt with either within a family or traditional context. This discriminatory practice against women extends to education with girls' right to education, especially that of [pregnant girls and adolescent mothers](#), not guaranteed because of absence of positive law or regulation required under the Convention on Rights of the Child to which Djibouti is a party (Statement by Amnesty International, 14 April 2022).

### Technological landscape

According to the [Datareportal: Digital 2024: Djibouti](#) (23 February 2024) / survey date - January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** Djibouti had 744.2 thousand internet users at the start of 2024, representing 65.0% of the population. This marks a 1.4% increase from the previous year, indicating growing internet adoption. However, 35.0% of the population remained offline, suggesting a significant portion still lacks access to the internet.
- **Social media usage:** The country had 176.5 thousand active social media users, equating to 15.4% of the total population. The number of social media users increased by nearly 97% over the past year, reflecting a rapid adoption of social media platforms, although the overall penetration remains relatively low. In January 2024, 41.6% of Djibouti's social media users were female, and 58.4% male.
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** There were 553.8 thousand cellular mobile connections in Djibouti in early 2024, which is equivalent to 48.4% of the total population. The number of mobile connections increased by 5.3% from the previous year, highlighting the growing importance of mobile connectivity in the country.

According to [BuddeComm's](#) August 2024 report, Djibouti's telecommunications sector faces several key developments and challenges:

- **Monopoly in telecom services:** Djibouti Telecom, the national telco, holds a monopoly over all telecom services, including fixed lines, mobile, internet, and broadband. This lack of competition has hindered market growth, keeping service prices high and limiting access for many customers, despite Djibouti's strategic location as a hub for international submarine cables.
- **Privatization efforts:** The Djibouti government has confirmed plans to privatize Djibouti Telecom by selling a minority stake while retaining some control. This initiative aims to modernize the economy by attracting foreign investment and expertise, following the example set by Ethiopia's recent telecom reforms.

- **Infrastructure developments:** Djibouti has continued to enhance its digital infrastructure, with Djibouti Telecom becoming a partner in new submarine systems like the Sea-Me-We-6 and the 2Africa cable. Additionally, Djibouti joined the African IXP Association and became the 10th member state of the Digital Cooperation Organization, reflecting its growing role in regional digital cooperation.

### Space launch partnership

In January 2023, President Guelleh announced a project to build a [space launch base](#), in partnership with the Chinese company Hong Kong Aerospace Technology (Hiiraan, 20 February 2023).

## Security situation

Djibouti's future is intricately tied to its regional neighbors and broader geopolitical influences. The country's strategic significance is amplified by its position at the crossroads of regional instability, with neighboring countries like Yemen, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan grappling with conflicts that could spill over into Djibouti. While the presence of foreign military bases provides some immediate stability, Djibouti's long-term security remains uncertain.

The tensions between Ethiopia and Somalia, exacerbated by Ethiopia's recent memorandum of understanding with Somaliland for sea access, add another layer of security concerns for Djibouti. This agreement has strained Ethiopia-Somalia relations, potentially destabilizing the region further and creating security implications for Djibouti. Djibouti's security situation is also deeply impacted by the conflict in Sudan, protests in Kenya, Somalia's struggle with al-Shabaab and Ethiopia's internal strife, such as the rise of the Amhara Militia Fano and tensions in Oromia. Each of these issues poses a direct or indirect threat to Djibouti, potentially destabilizing the Horn of Africa and heightening security risks.

Additionally, the Djiboutian government's tight grip on power, often at the expense of basic human rights, exacerbates internal insecurity. The erosion of the rule of law creates vulnerabilities, particularly for minority groups like Christians.

## Christian origins

"Around the 1st century AD, Djibouti made up part of the powerful Ethiopian kingdom of Aksum, which included modern-day Eritrea and even stretched across the Red Sea to parts of southern Arabia. It was during the Aksumite era, in the 4th century AD, that Christianity first appeared in the region. As the empire of Aksum gradually fell into decline, a new influence arose that would forever supersede the Christian religion in Djibouti: Islam. It was introduced to the region around AD 825 by Arab traders from Southern Arabia." (Source: [Lonely Planet](#), accessed 9 September 2020)

The historical connections between Ethiopia and Djibouti have led to a sustained presence of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in the country. European powers brought Roman Catholic and Protestant Christianity to the country following the arrival of French, who first gained a foothold in the region in 1883 (which was named "French Somaliland" in 1894). The Roman Catholic Church sent its first priest from Arabia to Djibouti in 1883. In 1940 the Reformed Church of France was established.

## Church spectrum today

Djibouti: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	2,000	16.3
Catholic	7,600	61.8
Protestant	420	3.4
Independent	540	4.4
Unaffiliated	1,700	13.8
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>12,260</b>	<b>99.7</b>
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	390	3.2
Pentecostal-Charismatic	510	4.1

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

**Orthodox:** Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world’s 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

The Christian presence, which is partly over 100 years old, is divided up into various denominations, including Roman Catholics, Protestants, Ethiopian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox and a small convert community with a Muslim background.

## Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Djibouti>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.

## External Links

- Recent history: fifth term in April 202 - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/10/veteran-ruler-guelleh-re-elected-djibouti-leader-for-fifth-term>
- Recent history: International IDEA - <https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/report/djibouti/february-2023>
- Political and legal landscape: Freedom in the World 2024 Djibouti report - <https://freedomhouse.org/country/djibouti/freedom-world/2024>
- Political and legal landscape: UNFPA, Djibouti: Gender Justice and the Law, 2018 - [https://arabstates.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Djibouti%20Country%20Assessment%20-%20English\\_0.pdf](https://arabstates.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Djibouti%20Country%20Assessment%20-%20English_0.pdf)
- Political and legal landscape: Girls Not Brides Djibouti - <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/djibouti/>
- Political and legal landscape: Georgetown, Women, Peace and Security Index 2019/20, p.38 - <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/WPS-Index-2019-20-Report.pdf>
- Religious landscape description: US State Department IRFR 2023 Djibouti - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/djibouti/>
- Economic landscape: Djibouti Digital Economy Diagnostic - <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2024/05/15/djibouti-digital-economy-opportunities-and-challenges-for-growth-and-development>
- Economic landscape: Africa Development Bank - <https://www.afdb.org/en/countries-east-africa-djibouti/djibouti-economic-outlook>
- Economic landscape: Heritage Foundation's 2024 - <https://www.heritage.org/index/pages/country-pages/djibouti>
- Economic landscape: UNDP Human Development Report Djibouti - <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/DJI>
- Economic landscape: Georgetown's 2019/20 Women, Peace and Security - <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/WPS-Index-2019-20-Report.pdf>
- Social and cultural landscape: World Factbook Djibouti - <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/djibouti/>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNDP Human Development Report Djibouti - <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/DJI> Djibouti
- Social and cultural landscape: UNHCR Djibouti Operational Update - <https://reporting.unhcr.org/djibouti-operational-update-7886>
- Social and cultural landscape: 2022 Country Report on Human Rights Practices - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/djibouti/>
- Social and cultural landscape: pregnant girls and adolescent mothers - <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/14/submission-committee-rights-child-review-djibouti>
- Technological landscape: Datareportal: Digital 2024: Djibouti - <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-djibouti>
- Technological landscape: BuddeComm's - <https://www.budde.com.au/Research/Djibouti-Telecoms-Mobile-and-Broadband-Statistics-and-Analyses>
- Technological landscape: space launch base - [https://hiiraan.com/news4/2023/Feb/189999/djibouti\\_announces\\_first\\_space\\_launch\\_base\\_in\\_africa.aspx](https://hiiraan.com/news4/2023/Feb/189999/djibouti_announces_first_space_launch_base_in_africa.aspx)
- Christian origins: Lonely Planet - <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/djibouti/history>