

World Watch Research

# Somalia: Background Information

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[research@od.org](mailto:research@od.org)

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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



Somalia: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
18,707,000	hundreds	OD estimate

## Recent history

Somalia declared independence in 1960 when the British protectorate and Italian colony merged. In 1969 President Mohamed Siad Barre's military government came to power and introduced 'Scientific Socialism' into the country. During this process, property owned by Christian missionary organizations and churches, including schools and clinics, were seized and Christians were expelled from the country. In 1974 a new law was introduced giving women the same inheritance rights as men. Islamic leaders preaching against this new law were imprisoned or executed. It was claimed that the secular and reformist nature of the government undermined the Islamic identity of the Somali people. This resulted in a revival of radical Islamic influence and the growth of Muslim clan-based militant organizations. They aimed to turn Somalia into an Islamic state. Siad Barre's regime and Islamic militants shared an enemy – Christians, whose presence had become increasingly visible in the years before the early 1990s. During Barre's rule, radical Muslims used their influence to encourage the government to ban the printing, importing, distributing or selling of Christian literature in the country. Moreover, the National Security Services (NSS) threatened, arrested, tortured and murdered many Somali Christians. Other Christians lost their jobs and businesses.

Relations between Somalia and its neighboring countries, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Kenya, had been soured by the Somalian government's claim that all territories where Somalis live belong to Somalia. As a result of this agenda to form a 'Greater Somalia', the country waged a major war with Ethiopia in 1977.

After decades of ruling the country with a mixture of terror and guile, Siad Barre's regime finally collapsed in 1991. The country was left without an effective government. War between the clans and drought threatened the lives of millions. The United Nations (UN) and the Organizations of African Unity (OAU) sought to end the crisis. In 1992, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 751 by which a UN operation in Somalia (UNOSOM I) was established. UNOSOM I sent in a US-led Unified Task Force (UNITAF). As the situation spun out of control, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 755 to establish a second UN operation in Somalia (UNOSOM II). Following the unsuccessful attempts to help Somalis create a central government, the USA withdrew its forces in 1994. The UN then decided to withdraw all its forces from Somalia (Security Council Resolution 954). For the following two decades Somalia became a lawless state where Islamists, local militias and warlords continued to fight each other. The country became a hub for militant Islamic activity.

In the meantime, even though not recognized by the international community, Somaliland declared unilateral independence from Somalia by citing the colonial boundaries between British Somaliland and Italian Somaliland. Puntland also declared its autonomy without severing its ties from the rest of Somalia.

After several attempts at mediation by the international community, a federal government was eventually formed in 2012. The government only controls cities and towns; many parts of rural Somalia still remain in the hands of al-Shabaab. Al-Shabaab has been consistently propagating anti-Christian ideology and regarding all foreign forces in Somalia as Christians intent on conquering Islam. In 2016, parliamentary elections were held and in February 2017, Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed was elected president. This was [greeted enthusiastically](#) by many Somalis and the international community (New York Times, 8 February 2017). It has been seen as a big step forward for Somalia.

In 2017 and in 2018, al-Shabaab remained potent enough to conduct deadly attacks in the country. AMISOM soldiers (deployed in Somalia by the African Union since 2007) were targeted on numerous occasions. For example, in [April 2018](#), up to 46 Ugandan peacekeepers were killed in a double suicide car bomb attack by Islamic militants (The Guardian, 1 April 2018). In May 2019, the Security Council extended the mandate of AMISOM and authorized a troop reduction, unanimously adopting Resolution 2472 (2019) at its 8537th meeting. In 2018 and 2019, the government continued to fight al-Shabaab with the help of African Union Forces. Al-Shabaab conducted a bombing in the capital city in July 2019 and wounded the Mayor of Mogadishu, who later [died](#) of his injuries (New York Times, 1 August 2019).

In 2020, there were border clashes between Kenyan and Somali government soldiers and there were rumors that Kenya might seek to annex some Somali territory. Deutsche Welle reported on 13 March 2020 that the Somali government [requested](#) Kenya to "halt its ongoing violations of Somalia's sovereignty and encroachment in the border areas. In a long-drawn legal battle involving maritime boundary dispute against Kenya, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled [largely in favor of Somalia in setting a new maritime border](#) in an area of the Indian Ocean believed to be rich in oil and gas (Al-Jazeera, 12 October 2021). However, [Kenya rejected the ICJ's jurisdiction](#) days before the Court announced its decision (Al-Jazeera, 8 October 2021). The situation in the area remains precarious as Jubbaland forces have been regrouping for possible fresh clashes, despite efforts to ease the hostility.

Some of the defining moments in 2022 (continuing into 2023) have been (see also below: *Political and legal landscape*):

- The election of former President Hassan Sheikh Mahamud as president in May 2022.
- Widespread famine
- Government offensive and clan uprisings against al-Shabaab since mid-2022.

## Political and legal landscape

The [Provisional Constitution of the Federal Republic of Somalia](#) was adopted on 1 August 2012 and affirms the absolute predominance of a strict interpretation of Sharia law. According to Article 2 of the Constitution, "Islam is the religion of the State; no religion other than Islam can be propagated in the country; and no law which is not compliant with the general principles and objectives of Sharia can be enacted." Furthermore, the Constitution categorically declares that Sharia law is supreme. Since the Constitution took a step back from securing freedom of religion by prohibiting apostasy, it can be expected that a better functioning federal government will not lead to a cessation of the regular violation of rights of Christians. Likewise, as stated in the Constitution, the province of Puntland has declared that only Islam may be propagated: "Islam shall be the only religion of the Regional Puntland State of Somalia. With the exception of Islam, no other religion can be spread in the Puntland state; the laws and culture of the people shall be based on the Islamic religion." The Constitution of Somaliland also states: "Islam is the religion of the Somaliland state, and the promotion of any religion in the territory of Somaliland, other than Islam, is prohibited."

The political situation in the country has created a hostile environment for Christians, especially for those coming from a Muslim background. As a result, the religious freedom violations against Christians in Somalia nearly always involves a very high level of violence.

In 2020, the president of Somalia [signed a landmark federal law](#), paving the way for the country to hold its first popular election in half a century (The Guardian, 24 February 2020). The president and the leaders of Somalia's five semi-autonomous federal states had reached an agreement in September 2020 to prepare for indirect parliamentary and presidential elections in late 2020 and early 2021. As part of the agreement, the election planning was set to commence on 1 November 2020. But the deal fell apart in the face of squabbles over how to conduct the vote, while talks in February 2021 between Farmaajo and the leaders of the country's federal states [failed to break the deadlock](#) (Al-Jazeera, 10 February 2021). In April 2021, parliament voted to extend the president's term for another two years to let the country prepare for direct elections. This move came amid growing pressure to end the political stalemate and was heavily criticized by the international community. Following clashes in the capital, Mogadishu, between factions of the security forces (which were divided over the issue), Somali lawmakers [voted unanimously to cancel](#) the two-year presidential term extension (France 24, 2 May 2021).

The cancelling of the extension gave Somalia's political leaders the impetus to agree on [new dates](#) for holding the postponed elections: The indirect presidential election was to be held on 10 October 2021, following the election of members to the Upper House in July and members of the Lower House in the period 10 August - 10 September 2021 (Al-Jazeera, 29 June 2021). However, in September 2021, Somalia's top two most powerful leaders – the President and Prime Minister – became [locked in a deepening political confrontation](#) after they named different men to head the country's intelligence service, causing fears of instability and further throwing the ongoing electoral process into doubt (Al-Jazeera, 8 September 2021). This was followed by the president [suspending](#) the prime minister's power to appoint and dismiss officials (Al-Jazeera, 16 September 2021), leading [regional leaders](#) and [international community](#) to de-escalate the standoff and commit to the elections (Al-Jazeera, 17 and 18 September 2021). The feud between the president and prime minister halted the complicated, indirect election process. Although it seemed they had come to an agreement in October 2021, in December the president [suspended](#) the powers of the prime minister amid the ongoing power-struggle between the two leaders, raising concerns of political violence possibly erupting (CNN, 27 December 2021). Heavily armed factions took up position in parts of the capital, Mogadishu.

In January 2022, Somali officials announced that they had [struck a deal](#) to carry out the delayed parliamentary elections by 25 February 2022 (Africanews, 10 January 2022). When the February date was also postponed with no new date in view, the USA imposed [sanctions on Somali officials](#) for undermining the democratic process in Somalia (Al-Jazeera, 26 February 2022), with the IMF also giving a [warning](#) that funding programs were a stake if elections were not held within the next few months (Africanews, 23 February 2022). After months of repeated postponements, Somalia finally [inaugurated 290 new lawmakers](#) in mid-April 2022 bringing the country a step closer to completing a prolonged electoral process, and [elected a new Speaker](#) at the end of April 2022, paving the way for the presidential vote (Africanews, 28 April 2022). After a record number of candidates ran in Somalia's presidential election, including the incumbent President Farmaajo, who announced candidacy for a second term. Former President [Hassan Sheik Mahmud](#) was elected president for the second time (CNN, 16 May 2022). [Analysts warn](#) that despite the fact that under the new president fighting against al-Shabaab is very robust and effective, with clans also rising up to combat al-Shabaab, "many of the deep political fissures that defined Farmaajo's rule persist and will resurface" (Brookings, 27 January

2023)." The USA has also kept up pressure on al-Shabaab by conducting airstrikes. For example, on 9 July 2023, [CNN reported](#) that US airstrikes had killed at least ten al-Shabaab fighters.

### Gender perspective

The legal landscape facing women and girls is additionally restrictive, in particular making marriage a place of enacting violent repression of female converts. Somalia is one of just six UN states not to have [ratified](#) the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Within marriages, women are vulnerable from a lack of legislation addressing [domestic violence or marital rape](#) (UN Women/UNDP, Somalia - Gender, Justice and the Law, 2018). Divorce laws also prevent women and girls from escaping an abusive situation. A man has the right to divorce his wife simply by *talaq*, whereas women must apply through the courts.

In this religiously conservative society that suppresses women, finding a [female Somali police general](#) fighting al-Shabaab and the patriarchy is a rare yet pioneering sight (Al-Jazeera features, 25 February 2022). Zakia is one of many women fighting for [gender equality](#) in the security sector and the inclusion of women at all levels on matters regarding national peace and security (Medium, 22 October 2020). Women also occupy 54 of the 247 [parliamentary seats](#) (IDEA Somalia country data, 1 August 2022 update) but cite discrimination by leaders of federal states based on “deeply ingrained traditional prejudices” for their inability to meet the established [30% gender quota](#) (Deutsche Welle, 4 May 2022).

In August 2020, outrage was sparked as the long-awaited Sexual Offences Bill (aimed at protecting women and girls from sexual abuse, rape and child marriage, and heralded as a progressive step) was [overturned](#) by parliament (Reuters, 11 August 2020). Instead of outlawing them, the replacement bill permits child and early marriage to continue. According to [UN Women](#), 45% of women are married before 18 years of age (UN Global Database on Violence Against Women: Somalia). Young female converts, if discovered, may be forcibly married to a radical Muslim as a corrective measure.

### Religious landscape

Somalia: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	hundreds	-

*According to OD-estimate*

The population of Somalia is overwhelmingly Muslim, 99% being Sunni Muslims. The small Christian community is under constant threat of attack, since Christians are seen as a foreign element that is in the country to damage both the culture and Islam. Open Doors estimates the number of Christians in the country to be “hundreds”. However, in the past, the Christian community was much larger and the country was home to one of the largest Catholic cathedrals in the region.

The years of chaos following the overthrow of President Siad Barre’s military regime in 1991 culminated in the rise of Sharia courts and of radical Islamic groups like al-Shabaab. They all pursue a clear Islamic identity against the background of a strong tribal identity. Changing religion – i.e., to Christianity – not only means a betrayal of Islam and the Muslim community but also a break with the norms and values of the clan as well. In tribal societies, this is a very serious offense. According to many Somalis, a "Somali is born Muslim and dies Muslim". Therefore, even if al-Shabaab's influence

were to decline, it does not mean that the threat to Christians would diminish. An example is Somaliland which declared independence in 1991 (but which is still unrecognized): It would seem to be a region free of Islamic militant activity, but Christians are just as much persecuted there because anti-Christian sentiment is rooted in the country's religion and culture.

### Gender perspective

Within this context, Christian male converts face extremely [hostile treatment](#) as they are perceived as leaders who ought to represent the Islamic faith; for instance, they are responsible for determining the faith of the family and therefore more is expected from them (World Watch Monitor, 7 February 2019). They can be blamed if a sister or wife converts, or killed. Suspected female converts, too, face extreme pressure from their families and local communities; they are commonly raped, publicly humiliated, or forcibly married to a radical sheikh.

### Economic landscape

Somalia is a fragile country in terms of both security and economy. Economic growth and foreign or domestic investment has been hampered by decades of persistent Islamist insurgency. It is regarded as a failed state where the government is unable to provide even the most basic social services. Somalia is “ungraded”, according to the [Index of Economic Freedom 2023](#), which describes the country in bleak terms: “Somalia’s economic freedom is not graded because of the lack of reliable data. Somalia is a failed state. Over the past decade, extreme violence and civil war, political instability, and famine have ravaged an already fragile living situation. The result is an utterly devastated economy and a country that lacks a functioning national government with the ability to provide even basic services”.

[According to the International Monetary Fund Staff Country Report, June 2024](#): "Economic activity has picked up in recent months, supported by a rebound in agriculture, though still affected by the lingering effects of two years of drought and recent severe flooding. The security situation remains challenging, with the government scaling up its military actions against the Al-Shabab terrorist group, amid the planned withdrawal of the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) by end-December 2024”.

[According to the World Bank Country Overview 2024](#): Real GDP growth has been low and volatile, averaging only 2% per year in 2019–23 while real GDP per capita averaged -0.8% per year.

**Economic growth and outlook** (as reported by [World Bank's Macro Poverty Outlook](#) Somalia, accessed 31 July 2024):

- "GDP is estimated to have grown at 3.1 percent in 2023, up from 2.4 percent in 2022."
- "Somalia continues to contend with frequent shocks in the context of widespread fragility, conflict, and violence. Recurrent climate-related shocks such as cycles of droughts, floods, locusts' infestation, volatile international commodity prices, as well as increased insecurity and conflict have interrupted the country's growth trajectory and slowed the transition from fragility."
- "Growth has been modest and does not generate the jobs needed to reduce poverty. It averaged only 2 percent annually in 2019–23 with an average negative real GDP per capita growth of 0.8 percent."
- "Real GDP growth is projected to expand from 3.7 percent in 2024 to 4 percent in 2026."

**Debt:**

- "Somalia achieved a historic HIPC Completion Point (CP) milestone on December 13, 2023. Following the CP, Somalia received full and irrevocable debt relief for the country of US\$4.5 billion. As a result, Somalia's external debt is estimated at less than 6 percent of GDP in 2023, from 64 percent in 2018."

**Poverty:**

- "Poverty remains high. Projections based on GDP per capita growth suggest poverty has increased from 71 percent in 2017 to 73 percent in 2023, based on the 2017 poverty line. According to the 2022 Integrated Household Budget Survey, while poverty rates are highest among the nomadic population, due to Somali's high urbanization, the largest share of the poor are in urban areas."
- "The poverty rate is projected to decrease between 2024 and 2026, reaching 71 percent in 2026, although still very high."
- "Labor force participation rates are exceptionally low with large gender gaps. Only one-third of men and 12 percent of women participate in the labor market. Poverty is high and widespread, with recurrent shocks increasing the risk of more people falling into poverty."

**Food insecurity:**

- "The economy is rebounding gradually with improved weather conditions contributing to the continued reversal of the impacts of the prolonged 2020/23 severe drought. Favorable rains in 2023 led to improved agricultural production, reduced food insecurity, and supported private consumption."

**Inflation:**

- "Inflationary pressures eased in 2023, supported by better agriculture performance and declining commodity prices. Overall inflation, however, remained sticky, averaging 6.1 percent in 2023 compared to 6.8 percent in 2022. Favorable rains in 2023 boosted agricultural production, easing local staple food prices. Food inflation averaged 0.7 percent in 2023, compared to 13.9 percent in 2022."

**Gender perspective**

Women are, in general, the most economically vulnerable within Somalia. This is in part due to low education rates for girls; only 35% of girls of school age were [enrolled](#) in school in 2020 (UN OCHA, 2020). The widespread practice of FGM results in thousands of girls [withdrawing](#) from school due to debilitating scarring and infections (Somali Magazine, January 2022). Early marriages also result in girls ending their education earlier than their male counterparts. Women and girls regularly lose their inheritance rights, too. Whilst under the 1975 Family Code (Article 158) women have equal rights to men, Sharia rules of inheritance are applied, and daughters receive half the share that sons receive.

## Social and cultural landscape

According to the [World Factbook Somalia](#) (accessed 31 July 2024):

- **Main ethnic groups:** Somali 85%, Bantu and other non-Somali 15% (Including 30,000 Arabs)
- **Main languages:** Somali (official, according to The provisional federal constitution (PFC) ), Arabic (official, according to the 2012 Federal Transitional Charter), Italian, English
- **Life expectancy at birth:** 55.72 years (2022 est.)
- **Median age:** 18.5 years (2020 est.)
- **Urban population:** 47.3% (2022 est.)

As stated in the [Encyclopedia Britannica](#) (Section: Somalia / People, last accessed 31 July 2024):

- "In culture, language, and way of life, the people of Somalia, north-eastern Kenya, the Ogaden region of Ethiopia, and the southern part of Djibouti are largely one homogeneous group." Further: "The Somali people make up the overwhelming majority of Somalia's population. They are divided into numerous clans, which are groups that trace their common ancestry back to a single father. These clans, which in turn are subdivided into numerous sub-clans, combine at a higher level to form clan families. The clan families inhabiting the interfluvial area of southern Somalia are the Rahanwayn and the Digil, which together are known as the Sab. Mainly farmers and agro-pastoralists, the Sab include both original inhabitants and numerous Somali groups that have immigrated into this climatically favorable area. Other clan families are the Daarood of north-eastern Somalia, the Ogaden, and the border region between Somalia and Kenya; the Hawiye, chiefly inhabiting the area on both sides of the middle Shabelle and south-central Somalia; and the Isaaq, who live in the central and western parts of northern Somalia. In addition, there are the Dir, living in the northwestern corner of the country but also dispersed throughout southern Somalia, and the Tunni, occupying the stretch of coast between Marca and Kismaayo. Toward the Kenyan border, the narrow coastal strip and offshore islands are inhabited by the Bagiunis, a Swahili fishing people."

### Refugees/IDPs

In the past three decades, conflict and famine in the country have led to hundreds of thousands fleeing the country. The insecure situation has also been compounded by millions continuing to be seriously affected by [drought and famine](#) (Reliefweb, last accessed 31 July 2024).

As of 30 June 2024, the [UNHCR](#) reported:

- There are 3.9 million IDPs in Somalia, and 905,000 Somali refugees in neighboring countries (predominantly in Kenya and Ethiopia).
- There are 39,000 foreign refugees and asylum seekers in Somalia (predominantly from Ethiopia and Yemen).

According to the [UNHCR](#) report "Somalia Refugee Crisis Explained" (19 October 2022):

- "At the end of 2021, there were 836,300 Somali refugees and asylum seekers worldwide, most of them – almost 80 percent – are living in neighboring countries like Kenya (279,200), Ethiopia (250,719), Yemen (69,940) and Uganda (61,853)."

- "The drought in the Horn of Africa is impacting more than 20 million people—including those in Somalia. ... The drought is severely affecting millions of refugees, IDPs and their host communities, primarily in Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya."  
"Refugees from Somalia have been living in refugee camps for nearly 30 years. Many have lived most or all of their lives in these camps. This is called a protracted refugee situation."

### Gender perspective

Gender inequality in Somalia is reinforced by its patriarchal norms, Islamic religious landscape and long history of gender discrimination. Women are widely viewed as subservient, and many continue to remain restricted to the domestic sphere. There are signs that these dynamics are slowly changing, with increasing numbers of women going to [university](#) to become working professionals (East Africa Monitor, 2 September 2020). According to the [Association of Somali Universities](#), the enrolment rate of female students in tertiary institutions increased by 17% in the last five years (University World News, 2022). Inequality remains deeply entrenched however, and women and children have reportedly experienced higher rates of [gender-based violence](#) in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (UNICEF, June 2020). Campaigners are pushing for the overturned [Sexual Offences Bill](#) to be reintroduced; this had sought to provide greater protection to victims of gender-based violence (Reuters, 11 August 2020).

### Technological landscape

Somalia's economic difficulties in recent years have made it difficult for investment in infrastructure to be maintained. The government has also had to contend with Islamist groups like al-Shabaab which have on occasions in the past forced the [closure of internet services](#) in some areas of the country (RSF, updated 20 January 2016). Besides the lack of infrastructure, society is conservative and slow to adopt technology on religious and cultural grounds. Al-Shabaab is opposed to most aspects of western civilization, of which modern technology is regarded as one.

According to [DataReportal Digital 2024: Somalia \(23 February 2024\) - survey date: January 2024](#):

- **Internet usage:** 27.6% penetration
- **Social media usage:** 15.8% of the total population. According to [Napoleon Cat](#) (June 2024), there were 2,978,700 Facebook users in the country: 56.2% were male, compared to 43.8% female.
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 54.8% of the total population. According to a 2018 OECD report, women in Africa are on average [34%](#) less likely to own a smartphone than their male counterparts (OECD 2018, p.13). This restricts their access to both information and community networks. The 2022 [GSMA Mobile Gender Gap](#) report also indicates that only 37% of the female population in Sub-Saharan African countries use mobile internet (GSMA, 2022, p. 39).

According to [BuddeComm research](#) (last updated 19 June 2024):

- A "National Communications Law was passed in October 2017, aimed at setting a legal and regulatory framework for the telecoms sector, while provision was made in the following year to set up a regulatory authority to oversee the telecom sector. More recently, three types of licenses have been issued to operators, providing clarity and bringing the market closer into line with international standards."

- Three mobile operators have launched 5G services.
- "Despite the many inherent difficulties faced in the country, the telecom market has flourished. Tariffs are among the lowest in Africa, and new cable systems coming on stream in the next few years (providing additional connectivity to Asia and Europe), as well as planned investments from local operators to bolster the country's national fibre backbone, will lead to downward pressure on retail pricing."

As the number of Internet users increases, it is likely that citizens (converts from Islam in particular) will have more access to online Christian resources.

## Security situation

Somalia is viewed as being a classic example of a modern failed state. For more than 25 years, the country has been a safe haven for Islamic militants who constantly target Christians both in Somalia and in neighboring countries. The country has now become a patchwork of competing clans, clan-based militias and Islamic groups. Thus, it has been difficult to have a central government or any sort of government in the country.

### A brief history of al-Shabaab

In 1984 *Al-Ittihad al-Islamiya* (AIAI) was formed from the merger of two Salafi organizations - *Al-Jama'at al-Islamiya* and *Wahdat al-Shabaab al-Islam*. This group was believed to be supported by the then Sudanese government. The Ethiopian army conducted numerous military campaigns against the AIAI and finally defeated them. In 1996, it was rumored that the militant group had transitioned into a political group. It was the leadership of the AIAI who also played a major role in establishing the Islamic Courts Union in 2000 (dissolved in 2007). After the defeat of the Islamic Courts Union by the Ethiopian army in 2007, al-Shabaab was formed. In order to weaken and eventually defeat this newly formed group, the international community backed the Somalia Transitional government (now Federal Government) by sending peacekeepers.

In May 2022, [Hassan Sheikh Mohamud was elected as new president](#), amidst attacks and violence by al-Shabaab who do not wish to see a democracy in Somalia (Al-Jazeera, 15 May 2022). The newly elected president immediately embarked on a mission to rid Somalia of al-Shabaab, backed by the US government and AU troops. On 17 May 2022, the USA decided to re-establish an [American troop presence](#) in Somalia to help local authorities combat the Al-Shabaab militant group, reversing the policy of the previous US administration (Africanews, 17 May 2022).

For a while, joint efforts yielded apparent success, but in recent months, there has been a resurgence of al-Shabaab including worrying reports of a [cooperation between al-Shabaab and Houthi militias](#) (CNN, 11 June 2024). The group has again bolstered its strength and numbers. Despite the government's offensive against the group in 2022 and 2023, 2024 has shown that it is still engaged in powerful attacks, also aiming to expand operations further south to Kenya and north to Ethiopia. According to a report by [VOA](#) on 17 June 2024, Al-Shabaab has reversed all Somali National Army gains made in central Somalia over the last two years and is now working with Houthi militants to expand its capabilities. In 2024, al-Shabaab is now back at high numbers of between 12,000 to 13,000 fighters due to strong financing and heavy recruitment efforts following a diplomatic deal between Ethiopia and Somalia's breakaway Somaliland region, which signed a memorandum of understanding earlier in

2024. They were able to use this political deal to recruit many who oppose Ethiopian policies into al-Shabaab ranks. This resurgence of al-Shabaab has prompted the Somali government to [slow the withdrawal of African peacekeepers](#), warning of a potential security vacuum.

At the beginning of 2022, al-Shabaab was conducting some 200 attacks per month according to the May 2022 [UN Security Council](#) report. Al-Shabaab has continued to conduct numerous attacks in 2023 and 2024. The list below offers a very small selection:

- In [March 2024](#), a military base was briefly overrun by al-Shabaab fighters using suicide car bombs (Reuters, 23 March 2024).
- In [February 2024](#): "Al-Shabaab claimed an attack in Mogadishu that killed several Emirati military officers in Mogadishu, which is part of the group's campaign against the UAE for its role in training Somali forces" (ISW, Salafi-Jihadi Movement Weekly Update, 15 February 2024).
- In [June 2023](#), at least six people were killed in a beach hotel siege in Mogadishu (France24, 9 June 2023).
- In [June 2023](#), the Ugandan president reported that an al-Shabaab attack on a military base had killed 54 Ugandan soldiers serving in the Africa Union forces in Somalia (Al-Jazeera, 4 June 2023)

In February 2023, regional countries Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia and Djibouti met to discuss a [joint military offensive](#) against al-Shabaab (Al-Jazeera, 1 February 2023).

The United Nations Security Council has regularly extended the mandate of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia ([UN SOM](#)). In October 2023, it was extended until 31 October 2024 (UN Press Release, 31 October 2023). The Council had authorized similar extensions for the AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). But on 1 April 2022, the [UN Security Council voted unanimously](#) to authorize the creation of a new African Union-led peacekeeping force in Somalia, called the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), in place of the AMISOM mission of nearly 20,000 military, police and civilians that will be gradually reduced to zero by the end of 2024.

In addition to al-Shabaab, an al-Qaeda affiliate, there is an Islamic State group affiliate in Somalia operating in Puntland. In a 2022 [recruitment campaign](#), Christians were blamed for the alleged historical suffering and persecution of Muslims (Terrorism Info, 4 August 2022).

### **Gender perspective**

Against a backdrop of [extreme hostility](#) towards Christians, daily life is a challenge for both men and women (The Critic, 23 June 2022). If identified, Christian men are likely to be threatened, tortured or brutally killed. Women and girls also face the threat of death, in addition to sexual violence and/or forced marriages.

### **Christian origins**

[Arab sources](#) from 10th-12th century describe the port of Seylac (Zeila), near the border with Djibouti, as a majority Christian city (Aram, B I, Somalia's Judaeo-Christian heritage, in: Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology 22.2, 2003). However by the end of the 15th century the Christian presence had died out. Jesuits visiting the island Soqotra in 1542 were amazed to find that the inhabitants were clearly Christian, although illiterate. It had to wait until 1881 before Christianity was introduced again into Somalia. Christian faith spread in the following years, especially after the Italians took control of

the southern coast, including Mogadishu. However, the colonial powers in both British and Italian territories at times opposed the work of missionaries among Somalis for fear of instability.

*For further information see: Melton J & Baumann M (Editors), Religions of the World (2nd Edition), 2010, p.2664f.*

In 1886 a French Roman Catholic mission agency and the Swedish Overseas Lutheran Mission set up bases in the port town of Berbera (in the then British protectorate of Somaliland), in Mogadishu and Kismayo. The church grew rapidly. Lutheran missionaries from the Church of Sweden came to Somalia in 1898 and opened educational and medical facilities. They also engaged in evangelistic outreach and had their greatest success among a group of Bantu-speaking former slaves. The mission was disrupted when the Italian authorities expelled the missionaries in 1935. The work was revived after World War II and during the 1950s further Christian missions participated. The Swedish Lutheran Mission, Mennonite mission and Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) in particular left their mark but in 1969 President Mohamed Siad Barre's Socialist government came to power and all property owned by Christian missions and churches (including schools and clinics) was confiscated.

In 1972 the government nationalized all of the Roman Catholic Church's property. However, in spite of the changes in the Catholic Church's status and the resultant departure of much of its personnel, a [Diocese of Mogadishu](#) was created in 1975 (Living Word, accessed 2 January 2024). By 1976 all foreign missionaries had left the country. Two groups of Somali nationals, one formerly associated with the Mennonites and one with SIM, continued to meet after the missionaries left. In the 1980s, a few Mennonites were able to return.

Before the early 1990s, the presence of Christians in Somalia was visible. According to an article in Aleteia published on 15 July 2019, when the [Catholic cathedral](#) in Mogadishu "opened in 1928, it was the largest cathedral in Africa. Built in three years and designed in a Norman Gothic style by architect Antonio Vandone di Cortemilia, the church was heavily influenced by the Cefalù Cathedral in Sicily." In July 1989, Bishop Colombo was gunned down in the middle of a church service. The cathedral was looted and damaged and, after that, Islamic militants in the country and from other parts of the world began to target Christians and Christian symbols.

## Church spectrum today

*For security reasons no information can be published.*

## 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=Somalia>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.

## External Links

- Recent history: greeted enthusiastically - [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/08/world/africa/somalia-farmajo-mohamed-abdullahi-mohamed.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/08/world/africa/somalia-farmajo-mohamed-abdullahi-mohamed.html?_r=0)
- Recent history: April 2018 - <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/01/al-shabaab-attack-kills-ugandan-soldiers-in-somalia>
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- Political and legal landscape: signed a landmark federal law - <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/feb/24/somalia-edges-closer-to-first-democratic-election-in-half-a-century>
- Political and legal landscape: failed to break the deadlock - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/10/what-is-delaying-somalias-election>
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- Political and legal landscape: suspending - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/16/somalia-crisis-deepens-as-president-withdraws-pms-powers>
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