



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

### FACTSHEET RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN SOMALIA

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In 2026, the Federal Republic of Somalia faces ongoing challenges to religious freedom due to the simultaneous threats of violent insurgencies across the country and declining political control over the semi-autonomous Republic of Somaliland and the State of Puntland. The federal government currently controls only the capital, Mogadishu, and a few satellite towns as it suffers from ineffective military strategies in battling multiple armed groups that espouse a violent interpretation of Islam and represent significant threats to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in Somalia today. These groups include al-Shabaab—a longstanding terrorist group in the south and central parts of the country—as well as an emerging Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) affiliate in the north. By contrast, Somaliland has long maintained relative political and economic stability.

This publication outlines major religious freedom *issues* in the Federal Republic of Somalia, including the breakaway states of Somaliland and Puntland. This report also assesses the significant religious freedom violations of insurgent nonstate actors, especially al-Shabaab, which USCIRF continues to *recommend* for designation as an Entity of Particular Concern (EPC).

#### USCIRF's Mission

*To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.*

#### State and Societal Limitations on FoRB

The Federal Republic of Somalia has consistently failed over the years to transition to a stable democracy due to its weak rule of law, the persistent presence of insurgent groups, a state commitment to tribal secularism, and the influence of ambitious warlords who undermine governance while acting with neither legal nor popular authority. Somalia's 1960 Constitution established Islam as the official religion but limited the application of Shari'a law to the personal status of Muslims. However, the current constitution, introduced in 2012, *enshrines* Islam as the sole religion; it declares "the Holy Quran and the Sunna of our prophet Mohamed (PBUH)" as its foundation and states that "no religion other than Islam can be propagated in the Federal Republic of Somalia"—while simultaneously prohibiting discrimination against any person on the basis of religion. The constitution also requires all laws to comply "with the general principles of Shari'a"; forbids conversion from Islam; compels the teaching of Islam in public and private schools while exempting non-Muslim ones; and requires the president to be a Muslim.

Of Somalia's approximately 19 million people (2024), an estimated 0.5 percent are Christian, of which the majority are converts from Islam. Currently, no churches operate in the country and Christians use extreme caution when meeting in groups, often in private homes. The constitution does not permit any form of religious conversion and the government restricts evangelization. While available sources do not provide details on the government's detention of people on religious grounds, some reports suggest that

the government does not intervene on behalf of converts to Christianity who face death threats and stigmatization from their family members or neighbors.

Governmental and social adherence to Islamic law and often strict interpretations of it in Somalia affect women in particular. Women's [conversion](#) to Christianity draws intense social penalties resulting in little interference in family affairs. Girls and young women already face ongoing pressure to conform to Islamic practices, with some confronting the additional prospect of forced marriage, sexual violence, and even death if they consider converting to Christianity. Given that widows often face public humiliation or economic discrimination, including loss of jobs or inheritance, families may force Christian widows to marry Muslim men.

For example, in 2025, after a woman claimed to see a vision of Christ and began listening to Christian worship music, her family began to beat her and held her and her child [captive](#) at home. The same year, another convert showed videos about her faith to her father and mother, leading her husband to order her to renounce her faith or he would divorce her. He forced her into exile with her children under the threat of death from her family. The police reportedly did not intervene in the matter. In January 2026, a Muslim social media influencer in Somalia posted a video claiming that Christians posed a threat to Somalis, especially "vulnerable people like women and children and the poor people," resulting in public comments calling for Allah to "destroy the people underground" and that "the infidels should be caught and hanged." No available evidence suggests that the government investigated these threats of violence. In February 2026, the European Center for Law and Justice submitted a [written statement](#) to the United Nations Human Rights Council requesting that the Somali federal government better protect Christians from persecution.

The government of Somalia has also infringed on the religious freedom of its Muslim-majority population, notwithstanding its recent relaxation of restrictions on a religious holiday. In September of 2025, the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs reinstated the public holiday, which celebrated the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad (*mawlid al-nabi*). The ministry had previously banned the holiday out of fear that Islamist insurgents—whose interpretation of Islam generally prohibits such celebrations as aberrant "innovations"—would launch attacks against celebrants gathered for the occasion. Violent groups have, in fact, previously targeted Sufi Muslims, for whom *mawlid* celebrations play an important communal role, and forced many of them to leave the country. Despite this concession to popular religious practices, Somalia's preoccupation with eradicating the



threat of al-Shabaab has had an overall negative [effect](#) on FoRB. For example, while officials remain vigilant toward threats from insurgents, they often fail to prevent or rectify attacks on religious freedom within Somali society. Community members may interpret the police's reported failure to investigate crimes against converts as a license to monitor and regulate the religious practices of their family and friends. The government's narrow focus on potential insurgencies has also manifested in its constant surveillance of the populace and [measures](#) to curb perceived religious zealotry within it. For example, in August 2024, the government ordered security forces in the southern city of Kismayo to seize hundreds of *niqabs* (full face coverings) from female residents. Officials reportedly justified this restriction on Muslim women's choice of religious garb as a way of curbing the potential spread of al-Shabaab's religious ideology and out of fear that insurgents could exploit such coverings to carry out clandestine attacks.

### Al-Shabaab as Particularly Severe Threat to FoRB

Al-Shabaab and similar violent insurgent groups currently pose the greatest threat to ethnic Somalis from all religious communities across the Horn of Africa. Formally known as Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen (the Mujahidin Youth Movement), al-Shabaab is a terrorist insurgent group that is loosely affiliated with al-Qaeda and has been active in Somalia since 2006. The group rejects democracy and religious freedom in its pursuit of a long-term goal of uniting ethnic Somali-inhabited areas of East Africa into a Somali caliphate under violent interpretation of Islamic law. Al-Shabaab [considers](#) the Somali government an illegitimate, apostate entity dependent on foreign powers; the group therefore calls for religious violence against the

government along with its perceived global enemies. The group also uses local sympathizers to manage a territory-wide surveillance apparatus that reinforces actual control of all religious expression and practice. Any attempt on the part of a given individual to convert to Christianity, for example, quickly meets with accusations of so-called betrayals of clan and identity and risks mob violence as a result. Finally, al-Shabaab regularly uses assassinations and arrests of clan elders to [coerce](#) and intimidate the population.

Al-Shabaab's insurgency escalated with its capture of and religiously oppressive rule over central and southern Somalia from 2008 to 2011. During that time, it administered corporal punishments (*hudood*), imposed strict behavioral and dress norms, and viewed even the possession of a Bible as evidence of apostasy and therefore deserving of a death sentence. Even since that period, however, the group has maintained its operations, levying taxes and violently attempting to impose its harshly enforced version of Shari'a on local communities. Reportedly, al-Shabaab continues to forcibly conscript young Muslim men into its ranks. The group also demands that families within its territories send their relatives who have converted to Christianity to Islamic centers for indoctrination. Al-Shabaab fighters have also targeted Muslim worshippers at mosques as potential recruits as part of their campaign to regain or seize control of Somalia, and in 2022 it "declared war" on all non-Muslims in the country. In 2021, the Puntland government [executed](#) 21 members of al-Shabaab for their participation in terrorist attacks over the years in that state.

In May 2025, the group claimed responsibility for an attack that killed at least 10 people, mainly military recruits registering at the Damanyo base near Mogadishu. By November, its forces were threatening to capture the capital, forcing foreign embassies and others to evacuate.

## Religious Freedom Conditions in Somalia's Breakaway States

### Republic of Somaliland

Somaliland, one of five Federal Member States in Somalia, declared itself an independent state in 1991, but most international bodies and governments, including the United States, do not recognize it as such. Even so, Somaliland's administration conducts an independent foreign policy and engages in diplomatic relations with several foreign governments, including Ethiopia, Taiwan, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel—the latter of which, in fact, recognizes its claim of sovereign independence. Somalia's

federal government, in response, has continued to reject any further steps toward the secession and independent statehood of Somaliland. Somalia also disapproves of Somaliland's ongoing relations with Israel and has pressured Muslim religious leaders to denounce the breakaway state. In January 2026, the federal Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs ordered mosque leaders in Somalia to dedicate sermons to "the importance of Somali unity and the dangers of Jewish interference"—a reference to Israel's recognition of Somaliland's independence.

While Somaliland's relative economic and political stability stand in contrast to the Somali Federal Republic's continual security crises, both political entities share some intersections of religion, law, and policy. For example, Somaliland has declared itself an Islamic republic; enshrined Islamic principles in its constitution; applied Shari'a; and criminalized apostasy, blasphemy, and proselytization. Some advocates have also identified deficiencies in the territory's protection of its small Christian minority, representing only an estimated .05 percent of the population of 6.3 million. In 2017, Somaliland officials closed the only Catholic church in the country, Saint Anthony of Padua in Hargeisa, the capital, and as of this writing they have not permitted it to reopen. Witnesses have reported that over the past few years, authorities also detained an unspecified number of Christian converts on apostasy grounds but eventually released them and dropped the charges. Both mass protests and government interference, meanwhile, have stymied Christians' recent efforts to make use of historic religious sites. However, overall, the breakaway republic currently offers a more promising environment for religious freedom than its federal counterpart—largely due to the absence of armed nonstate actors that use religious justifications for their violence.

### State of Puntland

Puntland, like Somaliland, is a territory in northeastern Somalia. After declaring its autonomy from Federal Somalia in 1998, Puntland formed a separate government that international bodies have yet to recognize as a sovereign country. Its constitution declares Islam as the "only religion of Puntland State of Somalia," and "with the exception of Islam, no other religion shall be propagated in Puntland State." The constitution adds that the "laws and culture of the people shall be based on the Islamic religion while prohibiting any law and any culture that contravenes Islam." The political system is based on "the guiding principles of Islamic Sharia" which take precedence over "any personal liberties of any individuals" and must direct any policies related to education and the rights of women.

In Puntland, religious police monitor suspected converts to Christianity. One interlocutor reports that lack of international recognition has helped both Puntland and Somaliland conceal their FoRB violations. The tiny Christian community in Puntland—an estimated .05 percent of 4.9 million people—remains highly vulnerable to social hostility and surveillance by Muslim family members and neighbors, as well as legal prohibitions on any public activities including perceived proselytization.

While the very active and well-financed al-Shabaab dominates most of federal Somalia, ISIS in Somalia (ISIS-S), a small affiliate, operates strictly in Puntland, primarily in the Golis mountains. The group, numbering perhaps 400 fighters, has avoided contact with the federal Somali army, typically battling Puntland State's security forces. These forces recently succeeded in confining ISIS-S to several villages where it coerces businesses for "tribute" to pay fighters and support the group's activities, including recruitment. Anyone refusing to pay this extortion money faces grave violence. Since U.S. forces bombed ISIS positions in early 2025 and Puntland police captured one of the group's leaders, the affiliate has reportedly lost control of up to half of its territory. Its surviving leaders, largely in hiding, have also been left with degraded command and control capabilities and diminished recruitment pipelines.

In March 2026, Morocco captured an ISIS cell within its borders, exposing the transnational group's network of assets and resources across Africa, which stretch all the way into the Horn region, including Somalia. Through its affiliates, ISIS continues to grow its threats to religious communities in East Africa, where it circulates its members via diaspora communities, potentially moving them toward active combat zones, including Puntland, while threatening the whole of federal Somalia.

## Conclusion

Societal norms, government action, and geostrategic matters all play substantial roles in impeding substantial improvements of religious freedom in Somalia. Amid the looming threat of al-Shabaab's national-scale imposition of its violent religious ideology, Somalia's government in its current, precarious form continues to impose its own restrictions on the religious freedom of both the Muslim-majority population and members of the socially stigmatized Christian community.



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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan legislative branch agency established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.