

WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
2

Somalia



LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).

Key findings

Christians in Somalia are under extreme threat. They are explicitly targeted by al-Shabaab operatives, often being killed immediately upon discovery. The violent non-state actor, al-Shabaab, which subscribes to the doctrine of Wahhabism, advocates Sharia law as the basis for all aspects of life in Somalia and has expressed its desire to eradicate Christians from the country. Christians face violation of their religious freedom from family members and the community. Conversion to Christianity is regarded as a betrayal of family and clan. Even being suspected of being a convert to Christianity means life-threatening danger. Over recent years, the situation has worsened as Islamic militants have intensified their hunt for Christians, especially Christian leaders. In Somaliland, which is considered the better part of the country, those who are suspected are detained on the suspicion of conversion.

Quick facts

LEADER

Prime Minister Hamza Abdi Barre

POPULATION

16,842,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

Hundreds (OD estimate)

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Federal Parliamentary Republic



Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	Hundreds	-

Source¹

Somalia is viewed as a failed state and remains among the poorest and most fragile nations in the world. The years of chaos following the overthrow of President Mohamed Siad Barre's military regime in 1991 culminated in the rise of Sharia courts and radical Islamic groups like al-Shabaab. The country has become a patchwork of competing radical Islamic groups, clans and clan-based militias, making it extremely difficult to form a stable government.

Culture is patriarchal. Only 30% of children attend school, of which only 40% are girls. The widespread practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) results in many leaving schools due to debilitating scarring and infections. Early marriages also mean girls' education ending prematurely.

The 2012 [Constitution](#) denotes Islam as the state religion and gives supremacy to Sharia law. No other religion can be propagated. Almost all (99%) of the population is Sunni Muslim, and Christians are seen as damaging to the culture and regarded as "a high value target" by al-Shabaab and other radical

groups. Daily life is a challenge. If identified, Christian men might have their businesses boycotted, be threatened, tortured or killed. Women also face the threat of death, in addition to sexual violence and/or forced marriages. It is common for men, as well as women, to be killed if they leave Islam.

How the situation varies by region

No area is safe for Christians. However, Christians are most at risk in areas under the control of radical Islamic factions such as al-Shabaab. These are concentrated particularly in the south and south-west, including areas around Kismayo, Jamaamee, Marka, and El Hur. While northern regions like Somaliland and Puntland are more stable than the south, Christians are still at extreme risk of violence.



¹According to OD-estimate

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.

Historical Christian communities

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.

Converts to Christianity

Christians with a Muslim background face the most severe violations of their fundamental rights and are considered a high-value target by al-Shabaab operatives. In the country's very recent history, converts (or those accused of being converts) have often been killed on the spot when discovered.

Non-traditional Christian communities

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.



Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression:

Islamic militants operate freely in many regions, and kill Somalis who are suspected of being converts to Christianity. As the country attempts to stabilize and form a legitimate government, political leaders, and government officials tend to be overwhelmingly in favor of a strict interpretation of Sharia law.

Clan oppression:

Somali society is based around a strong clan identity, which is heavily intertwined with being Muslim. Family members and clan leaders view conversion to Christianity as a betrayal. As such, any Christian who is discovered is at extreme risk of immediate violence.

Organized corruption and crime:

Criminals profit from the lawlessness in Somalia. They work through a network of illegal trade routes and have strong connections to al-Shabaab. The money these cartels generate are used to buy weapons and fund attacks against Christians and other civilians.

Dictatorial paranoia:

Christians in the country face pressure from the government. It is the government that implement the laws which limit Christian rights in the country. The government in Somalia (Puntland, Somaliland, and Somalia) are denying Christians their rights.



How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Young female converts to Christianity remain one of the most vulnerable populations. Commonly, a woman suspected of Christianity will be humiliated in public, kept under strict house arrest, raped, abducted, forcibly married to a radical sheikh, or killed. If already married, she will likely be divorced and have her children taken away to ensure that they are raised in an Islamic way. Christian women also suffer when their husbands are imprisoned or killed; many are taken advantage of by male relatives, and the family often ends up impoverished.

- Abduction
- Denied access to Christian religious materials
- Denied access to social community / networks
- Denied custody of children
- Discrimination / harassment via education
- Enforced religious dress code
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Forced to flee town / country
- Incarceration by family / house arrest
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

MEN

Somalia is a patriarchal society with high social control. Somali men suspected of conversion to Christianity face extreme violations of their fundamental rights. They are at risk of being verbally abused, physically assaulted, having their businesses taken over, imprisoned, heavily threatened, tortured, abducted, or killed. Men face additional pressure because they are expected to lead their family in religious matters and can consequently be blamed if a family member

converts. Families forcefully send their young men to Islamic rehabilitation centers to be trained as al-Shabaab militia, including converts.

- Abduction
- Denied access to Christian religious materials
- Enforced religious dress code
- Imprisonment by the government
- Military / militia conscription / service against conscience
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2023	2	92
2022	3	91
2021	3	92
2020	3	92
2019	3	91

The overall score for Somalia has remained more or less stable at an extreme level, although there was a slight increase of 0.2 in the violence score. Christians in the country risk being killed by radical Islamic militants, and clan leaders, elders, and family members monitor the movements of any suspected Christian convert. In the WWL 2023 reporting period, the political landscape also deteriorated as a result of disagreement between tribal leaders, the government in power, opposition leaders, and even the international community about holding elections. This has resulted in boosting the morale of the radical Islamist groups, as did the take-over of power in Afghanistan by the Taliban.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

Due to security concerns, no specific examples are published here.

Private life

Owning Christian material is strictly forbidden. If found in possession of a Bible or other printed Christian material, the person is executed with the blessing of their relatives and community. Being suspected of conversion risks severe consequences. Converts must hide their conversion to Christianity even from family members.

Family life

Somali society assumes children to be Muslim. Raising children as Christian is extremely difficult, and even telling children about Christianity could risk radical members of the clan attacking the child's parents. All children must attend madrassa and take Islamic classes.

Community life

Somali society is conservative and Islamic teachings are imposed upon the population. Christian converts from a Muslim background are under constant pressure from members of their community, and monitored. Deviation from "good Muslim behavior" can be reported to groups like al-Shabaab, who carry out violent attacks on Christian groups.

National life

The Somali government believes that there are no Somali Christians, given that the Constitution forbids conversion from Islam. Freedom of expression is greatly restricted.

Church life

Christians are not allowed to consider rebuilding churches. An attempt to reopen a Catholic church in Mogadishu was not successful. Another attempt to reopen a Catholic church in Hargeisa was met with public outcry and hostility. There is constant monitoring to see if there are informal places of Christian worship (house churches) operating in the country.



International obligations & rights violated

Somalia has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in the following international treaties:

1. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)
2. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)
3. Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)
4. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)*

**Somalia has a reservation on CRC Art. 14 protecting children's freedom of religion or belief.*

Somalia is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- Christian converts are killed on the spot if their conversion is discovered or merely suspected (ICCPR Art. 6)
- Christian parents cannot raise their children according to their religious values (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)
- All Somali are assumed to be Muslim and forbidden to leave Islam (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Women converts are forcibly married and pressured to recant their beliefs (ICCPR Art. 23 and ICESCR Art. 10)



Situation of other religious minorities

No religious groups other than Sunni Islam have any meaningful rights in Somalia. In areas controlled by al-Shabaab, the situation has become so extreme that even Shia Muslims keep a very low profile. Moderate Sunnis are also targeted. Laws in Somalia prohibit the propagation of any religion other than Islam, and prohibit Muslims from converting or leaving Islam. The Constitution also states that all laws must comply with the general principles of Sharia. In this context, any other religion except (Sunni) Islam will experience severe challenges.



Open Doors in Somalia

Open Doors has been supporting Somali believers since the 1990s. Our vision is to see followers of Christianity grow to maturity in their faith and have nurturing relationships amid persecution. We seek to achieve that by facilitating discipleship, and equipping Christians to cope with severe persecution.

About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the Full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2023 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- The Full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology - as well as the complete WWL 2023 ranking and reports - can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
