



**Somali  
Mission**

Research, Train  
and Transform

# Faith under Fire: Overview of the Presence and Persecution of Christianity in Somalia

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Somali Mission

# Table Of Contents

<b>1. Executive Summary</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2. Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>3. Historical Background</b>	<b>5</b>
3.1. Early Christian Presence	5
3.2. Colonial Era Missions	6
3.3. Resistance and Decline	7
<b>4. Demographics and Denominations</b>	<b>8</b>
4.1. Christian Population in Somalia	8
4.2. Denominations and Worship Practices	9
<b>5. Legal context and Political Framework</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>6. Persecution and Human Rights Violations</b>	<b>11</b>
6.1. State-Level Restrictions and Legal Framework	11
6.2. Threats from Extremist Groups	11
6.3. Societal and Clan-Based Persecution	12
<b>7. Challenges &amp; Opportunities</b>	<b>13</b>
7.1. Challenges	13
7.2. Emerging Opportunities	13
<b>8. Recommendations</b>	<b>14</b>
8. 1. Legal & Institutional Reforms	14
8.2. International Advocacy & Designations	15
8.3. Support for Underground House Churches and Trauma counselling	15
8.4 Awareness, Prayer & Solidarity	15
8.5. Risk Mitigation & Security Planning	16
<b>9. Conclusion</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>10. References</b>	<b>17</b>

# 1. Executive Summary

Christianity in Somalia exists as an extremely small and vulnerable minority amidst a predominantly Muslim population. Historical missionary efforts during colonial periods established some Christian communities, but today, Somali Christians number only a few thousand at most, with most practicing their faith secretly due to strict religious laws and widespread persecution. Somalia's legal framework, based on Sharia law, criminalizes conversion from Islam and prohibits open worship, while extremist groups such as Al-Shabaab actively target Christians for violence. Despite these challenges, Christianity persists through underground networks within Somalia and a growing diaspora community abroad.

This report examines the historical context, demographic realities, legal restrictions, persecution dynamics, and presence of Christianity in Somalia. It highlights the urgent need for international advocacy, humanitarian support, and careful research to protect religious minorities facing severe human rights violations.

## 2. Introduction

Religious freedom is a fundamental human right, yet in some regions of the world, minority faiths face severe restrictions and dangers. Somalia, a nation in the Horn of Africa, is overwhelmingly Muslim, with Islam deeply embedded in its culture, law, and governance. Christianity, historically introduced through missionary work and trade, now exists only on the fringes of Somali society.

This report seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of Christianity's presence in Somalia, exploring its historical roots, current status, legal challenges, and the plight of Somali Christians both inside the country and in diaspora communities. The goal is to inform policymakers, human rights organizations, mission workers, and researchers about the risks and resilience of this minority faith group and to offer recommendations for improved protections and support.

The report draws upon academic literature, reports from human rights organizations, international religious freedom assessments, observations, and testimonies from Somali Christians and advocacy groups.

# 3. Historical Background

## 3.1. Early Christian Presence

Christianity's roots in the Somali Peninsula trace back to the early centuries of the Common Era. In his paper entitled, *Somalia's Judeo-Christian Heritage: A Preliminary Survey* (2003), Ben Aram details various forms of evidence indicating a Christian presence in Somalia before the advent of Islam. This evidence is categorized into three main areas:

- ***Written Historical Records.*** Arab historians from the 10th to 12th centuries, such as al-Mas'udi, al-Biruni, and al-Idrisi, described Seylac, a port in northwest Somalia, as a Christian city where a Christian majority coexisted with Muslim merchants (Aram, 2003). Additionally, St. Francis Xavier documented encountering inhabitants on Soqotra Island in 1542 who identified as converts of St. Thomas and practiced Lenten fasts similar to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Ibid, 2003).
- ***Archaeological Findings.*** In 1854, Richard Burton observed ruins in the Sanaag Region identified as a church and noted the presence of cross markings on graves (Aram, 2003). More recently, in 1991, an amateur Somali archaeologist named Cabdi discovered engraved stones with crosses and a stone structure believed to be a place of worship, further suggesting a pre-Islamic Christian presence (Ibid, 2003).
- ***Enduring Cultural Symbols and Practices.*** The cross symbol continues to be used in Somali culture for various superstitious purposes, including on camel brands and grave markers by certain clans, often referred to as "brand of the saints" (Ibid, 2003). Christian practices, like the use of the cross and observing Sunday as a day of rest, are believed to have diffused southward into Somali territories from highland Ethiopia and southern Arabia as early as 1300, particularly along the Shabeelle River valley (Ibid, 2003).

Collectively, this evidence points to a significant Christian presence in Somalia across different regions and historical periods prior to the establishment of Islam (Ibid, 2003). However, with the advent of Islam in the 7th and 8th centuries, Christianity gradually declined and eventually disappeared from the Somali coast. The spread of Islam led to the integration of Somali society into the broader Islamic world, overshadowing earlier Christian influences.

## 3.2. Colonial Era Missions

Christian missionary activity in Somalia resumed during the colonial era. In 1881, Roman Catholic missionaries from the Trinitarian Order arrived in British Somaliland, establishing orphanages and providing education and healthcare services (Ali, 2020). Their efforts resulted in the adoption and upbringing of several Somali children as Christians. The Roman Catholic Church (RCC) played a notable role in Somalia, especially in Italian Somaliland. It established a presence, built the Mogadishu Cathedral in 1928, and claimed thousands of Somali Catholic members, mainly among the Bantu population. The Church developed schools, orphanages, and hospitals, often with support from the Italian colonial government. The construction of the Mogadishu Cathedral symbolized the Catholic Church's presence and influence during the Italian colonial period. The cathedral served the spiritual needs of Italian colonial officers and their families, while also accommodating a small number of Somali converts.

Likewise, the Swedish Evangelical Mission (SEM), a Lutheran organization, commenced missionary activities in southern Somalia in 1898, albeit primarily targeting the Oromo ethnic group in Ethiopia at that time. Nonetheless, SEM ultimately established mission centers in Kismayo and surrounding areas. SEM's mission endeavors concentrated on delivering health services, education, and establishing churches. They quickly created a foothold throughout the local populace and gained converts. Joseph Ali, an individual of Somali ethnicity, was "probably the first Somali baptized into a Protestant church" in 1898 (A Legacy of Commitment: The Mission of SEM, 2016). Dahir Abdi was also a significant figure among the initial Somali converts referenced in SEM archives. He was brought to Sweden by Carl Cederqvist, "baptized in Falun in 1903, and started his studies at Johanneland", becoming the first theologically trained individual of Somali ethnicity to work alongside Swedish missionaries. The congregations established by SEM in the Jubba Valley from 1898 to 1935 had around 400–500 baptized members prior to the expulsion of SEM missionaries from Somalia by the Italians (Ibid).

In 1949, the United Nations resolved that the former Italian colony of Somalia would be designated as a UN Trust Territory under Italian administration, contingent upon Somalia achieving complete independence after a decade. In the early years of this period, North American missions sought to start missionary activities with Somalis. Somalia Mennonite Mission (SMM) commenced operations in Somalia in 1953, followed by the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) in 1954. During an investigation conducted by the SMM team in Somalia in 1950 prior to involvement, it was discovered that "most of those who had become Christians through the witness of the Swedish Evangelisk Fosterlands-Stiftelsen (EFS), prior to World War II, had returned to Islam" (Shenk, 1972:101). As a result, SMM chose to establish mission centers in the Jubba Valley as a means of reestablishing contact with the Christians who had

Despite encountering obstacles and gradual advancements in church growth during their two-decade involvement, both SMM and SIM collaborated in their efforts to witness for Somalis. In 1962, a Somali radicalized by Islam assassinated SMM missionary Marlin Grove, and in the subsequent years following Somalia's independence in 1960, the government prohibited the dissemination of any religion apart from Islam. Shenk asserts that growth decreased after 1968, accompanied by a decline in congregational attendance (Shenk 1972:322). Hellen Miller estimated the Somali Christian population in 1963 to be around thirty converts (Miller, 2006:63). Overall, during the two decades of SIM and SMM engagement, the number of Christians remained small.

### 3.3. Resistance and Decline

The introduction of Christianity faced significant resistance from Somali society. Despite missionary efforts, Christianity never gained a substantial foothold among the Somali population. The Dervish resistance in British Somaliland (1899–1920), led by Sayid Mohamed Abdallah Hassan, had significant effects on the political, religious, and social landscape of the region. One such consequence was the British colonial administration's decision to ban Christian missionary activities in British Somaliland due to fear of religious rebellion. The movement opposed Christian missionary activities, viewing them as a threat to Somali culture and Islam. Consequently, the British authorities recognized that attempts at Christian proselytization would provoke further resistance. In Italian Somaliland, the Italian colonial authorities expelled SEM missionaries from Jubba in 1935, resulting in the closure and confiscation of mission properties, which left Christians without worship facilities. In addition, persecution and social pressure forced many Christians to return back to Islam or at least pretend to be Muslims to avoid social exclusion and ostracism.

The rise of Somali nationalism and its subsequent independence in 1960 led to a decline in Christian missionary activities. The new government adopted a secular posture, allowing religious minorities to function without major restrictions. However, the political landscape shifted in the 1970s with the rise of the socialist government led by Mohamed Siyad Barre, which closed church-run schools and expelled missionaries. Furthermore, the Islamic awakening, which refers to religious, intellectual, and political developments from the mid-20th century onwards, emphasized a return to Islamic principles in public and private and had a profound effect on Somalis. Locally educated scholars and preachers influenced by Egyptian and Saudi Arabian ideologies, including the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafism, emerged and preached to safeguard against Western Christian influence. Their efforts played a significant role in the rise of Islamic radicalism and decline of traditional Islam and Christianity throughout Somalia. Since the collapse of the central government in Somalia in 1991, the small Christian communities have faced intense persecution. Numerous Christians lost their lives, while others sought refuge in neighboring countries such as Ethiopia and Kenya, where they managed to maintain small fellowships and Christian gatherings to some degree.

## 4. Demographics and Denominations

### 4.1. Christian Population in Somalia

Christianity constitutes a significantly tiny and marginalized minority in Somalia. Various estimates suggest that the Christian population may range from [a few hundred](#) to a few thousand individuals. In 2023, the Somali Bible Society issued a [census](#) indicating that more than 170,000 Somali Christians are present across Somalia, Djibouti, Ethiopia and Kenya. Although the Somali Mission cannot independently verify these figures, it has observed a notable increase in the Somali Christian demographic in recent years. Surveys conducted by Somali Mission affiliates over the past five years indicate that the majority of Somali Christians believe their number does not exceed a few thousand. Considering the social media presence of those involved in online evangelism, it is conceivable that the Christian community in the Horn of Africa may number in the thousands. Nevertheless, due to the predominant practice of faith in secret among Christians, and the grave social and legal consequences linked to apostasy, determining the precise number of Christians in Somalia is challenging. In territories governed by Al-Shabaab, the identification of a Christian conversion may result in [immediate execution](#).

## 4.2. Denominations and Worship Practices

Christian denominations in Somalia are limited, with the Catholic Church being the most established. The Catholic presence is centered in Mogadishu, where the Apostolic Vicariate of Mogadishu was historically active. However, due to ongoing conflicts and security concerns, the Catholic community now primarily operates [through humanitarian efforts via Caritas Somalia](#), which provides aid to vulnerable populations.

In the post-independence era, Protestant and Evangelical missionary activities discouraged the establishment of churches based on denominational affiliations. As a result, most Christians today do not affiliate with any specific denomination. Somali Christians predominantly remain unaffiliated and tend to live in isolation. While they may convene for fellowship meetings to engage in prayer and Bible study, they exhibit a deficiency in leadership and organizational structures. Recently, the Somali Evangelical Church (SEC) has demonstrated notable organizational capacity and continuity. SEC is present in various regions of the Somali-inhabited Horn of Africa and is led by multiple individuals with theological education, including some who are ordained ministers. Abebe Woyecha, in his unpublished MA thesis, identifies the Somali Evangelical Church as a "good model" for functionality, characterized by the presence of a pastor and elders (Woyecha, 2024:82).

Lay leaders, lacking formal training, primarily guide worship practices that typically include worship songs, prayer, Bible reading, and sermons. For security reasons, many believers choose to engage in online meetings through WhatsApp, Telegram, or Messenger groups. SEC functions like a liturgical church, featuring a structured worship practice that encompasses an opening prayer, worship songs, confession and absolution, recitation of the Creed (primarily the Apostle's Creed) for faith affirmation, Bible reading and sermon, and congregational prayer concluded with the Lord's Prayer. The church also has a liturgy for the service of holy sacraments, including baptism and Holy Communion.

Generally, there are no public churches in Somalia. The last functioning Catholic churches in Hargeisa and Mogadishu ceased functioning, and no public Christian places of worship have been rebuilt since. This absence of visible religious institutions further contributes to the secret nature of the Christian community, making it even more difficult to estimate its true size.

## 5. Legal context and Political Framework

Islam is deeply ingrained in Somali identity, and conversion to Christianity is viewed as a profound betrayal. Even the suspicion of conversion can lead to severe consequences, including ostracism, physical abuse, or death. Somalia's legal and political framework is grounded in Islamic principles, which significantly impact religious freedom, particularly for minority faiths such as Christianity. In Somali society, clan and community pressures play a significant role in enforcing religious conformity. Families and clans have been known to apply [vigilante justice in cases of apostasy](#), further marginalizing individuals who express or practice non-Islamic beliefs.

Since 1991, Somalia has lacked a viable central authority following the collapse of its central government. Somaliland declared independence in 1991, although it has not attained international recognition since its inception. It possesses a distinct constitution, governance structures, judicial system, currency, passport, and armed forces. Although Somalia implemented a federal system with a provisional constitution in 2012, the federal government remains weak, and al-Shabab, a terrorist group, persists in exerting authority over segments of southern Somalia.

The 2012 [Provisional Constitution](#) of the Federal Republic of Somalia establishes Islam as the state religion and prohibits the propagation of religions apart from Islam. It also mandates that no law may be enacted that contradicts the general principles of Shari'ah (Article 2: 1-3). Similarly, the constitutions of Somaliland (Article 5) and Puntland (Article 9) explicitly establish Islam as the state religion and prohibit the promotion of any religion apart from Islam. While [Somaliland's Constitution](#) mentions the right to religious freedom (Article 33:1), it has an additional clause that says, "Islamic Sharia does not accept that a Muslim can renounce his beliefs," which can be interpreted as banning Muslims from converting to another religion.

## 6. Persecution and Human Rights Violations

### 6.1. State-Level Restrictions and Legal Framework

Somalia's legal system is grounded in Islamic law (Shari'ah), which prohibits apostasy and proselytism. The 2012 Provisional Constitution designates Islam as the state religion and prohibits the propagation of any other faith. This legal framework creates an environment where conversion from Islam is not only socially unacceptable but also legally perilous. In regions like Puntland and Somaliland, [explicit legal provisions](#) further criminalize conversion from Islam, leading to arrests and legal actions against individuals accused of apostasy. Although Somalia's Penal Code does not explicitly criminalize apostasy, Shari'ah law, as interpreted in Somalia, considers conversion from Islam a serious offense. Individuals suspected of apostasy, blasphemy or proselytism face severe penalties, including imprisonment, harassment, and even death threats. In regions like Somaliland, [individuals accused of apostasy](#) have been sentenced to prison terms, with some cases resulting in conditional releases upon recantation of their faith.

The legal and societal restrictions create an environment where religious minorities, particularly Christians, must practice their faith in extreme secrecy. There are no known churches or public places of worship for non-Muslims in Somalia, and the Mogadishu Cathedral, once a symbol of the Catholic presence, is no longer used for Christian worship due to security concerns ([ACN International](#)). Likewise, efforts to reopen the Catholic church in Hargeisa, the capital of Somaliland, in 2017 were [unsuccessful](#) due to security issues, and the church remains closed to this day.

### 6.2. Threats from Extremist Groups

Al-Shabaab, an Islamist militant group affiliated with Al-Qaeda, controls significant portions of southern and central Somalia. The group enforces a strict interpretation of Shari'ah law and has been responsible for numerous killings of Christians, both within Somalia and across the border in Kenya. Al-Shabaab maintains a network of informants who report suspected Christian activities, making it nearly impossible for underground churches to operate safely. Individuals discovered practicing Christianity often face [immediate execution](#). The group also targets traditional Sufi Muslims and other religious minorities, viewing them as apostates.

### 6.3. Societal and Clan-Based Persecution

In Somali society, clan and community pressures play a significant role in enforcing religious conformity. Individuals suspected of converting to Christianity or engaging in proselytism may face ostracism, physical violence, or forced divorce. In some cases, families and clans have been known to apply vigilante justice in cases of apostasy, further marginalizing individuals who express or practice non-Islamic beliefs. However, some northern pastoralist tribes may shelter noteworthy Christian converts with higher social rank from their clan members. The late Somaliland public figure and Christian convert, Dr. Omar Dihod, was an example. He served as the Somaliland president's special advisor until his death in 2016. Upon his death, he received a state funeral attended by President Ahmed Silanyo. His clan protected him for his generosity and positive contributions to the community and clansmen.

While international human rights organizations and Christian advocacy groups have repeatedly highlighted the dire situation of the Somali Christians and lack of respect for religious freedom in Somalia, Christian conversion and practices are severely restricted. There are no known churches or public places of worship for non-Muslims in the country. The combination of restrictive laws, societal pressures, and extremist enforcement creates a perilous situation for Christians in Somalia, compelling them to live in constant [fear of discovery and persecution](#).

# 7. Challenges & Opportunities

## 7.1. Challenges

*Legal and Institutional Barriers:* The 2012 Provisional Constitution places Shari'ah above all laws, prohibiting the propagation of non-Islamic religions and mandating laws to align with Islamic principles ([Christian Persecution](#)). The self-declared independent state of Somaliland and Puntland further ban conversion from Islam and limit religious freedom, with penalties including [imprisonment for blasphemy or apostasy](#).

*Societal Pressure and extremist threats:* Somali Muslims account for more than 98% of the overall demography. Individuals who decide to leave Islam frequently face enormous obstacles that hinder their life. People who have rejected Islam frequently experience prejudice, intense pressure, and threats—from ostracism and forced divorce to violence. For these reasons, many Christians opt to keep a low profile and steer clear of attention. Even diaspora Christians remain secret due to fear of potential backlash. Additionally, radical Islamists spread hate messages against Christians, and extremist groups like al-Shabab, which controls large areas in southern Somalia, often execute anyone suspected of apostasy.

*Weak State Protection:* Somalia's central government collapsed in 1991, leaving the country without a central authority capable of upholding the rule of law and protecting minority communities. Regional governments also fail to ensure the safety of Christians, implying that those who openly express their faith face ongoing threats from extreme Islamists and vigilante acts by families and local groups attempting to enforce religious conformity beyond state legislation.

*Disunity among the Somali believers:* Disunity among Somali Christians is evident in all Somali-inhabited regions. This division arises from multiple factors, such as cultural backgrounds, competition or personal interests, and occasionally clan affiliations, but is primarily unrelated to theological beliefs or doctrinal differences. Such divisions may impede collaboration and collective efforts within the Somali Christian community.

## 7.2. Emerging Opportunities

*Unprecedented growth:* Despite potential risks and intense persecution, the population of Somali Christians has increased significantly in recent years. Although their number remains relatively small, this exceptional growth, as well as the recognition of Somali Christians by Somali Muslims, indicates a shift in mindset that inspires renewed optimism and trust. Digital platforms also enable Somali believers to gather for prayer and fellowship, as well as access Bible and discipleship resources.

*Diaspora Networks and Support:* Diaspora-based Somali Christians in Kenya, Ethiopia, North America, and Europe offer moral, spiritual support, and fellowship to Somali Christians in Somalia. These networks help converts remain connected under conditions of secrecy. Some participate and play a significant role in online evangelism and discipleship, and in cases of emergency, they provide logistical assistance and safe relocation options for victims of persecution.

*International and local Advocacy:* Organizations such as Open Doors (OD), Voice of the Martyrs (VoM), International Christian Response (ICR Canada), and CSI persist in documenting cases of persecution, organizing prayer and lobbying, and advocating for international protection and asylum. Open Doors consistently ranks Somalia as one of the most dangerous places for Christians (World Watch List #2 in 2025). It offers discipleship training, prayer networks, and discreet support to Somali converts across East Africa. Furthermore, local Somali advocates and human rights defenders are calling for religious freedom across Somalia, especially in light of the recent detention of Christians in Somaliland, a self-declared autonomous state. These [concerned citizens](#) report incidents of religious persecution to the relevant western diplomatic missions and work to promote religious freedom on local levels.

## 8. Recommendations

The following recommended actions aim to enhance protection, visibility, and support for Somali Christians particularly converts at extreme risk.

### 8. 1. Legal & Institutional Reforms

- ***Advocate for constitutional safeguards.*** Encourage Somalia's constitutional review process (ongoing since 2023), as well as regional constitutions like Somaliland and Puntland, to incorporate explicit protections for religious minorities, clarifying that religious freedom extends to non-Muslims.
- ***Engage the UN Human Rights Committee.*** Facilitate Somali participation in UN CCPR dialogues to highlight the plight of converts and urge reform. The [Committee's 2024](#) concluding observations call for urgent improvements to religious freedoms and protection for vulnerable groups.

## 8.2. International Advocacy & Designations

- ***Support CPC designation:*** Urge U.S. and international bodies (such as USCIRF) to reaffirm Somalia—and Al-Shabaab as a non-state actor—as [Countries of Particular Concern](#), prompting diplomatic pressure and resource allocation.
- ***Increase coordination among NGOs:*** Organizations like Open Doors, ICR Canada, and CSI should continue unified advocacy campaigns, pressing for access to justice, diplomatic engagement, and protective policies toward Somali Christians. Moreover, international advocacy networks should assist local individuals and groups in asserting their rights and offer platforms for articulating their concerns.

## 8.3. Support for Underground House Churches and Trauma counselling

- ***House church support:*** Support the emerging house churches and provide discipleship and leadership trainings for church leaders to ensure they are well-equipped to guide their communities. This initiative will foster spiritual growth and create a strong foundation for the churches to thrive in their mission.
- ***Fostering unity:*** It is essential for leaders and members alike to focus on shared values and common goals, promoting dialogue and understanding. By bridging these divides, the community can work more effectively to address challenges and support one another in their faith journeys.
- ***Trauma counselling for survivors:*** Offer discreet counseling, medical aid, and housing support for those harmed by family violence or extremist attacks.

## 8.4 Awareness, Prayer & Solidarity

- ***Global prayer mobilization:*** Promote participation in the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church every November and involve religious communities worldwide to highlight the crisis in Somalia.
- ***Localized regional awareness campaigns:*** Use different media platforms to elevate stories of Somali Christians—encouraging safe community support and cross-continental solidarity.

## 8.5. Risk Mitigation & Security Planning

- ***Emergency relocation pathways.*** Somali Christians frequently claim that their lives are in serious danger and that they need relocation and asylum in Europe or North America. Partner churches and mission agencies must carefully examine converts who are in danger and implement identifying methods. These methods should emphasize persons' safety and well-being while ensuring that their rights are protected throughout the process.
- ***Risk assessments for in-country support staff.*** Prioritize staff safety and implement strict operational security for missions and NGOs engaging local converts—ensuring confidentiality, safe transport, and exit options

## 9. Conclusion

Christianity in Somalia persists in extraordinary adversity. With a small population of Christians of between hundreds to thousands, most of whom are converts from Islam, the faith exists primarily in secret amid an overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim society. The 2012 Provisional Constitution formally embeds Sharia law and forbids the propagation of religions apart from Islam, effectively barring public Christian worship and limiting legal recourse for converts. Similarly, the self-declared state of Somaliland prohibits the promotion and practice of any religion other than Islam in its constitution. Somalia is consistently identified as one of the **most dangerous countries** for Christians ranked **#2** in Open Doors' [World Watch List 2025](#), second only to North Korea. Converts and underground believers face threats from extremist actors like Al-Shabaab, who enforce a severe interpretation of Shari'a, often executing suspected Christians or encouraging family or clan violence. While legal reforms are a distant prospect, support for house churches and emerging Christian communities, international advocacy, and risk mitigation offer pathways to improve the safety and visibility of Somali Christians. Coordinated action along these lines is essential to provide protection, amplify voices, and uphold religious freedom in Somalia.

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