



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

FACTSHEET

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RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN THE HORN OF AFRICA

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USCIRF's Mission

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

Religious Freedom Concerns in the Horn of Africa

Introduction

The Horn of Africa is a region of sub-Saharan Africa that borders the Indian Ocean, the Gulf of Aden, and parts of the Red Sea. In recent years, crises, insurgencies, and authoritarian regimes in the region have yielded religious repression and attacks on houses of worship and religious leaders. The authoritarian government in [Eritrea](#) refuses to register new religious organizations and prosecutes individuals for expressing or adhering to their religious beliefs, including detaining dozens of religious prisoners of conscience. In the context of Ethiopia's civil war, both government and rebel actors have targeted worshippers and religious infrastructure with violence. In Somalia, militant Islamist group *al Shabaab* has attacked mosques in its campaign to establish religious governance in the country, while authorities in Somalia and semi-autonomous Somaliland show worrying commitments to enforcing specific interpretations of Islam.

This factsheet highlights challenges facing freedom of religion or belief in several countries in the Horn of Africa.

Eritrea

Eritrea is a coastal state bordering the Red Sea that won its independence from neighboring Ethiopia in 1993. With a [population](#) of just over six million people, Eritrea's [religious demography](#) is difficult to assess. The government recognizes three Christian denominations (Eritrean Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant), estimated to comprise between 49 and 63 percent of the population, as well as Islam, estimated to comprise between 37 and 49 percent. Reports indicate that there are minority communities that adhere to [Baha'i](#), [Jewish](#), and traditional or indigenous faiths.

While the [Eritrean constitution](#) protects citizens' rights to freedom of thought, belief, conscience, and religious practice, the government regularly violates these rights in practice. The government of Eritrea requires all religious groups to apply for registration, with only the four approved communities approved to operate since 2002. Applications from other faith communities have been denied for being "defective" according to the Office of Religious Affairs. Without formal registration, other faith groups' rights are denied; they are prohibited from building or owning houses of worship or engaging in religious practices such as praying in groups.



The government continues to detain 20 Jehovah's Witnesses for conscientious objections and other expressions of their faith. In February 2022, [Patriarch Abune Antonios](#), the former leader of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, [died](#) at age 94 after spending a decade and a half under house arrest because of his religious beliefs and advocacy. In October, security forces [detained Catholic leaders](#) Bishop Fikremariam Hagos Tsalim, Father Mihretab Stefanos, and Friar Abbot Abraham at the airport in Asmara as they returned from traveling in Europe. The government did not publicize charges against Tsalim and his colleagues, but sources from the ground allege that they have been targeted for publicly highlighting human rights violations in Eritrea in their homilies.

Given government restrictions on religious practice, especially for unrecognized groups, as well as the continued detention of religious prisoners of conscience, USCIRF recommended in [2022](#) that the U.S. State Department continue to designate Eritrea a country of particular concern (CPC) for engaging in particularly severe violations of freedom of religion or belief. In December the State Department implemented this recommendation, designating Eritrea a CPC for the 18th consecutive year.

Ethiopia

Ethiopia, a landlocked nation in the Horn of Africa, is home to more than [113.6 million people](#). Approximately 43.8 percent of the population identify as Ethiopian Orthodox, 31.3 percent as Muslim, and 22.0 percent as Protestant, with adherents of Catholicism, traditional, and other beliefs comprising the remainder.

In 2020, mounting political tensions between the federal government led by President Abiy and Tigrayan regional political and ethnic elites [erupted into violence](#). All parties to the conflict have committed [war crimes](#), including [mass extrajudicial killings](#) of civilians and [the systematic use of sexual violence](#) and assault. Estimates suggest the conflict has killed as many as [half-a-million](#) people and resulted in devastating [economic](#), [humanitarian](#), and [food security](#) crises. Moreover, the military mobilization triggered by the Tigrayan crisis also escalated a [decades-old conflict](#) with ethno-political separatists in Ethiopia's central Oromiyya Region.

While the direct impacts of recent violence in Ethiopia have been predominantly ethnic, this violence has also created indirect implications for freedom of worship as parties to the conflict have attacked and desecrated [places of worship](#) during the conflict. In 2020, Ethiopian and Eritrean troops allegedly attacked the [city of Axum](#), considered a sacred city by Ethiopian Christians, and massacred hundreds of civilians. Government and rebel fighters have traded accusations over responsibility for the 2021 shelling and looting of the [Al Nejashi mosque](#), the oldest mosque in Africa. Soldiers have damaged ancient monasteries in the [Ger'alta region](#) and reportedly committed massacres in the ancient monasteries of Maryam Dängälät and Abba Yem'atta (Guh.). In Oromia, Ethiopian security forces attacked practitioners of an indigenous religion conducting the sacred [Waaqa Kadhaa](#) prayer ceremony and abducted at least 40 worshippers, including several spiritual leaders known as [Abba Gadaas](#). Officers beat and tortured the abductees, some of whom were systematically [executed](#).

Instability and impunity for violence in Ethiopia have also aggravated religious tensions in some regions and led to nonstate armed actors attacking houses of worship and religious communities. In April 2022, alleged anti-Muslim extremists [attacked](#) the funeral of a Muslim elder in the northern city of Gondar and killed 20 members of the Muslim community. In November 2022 an unidentified armed group killed at least 15 worshippers in a [drone](#)

[attack](#) on an Evangelical Christian church in Oromia State following similar drone attacks on other infrastructure in the area earlier that month.

Somalia

Somalia is an East African state extending from the Gulf of Aden down past the equator along the coast of the Indian Ocean. With just under [12.4 million people](#), Somalia is a Muslim majority country, with over 99 percent of its population estimated to adhere to Islam. Prominent Islamic schools of thought in Somalia include the Ash'ariyah theology, Shafi'i jurisprudence, and Sufism.

Al Shabaab gained prominence in a complex landscape of Salafi elites in dominating Somali politics in the early 2000s. Seeking to overthrow the central government and establish an Islamic state in accordance with its version of Shari'a, *al Shabaab* enforces its own [interpretation of Shari'a](#) in its areas of control, including prohibiting movies and music, khat (a narcotic plant that is often chewed), smoking, and the shaving of beards.

Al Shabaab fighters have targeted mosques and worshippers in their military campaign to seize control of Somalia. In 2020, a suicide bomber wearing a vest laden with explosives targeted the Muslim congregation at the [Qaadim mosque](#) in Kismayo as people were leaving the mosque after performing Friday prayers, killing six people. Later that year *al Shabaab* assassinated a local official as he left a [mosque](#) in Puntland from Friday worship. In 2022, armed *al Shabaab* [militants raided two mosques](#) in Mandera during prayers, using the platform to declare war on non-Muslims and lecture the worshippers about joining their cause. In July of that year alleged *al Shabaab* fighters killed a federal official with a bomb attack on a [mosque in Baidoa](#) during Friday prayers.

Government efforts to combat *al Shabaab* have also put Somalis' rights to freedom of religion or belief at risk. The government recently prohibited the use of the term *al Shabaab*, instead requiring the public and media to refer to the group as [Khawarji](#), a derogatory term that means "a deviation from Islam" or "a deviant sect." The government also announced in late 2022 that it will regulate Friday sermons in mosques across the country to fight *al Shabaab* ideology and "unify the sermons." Despite a public safety justification for such policies in the context of an active violent insurgency, these actions strongly imply that the Somali government maintains and seeks to enforce a particular interpretation of Islam and may intimidate or retaliate against Somalis who interpret Islam differently.

For example, recently the Speaker of Somalia's Lower House of Parliament rejected a revised law prohibiting sexual abuse, saying that he would not table any laws that he interpreted as [contrary to the Islamic religion](#).

Additionally, authorities in the semi-autonomous region of Somaliland in northern Somalia have also taken legal action against Christian converts. Somaliland, which considers itself independent from Somalia but remains unrecognized by most international bodies, identifies as an Islamic country, [enshrines Islamic principles](#) in its constitution, applies Shari'a law, and criminalizes blasphemy, apostasy, and proselytization. In the past three years, there have been several cases of Somaliland authorities detaining Christian converts on these charges. Although some cases have been dropped due to international pressure, others remain pending.

Conclusion

The U.S. government engages in the Horn of Africa in several ways. The United States routinely designates Eritrea a country of particular concern (CPC) and enacts sanctions against Eritrean government authorities committing religious freedom and human rights abuses. The U.S. government has also [spearheaded](#) efforts to [address atrocities](#) and pursue a [political solution](#) to the Tigray conflict in Ethiopia. In Somalia, the U.S. [armed forces](#) conduct counterterrorism operations and trainings and support the Somali forces and the African Union mission in their efforts to neutralize *al Shabaab*. Cumulatively, the U.S. government has spent hundreds of millions of dollars in humanitarian and security assistance in the region.

For many religious communities in several countries in the Horn of Africa, worship and religious practice have become dangerous. While authoritarian regimes seek to exercise control over the religious beliefs and practices of their citizens, military and rebel fighters and Islamist insurgents view houses of worship as legitimate targets of violence in the context of warfare, despite international law. These trends pose a threat to freedom of religion or belief for individuals and communities in Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia. U.S. embassies and State Department regional bureaus setting policy priorities for the region should incorporate analyses of religious freedom risks into their policy- and decision-making protocols and ultimately strengthen efforts to promote freedom of religion or belief in the context of these security and human rights crises.



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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