

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2026

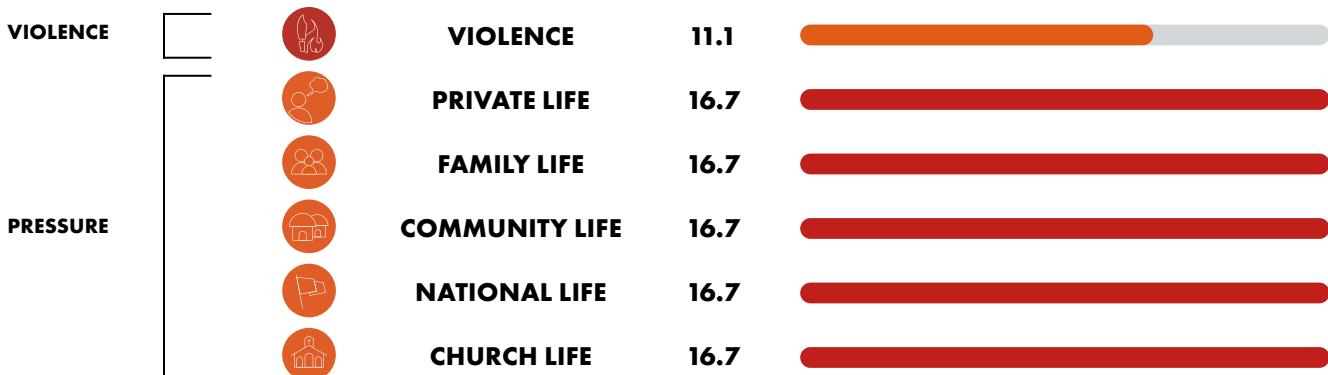
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

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 ( $6 \times 16.7 = 100$ ).

### Key findings

Christians in Somalia face extreme persecution in a rapidly deteriorating security and political landscape. Al-Shabaab, despite previous losses, has resurged, exploiting federal fragmentation and tensions between the central government and regional states like Jubaland. This power vacuum has allowed the group to reclaim territory, particularly in the south near the Kenyan border. Rising hostilities between Somalia and Ethiopia, fueled by maritime disputes and troop withdrawals, have further destabilized the region. Ethiopia's reduced role in Africa Union's peacekeeping force [African Union Transition Mission in Somalia](#) (ATMIS) has weakened counterinsurgency efforts, exposing vulnerable populations. Al-Shabaab continues its campaign to eliminate Christianity, enforcing strict Sharia law and targeting Christian converts, especially Muslim-background believers. Social surveillance reinforces this threat: conversion is seen as a betrayal of clan and identity, often resulting in community-driven violence. Al-Shabaab's survival is bolstered by criminal networks, allowing it to sustain governance, fund operations, and continue its violent suppression of all Christian presence. There is no legal or social protection for Christians. Worship must take place in total secrecy.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

Prime Minister Hamza Abdi Barre

### POPULATION

19,282,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

Hundreds (Open Doors estimate)

### MAIN RELIGION

Islam

### GOVERNMENT

Federal Parliamentary Republic



© Alamy

## Context

Religious context	Number of adherents	% of adherents in country
Christians	*	-
Muslims	19,253,000	99.9
Ethnic religionist	12,900	0.0
Others	16,100	0.1
<b>Total</b>		<b>100%</b>

Source<sup>1</sup>. \*For security reasons no numbers can be provided.

The persecution of Christians in Somalia is deeply embedded in the country's political, religious, and social order shaped by decades of authoritarianism, civil war and militant Islamism. During the rule of Mohamed Siad Barre (1969–1991), Somalia embraced "Scientific Socialism," which imposed secular modernization while simultaneously suppressing religious minorities. Churches were closed, missionaries expelled, and Christians harassed or killed by state security forces. This repression, paradoxically, coexisted with growing Islamist sentiment that viewed Christianity as a foreign imposition.

Following Barre's collapse in 1991, Somalia descended into chaos. Clan-based militias, warlords, and eventually jihadist movements filled the vacuum. By the mid-2000s, al-Shabaab, an al-Qaeda affiliate, had emerged as the dominant insurgent force, controlling significant parts of southern and central Somalia. Despite military pressure from AMISOM (now ATMIS) and the Somali government, al-Shabaab remains deeply entrenched,

drawing support from criminal economies and exploiting federal fragmentation and regional disputes.

The 2012 provisional constitution enshrines Islam as the state religion and prohibits laws contrary to Sharia. Christianity is effectively criminalized, especially conversion from Islam. Muslim-background believers face execution by al-Shabaab, honor killings by their clans and total social exclusion. Christian women are at risk of forced marriage, assault and disappearance.

Even in semi-autonomous regions like Puntland and Somaliland, hostility persists. Both uphold Islam as the sole legal religion. Attempts to reopen churches in Hargeisa have sparked public protests and arrests. In Puntland, religious police monitor suspected converts. These regions' lack of international recognition further shields rights violations from scrutiny.

Tensions with Ethiopia—triggered by maritime disputes and port agreements with Somaliland—have weakened regional security. Ethiopia's military drawdown has created operational gaps that al-Shabaab now exploits. The insurgent group also sustains itself through transnational organized crime, including smuggling and extortion, making it resilient and difficult to dislodge.

In Somalia, the persecution of Christians is not limited to armed actors. It is woven into legal structures, social customs, and political power dynamics. For Somali Christians, survival depends on secrecy; their faith is practiced underground, in a society where public worship, legal protection, and communal solidarity are all absent.

<sup>1</sup> Other refers to all the rest to make up 100%: Gina A. Zurlo, ed., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2025 – adapted to incorporate OD-estimate

## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### ISLAMIC OPPRESSION

Islamic oppression is the dominant force behind Christian persecution in Somalia. Al-Shabaab, the most powerful jihadist group in the country, enforces a brutal version of Sharia law across much of southern and central Somalia. Christians—especially Muslim-background believers—are publicly executed, often as warnings to others. Even in areas under the Somali federal government, Puntland, and Somaliland, conservative Islamic norms pervade political and legal systems. The 2012 Provisional Constitution prohibits the propagation of other religions and institutionalizes Islam as the state religion. This creates a legal framework that suppresses all Christian expression and equates religious diversity with treason.

### CLAN OPPRESSION

Somali identity is inseparable from clan loyalty. Converting to Christianity is seen not just as religious betrayal, but as a rejection of one's lineage and community. Converts face honor-based violence, disownment, or execution, often at the hands of their own families. With clan structures overriding state authority, converts have no legal protection and must live in hiding.

### ORGANIZED CORRUPTION AND CRIME

Somalia's lawlessness enables criminal networks, many aligned with or supporting al-Shabaab, to flourish. These networks traffic weapons, people and resources, sustaining violence and extremist operations. Christians often fall victim to both ideological targeting and the collateral damage of a criminalized war economy.

### DIKTATORIAL PARANOIA

Somalia is not a unified dictatorship, but its weak and divided government often acts in an authoritarian way. Christian identity is viewed as a foreign threat. Officials, often influenced by Islamist ideology, participate in or condone surveillance, harassment, and intimidation—creating an environment where Christianity is effectively criminalized.

## How the situation varies by region

No part of Somalia offers full safety for Christians, but the risk is most acute in areas under al-Shabaab control, particularly in the south and south-west—including Kismayo, Jamaame, Marka and El Hur. In these regions, al-Shabaab enforces a brutal version of Sharia law and openly executes those found to be Christian, especially converts from Islam. In Northern regions such as Somaliland and Puntland, Christians remain highly vulnerable due to widespread social hostility, surveillance and legal prohibitions against conversion and proselytization. In Somaliland, attempts to reopen Christian places of worship have led to protests, arrests and public backlash.

## 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 rights and are considered a high-value target by al-Shabaab operatives. Converts to Christianity (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.



## How are men and women differently affected?

### WOMEN

Somalia's women face severe gender inequality, with FGM affecting nearly all girls, high child marriage rates and widespread displacement. In IDP camps, women and girls risk rape, exploitation and abuse. Female converts to Christianity are especially vulnerable, facing public humiliation, house arrest, forced marriage, rape or death. Widows may be coerced into marrying Muslim men and Christian girls risk being abducted then forced to convert. Economic discrimination, including inheritance laws, leaves widows and daughters impoverished. Christian girls in schools face pressure to conform to Islamic practices.

#### **Female typical pressure points:**

- Abduction
- Denied access to social community/networks
- Denied custody of children
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Forced out of home/expulsion
- Targeted seduction
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

### MEN

Somalia's patriarchal, clan-based society ties male identity closely to Islam, leaving converts highly vulnerable. Men and boys suspected of converting to Christianity risk assault, torture, abduction, imprisonment, or death - even from their own families. Al-Shabaab forcibly recruits young men, while families may send converts to Islamic centers for indoctrination. Converts face public tests of loyalty, loss of inheritance, denial of education and coercion to renounce their faith. Discovery leads to stigma and hardship for families, with widows and children left impoverished. Most men retreat further underground, weakening church leadership.

#### **Male typical pressure points:**

- Abduction
- Imprisonment by government
- Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological

## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2026	2	94
2025	2	94
2024	2	93
2023	2	92
2022	3	91

Somalia scores 94 points in WWL 2026, essentially the same as in WWL 2025. Over the past five years, the country has consistently remained above the 90-point threshold, reflecting a situation that has barely shifted in severity. Life for Christians remains exceptionally fragile. They cannot meet openly, reveal their faith or rely on state protection. Al-Shabaab's dominance in many areas, combined with pervasive clan surveillance and the absence of functioning national institutions, leaves Christians exposed to immediate and often lethal retaliation. Even suspicion of Christian practice can lead to disappearance, targeted killing, or collective punishment of families.



© Alamy

# Examples of violence in the reporting period

For security reasons, no specific details of violence against Christians can be published.

## PRIVATE LIFE

Private life for Somali Christians, especially Muslim-background believers, is marked by fear and concealment. Possessing Christian materials like a Bible or audio message is treated as proof of apostasy, often punishable by death. In many cases, relatives or clan members carry out or approve the execution, viewing it as both Sharia-compliant and an act of clan loyalty. Converts must hide every expression of faith: prayers are silent, discussions are avoided and ritual participation faked. Even hesitation to follow Islamic practices, such as missing prayers, raises suspicion. In such conditions, practicing faith becomes dangerous and is limited to the most inner private life.



## FAMILY LIFE

The family is central to Somali identity and often becomes the enforcer of Islamic conformity. Children are automatically assumed to be Muslim, deviation is met with hostility. Parents who teach Christianity to their children face violence, denunciation or death, sometimes from extended family. All children must attend Islamic education and there is no legal pathway to opt out. Christian parents are forced into an impossible dilemma: protect their children by concealing their faith or risk losing them to indoctrination or retaliation.

## COMMUNITY LIFE

Public life offers no safety for Christians. Islamic practice is publicly enforced through mosques, clan elders and community informants. Converts are closely watched for signs of deviation, such as not attending Friday prayers or fasting during Ramadan. Accusations are often passed to al-Shabaab, who act swiftly and violently. Any attempt to form support networks risks exposure. Christians are forced to perform public conformity while remaining spiritually isolated.

## NATIONAL LIFE

At the national level, Christianity is denied by law and policy. The 2012 Provisional Constitution enshrines Islam as the sole religion and bans proselytism. The government does not acknowledge Somali Christians, and officials often claim they do not exist. There are no legal protections and state actors sometimes participate in persecution, reinforcing the absence of religious freedom.

## CHURCH LIFE

Formal church life has been extinguished. All registered churches have been closed or destroyed. Attempts to reopen even symbolic Christian spaces—such as in Hargeisa—have faced mass protests and government suppression. House churches operate under extreme secrecy and disband at signs of risk. Christian worship in Somalia is underground and pursued at great personal cost.

## International obligations & rights violated

**Somalia has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights under 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.



## Open Doors in Somalia

Open Doors has been supporting Somali believers across the Horn of Africa (note: not believers in Somalia) since the 1990s. Our vision is to see followers of Christ grow to maturity in their faith and have nurturing relationships amid persecution. We seek to achieve that by:

- Facilitating discipleship
- Equipping Christians to cope with severe persecution



---

## ABOUT THIS DOSSIER

- The content of this Country Dossier is based on detailed analysis carried out by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. This dossier may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2026 Open Doors International.
- All 50 Country Dossiers – along with the latest update of WWL Methodology – can be accessed [here](#).
- The WWL 2026 reporting period was 01 October 2024 - 30 September 2025.

*Most photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.*