



Reaching the Nations International Church Growth Almanac

Country reports on the LDS Church around the world from a landmark almanac. Includes detailed analysis of history, context, culture, needs, challenges and opportunities for church growth.



Djibouti

Population: 0.81 millions (#164 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 23,200 square km. Located in East Africa, Djibouti is a small country on the coast of the Gulf of Aden that borders Somalia, Ethiopia, and Eritrea. Plains occupy most of the terrain with hills and mountains in central areas near the coast. The climate consists of hot, dry desert with inadequate fresh water supplies to sustain human activity. Other environmental issues include little arable land, desertification, water pollution, and human threats to endangered species. Earthquakes, droughts, and flash flooding are natural hazards. Djibouti is divided into six administrative districts.

Peoples

Somali: 60%

Afar: 35%

Other: 5%

Afars were among the first to settle Djibouti and at one time controlled more than two-thirds of the nation. Afars today reside in the north, whereas Somalis populate the south. Issa-Somalis are the largest Somali clan. Conflict between Issa-Somalis and Afars has continued for many years. Somalis continue to immigrate as refugees from neighboring Somalia. There has also been conflict between recent immigrant groups and native Djiboutians.^[1] Refugees and migrants from Yemen have come in increasing numbers in recent years due to the Yemeni Civil War.

Population: 865,267 (July 2017)

Annual Growth Rate: 2.16% (2017)

Fertility Rate: 2.31 children born per woman (2017)

Life Expectancy: 61.0 male, 66.2 female (2017)

Languages: Somali (40%), Afar (13.5%), Arabic dialects (10%), French (1.5%), other (35%). French and Arabic are official

languages, but Somali and Afar are most widely spoken as first and second languages.

Literacy: 67.9% (2003)

History

Djibouti's maritime position and location bridging Africa and the Arabian Peninsula have significantly shaped its history. Trade routes between Africa and Asia often traveled through Djibouti. Islam spread to the region shortly after its advent in the seventh century. The French took interest in the geopolitical importance of the area and established French Somaliland. Prior to independence in 1977, Djibouti was known as the French Territory of the Afars and the Issas. The first president, Hassan Gouled Aptidon, ruled for more than two decades under an authoritarian one-party government. Civil war between Issa-Somali-led government and the Afars occurred in the 1990s and ended in 2001. Democratic elections first occurred in 1999 and again in 2005. The United States and France maintain strong political ties.

Culture

Traditional cuisine is based on animal products originating from herds maintained by nomadic pastoralists. Grains are widely consumed and in cities European foods are available. Many men cultivate and chew qat—an evergreen shrub found in some areas of East Africa and the Middle East that has mild narcotic properties. Alcohol and cigarette consumption rates are low. Polygamy is legal and still practiced.

Economy

GDP per capita: \$3,600 (2017) [6.05% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.473

Corruption Index: 31 (2017)

The economy depends on its geostrategic location and services provided to trade and travel. Many trade goods transit through Djibouti. Port activity primarily consists of imports and exports bound for Ethiopia. Djibouti controls some shipping lanes in the Red Sea. The only United States military base in Sub-Saharan Africa is located in Djibouti and is vital to counterterrorism operations. Natural resources are scarce, and unemployment is high (nearly 40% nationwide and nearly 80% for youth). Services and industry produce 76% and 21% of the GDP, respectively. Most people residing outside the capital city are pastoralists and live nomadic lives with their livestock. Agricultural products include fruit, vegetables, and animal products. Primary trade partners include Ethiopia, the United Arab Emirates, Somalia, and France. Djibouti suffers from major corruption issues, particularly human trafficking linked to the sex trade and domestic servants for the region.

Faiths

Muslim: 94%

Christian and others: 6%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Catholic – 5,000

Latter-day Saints – less than 25 – 1

Religion

The population is almost entirely Muslim. Citizens are officially regarded as Muslim by the government unless they specifically indicate otherwise. Most non-Muslims are Christians. Notable Christian groups with a presence in Djibouti include Roman Catholics, Protestants, Ethiopian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, and Jehovah's Witnesses.[\[2\]](#)

Religious Freedom

The constitution protects religious freedom, which is usually upheld by the government. Islam is the state religion. The government does not impose penalties or restrictions on Muslims not active in their faith or on non-Muslims. Muslim and non-Muslim groups alike must register with the government to operate in the country. The government conducts a thorough investigation of religious group applicants. Religious groups are required to obtain approval from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, sign a one-year long agreement that describes the group's activities, and submit quarterly reports. Although there are no laws banning proselytism, it is strongly discouraged, and most non-Muslim groups do not engage in open missionary work. Nevertheless, Christian leaders report that they are permitted to operate freely. There are reports of minor religious intolerance toward non-Muslims, but overall, Muslims and other religious groups tend to live harmoniously. Conversion from Islam to other religions is discouraged.[\[3\]](#)

Largest Cities

Urban: 78%

Djibouti, **'Ali Sabieh, Tadjoura, Obock, Dikhil, 'Arta, Holhol, Dorra, Gâlâfi, Loyada.**

Cities listed in **bold** have no LDS congregation.

One of the ten largest cities may have an LDS congregation. Over 80% of the national population lives in the ten largest cities. The city of Djibouti accounts for 64% of the population.

LDS History

The Africa Area and later the Africa Southeast Area administered Djibouti. The Kenya Nairobi Mission included Djibouti until it was reassigned to the Uganda Kampala Mission in 2009. A group for members in United States military has operated for at least a couple of decades. Another small group functioned in the late 2000s for an American family and a returned missionary. The Djibouti Military Branch was discontinued in 2016.

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: less than 25 (2018)

Members in the United States military or other United States employees and their families account for most Church membership.[\[4\]](#) Only a few, if any, native or African members reside in the country.

Congregational Growth

Branches: 1 Groups: 1 (2018)

In 2010, the Church organized its first independent branch named the Djibouti Military Branch. The branch was discontinued in 2016. Sometime in approximately 2017 Djibouti was unassigned from the Uganda Kampala Mission and reassigned to the direct supervision of the Africa Southeast Area. A member group operated in 2017. The Church organized the Africa Southeast Area - Djibouti (Administrative) Branch in early 2018 in an apparent effort to supervise group meetings on the military base, any private church meetings in member homes, and to keep track of isolated members.

Activity and Retention

Most members are likely active in the Church. Children of record baptisms occur. One such baptism for a foreign family in 2017 had as many as fifty people in attendance, most of whom are not members of the Church.[\[5\]](#) There were eighteen people who attended sacrament meeting with Elder Kevin S. Hamilton.[\[6\]](#)

Language Materials

Languages with LDS Scripture: Arabic, English, French.

All LDS scriptures are available in Arabic and French. A wide range of ecclesiastic materials are available in Arabic and French.

Church materials in Somali consist of Gospel Principles and The Prophet Joseph Smith's Testimony. Translations of the sacrament prayers, Gospel Fundamentals, and The Prophet Joseph Smith's Testimony are available in Afar.

Meetinghouses

Church meetings are likely held in a servicemen chapel on Camp Lemonnier. Small groups may meet in the privacy of members' homes.

Health and Safety

HIV/AIDS infected 1.3% of the adult population in 2016. Methods of infection include illicit sexual relations, drug use, HIV-positive mothers, and contaminated needles.

Humanitarian and Development Work

Members in North Carolina participated in a U.S. military led humanitarian effort in 2007. Members assembled one hundred hygiene kits and donated clothes and schools and medical supplies.^[7] The Church has conducted two humanitarian and development projects (one emergency response project and one refugee response project) in Djibouti since 1985.^[8]

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

Unlike most of its neighbors, Djibouti demonstrates considerably more tolerance towards non-Muslims and enjoys many aspects of freedom of religion. Open proselytism is socially discouraged, indicating that future LDS missionaries assigned to serve in Djibouti would most likely work through member referrals and contacts gained through humanitarian work. The Church would have to be diligent in meeting the strict guidelines to maintain registration with the government if the Church becomes registered one day.

Cultural Issues

The Somali and Afar are the most prominent people groups and both are homogenously Muslim. The Church has yet to develop teaching and proselytism materials tailored to the religious background of Muslims. Conversion of Muslims to Christianity is discouraged and converts are often persecuted. As a result, converts among ethnic minority groups and foreigners appear most likely once an LDS presence is established. The chewing of qat is a cultural habit that stands against LDS church teachings. Those practicing polygamy who desire to be baptized must end polygamous marriages in divorce and be interviewed by a member of the mission or area presidency.

National Outreach

The concentration of the majority of the population in the capital requires fewer mission outreach centers once formal missionary work begins. Initial mission efforts will most likely be limited to the capital for many years or decades. The Church will likely face major challenges reaching those living as nomads or residing in small villages due to cultural restrictions, limited mission resources for a country with less than one million inhabitants, and possible safety issues in conflict zones. A comparatively small population, distance from the nearest mission headquarters in Kampala, Uganda and a homogenously Muslim population may discourage serious interest by mission and area leaders to consider missionary efforts in Djibouti for many years or decades to come.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Member activity and convert retention rates are similar to that of other locations in Muslim-majority nations with a high concentration of LDS United States military personnel.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

Future proselytism prospects are complicated by ongoing conflict between the Afars and Issa-Somalis. Non-Africans constitute the majority of Church membership, leading to significant challenges fellowshiping and introducing the Church to natives.

Language Issues

At least 65% of the population has some Church materials translated into their native language. Low literacy rates are a major problem.

Leadership

Church leadership appears to be almost entirely comprised of U.S. military personnel. The Church may struggle to develop local leadership among Somalis and Afars due to low receptivity, the small number of members among these ethnic groups around the world, and distance from area headquarters in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Temple

Djibouti is currently assigned to the Johannesburg South Africa Temple district, but may be reassigned to the Nairobi Kenya Temple once it is completed. As most members are in the U.S. military, many appear to attend the Frankfurt Germany Temple like their counterparts in the Middle East. Inordinate distances and traveling costs limit temple attendance.

Comparative Growth

Djibouti shares more commonalities with the Middle East than Africa in terms of Church membership, as most members are on temporary assignment with the United States military. Like other homogenously Muslim nations in North Africa and in East Africa, there appear to be few, if any, native Latter-day Saints in Djibouti.

Many Christian groups do not report membership numbers and church statistics for Djibouti due to strong Islamic influences and the small number of Christian followers. Christian groups appear most successful attracting converts among Ethiopian Christians and other immigrant groups.

Future Prospects

Opportunities for mission outreach in Djibouti appear more favorable than other homogeneously Muslim countries in the region due to relative tolerance of non-Muslims and foreign missionaries working on humanitarian assignment but may be limited by low receptivity and cultural pressures against conversion. However, the largely homogenous Muslim population may become less accommodating toward Christian groups in the future in view of the heavy restrictions that Christians face in large, influential nations such as Yemen and Somalia. The lack of native Djiboutian Latter-day Saints to assist in mission efforts in a culture where open proselytism is frowned upon will likely continue to delay any organized mission outreach efforts for years or decades to come. Furthermore, recent opinions shared by area leadership suggest no interest in missionary efforts given the prominence of Islam in Djibouti culture.

[1] "Djibouti," Countries and their Cultures, retrieved 5 June 2010. <http://www.everyculture.com/Cr-Ga/Djibouti.html>

[2] "Djibouti," International Religious Freedom Report 2016. Accessed 24 July 2018.
<https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2016religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2016&dlid=268642#wrapper>

[3] "Djibouti," International Religious Freedom Report 2016. Accessed 24 July 2018.
<https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2016religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2016&dlid=268642#wrapper>

[4] Criddle, Jayson C. "Living in Djibouti." Lds.org – Africa Southeast Area. Accessed 24 July 2018.
<https://africase.lds.org/living-in-djibouti>

[5] Criddle, Jayson C. "Living in Djibouti." Lds.org – Africa Southeast Area. Accessed 24 July 2018.
<https://africase.lds.org/living-in-djibouti>

[6] Donnelly, Sean. "Four Corners of the Earth." Africa Southeast Area – Lds.org. 11 July 2017.
<https://web.archive.org/web/20170728192743/http://africase.lds.org/four-corners-of-the-earth?lang=eng-za>

[7] "Helping needy in Djibouti," LDS Church News, 17 February 2007.
<http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/50154/Helping-needy-in-Djibouti.html>

[8] "Where We Work," LDS Charities. Accessed 24 July 2018. <https://www.ldscharities.org/where-we-work>