Reaching the Nations International Church Growth Almanac

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

Somalia

Population: 10.43 millions (#85 out of countries)

By David Stewart and Matt Martinich

Geography

Area: 637,657 square km. Located in East Africa on the Horn of Africa, Somalia borders Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti, the Gulf of Aden, and the Indian Ocean. Desert covers most the country, and some areas experience a seasonal monsoon that moderates temperatures. Periods between monsoons tend to be hot and humid. The terrain is flat with some plateaus and small mountains in the north. Drought, dust storms, and floods are natural hazards. Environmental issues include famine, contaminated drinking water, deforestation, soil erosion, and desertification. Somalia is divided into eighteen administrative regions.

Peoples

Somali: 85%

Other: 15%

Other ethnic groups consist of Bantu or non-Somali peoples.

Population: 11,031,386 (July 2017)—Note: population estimates vary widely

Annual Growth Rate: 2.0% (2017)

Fertility Rate: 5.8 children born per woman (2017)

Life Expectancy: 50.7 male, 54.9 female (2017)

Languages: Somali languages (97%), other (3%). Somali is the official language. Arabic, English, Italian, and Swahili are also spoken. Languages with over one million speakers include Somali (7.82 million), Standard Arabic (2.05 million), and Maay (1.75 million).

Literacy: 38% (2011)

History

Since ancient times, Somalia has been a center of trade for East Africa and the Middle East. The Kingdom of Punt was headquartered in Somalia and traded with many civilization including the Egyptians, Babylonians, and Phoenicians. Islam quickly arrived to Somalia, and Mogadishu became an important center for religion in East Africa. Although never formally colonized, portions of Somalia were annexed by European powers in the late nineteenth century. Britain ruled northern Somalia, named Somaliland, but several decades of civil disorder occurred due to Dervish leaders who sought independence and an end to foreign rule. The rebellion was not put down until 1920 when the British used aircraft for the first time in a military campaign in Africa. Italian Somaliland consisted of central and southern Somalia and came under Italian rule in the late nineteenth century. During World War II, Italy invaded British Somaliland and united the two regions. Control of both states fell to the British following the war, and Italy regained jurisdiction for Italian Somalia shortly thereafter. Independence occurred in 1960 as European forces vacated the country and united both British and Italian sections.

In 1969, a coup brought authoritarian socialist rule that created greater stability until its collapse in the early 1990s. The United Nations conducted a humanitarian mission from 1993 to 1995 to relieve suffering from famine and the lawlessness that overtook the country. Increasing anarchy has occurred over the past two decades as Somalia has divided into several smaller autonomous and semi-autonomous states that remain unrecognized by the international community. The Republic of Somaliland appears the most stable and promising, as a full functioning government is in place. Other de facto states or political powers include Puntland, the Somali Federal Government, and Harakat al-Shabaab Mujahideen. Pirate attacks on cargo ships, oil tankers, and passenger vessels off the Somali coast occur frequently and are a subject of international concern.

Culture

Sitting at the crossroads of East Africa and the Middle East, Somalia has diverse cuisine and literature. Somali music possesses many unique characteristics, such as being based on a five-pitch music system instead of the common seven-pitch system. Many live nomadic lives. Islam heavily influences daily living. Laws originate from three different sources: civil law, Shari'a law, and Xeer (a customary law). Polygamy is widely practiced.

Economy

Estimated GDP per capita: $300-600 (2017) [less than 1% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: N/A

Corruption Index: 9 (2017)

The lack of a central government presents many unique economic conditions. Many hotels have their own private militias for security. Agriculture produces and employs most the population. Many are nomads and heavily depend on their livestock for survival. Primary agriculture products include bananas, sorghum, corn, and livestock. Natural resources are scarce; lawlessness has prevented much of the discovery and exploitation mineral, petroleum, and hydropower resources. Somalia does have an established and well-functioning telecommunications industry. There have been positive developments in recent years in Mogadishu such as the establishment of the first gas stations, supermarkets, and airline flights outside of the region such as to Turkey. Moreover, a record amount of foreign aid and investment was collected in 2017. Primary trade partners include the Oman, Saudi Arabia, China, and India.

Somalia was rated by Transparency International as the most corrupt sovereign nation as of 2017. Piracy, illegal roadblocks, terrorism, murder, and kidnapping are widespread. Terrorism has frequently targeted locations associated with Western interests.[1]

Faiths

Muslim: 99%

Other: 1%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Catholic – 100?

Religion

Nearly all Somalis are Sunni Muslim. Other religious groups with a small community in Somalia include Christians and Sufis.[2]

Religious Freedom

The provisional federal charter allows for freedom of religion. However, the charter identified Islam as the state religion, prohibits proselytism by followers of non-Islamic religions, and requires all laws to confirm with sharia law. Non-Muslims are not exempt from sharia legal principles. De facto states range in their tolerance towards non-Muslims, but overall, these governments prohibit Muslims from converting to other religions. Christians are not accepted and are actively persecuted. A Catholic church in Hargeisa was the only public place of worship for non-Muslims and this church reportedly had fewer than ten people who attend mass. In Puntland, the government does not tolerate the spread of non-Islamic religions and closely monitors religious activities. The al-Shabaab militia group, which controls southern Somalia, commits acts of violence to enforce a radical interpretation of Islam.[3]

Largest Cities

Urban: 45%

Mogadishu, Hargeysa, Berbera, Chisimayu, Jamaame, Baidoa, Burao, Bender Cassim, Afgooye, Galcaio.

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

No cities have an LDS congregation. Most the urban population lives in the ten largest cities.

LDS History

The Church established a branch in the early 1980s for foreign members living in Somalia, many of whom were assisting the government. The branch was discontinued after members returned to their home countries. Church services were held for American military in the early 1990s. In 1998, Somalia was assigned to the Africa Southeast Area. An American member thwarted a pirate attack on a cargo ship off the coast of Somalia in 2009.[4]

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: less than 20 (2018)

Somali converts have joined the Church in Kenya.[5] Some Somali members attended a meeting with President Hinckley in 1998.[6] The few Somali members either joined the Church when a branch operated in the 1980s or in a country with a Church presence and later returned to their homeland.

Congregational Growth

Branches: 1 (2018)

As of 2004, there were no organized Church groups in the country.[7] In 2018, Somalia was not assigned to a mission but instead was administered directly by the Africa Southeast Area. The Church has operated an administrative branch for Somalia since the early 2010s to keep track of isolated members.

Activity and Retention

It does not appear that many Somalis joined the Church when there was a Church presence, as prior congregations served primarily expatriate members, and no active proselytism is known to have occurred. Any LDS members remaining in Somalia likely keep their membership secret in order to avoid persecution and death threats.

Language Materials

Languages with LDS Scripture: Arabic, English, Italian, Swahili.

All LDS scriptures are available in Arabic, Italian, and Swahili. A wide range of ecclesiastic materials are available in Arabic and Italian, whereas Church material translations in Swahili include missionary materials and a limited number of unit, priesthood, Relief Society, hymns, and Church proclamations. Gospel Fundamentals is available in Swahili. Church materials in Somali are limited to Gospel Principles and The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith.

Meetinghouses

Meetings occurred in members' homes or on military compounds when units were organized in Somalia. No organized LDS meetings likely occur in Somalia at present.

Health and Safety

Nationwide lawlessness and the violent enforcement of Islamic law create dangerous conditions for Christian missionaries and workers. Non-government organizations (NGOs) with strictly humanitarian missions have had to evacuate periodically due to threats of violence. The threat of spreading disease is lower than many African nations, and HIV/AIDS has infected 0.5% of the population, although some tropical diseases are endemic, health care infrastructure is extremely limited, and access to medicine is poor or nonexistent. Outsiders become frequent targets of harassment and violence, as they are accused of conducting missionary work or spying for Ethiopia. The United States and many other Western governments strongly advise their citizens against travel to Somalia.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church provided humanitarian relief to Somalia and surrounding countries in the early 1990s due to drought.[8] Long-term assistance in food donations and rehabilitation were offered by the Church in 1994.[9] LDS humanitarian and development efforts have increased in recent years. For example, of the twelve emergency response and refugee response programs that have occurred in Somalia since 1985, nine of these programs occurred in 2017.[10]

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

The current state of religious freedom in Somalia, along with political collapse, lawlessness, and widespread violence, represent major obstacles preventing the establishment of the Church. Although the charter guarantees religious freedom, most local governments do not protect these rights. This results in the tolerated abuse and harassment of Christians and other non-Muslims. Current conditions suggest that any Church presence would be highly sensitive and would require members to meet in private locations in order to avoid lawlessness. Greater religious freedom occurs in Somaliland and Puntland, but the laws of these de facto states severely limits the functioning of Christian churches and strictly prohibits the conversion of Muslims to non-Islamic religions, thereby barring any missionary activity.

Cultural Issues

Somalia has a highly homogenous religious demography, creating greater challenge for the Church to attract converts. Very few have any background in Christianity, resulting in many misunderstandings about the Bible and Christian theology. Low literacy rates impede any passive missionary activity, as few can read tracts and pamphlets expounding and clarifying the Church's doctrines and practices. Internet access is extremely limited or nonexistent in most areas. Lawlessness creates challenges in forming boundaries between opposing clans and pseudo-nation states. The nomadic lifestyle of many Somalis will render this portion of the population unreached by the Church for many years following any formal Church establishment due to remote locations in which they reside and the transient nature of their lifestyle. The common practice of polygamy may challenge future mission outreach, as those married to a polygamous spouse must end these relations in divorce and be interviewed by a member of a mission or area presidency to be baptized.

National Outreach

The entire population of eleven million is unreached by current mission outreach although an administrative branch operates to keep track of isolated members in the country. Any future organized missionary work will likely occur through the Kenya Nairobi Mission. Although missionary work in Somalia is presently prohibited by law, lawlessness, violence, and a tiny LDS membership, future endeavors will likely be limited by the large, receptive populations of neighboring Kenya and Ethiopia—which have forty-eight million and 105 million people, respectively—drawing away limited mission resources and manpower.

Outreach among Somalis in nations with active missionary work may prepare for national outreach in Somalia. Neighboring

Ethiopia has over five million Somalis and Kenya has more than two million. Somali communities are also found in Europe, the United States, Canada, and the Middle East.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

There is no official LDS presence in Somalia, and likely few native members at present.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

The lack of ethnic diversity allows for fewer ethnic tensions and hostilities. However, clan violence between different Somali groups occurs and may become a source of conflict in the Church once a congregation is reestablished. Differing political views and allegiances to various militia groups among Somalis may lead some to not pursue learning about the Church if most LDS members belong to one political entity.

Language Issues

The Church benefits from a population that only speaks Somali languages. The translation of two Church resources into Somali may indicate that the Church has had some prior success in attracting converts from Somalia. At present, LDS outreach to Somalis occurs primarily in the United States, Europe, and Kenya.

Leadership

Potential Somali Church leadership may be limited to only a couple individuals. Greater leadership development will need to occur prior to the establishment of Somali-speaking congregations in Somalia and among Somali diaspora communities.

Temple

Somalia pertains to the Johannesburg South Africa Temple district. No temple trips occur from Somalia. Members face challenges in long distance, airfare, and obtaining visas to visit the temple.

Comparative Growth

Somalia is among a few African nations (e.g. Djibouti and South Sudan) that once had an official branch but no longer have an official branch. Nearby East African nations that are predominantly Christian have an established Church presence. Kenya and Uganda have experienced moderate-to-rapid membership growth for several years. There were nearly 16,000 members in Uganda and 13,600 members in Kenya as of year-end 2017.

Christians do not proselyte in Somalia and most of the mission-oriented denominations have no current presence. Christian outreach among Somalis has occurred in other nations. For example, Jehovah’s Witnesses report approximately a dozen congregations worldwide that conduct meetings in the Somali language.

Future Prospects

The outlook for a future Church presence in Somalia appears unfavorable. The country lacks a functional central government in most areas. Somali de facto states have highly restrictive laws against proselytism and typically tolerate violence towards non-Muslims. Somali members living in other nations have shown keen interest in bringing the gospel to their native country. Even if a national government tolerant toward non-Muslims emerges, the Church will face many challenges in its establishment, as virtually the entire population is Muslim and suffers from high illiteracy. The most probable method of an eventual reestablishment of an LDS presence will be through Somali members joining the Church in Ethiopia and Kenya and returning in large enough numbers to justify the recreation of a congregation in Mogadishu.

[1] “Somalia Travel Advisory,” Travel.State.Gov – U.S. Department of State – Bureau of Consular Affairs. 9 July 2018. https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/somalia-travel-advisory.html

[2] “Somalia,” International Religious Freedom Report 2016. Accessed 21 July 2018. https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2016religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2016&dlid=268694#wrapper

[3] “Somalia,” International Religious Freedom Report 2016. Accessed 21 July 2018. https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2016religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2016&dlid=268694#wrapper

[4] Caceres, Michelle. “Prayer, quick thinking thwart pirate attack,” LDS Church News, 13 June 2009. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/57461/Prayer-quick-thinking-thwart-pirate-attack.html

[5] “McDonald, Hiram. “Church is growing in east Africa,” LDS Church News, 6 September 1997. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/29126/Church-is-growing-in-east-Africa.html

[6] Hart, John L. “’This work will grow and grow in this land,’” LDS Church News, 28 February 1998. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/30434/This-work-will-grow-and-grow-in-this-land.html

[7] “Somalia,” Deseret News 2010 Church Almanac, p. 575.

[8] “Deadly drought,” LDS Church News, 26 September 1992. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/22762/Deadly-drought.html

[9] “Church’s humanitarian efforts provide relief around the world,” LDS Church News, 13 August 1994. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/24169/Churchs-humanitarian-efforts-provide-relief-around-the-world.html

[10] “Where We Work,” LDS Charities. Accessed 21 July 2018. https://www.ldscharities.org/where-we-work