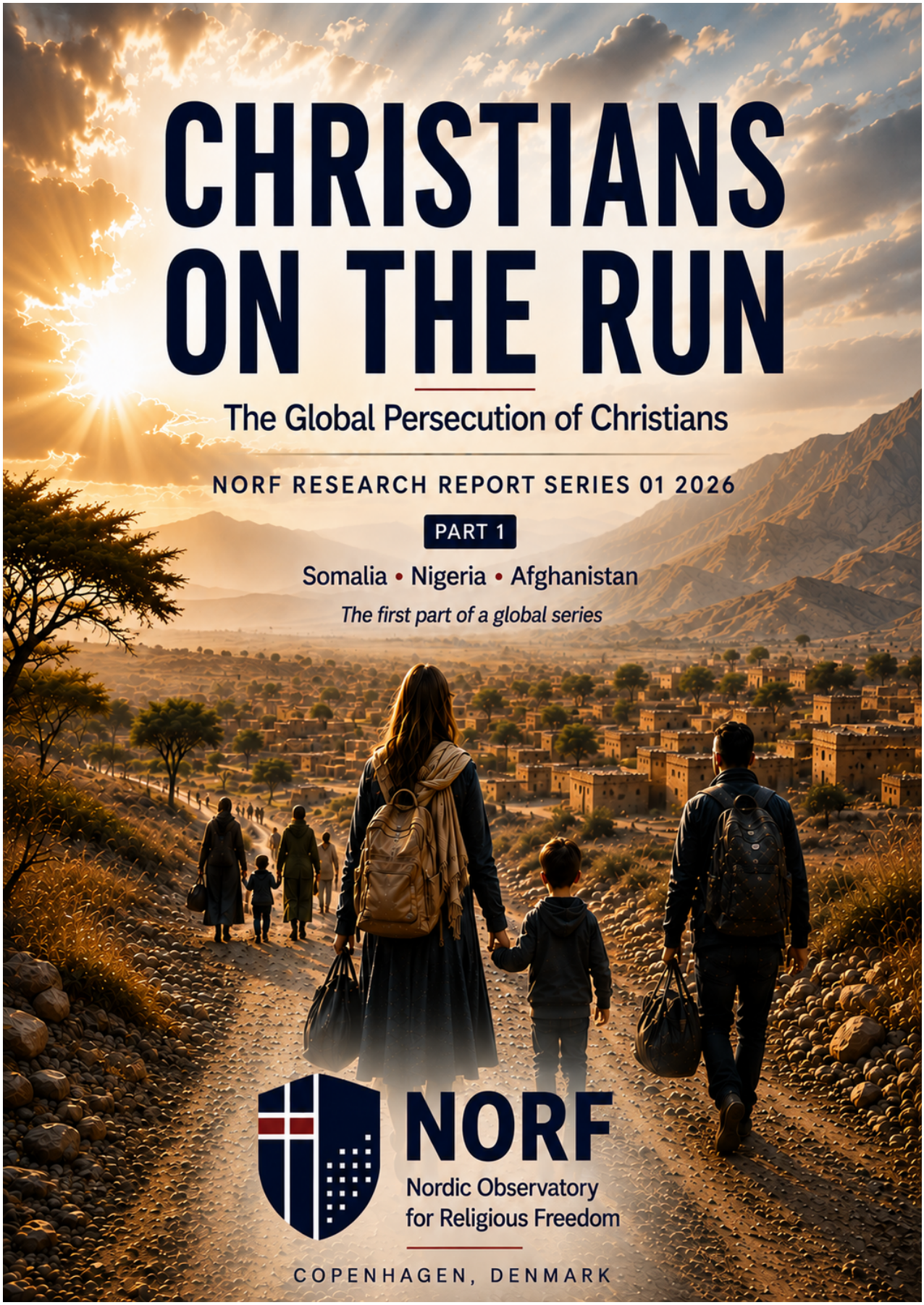

CHRISTIANS ON THE RUN
The Global Persecution of Christians
NORF RESEARCH REPORT SERIES 01 2026
PART 1
Somalia • Nigeria • Afghanistan
The first part of a global series
NORF
Nordic Observatory for Religious Freedom
COPENHAGEN, DENMARK

CHRISTIANS ON THE RUN

The Global Persecution of Christians

Annual Report 2026 — Part I
Somalia · Nigeria · Afghanistan

NORF Research Report Series 01/2026
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Research Independence

NORF conducts its research independently. The findings, assessments and recommendations contained in this report are based on the evidence and methodology described in the report and do not represent the views of governments, political parties, religious institutions, donors or other external organisations.

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Foreword

The conception of this report grew from a simple but troubling observation: around the world, people belonging to religious minorities are still denied the freedom to determine their own path of religion or belief.

For millions of people, freedom of religion or belief is not an abstract principle of international law. It concerns something deeply personal: the freedom to believe, not to believe, to change one's religion, or to practise one's faith without fear.

Yet for many, that freedom does not exist.

People are pressured or forced to adhere to a religion they have not freely chosen. Others face discrimination, exclusion and threats because of their beliefs. In the gravest cases, people are abducted, subjected to sexual violence, displaced or killed because of their religious identity or because they have chosen a faith different from that expected of them.

What particularly concerned us when we began this work was that these injustices are not simply a collection of sporadic or unrelated incidents.

The evidence examined in this report points instead to recurring patterns of persecution produced by multiple, often overlapping drivers. Some appear across very different societies: weak institutional protection, impunity, extremist violence, restrictive legal environments and societal hostility. Others are rooted in particular national, regional, historical and political circumstances.

Understanding that distinction matters.

If persecution is systemic, documenting individual incidents is not enough. We must also seek to understand the structures that allow those incidents to occur repeatedly, identify those responsible for preventing them, and examine why protection so often fails.

This first NORF Annual Report is a beginning.

Part I focuses on Christians in Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan. The three countries are profoundly different, and the forms of persecution documented within them are different as well. They should not be reduced to a single narrative. What they share is that fundamental freedoms which many of us take for granted can carry extraordinary personal risk for those who attempt to exercise them.

Our ambition is to bring greater light to these injustices through careful, independent and transparent research; to give greater visibility to people and communities whose experiences may otherwise remain hidden; and to provide evidence that can be used by policymakers, researchers, civil society and others working to protect Freedom of Religion or Belief.

We cannot give a voice to people who already have one. But we can help ensure that those whose voices are suppressed, ignored or impossible to hear are not absent from the evidence.

And we can document.

Because without documentation, violations can be denied. Without evidence, responsibility can be avoided. And without sustained attention accountability is very unlikely.

That is why NORF begins its work with a simple commitment:

We document today so that accountability remains possible tomorrow.

Daniel Dasic
Founder & Chairman
Nordic Observatory for Religious Freedom (NORF)
Copenhagen, August 2026

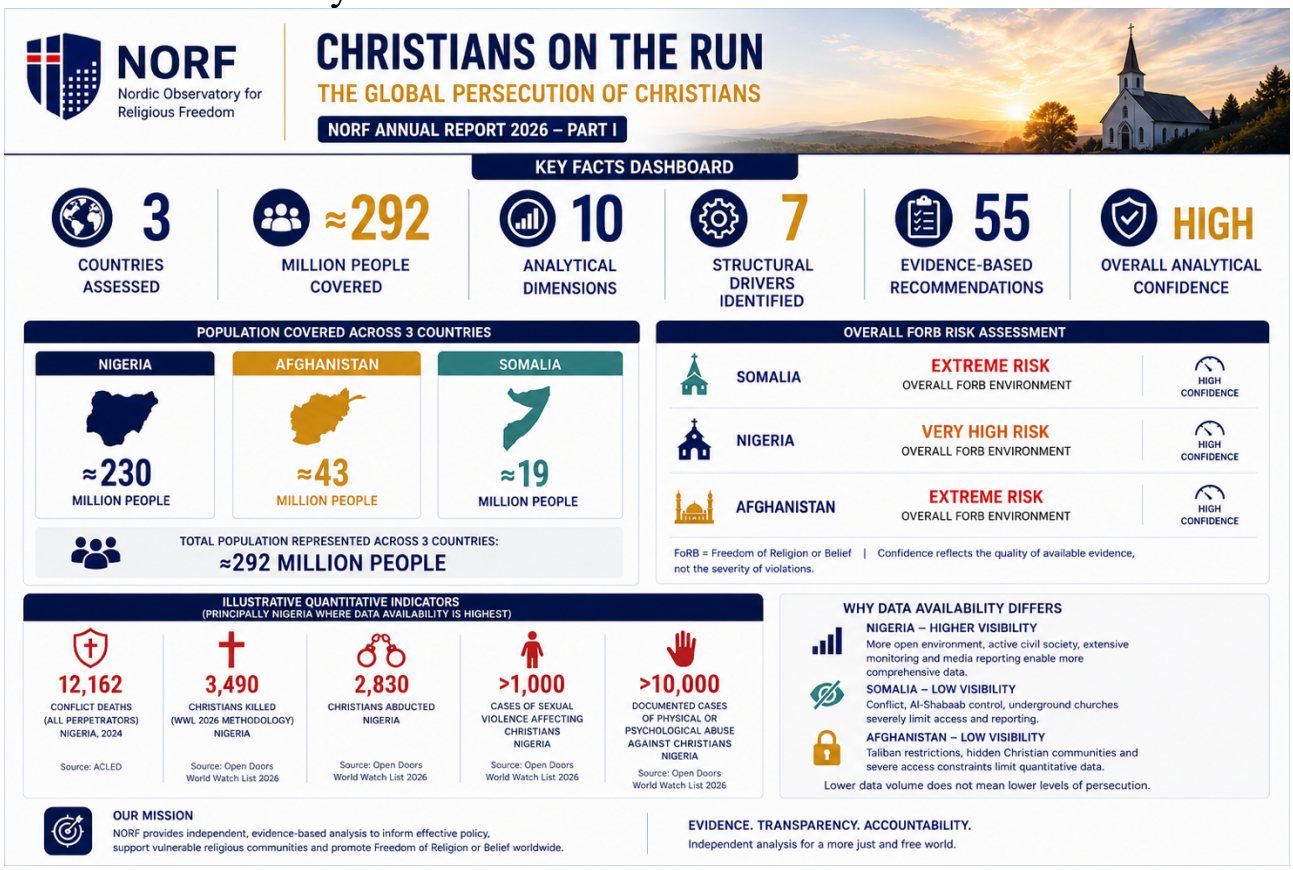
Executive Summary

Christians on the Run

The Global Persecution of Christians

NORF Annual Report 2026 – Part I

Executive Summary at a Glance



This inaugural Annual Report by the **Nordic Observatory for Religious Freedom (NORF)** presents a comparative assessment of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) and the persecution of Christian communities in **Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan**. Together, these countries represent three distinct but complementary models of persecution: state collapse and extremist governance (Somalia), constitutional protection undermined by insecurity and weak implementation (Nigeria), and institutionalised religious repression under Taliban rule (Afghanistan). Applying a common analytical framework across all three case studies enables systematic comparison while preserving each country's unique historical, political and social context.

Purpose of the Report

Freedom of Religion or Belief is recognised as a fundamental human right under international law. Yet millions of people continue to experience discrimination, violence and persecution because of their religion or belief.

The purpose of this report is not merely to document individual violations, but to identify the structural conditions that enable persecution to persist. Through comparative analysis, the report seeks to support policymakers, researchers and international organisations with transparent, evidence-based assessments capable of informing more effective protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief. The report follows the NORF analytical architecture, moving from conceptual foundations and methodology through empirical country assessments, comparative analysis and evidence-based recommendations.

Research Question

This report addresses the following research question:

To what extent are Christians among the most persecuted religious communities globally, and what explains the observed patterns?

The comparative assessment supports the conclusion that **Christians constitute one of the world's most severely persecuted religious communities in several contemporary conflict-affected and politically restrictive environments.** Across Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan, the evidence consistently documents severe and persistent violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief. Although the manifestations of persecution differ between countries, the analysis demonstrates that these violations are systematic rather than isolated and arise from enduring structural conditions rather than temporary crises.

The report further concludes that persecution cannot be explained by religious identity alone. Instead, severe violations emerge where restrictive legal frameworks, weak institutions, armed non-state actors, political instability, societal intolerance and widespread impunity reinforce one another over time. Comparative analysis identifies these recurring structural drivers across all three case studies, although each country exhibits its own distinctive combination of risk factors.

The Scale of the Challenge

The three countries examined represent approximately **291 million people**.

- **Nigeria:** approximately **230 million inhabitants**
- **Afghanistan:** approximately **43 million inhabitants**
- **Somalia:** approximately **19 million inhabitants**

The available evidence demonstrates severe restrictions on Freedom of Religion or Belief across all three countries. However, the **quantity of documented data differs substantially**, reflecting differences in access, security conditions and the visibility of Christian communities rather than differences in the severity of persecution.

Nigeria – A Highly Documented Conflict Environment

Nigeria provides the most comprehensive quantitative evidence because of comparatively greater access for researchers, extensive conflict-event databases and active national and international monitoring organisations.

The report documents:

- **12,162 conflict-related deaths** recorded during 2024.
- **3,490 Christians killed** under the Open Doors World Watch List 2026 methodology.
- **2,293 Christians abducted.**
- **More than 1,000 reported cases of sexual violence** affecting Christians.
- **More than 10,000 reported cases of physical or psychological abuse** against Christians.

These figures illustrate both the broader national security crisis and the disproportionate impact experienced by Christian communities in several regions of the country.

Somalia – Extreme Risk with Limited Quantification

Somalia presents one of the world's most restrictive environments for Christians. Large areas remain inaccessible because of prolonged conflict and Al-Shabaab control, while Christians are largely forced to conceal their identity. Consequently, the limited availability of quantitative data should **not** be interpreted as evidence of lower levels of persecution. Rather, it reflects severe constraints on independent monitoring and the clandestine nature of the Christian community. NORF therefore assesses Somalia as an **Extreme FoRB Risk** environment with **High overall analytical confidence** based on systematic evidence triangulation.

Afghanistan – Hidden Communities Under Institutionalised Restriction

Afghanistan presents similar methodological challenges. Since the Taliban returned to power in August 2021, constitutional and institutional protections for Freedom of Religion or Belief have effectively disappeared. Christians survive almost exclusively as underground communities of converts, making reliable statistical reporting exceptionally difficult. Consequently, NORF's assessment relies on carefully corroborated qualitative evidence supported by multiple independent sources rather than comprehensive incident datasets. Afghanistan is assessed as one of the world's most restrictive environments for Freedom of Religion or Belief, with **High overall analytical confidence** despite limited numerical reporting.

Principal Findings

The comparative assessment identifies five overarching conclusions.

Persecution is structural rather than incidental.
Across all three countries, violations arise through the interaction of legal restrictions, institutional weakness, insecurity and societal hostility rather than isolated events.

Freedom of Religion or Belief reflects broader governance quality.
The most severe FoRB violations consistently coincide with weak rule of law, limited institutional accountability, shrinking civic space and deteriorating governance.

Legal protection alone is insufficient.
Nigeria demonstrates that constitutional guarantees do not necessarily translate into effective protection where implementation remains weak and insecurity persists.

The most severe persecution is often the least measurable.
Hidden Christian communities in Somalia and Afghanistan illustrate a central methodological challenge: limited quantitative data frequently reflects restricted access and clandestine populations rather than lower levels of persecution.

Comparative analysis strengthens policy relevance.
Applying a common analytical framework across three diverse countries reveals recurring structural drivers that would be less apparent through individual country studies alone.

Methodological Contribution

A principal contribution of this report is the introduction of the **NORF analytical framework**.

Rather than relying on a single dataset or monitoring organisation, the report systematically integrates evidence from United Nations mechanisms, USCIRF, the U.S. Department of State, Open Doors, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, ACLED, the World Bank, V-Dem, Pew Research Center and other recognised sources. Every major conclusion is based on evidence triangulation and accompanied by an explicit confidence assessment.

Throughout the report, five methodological principles are applied consistently:

- evidence precedes interpretation;
- multiple independent sources are systematically triangulated;
- legal protection is distinguished from implementation in practice;
- structural drivers are analysed alongside documented incidents; and
- confidence assessments communicate the quality of evidence rather than the severity of violations.

Policy Implications

The report demonstrates that effective protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief requires long-term structural engagement rather than reactive crisis management.

Accordingly, NORF recommends that governments and international organisations:

- strengthen implementation of international FoRB obligations;
- integrate FoRB into conflict prevention and peacebuilding;
- improve independent monitoring and evidence collection;
- strengthen accountability for serious violations;
- protect high-risk religious communities through context-specific interventions; and
- invest in institutional capacity capable of sustaining long-term protection.

These recommendations are derived directly from the comparative empirical findings presented throughout the report.

Looking Forward

This publication represents the **first edition of the NORF Annual Report** and should be understood as the beginning of a long-term programme of comparative research on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Future editions will expand geographical coverage, strengthen longitudinal monitoring and refine the analytical framework as additional evidence becomes available. The objective is to establish an increasingly robust international evidence base capable of supporting policymakers, researchers, civil society organisations and international institutions in protecting Freedom of Religion or Belief worldwide.

Final Message

Freedom of Religion or Belief cannot be protected without reliable evidence.
Reliable evidence depends upon transparent methodology.
Transparent methodology depends upon systematic and independent documentation.

We document today so that accountability remains possible tomorrow.

NORF
Nordic Observatory for Religious Freedom

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AT A GLANCE

CHRISTIANS ON THE RUN – THE GLOBAL PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS

ANNUAL REPORT 2026 – PART 1



OUR PURPOSE

Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) is a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of democratic, just and peaceful societies. Yet millions of people continue to face violence, discrimination and repression because of their faith.

NORF provides independent, evidence-based analysis to inform effective policy and strengthen protection for all.

OUR RESEARCH QUESTION

To what extent are Christians among the most persecuted religious communities globally, and what explains the observed patterns?

Our analysis shows that Christians are among the most severely persecuted religious communities in several conflict-affected and politically restrictive environments.

Persecution is driven by a combination of interlinked structural factors rather than a single cause.

THE THREE COUNTRIES IN FOCUS

SOMALIA



EXTREMIST VIOLENCE + SOCIETAL PRESSURE
Al-Shabaab and clan-based enforcement create severe risks for Christians.

NIGERIA



MASS VIOLENCE + INSTITUTIONAL FAILURE
Armed groups target Christian communities amid weak security and impunity.

AFGHANISTAN



STATE-IMPOSED RESTRICTIONS + SOCIAL REPRESSION
The Taliban's rule imposes severe restrictions on religious freedom and practice.

FIVE KEY FINDINGS

1. **SYSTEMATIC, NOT ISOLATED**
   Violations include killings, abductions, detentions, restrictions on worship, discrimination and displacement.
2. **LINKED TO GOVERNANCE**
   Severe FoRB violations coincide with weak rule of law, limited accountability and shrinking civic space.
3. **LAW ALONE IS INSUFFICIENT**
   Constitutional guarantees do not ensure protection without effective institutions and enforcement.
4. **HIDDEN COMMUNITIES ARE UNDER-REPORTED**
   In hostile environments, many Christians hide their faith. Data reflects minimum verified levels of persecution.
5. **COMPARISON REVEALS PATTERNS**
   Different contexts, similar drivers. Comparative analysis produces stronger evidence for action.

SEVEN STRUCTURAL DRIVERS OF PERSECUTION



OUR METHODOLOGY

MULTIPLE SOURCES	VALIDATION & TRIANGULATION	ANALYSIS & COMPARISON	EVIDENCE-BASED CONCLUSIONS
ACLED • V-Dem UNHCR • World Bank Pew • USCIRF Open Doors	Cross-checking data for accuracy and reliability	Quantitative indicators + qualitative evidence	Transparent findings with confidence assessments

Evidence always precedes interpretation. Every finding is supported by documented sources and confidence levels to ensure transparency and credibility.

FIVE PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **STRENGTHEN FORB OBLIGATIONS**
   Ensure laws and policies align with international FoRB standards.
2. **PROTECT VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES**
   Implement context-specific measures to protect high-risk religious communities.
3. **IMPROVE ACCOUNTABILITY AND JUSTICE**
   Investigate, prosecute and hold perpetrators accountable for all violations.
4. **STRENGTHEN MONITORING AND DATA**
   Invest in independent monitoring, documentation and early-warning mechanisms.
5. **INTEGRATE FoRB INTO POLICY**
   Integrate FoRB into conflict prevention, humanitarian and development efforts.

FINAL MESSAGE

Persecution is not inevitable.
It is the product of human choices—and it can be prevented.

WE DOCUMENT TODAY
SO THAT ACCOUNTABILITY REMAINS POSSIBLE TOMORROW.

THIS IS THE FIRST EDITION OF NORF'S ANNUAL REPORT. Future editions will expand coverage, strengthen longitudinal analysis and refine our methodology.

INDEPENDENT. EVIDENCE-BASED. NON-PARTISAN.

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ACLED — Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project
ARDA — Association of Religion Data Archives
ATMIS — African Union Transition Mission in Somalia

CEDAW — Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CRC — Convention on the Rights of the Child
EUAA — European Union Agency for Asylum
FoRB — Freedom of Religion or Belief
ICCPR — International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICESCR — International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
IMN — Islamic Movement in Nigeria
ISKP — Islamic State Khorasan Province
ISWAP — Islamic State West Africa Province
NGO — Non-Governmental Organisation
NHRC — National Human Rights Commission (Nigeria)
NORF — Nordic Observatory for Religious Freedom
OCHA — United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OHCHR — Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
UDHR — Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN — United Nations
UNAMA — United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNDP — United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO — United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF — United Nations Children's Fund
USCIRF — United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

Chapter 1

1.1 Purpose and Scope

Religious persecution is a complex and evolving phenomenon shaped by political governance, legal frameworks, armed conflict, social dynamics, ideology, and the capacity of states to protect fundamental rights. Christians experience persecution under diverse conditions, ranging from systematic state repression and discriminatory legislation to violent attacks by non-state actors and societal exclusion. Understanding these dynamics requires an analytical approach that moves beyond isolated incidents and examines the broader structural environment in which persecution occurs.

This report provides an independent, evidence-based assessment of the conditions affecting Christians in countries where persecution, discrimination, or restrictions on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) are of particular concern. Rather than documenting individual incidents alone, the report evaluates patterns of persecution, identifies structural drivers, assesses institutional capacity, and analyses the interaction between legal, political, security, and societal factors.

The purpose of the report is threefold:

- to provide an objective assessment of the situation facing Christians in each country;
- to identify the principal drivers, risks, and trends influencing religious freedom; and
- to support evidence-based dialogue and decision-making among policymakers, civil society organisations, churches, researchers, and other stakeholders engaged in promoting freedom of religion or belief.

The report is grounded in internationally recognised human rights standards, including Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, while drawing upon a broad range of independent governmental, intergovernmental, academic, and civil society sources. Throughout the report, findings are based on triangulated evidence rather than any single organisation or dataset, ensuring that assessments reflect the best available information across multiple independent sources.

1.2 Methodological Approach

This report applies a structured comparative methodology designed to ensure consistency, transparency, and analytical rigour across all country assessments. Recognising that religious persecution rarely results from a single cause, the methodology integrates qualitative and quantitative evidence to examine both immediate manifestations of persecution and the structural conditions that enable or constrain violations of freedom of religion or belief.

Each country assessment follows a common analytical framework covering:

- the constitutional and legal protection of religious freedom;
- the political and institutional environment;
- patterns of discrimination, harassment, violence, and persecution affecting Christians;
- the role of state and non-state actors;
- conflict dynamics and security conditions;
- governance, rule of law, and state capacity; and
- recent developments and observable trends.

To strengthen reliability, findings are derived through systematic triangulation of multiple independent sources. Core evidence is drawn from the United Nations, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), the U.S. Department of State, Open Doors International, Aid to the Church in Need (ACN), Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and other recognised international organisations. These qualitative assessments are supplemented by quantitative indicators and datasets from sources including ACLED, Uppsala Conflict Data

Program (UCDP), the World Bank, V-Dem Institute, Transparency International, the World Justice Project, Pew Research Center, and other established research institutions.

Where sources differ in interpretation or emphasis, the report does not automatically privilege a single authority. Instead, evidence is evaluated according to its credibility, methodological transparency, independence, recency, and consistency with other available documentation. Greater analytical weight is assigned to findings supported by multiple independent sources, while contested or uncertain information is explicitly identified where appropriate.

Country assessments therefore represent analytical judgements based on the balance of available evidence rather than definitive statements about every individual incident. This approach recognises that information environments differ substantially across countries, particularly where governments restrict access, armed conflict limits independent reporting, or reliable local documentation is scarce.

By combining legal analysis, governance indicators, conflict data, human rights reporting, religious freedom assessments, and demographic evidence within a single comparative framework, the methodology seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of both the current situation and the underlying factors shaping the persecution of Christians across different national contexts.

1.3 Scope, Definitions and Analytical Boundaries

Establishing a Common Analytical Framework

Every empirical study requires clearly defined analytical boundaries. Without explicit definitions of its concepts, geographical scope, temporal coverage and methodological limitations, even the most comprehensive dataset may be interpreted inconsistently. This report therefore begins by establishing a common conceptual framework that guides the analysis presented in subsequent chapters. Defining the scope of the study serves not merely an editorial function but constitutes an essential methodological requirement. Readers, policymakers and researchers must understand precisely what is measured, why particular countries have been selected, how key concepts are defined and where the limitations of the analysis lie.

The phenomenon commonly described as "religious persecution" is inherently multidimensional. It encompasses a broad spectrum of actions ranging from subtle legal discrimination to systematic campaigns of violence and killings. Different international organisations employ different definitions depending upon their institutional mandates. Human rights bodies often focus on violations of internationally recognised freedoms, conflict researchers concentrate on politically motivated violence, while humanitarian organisations primarily examine the consequences of persecution through displacement, humanitarian need and civilian vulnerability. Consequently, this report adopts a deliberately broad analytical framework that integrates these different perspectives rather than privileging a single disciplinary approach.

Throughout this publication, the term **freedom of religion or belief (FoRB)** is used in accordance with international human rights law. As articulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and reaffirmed in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, freedom of religion or belief includes the right to adopt, change, manifest or refrain from

holding a religion or belief without coercion (United Nations, 1948, 1966). This definition extends beyond freedom of worship to encompass public expression, religious education, association, observance and the equal enjoyment of civil and political rights irrespective of religious affiliation.

Accordingly, violations of freedom of religion or belief are understood not only as direct acts of violence but also as legal, administrative, political and social measures that intentionally or effectively restrict these internationally protected freedoms. Such violations may include the criminalisation of religious conversion, prohibitions on religious assembly, discriminatory registration requirements, destruction or confiscation of places of worship, restrictions on religious education, arbitrary detention of clergy, limitations on humanitarian access for faith-based organisations, and systematic exclusion from public life based on religious identity. The report therefore recognises persecution as a continuum rather than a binary condition, acknowledging that severe violence is frequently preceded by progressive institutional discrimination and the gradual erosion of fundamental rights.

Defining Religious Persecution

Although no universally accepted legal definition of "religious persecution" exists under international law, the concept has been extensively developed through international refugee law, human rights jurisprudence and scholarly literature. For the purposes of this report, **religious persecution** refers to the systematic or repeated denial of internationally recognised rights and freedoms directed against individuals or communities because of their religion or belief, where such actions result in significant harm, discrimination, coercion or threats to life, liberty or human dignity. This definition is consistent with guidance issued by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees concerning refugee status determination on the basis of religion (UNHCR, 2004).

Importantly, persecution should not be equated solely with physical violence. A state may create conditions amounting to persecution through legislation, administrative practices or institutional discrimination even in the absence of widespread armed conflict. Likewise, non-state actors—including insurgent groups, extremist organisations, criminal networks or communal militias—may perpetrate severe violations of religious freedom where governments are unwilling or unable to provide effective protection. This distinction is particularly relevant in fragile states, where state authority may be contested across large territories and multiple armed actors exercise de facto control over civilian populations.

The report also distinguishes between **religious discrimination**, **religious intolerance** and **religious persecution**. Discrimination refers to unequal treatment on the basis of religion that limits equal access to rights, services or opportunities. Intolerance encompasses hostile attitudes, social exclusion or incitement directed against religious groups. Persecution represents the most severe end of this continuum, characterised by sustained or systematic violations producing serious harm or death. Maintaining these distinctions is essential for analytical precision and prevents the conflation of fundamentally different phenomena.

Why This Report Focuses on Christians

This report examines the global condition of freedom of religion or belief through the particular lens of Christian communities. This focus reflects the institutional mission of the Nordic Observatory for Religious Freedom and does not imply that violations experienced by other religious communities are of lesser importance. On the contrary, NORF recognises that Muslims, Jews, Yazidis, Hindus, Buddhists, Bahá'ís, Ahmadis, atheists and many other groups experience serious violations of freedom of religion or belief in different political and regional contexts. The principles of international human rights law apply equally to all individuals regardless of religious affiliation.

The decision to focus specifically on Christians is based on three considerations. First, Christians constitute the world's largest religious community, numbering approximately 2.4 billion people, yet they remain minorities in many regions where severe restrictions on religious practice exist (Pew Research Center, 2024). Second, a substantial body of evidence indicates that Christian communities experience a wide range of violations, including targeted violence, discrimination, displacement, arbitrary detention and restrictions on religious practice, although the nature and intensity of these violations vary considerably across countries (USCIRF, 2025; Open Doors, 2025). Third, the availability of comparative datasets and long-term documentation makes it possible to analyse these developments systematically using empirical methods.

Importantly, the report does not assume that every conflict involving Christians constitutes religious persecution. Conflicts are complex and often involve overlapping political, ethnic, economic and territorial drivers. Accordingly, religious identity is analysed as one factor among several that may influence patterns of violence or discrimination. Where evidence suggests that attacks are primarily motivated by criminal activity, political rivalry or resource competition, this is explicitly acknowledged. The analytical objective is therefore explanation rather than advocacy alone.

Geographic Scope

The report adopts a global perspective while recognising that the intensity and character of religious persecution vary significantly across regions. The quantitative analyses presented in Chapter 3 include worldwide datasets covering more than 190 sovereign states and territories where reliable data are available. Within this global framework, particular attention is devoted to countries exhibiting sustained patterns of violence, institutional discrimination or deteriorating conditions affecting Christian communities.

Based on the current evidence base, special analytical emphasis is placed on countries such as Somalia, Nigeria, Pakistan, India, Sudan, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iran and the People's Republic of China. These countries were not selected because they represent the only locations where Christians experience persecution but because they collectively illustrate distinct models of restriction. Nigeria demonstrates the interaction between insurgency, communal violence and state fragility. Pakistan illustrates the role of blasphemy legislation and societal discrimination. India highlights challenges associated with majoritarian nationalism and regional variation. Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo illustrate the consequences of prolonged armed conflict. Ethiopia demonstrates the interaction between civil war and ethnic fragmentation. Iran exemplifies

state-imposed legal restrictions, while China provides insight into technologically enabled systems of surveillance and administrative control over religious life.

Together, these case studies represent diverse political systems, conflict environments and legal traditions, allowing broader comparative conclusions to be drawn regarding the mechanisms through which freedom of religion or belief may be restricted.

Figure 1.3



Table 1.3

Operational Definitions Used Throughout the Report

Concept	Operational definition	Principal source
Freedom of Religion or Belief	Rights protected under Article 18 UDHR and ICCPR	United Nations (1948; 1966)
Religious discrimination	Unequal treatment based on religion	OHCHR
Religious persecution	Systematic denial of fundamental rights causing serious harm	UNHCR (2004); scholarly synthesis
Conflict event	Individual political violence event	ACLED
Governance	Institutional quality and democratic performance	V-Dem
Forced displacement	Refugees and internally displaced persons	UNHCR

APA 7 References

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United Nations. (1966). *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*. https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2004). *Guidelines on International Protection No. 6: Religion-Based Refugee Claims*. https://www.unhcr.org

United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. (2025). *Annual Report 2025*. https://www.uscirf.gov

1.4 Limitations, Ethical Considerations and Research Integrity

1.4.1 Why Measuring Religious Persecution Is Difficult

Religious persecution is among the most complex human rights phenomena to measure empirically. Unlike conventional indicators such as gross domestic product, population size or unemployment, persecution cannot be observed through a single universally accepted metric. Instead, it emerges

through the interaction of political decisions, legal frameworks, armed conflict, institutional discrimination, social attitudes and individual acts of violence. Consequently, no single dataset captures the full extent of religious persecution, and any attempt to measure the phenomenon requires careful integration of multiple sources, methodologies and analytical perspectives.

This challenge is widely recognised within the social sciences. Human rights violations frequently occur in environments characterised by limited transparency, restricted media access, political instability or ongoing armed conflict. Governments responsible for violations may suppress information, restrict independent journalism or criminalise documentation efforts. Non-state armed groups often operate in areas beyond effective governmental control, making independent verification difficult. Even where reliable information exists, incidents may remain undocumented because victims fear retaliation, lack access to reporting mechanisms or distrust public authorities (Landman & Carvalho, 2009; OHCHR, 2021).

These structural limitations mean that reported incidents should generally be interpreted as **minimum documented levels of abuse** rather than complete measurements of all violations. Under-reporting is particularly likely in remote rural regions, active conflict zones and authoritarian political systems where independent observers have limited access. Conversely, countries with relatively free media environments may appear to record higher numbers of incidents simply because documentation systems function more effectively. High event counts should therefore not automatically be interpreted as evidence of more severe persecution without considering reporting capacity, population size, conflict intensity and institutional transparency.

Recognising these limitations is not a weakness of the present report. On the contrary, transparent discussion of methodological uncertainty is a defining characteristic of responsible empirical research. Rather than claiming certainty where evidence remains incomplete, NORF seeks to identify patterns that are consistently supported across multiple independent datasets. Throughout this report, conclusions are therefore based on converging evidence rather than isolated observations.

1.4.2 Data Limitations and Reporting Bias

Every dataset employed in this report possesses particular strengths and inherent limitations. Understanding these characteristics is essential for the appropriate interpretation of the findings presented in subsequent chapters.

The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) provides one of the world's most comprehensive event-based datasets on political violence, protests and conflict. Its principal strength lies in its high temporal and geographical resolution, enabling detailed analysis of conflict dynamics at the level of individual events. However, ACLED documents political violence rather than religious persecution specifically. Consequently, interpretation requires contextual analysis to determine whether religious identity constituted a significant factor in a given incident (Raleigh et al., 2010).

Similarly, the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project offers one of the most sophisticated comparative datasets on democratic governance, civil liberties and institutional performance. V-Dem enables researchers to examine long-term relationships between political institutions and human rights conditions across countries. Nevertheless, governance indicators are necessarily based

upon expert assessments and statistical modelling rather than direct observation of individual violations (Coppedge et al., 2025).

International organisations such as the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) provide authoritative information regarding refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced persons. These statistics constitute indispensable indicators of humanitarian consequences but generally do not record the specific religious identities of displaced populations. As a result, displacement figures alone cannot be interpreted as direct measures of religious persecution.

Advocacy organisations including Open Doors, Aid to the Church in Need, Christian Solidarity Worldwide and the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom provide highly specialised documentation concerning restrictions affecting Christian communities. Their long-standing thematic expertise offers valuable contextual information unavailable in broader international datasets. At the same time, their institutional mandates differ from those of academic research organisations. Accordingly, their findings are evaluated alongside independent datasets and peer-reviewed scholarship rather than treated as stand-alone evidence.

For this reason, NORF deliberately employs **methodological triangulation**. No conclusion presented in this report rests upon a single source of information. Instead, statistical datasets, legal documents, academic literature, governmental reports, international organisations and specialised monitoring institutions are systematically compared in order to identify findings that remain consistent across independent sources. This approach substantially increases both the reliability and the validity of the report's conclusions (Denzin, 1978; Flick, 2018).

1.4.3 Ethical Considerations

Research concerning religious persecution inevitably raises significant ethical responsibilities. Behind every statistical indicator are individuals, families and communities whose lives have been profoundly affected by discrimination, displacement, imprisonment or violence. The purpose of empirical measurement must therefore extend beyond numerical description. Responsible documentation seeks to contribute to accountability, informed policymaking and the prevention of future violations while respecting the dignity and security of affected populations.

NORF adheres to internationally recognised principles of research ethics, including respect for human dignity, accuracy, transparency and impartiality. Particular care is taken to avoid sensationalism, political instrumentalisation or selective presentation of evidence. Incidents are reported because they are empirically documented, not because they support predetermined narratives or policy preferences.

Equally important is the recognition that religious persecution rarely occurs in isolation from other forms of vulnerability. Religious identity frequently intersects with ethnicity, gender, political affiliation, socio-economic status and geographic location. Consequently, analytical interpretations throughout this report seek to acknowledge the multidimensional nature of violence rather than reducing complex conflicts to exclusively religious explanations.

The report further recognises that statistical representation itself carries ethical implications. Numbers may create an impression of precision that exceeds the quality of the underlying evidence.

Accordingly, quantitative indicators throughout the report should be interpreted as analytical tools rather than exact measurements of human suffering. Whenever uncertainty exists regarding the interpretation of available evidence, this uncertainty is explicitly acknowledged.

1.4.4 Research Independence

The credibility of empirical research depends fundamentally upon intellectual independence. NORF therefore maintains that research findings must remain independent of political, religious, ideological or financial interests. Although the organisation's mission is to strengthen understanding of freedom of religion or belief and to document violations affecting Christian communities, this mission cannot justify compromising scientific standards.

Accordingly, NORF adopts an **evidence-first approach**. Analytical conclusions are derived from documented observations rather than institutional preferences. Where available evidence contradicts widely held assumptions, the evidence takes precedence. Similarly, where documentation remains insufficient to support definitive conclusions, uncertainty is reported openly rather than replaced by speculation.

This principle reflects internationally accepted norms of responsible scientific practice. Transparency regarding methods, data sources, analytical assumptions and limitations enables external researchers to evaluate, replicate and challenge the findings presented in this report. Such openness strengthens rather than weakens institutional credibility and contributes to constructive scholarly dialogue.

The report also distinguishes clearly between empirical observations and normative recommendations. Statistical analyses describe observed patterns within available evidence. Policy recommendations presented in later chapters represent informed interpretations derived from these findings but remain analytically distinct from the underlying empirical results. Maintaining this distinction protects the objectivity of the research process while allowing evidence to inform public policy.

1.4.5 NORF Research Principles

The methodological choices presented throughout this report are guided by six overarching research principles that will govern all future NORF publications.

Evidence before advocacy. Public advocacy must rest upon verifiable empirical evidence. Reliable documentation strengthens accountability and enhances the credibility of policy recommendations.

Transparency over certainty. Scientific integrity requires acknowledging uncertainty wherever evidence remains incomplete. Confidence should never be overstated.

Methodological pluralism. No single dataset adequately captures the complexity of religious persecution. Robust conclusions emerge through the systematic integration of quantitative data, qualitative documentation, legal analysis and country-specific expertise.

Academic independence. Research findings must remain independent of political, religious or financial influence. Conclusions follow the evidence irrespective of institutional expectations.

Protection of vulnerable communities. Documentation should contribute to prevention, accountability and informed public debate while respecting the dignity and security of affected individuals and communities.

Commitment to reproducibility. Wherever possible, methods, datasets and analytical procedures should be sufficiently transparent to permit independent verification and future replication.

Together, these principles define NORF's approach to evidence-based human rights research. They also provide the methodological foundation for the country analyses, comparative assessments and policy recommendations presented throughout the remainder of this report.

Figure 1.4

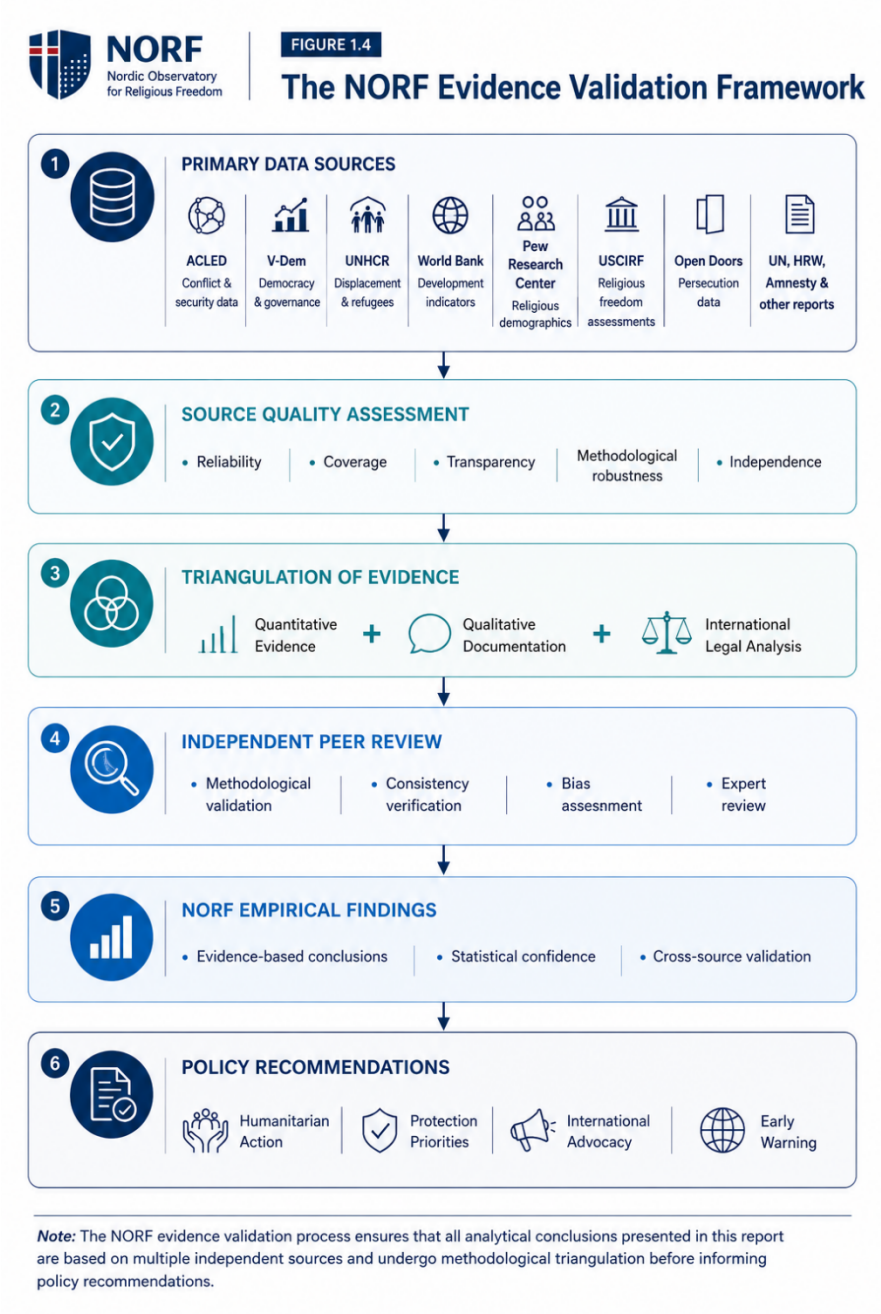


Table 1.4

Strengths and Limitations of Principal Data Sources

Source	Primary contribution	Principal limitation	Role in NORF methodology
ACLED	High-resolution conflict event data	Does not directly identify religious motivation	Event-level violence analysis
V-Dem	Governance and democratic institutions	Expert-modelled indicators	Institutional context
UNHCR	Refugee and displacement statistics	Limited religious disaggregation	Humanitarian consequences
World Bank	Socio-economic indicators	Indirect relationship to persecution	Structural vulnerability
Pew Research Center	Religion, demographics and restrictions	Periodic rather than continuous updates	Comparative religion indicators
USCIRF	Freedom of religion assessments	Policy-oriented reporting	Legal and institutional analysis
Open Doors	Christian persecution monitoring	Advocacy mandate	Community-specific documentation
Freedom House	Civil liberties and political rights	Broad human rights focus	Democratic environment

References (APA 7)

Coppedge, M., et al. (2025). *Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Annual Report 2025*. V-Dem Institute.

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1.5 Structure of the Report and Reading Guide

From Documentation to Decision-Making

Understanding religious persecution requires more than documenting isolated incidents of violence. Effective policy responses depend upon recognising broader patterns, identifying structural drivers, evaluating institutional resilience and translating empirical evidence into practical recommendations. Accordingly, this report has been designed as a progressive analytical framework in which each chapter builds upon the evidence established in the preceding sections.

Rather than presenting country narratives in isolation, the report follows a structured research process. It begins by defining the conceptual and methodological foundations necessary for rigorous analysis before progressing through global empirical assessments, regional comparisons, thematic investigations and finally policy recommendations. This sequential approach reflects established principles of evidence-based policy research: robust recommendations can only emerge from transparent methodology and systematically analysed data.

The structure has also been developed with multiple audiences in mind. Policymakers often require concise summaries and actionable recommendations. Researchers may focus on methodological transparency and statistical robustness. Journalists seek verified facts supported by credible documentation, while humanitarian organisations frequently consult country-specific analyses to understand operational environments. By organising the report into clearly defined analytical layers, each audience can navigate directly to the information most relevant to its needs while maintaining confidence that every conclusion rests upon the same empirical foundation.

Importantly, the report is intended not only to document current conditions but also to establish a reproducible framework for future annual and quarterly assessments. Consistent chapter organisation, standardised indicators and transparent methodology enable meaningful comparisons across time, allowing trends to be monitored systematically rather than relying upon anecdotal observations or isolated case studies.

The Logic of the Report

The report progresses from general principles towards increasingly detailed empirical analysis before concluding with evidence-based recommendations. This progression mirrors the scientific research process itself.

Chapter 1 establishes the purpose of the report, defines its analytical scope and introduces the ethical and methodological principles guiding NORF's work. It explains why freedom of religion or belief represents a measurable public policy issue and why empirical documentation is essential for democratic accountability and informed decision-making.

Chapter 2 presents the methodological architecture underpinning the report. It describes the datasets employed, explains the criteria used for country selection, outlines statistical and qualitative analytical methods, discusses indicator construction and addresses methodological limitations in greater technical detail. This chapter enables readers to evaluate the robustness and reproducibility of the analyses presented throughout the remainder of the report.

Chapter 3 constitutes the empirical core of the publication. Drawing upon internationally recognised datasets, it provides a global assessment of political violence, restrictions on freedom of religion or belief, governance indicators, displacement patterns and socio-political risk factors affecting Christian communities. Comparative statistical analyses identify countries exhibiting elevated risk, significant deterioration or emerging trends requiring closer attention. Rather than presenting isolated statistics, Chapter 3 integrates multiple indicators to reveal patterns that would remain invisible if each dataset were analysed independently.

Subsequent chapters examine these findings through complementary analytical perspectives. Regional chapters explore the political, legal and historical contexts shaping persecution across different parts of the world. Country case studies provide detailed examinations of particularly significant situations, highlighting local dynamics that cannot be captured through global statistical analysis alone. Thematic chapters investigate cross-cutting issues such as displacement, gender-specific vulnerabilities, attacks on religious institutions, legal restrictions on religious practice and the relationship between governance and religious freedom.

The report concludes with a synthesis of the evidence and a series of policy recommendations directed towards governments, international organisations, parliamentary institutions, civil society organisations and religious communities. These recommendations are explicitly derived from the empirical analyses presented throughout the report and are clearly distinguished from the underlying factual findings.

Reading the Report

Although the report has been designed to function as a coherent whole, different readers may approach it with different objectives.

Readers seeking a broad overview of global developments may consult the Executive Summary together with Chapters 3 and the concluding recommendations. These sections provide a comprehensive understanding of the principal findings without requiring detailed engagement with the methodological chapters.

Researchers and academic readers are encouraged to begin with Chapters 1 and 2 before proceeding to the empirical analyses. These chapters explain the conceptual framework, data sources and analytical methods that underpin the report's conclusions and facilitate independent evaluation of the research design.

Policymakers and government officials may find particular value in the comparative analyses and country profiles, which combine empirical indicators with concise contextual explanations and policy implications. The standardised structure adopted throughout the report facilitates comparison between countries and enables readers to identify recurring patterns across regions.

Journalists, educators and civil society organisations may utilise individual country chapters or thematic analyses independently, as each chapter contains sufficient contextual information to function as a stand-alone reference while remaining integrated within the broader analytical framework.

Regardless of the chosen reading path, the report is intended to serve as a reference publication rather than a document to be read only once. Its standardised methodology, comprehensive bibliography and consistent presentation of evidence are designed to support repeated consultation throughout the year as conditions evolve and new developments emerge.

A Living Research Programme

This publication represents the inaugural edition of NORF's annual flagship report on religious persecution affecting Christian communities worldwide. It should therefore be understood not as a one-time assessment but as the foundation of a long-term research programme.

Beginning with this edition, NORF intends to publish annual comprehensive assessments supplemented by quarterly analytical updates. Maintaining a consistent methodological framework across these publications will enable year-on-year comparisons, longitudinal trend analysis and the continuous refinement of empirical indicators as new data become available. Over time, this cumulative approach will strengthen both the reliability of the findings and their usefulness for policymakers, researchers and practitioners.

Future editions will benefit from expanding datasets, improved analytical techniques and increasing opportunities for collaboration with academic institutions, international organisations and regional experts. At the same time, the guiding principles established in this introductory chapter—transparency, methodological rigour, evidence-based analysis and intellectual independence—will remain constant. These principles form the foundation upon which NORF's research identity is built.

Ultimately, the objective of this report extends beyond documentation. Reliable evidence can illuminate patterns that would otherwise remain obscured, inform more effective public policy and strengthen accountability for violations of freedom of religion or belief. By combining rigorous empirical analysis with careful contextual interpretation, NORF seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of one of the most significant yet under-documented human rights challenges of the contemporary world.

Figure 1.5



Figure 1.5. The analytical architecture of the NORF Annual Report. Each chapter builds sequentially from conceptual foundations through methodological validation and empirical analysis to evidence-based policy recommendations, creating a transparent and reproducible research framework.

Table 1.5

Structure and Purpose of the NORF Annual Report

Chapter	Primary Purpose	Principal Audience	Core Outputs
Executive Summary	Present key findings and recommendations	Decision-makers, media	Strategic overview
Chapter 1	Define purpose, scope and research principles	All readers	Conceptual framework
Chapter 2	Explain methodology and data sources	Researchers, analysts	Methodological transparency
Chapter 3	Global empirical assessment	Policymakers, researchers	Comparative indicators and trends
Regional Chapters	Explain regional dynamics	Governments, NGOs	Contextual analysis
Country Profiles	Provide in-depth national assessments	Diplomats, practitioners	Country risk assessments
Thematic Chapters	Examine cross-cutting issues	Researchers, specialists	Thematic insights
Policy Recommendations	Translate evidence into action	Governments, international organisations	Actionable recommendations
Appendices	Ensure transparency and reproducibility	Researchers	Methods, datasets and supplementary material

References (APA 7)

Booth, W. C., Colomb, G. G., & Williams, J. M. (2016). *The Craft of Research* (4th ed.). University of Chicago Press.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2023). *OECD Publishing Style Guide* (3rd ed.). OECD Publishing.

World Bank. (2024). *World Development Report 2024: The Middle-Income Trap*. World Bank.

Chapter 2

2.1 Research Design and Analytical Framework

Introduction

The credibility of any empirical assessment depends fundamentally upon the transparency of its research design. Conclusions concerning religious persecution cannot rely upon isolated incidents, anecdotal observations or selective reporting. They must instead emerge from systematic analysis of verifiable evidence collected through transparent and reproducible methods. For this reason, the NORF Annual Report adopts a multidisciplinary research design that combines quantitative conflict analysis, political science, human rights research and comparative country assessment within a single analytical framework.

Rather than relying on any single dataset or institutional assessment, the report integrates information from multiple internationally recognised sources. Political violence data, governance indicators, refugee statistics, demographic information and religious freedom assessments are examined collectively to identify patterns that would remain obscured if each source were analysed independently. This approach reflects an important principle of modern social science: complex social phenomena are best understood through the triangulation of complementary forms of evidence (Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Religious persecution represents precisely such a complex phenomenon. It encompasses violent attacks, discriminatory legislation, restrictions on religious practice, forced displacement, institutional discrimination and broader political dynamics that interact across multiple levels of society. No individual dataset measures all of these dimensions. Consequently, robust analysis requires integrating several independent sources while recognising the strengths and limitations of each.

Evidence-Based Research

The methodological philosophy underpinning this report is evidence-based policy research. Within this tradition, empirical observations are distinguished clearly from normative conclusions. The purpose of the research is not to advocate predetermined political positions but to establish, as accurately as possible, observable patterns concerning violations of freedom of religion or belief affecting Christian communities worldwide.

Evidence-based policy research has become the dominant analytical framework employed by organisations such as the OECD, the World Bank, the European Commission and numerous United Nations agencies. Although these institutions differ considerably in mandate and methodology, they share several core principles that also guide this report:

- transparency of data sources;
- reproducibility of analytical procedures;
- explicit acknowledgement of uncertainty;
- systematic comparison across cases;

- clear distinction between empirical findings and policy recommendations.

Adherence to these principles enhances both scientific credibility and practical utility. Policymakers must be able to understand not only the conclusions reached but also the evidential basis upon which those conclusions rest.

Mixed-Methods Research Design

The report adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches in order to capture both measurable trends and contextual complexity.

Quantitative analysis identifies global patterns by examining variables such as conflict events, fatalities, displacement, governance indicators, demographic change and restrictions on religious freedom across multiple countries. Statistical comparison allows countries to be assessed consistently using common indicators while identifying regional trends and significant changes over time.

However, quantitative indicators alone rarely explain why persecution occurs or how local political and historical conditions shape particular forms of violence or discrimination. Consequently, statistical findings are supplemented by qualitative analysis drawing upon governmental reports, international organisations, legal documentation, academic literature and carefully evaluated secondary sources. These contextual analyses provide explanatory depth without sacrificing methodological transparency.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence follows an explanatory sequential design in which statistical analysis identifies significant patterns that are subsequently interpreted through contextual investigation. This approach reduces the risk of both overgeneralisation and anecdotal reasoning while strengthening confidence in the report's conclusions.

Analytical Levels

To ensure consistency across all subsequent chapters, the report analyses religious persecution at four interconnected levels.

The **global level** identifies worldwide trends, compares countries and regions, and examines changes over time.

The **regional level** investigates how geography, political systems, conflict dynamics and historical developments shape patterns of persecution within particular world regions.

The **national level** analyses individual countries using a standardised analytical framework that facilitates comparison while recognising national specificities.

Finally, the **case-study level** examines selected incidents or developments in greater detail where they illustrate broader structural patterns or emerging trends.

This multi-level framework enables the report to balance comparability with contextual sensitivity. Statistical consistency is maintained across countries without ignoring the political and cultural diversity that characterises different forms of religious persecution.

Analytical Framework

The analytical model developed for this report rests upon five interconnected dimensions:

1. **Political Violence**, measured through conflict event data and violence against civilians.
2. **Legal and Institutional Restrictions**, including constitutional provisions, legislation and administrative practices affecting freedom of religion or belief.
3. **Societal Hostility**, encompassing communal violence, discrimination and social exclusion directed against Christian communities.
4. **Governance and State Capacity**, assessing the ability and willingness of state institutions to protect religious minorities and uphold fundamental rights.
5. **Humanitarian Consequences**, including forced displacement, refugee movements, internal displacement and broader societal impacts.

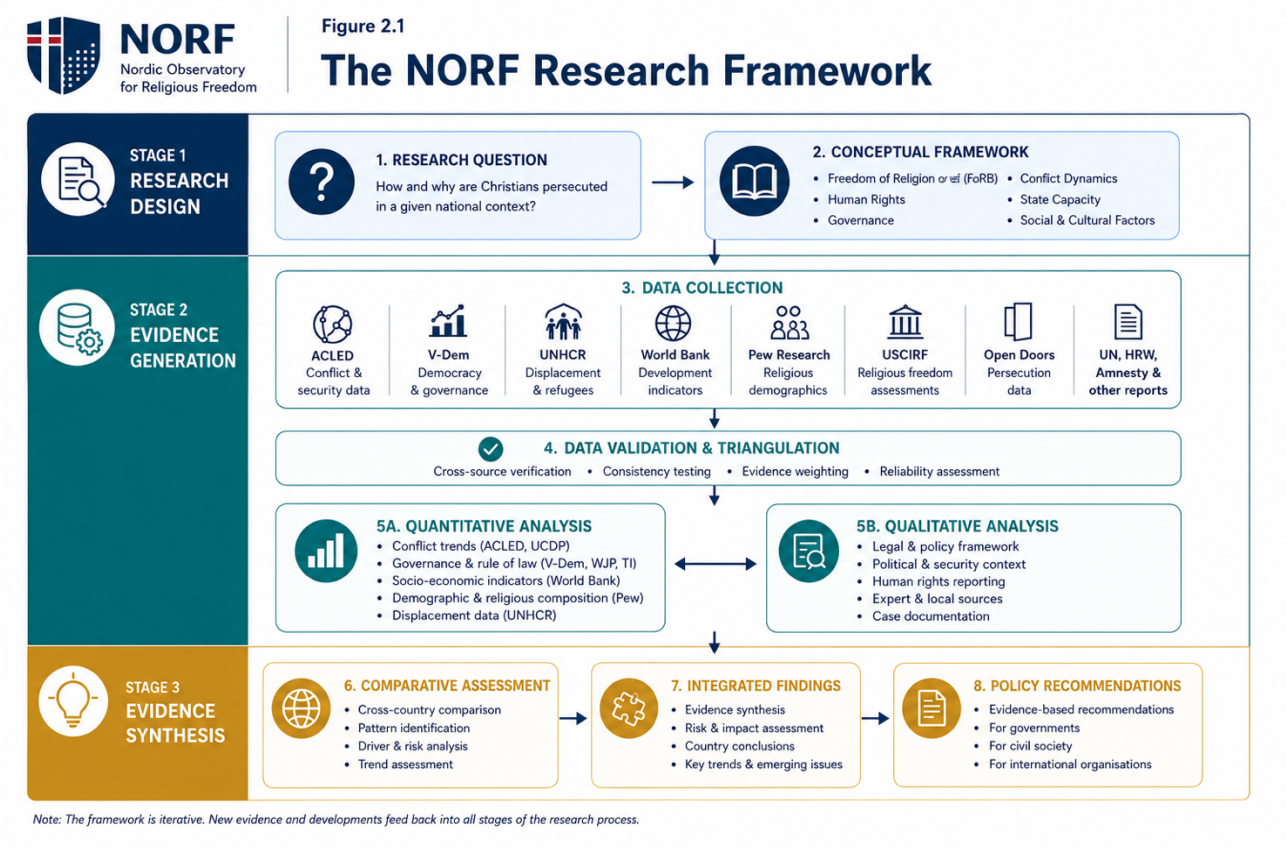
Taken together, these dimensions provide a comprehensive framework for understanding persecution as a multidimensional process rather than a collection of isolated incidents.

Research Philosophy

This report adopts a critical realist epistemological perspective. Observable events such as attacks on churches, arrests of religious leaders or forced displacement are treated as measurable phenomena, while recognising that these events are generated by deeper political, institutional and social structures that require contextual interpretation. Accordingly, the report combines empirical measurement with theoretically informed analysis to explain not only what has occurred but also the structural conditions that make persecution more or less likely.

Throughout the report, methodological transparency takes precedence over analytical certainty. Where evidence is incomplete, contradictory or subject to competing interpretations, these limitations are explicitly acknowledged rather than concealed. Such openness is essential for maintaining scientific integrity and enabling future research to refine or challenge the conclusions presented.

Figure 2.1



References (APA 7)

Bryman, A. (2016). *Social Research Methods* (5th ed.). Oxford University Press.

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.

OECD. (2020). *Quality Framework and Guidelines for OECD Statistical Activities*. OECD Publishing.

United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2012). *Human Rights Indicators: A Guide to Measurement and Implementation*. United Nations.

2.1.2 Human Rights as the Normative Foundation

The analytical framework adopted throughout this report is grounded in the contemporary international human rights system established after the Second World War and subsequently developed through international treaties, jurisprudence and state practice. NORF therefore evaluates incidents of religious persecution according to internationally recognised legal principles rather than theological, political or ideological preferences.

At the centre of this framework lies the principle that human rights belong to persons—not to religions, ideologies or belief systems. Freedom of religion or belief protects every individual's right

to adopt, change, reject or peacefully manifest religious or non-religious convictions. These rights exist independently of the truth, popularity or social acceptance of the beliefs concerned.

Accordingly, this report consistently distinguishes between the protection of individuals and the protection of ideas. International human rights law protects persons and communities from violence, coercion, discrimination and persecution because of their religion or belief. It does not establish a corresponding right for religious doctrines, institutions, sacred texts or theological claims to be immune from peaceful criticism, academic inquiry, satire or public debate.

This distinction is fundamental for maintaining both freedom of religion and freedom of expression within democratic societies. Individuals possess rights; ideas remain open to discussion. NORF therefore evaluates whether governments or non-state actors violate the rights of persons rather than whether particular religious ideas have been criticised or challenged.

2.1.3 Religion-Neutral Methodology

A central objective of NORF's methodology is analytical neutrality. The report does not assume that any religion deserves greater legal protection than another, nor does it evaluate theological claims or religious truth. Instead, the analytical framework applies identical criteria regardless of whether victims belong to Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Yazidi, Bahá'í, atheist or other religious or non-religious communities.

The present report focuses specifically on Christians because Christians constitute the subject population selected for this study. This thematic focus should not be interpreted as implying that persecution of Christians is uniquely important or that violations affecting other communities are less significant. Rather, it reflects the scope of the present research programme. The legal standards, analytical framework and methodological principles employed throughout the report are universally applicable and could be employed equally in assessments of persecution affecting any other religious or belief community.

Such neutrality is essential for scientific credibility. By applying consistent definitions across countries, political systems and religious traditions, NORF seeks to minimise analytical bias while maximising the comparability of empirical findings.

2.1.4 Freedom of Religion within Democratic Society

Freedom of religion or belief exists alongside—not above—the rule of law. Democratic societies are required to protect the peaceful exercise of religion while simultaneously safeguarding the rights and freedoms of all other individuals. International human rights law therefore recognises that the manifestation of religion may, under carefully defined circumstances, be subject to limitations prescribed by law and necessary to protect public safety, public order, public health, public morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

Consequently, this report distinguishes between **neutral regulation of public conduct** and **religious persecution**. Governments retain legitimate authority to regulate the time, place and manner of activities conducted in public spaces, provided that such regulation is lawful,

proportionate, non-discriminatory and applied equally across all religious and non-religious communities.

Restrictions become problematic when they selectively target particular religious groups, prevent individuals from practising their faith, or create unequal legal treatment based solely on religious identity. Throughout this report, the legality and proportionality of restrictions are assessed against international human rights standards rather than domestic political preferences.

2.1.5 Evidence-Based Research Design

The report adopts a mixed-method research design combining quantitative conflict and incident data with qualitative legal, political and contextual analysis. Multiple independent sources are systematically compared to strengthen reliability, reduce the influence of reporting bias and increase the robustness of empirical conclusions.

The primary quantitative dataset is derived from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), which provides geocoded information on political violence, attacks against civilians, protests and strategic developments. These data are complemented by reports from the United Nations, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), Open Doors International, Aid to the Church in Need (ACN), Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and relevant academic literature.

Rather than relying upon any single organisation, NORF employs source triangulation wherever possible. Reported incidents are assessed within their legal, political and historical contexts before inclusion in the analysis. This approach reduces the risk that isolated reports or politically motivated narratives unduly influence the findings.

2.1.6 Principles Guiding the Entire Report

The analytical framework presented in this chapter establishes the principles applied consistently throughout every subsequent chapter of this report:

- **Universality:** Every individual possesses equal freedom of religion or belief irrespective of faith or non-belief.
- **Person-centred protection:** Human rights protect individuals and communities, not religious doctrines or institutions.
- **Neutrality:** Identical analytical standards are applied across all countries and religious traditions.
- **Evidence before advocacy:** Conclusions are based on verifiable empirical evidence and transparent methodology.
- **Rule of law:** Religious freedom is exercised within a legal framework that protects the equal rights of all members of society.
- **Transparency:** Definitions, data sources and analytical procedures are explicitly documented to facilitate scrutiny and replication.

Together, these principles form the methodological foundation for the remainder of the report. They ensure that subsequent analyses of country conditions, patterns of persecution and policy responses

are grounded in internationally recognised legal standards, supported by empirical evidence and presented according to transparent and academically rigorous research practices

Transition to Chapter 2.2

Having established the overall research design and analytical philosophy, the next section addresses a foundational methodological question: **what constitutes religious persecution?** Because international organisations, legal scholars and human rights institutions employ differing definitions and conceptual frameworks, a precise operational definition is necessary before empirical measurement can proceed. Section 2.2 therefore examines the conceptual foundations of religious persecution and explains how the term is used consistently throughout this report.

APA 7 reference list,

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2.2 International Human Rights Framework

Religious freedom is among the oldest and most universally recognised human rights in modern international law. Although religious beliefs, traditions and institutions differ considerably across societies, the international legal framework establishes that every individual possesses the inherent right to adopt, maintain, change, reject or express a religion or belief without coercion or discrimination. This protection derives from the broader recognition that freedom of thought, conscience and religion forms an indispensable component of human dignity, democratic governance and peaceful coexistence.

The contemporary legal understanding of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War. The systematic persecution of religious, ethnic and political communities demonstrated that protecting freedom of conscience was essential not only for

safeguarding individual liberty but also for preventing authoritarianism and mass atrocities. Consequently, the right to freedom of religion became embedded within the international human rights architecture established by the United Nations after 1945.

Today, the legal protection of FoRB extends across multiple international and regional instruments. Although terminology and enforcement mechanisms differ between jurisdictions, these instruments establish a remarkably consistent normative framework. Together they define freedom of religion not merely as protection of religious practice but as protection of individual autonomy in matters of conscience.

The cornerstone of this framework is **Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)**, adopted unanimously by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948. Article 18 declares:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance (United Nations, 1948).

Although the Universal Declaration is not itself legally binding, it has become one of the most influential normative instruments in international law. Numerous provisions have subsequently been incorporated into binding treaties, national constitutions and regional human rights conventions. The principles articulated in Article 18 therefore constitute the foundation upon which subsequent international protection of religious freedom has been constructed.

The legally binding expression of these principles appears in **Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)**, which entered into force in 1976 and today binds the overwhelming majority of UN member states. The ICCPR confirms that every person enjoys freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including the freedom to adopt a religion or belief of one's choice and the freedom to manifest that religion individually or collectively, publicly or privately (United Nations, 1966).

Importantly, the Covenant distinguishes between two dimensions of religious freedom. The **forum internum**, or internal freedom of conscience, is absolute. No state may legitimately compel an individual to adopt, renounce or change a religion or belief. By contrast, the **forum externum**, referring to the external manifestation of religion through worship, teaching, observance and practice, may under narrowly defined circumstances be subject to lawful restrictions. These restrictions, however, are exceptional and must satisfy strict legal criteria established under international human rights law.

The authoritative interpretation of Article 18 is provided by **General Comment No. 22**, adopted by the United Nations Human Rights Committee in 1993. The Committee emphasises that freedom of religion extends far beyond membership of organised religions. It equally protects non-theistic beliefs, atheistic convictions, agnosticism, indigenous belief systems and the right not to profess any religion at all. Furthermore, the Committee stresses that freedom to change religion—or to abandon religion entirely—is an essential element of Article 18 and may not be restricted by states through coercion, intimidation or criminal sanctions (United Nations Human Rights Committee, 1993).

These principles establish an important normative distinction that guides NORF's analytical framework. International human rights law protects **individuals**, not belief systems. Human beings possess rights; religions, ideologies and theological doctrines do not. Consequently, international law simultaneously protects the right to practise a religion and the right of others peacefully to criticise, reject or debate religious ideas. Democratic societies therefore distinguish between protecting persons from discrimination and protecting ideas from criticism. This distinction forms one of the central analytical principles employed throughout this report.

Regional human rights systems reinforce these protections. Within Europe, **Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)** guarantees freedom of thought, conscience and religion while recognising that limitations upon the public manifestation of religion must remain lawful, necessary and proportionate in a democratic society (Council of Europe, 1950). The jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights has repeatedly affirmed that pluralism, tolerance and broad-mindedness constitute defining characteristics of democratic societies, requiring states to protect both religious minorities and freedom of expression even where competing rights occasionally come into tension.

Comparable protections exist within the **American Convention on Human Rights**, the **African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights**, and the **Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union**. Although institutional enforcement varies between regions, the convergence of these legal instruments demonstrates a broad international consensus: freedom of religion or belief is a universal human right belonging equally to every individual irrespective of nationality, ethnicity, religion or political system.

For NORF, this legal framework serves a methodological rather than merely descriptive function. Every country assessment contained within this report is evaluated against internationally recognised legal standards rather than against theological doctrine, political ideology or cultural preference. Whether violations occur against Christians in Nigeria, Uyghur Muslims in China, Bahá'ís in Iran, Ahmadis in Pakistan, Yazidis in Iraq or atheists imprisoned for apostasy, the same analytical principles are applied consistently. Equal standards constitute a prerequisite for credible human rights research.

At the same time, equal standards do not imply identical empirical outcomes. Different countries exhibit different patterns of religious repression, varying institutional capacities and diverse political contexts. Some governments directly persecute religious minorities through legislation, imprisonment or state violence. Others fail to protect vulnerable communities from attacks perpetrated by non-state actors. NORF therefore distinguishes carefully between **state-sponsored persecution**, **state failure to protect**, and **societal or communal violence**, recognising that each phenomenon requires different policy responses while remaining subject to the same underlying human rights principles.

This international legal framework provides the normative foundation upon which the remainder of this report is constructed. The following sections examine how these universal principles are translated into operational analytical criteria and how they inform NORF's assessment of religious persecution across the countries examined in this report.

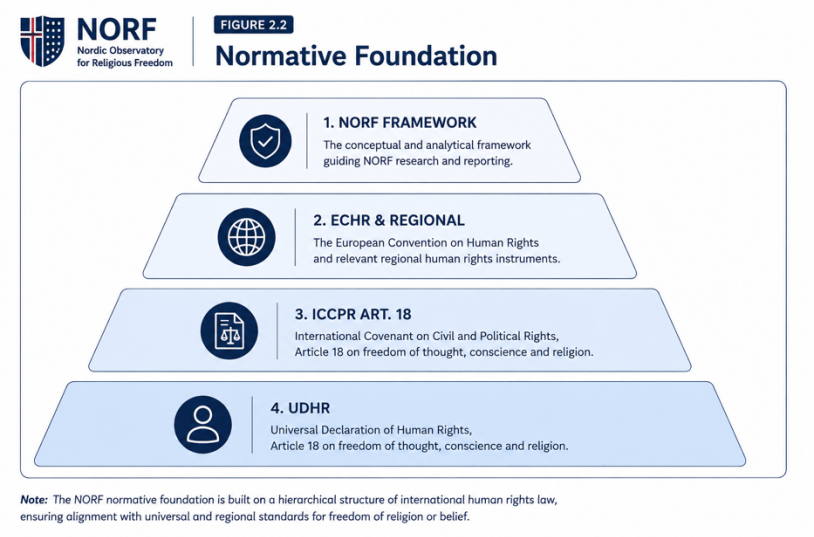


Figure 2.2. *Normative Foundation of the NORF Analytical Framework.*
Source: Authors' illustration based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (United Nations, 1966), the European Convention on Human Rights (Council of Europe, 1950), and related regional human rights instruments.

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2.2.2 Freedom of Religion Protects Individuals—not Ideas

One of the most important distinctions in international human rights law is the difference between protecting **persons** and protecting **belief systems**. Although frequently misunderstood in political debate, the international legal framework consistently affirms that human rights belong to individuals rather than to religions, ideologies or philosophical doctrines. Freedom of religion therefore safeguards the dignity, autonomy and equality of every person regardless of belief, while simultaneously preserving the democratic principle that ideas—including religious ideas—remain open to peaceful discussion, criticism and disagreement.

This distinction is fundamental to NORF's analytical framework. Throughout this report, religious freedom is understood as a right held by individuals and communities of individuals. It is not interpreted as conferring legal immunity upon religious institutions, sacred texts or theological

doctrines. Democratic societies depend upon the coexistence of two complementary freedoms: the freedom to practise one's religion and the freedom of others to question, reject, criticise or satirise religious beliefs without fear of state punishment.

The **United Nations Human Rights Committee** has repeatedly emphasised that Article 18 of the ICCPR protects freedom of thought, conscience and religion as an aspect of individual autonomy rather than institutional privilege. Likewise, **Article 19 of the ICCPR** protects freedom of opinion and expression, recognising that open debate may include criticism of religious beliefs, political ideologies and cultural traditions (United Nations, 1966). Together, Articles 18 and 19 establish a constitutional balance that lies at the heart of democratic societies: individuals enjoy robust protection against discrimination because of their beliefs, but no belief system is exempt from peaceful public scrutiny.

This distinction has been reinforced through the jurisprudence of the **European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR)**. The Court has consistently observed that freedom of expression protects not only information and ideas that are favourably received but also those that "offend, shock or disturb" the state or segments of the population, provided that such expression does not incite violence or hatred. This principle reflects the understanding that democratic pluralism requires tolerance of disagreement, including disagreement concerning religion (Handyside v. United Kingdom, 1976).

Accordingly, international human rights law does not recognise a universal "right not to be offended." Individuals may experience profound offence when deeply held beliefs are criticised, questioned or rejected. Such emotional responses are understandable in diverse societies. Nevertheless, offence alone does not constitute a violation of human rights. Legal intervention becomes justified only where expression crosses the threshold into unlawful conduct, such as direct incitement to violence, discrimination or hostility against identifiable persons or groups.

This distinction has practical implications for assessing alleged violations of religious freedom. The publication of critical academic research concerning a religion, the peaceful demonstration against religious institutions, the satire of religious figures, or public advocacy for secularism may provoke controversy or offence. Yet these activities ordinarily fall within the scope of protected freedom of expression. Conversely, threatening believers with violence, preventing individuals from attending worship, destroying places of worship, criminalising religious conversion, or denying equal access to education or employment because of religion constitute violations of internationally protected human rights.

NORF therefore distinguishes carefully between **criticism of beliefs** and **discrimination against believers**. This distinction is not merely semantic; it determines whether a given incident represents an exercise of democratic freedom or an infringement of internationally protected rights. Maintaining this analytical clarity is essential if human rights monitoring is to remain legally coherent and politically impartial.

The distinction is equally important when analysing legislative developments. A number of states continue to enforce blasphemy, apostasy or religious defamation laws that criminalise criticism of dominant religions. International human rights bodies have repeatedly expressed concern that such legislation is frequently used to suppress political opposition, silence religious minorities or prosecute individuals who peacefully exercise freedom of expression. The Human Rights Committee has therefore clarified that prohibitions on displays of disrespect toward a religion or

belief system are generally incompatible with the ICCPR except under the narrow circumstances provided by Article 20 concerning advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence (United Nations Human Rights Committee, 2011).

For NORF, preserving this distinction is indispensable to maintaining analytical neutrality. Human rights research cannot consistently defend the freedom of Christians to preach the Gospel while simultaneously denying others the right peacefully to question Christianity. Likewise, protecting Muslims from discrimination requires equal protection of those who criticise Islam without advocating hatred or violence. The same principle applies to every religion, belief system and worldview examined throughout this report.

Consequently, NORF evaluates alleged violations according to a consistent legal standard. The decisive question is not whether a statement is considered respectful, offensive or controversial. Rather, the relevant question is whether the conduct infringes the internationally recognised rights of identifiable individuals or communities. This evidence-based and rights-based approach enables consistent comparison across jurisdictions, political systems and religious traditions while reducing the risk that human rights analysis becomes influenced by theological or ideological preferences.

Ultimately, freedom of religion and freedom of expression should not be understood as competing rights but as mutually reinforcing pillars of democratic society. Individuals must be free to believe, worship and organise their religious lives without fear of coercion. At the same time, democratic societies require the freedom peacefully to debate, criticise and even reject religious ideas. Only by protecting both freedoms simultaneously can states preserve genuine pluralism, equal citizenship and the open exchange of ideas upon which democratic governance depends.

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2.2.3 Legitimate Limitations under International Human Rights Law

Although freedom of thought, conscience and religion constitutes one of the fundamental rights recognised under international law, it is not absolute in every respect. International human rights

law distinguishes carefully between the **internal freedom of belief**, which enjoys complete protection, and the **external manifestation of religion**, which under narrowly defined circumstances may be subject to lawful limitations. Understanding this distinction is essential for evaluating whether government actions represent legitimate regulation or unlawful religious persecution.

Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) establishes that every individual possesses the unrestricted freedom to hold, adopt or change a religion or belief of his or her choice. This internal dimension of religious freedom—commonly referred to by its Latin expression *forum internum*—may never be limited by the state. Governments cannot legitimately compel religious conversion, prohibit personal belief, or punish individuals solely because of their religious convictions. Freedom of conscience is therefore regarded as absolute under international human rights law (United Nations, 1966).

The public manifestation of religion, however, occupies a different legal category. Worship, religious education, public preaching, missionary activity, religious dress, ceremonies, and the establishment of religious institutions all involve actions that take place within society and may therefore intersect with the rights of others. Article 18(3) of the ICCPR consequently permits restrictions on the manifestation of religion, but only under exceptionally strict conditions.

International law recognises only five legitimate grounds upon which limitations may be imposed:

- the protection of **public safety**;
- the protection of **public order**;
- the protection of **public health**;
- the protection of **public morals**; and
- the protection of the **fundamental rights and freedoms of others** (United Nations, 1966).

Importantly, these categories are exhaustive rather than illustrative. Governments may not invent additional justifications simply because a religious practice is unpopular, politically inconvenient or socially controversial. Restrictions that fall outside these recognised grounds are incompatible with the Covenant.

Even where one of these legitimate aims is invoked, international human rights law requires that any restriction satisfy several cumulative legal tests. These principles—developed through the jurisprudence of the Human Rights Committee, the European Court of Human Rights and other regional human rights bodies—form the cornerstone of contemporary proportionality analysis.

First, any limitation must be **prescribed by law**. Government interference with religious practice cannot be based upon arbitrary administrative decisions or vague political discretion. The relevant legal provisions must be publicly accessible, sufficiently precise and foreseeable in their application so that individuals understand the legal consequences of their conduct.

Second, the restriction must pursue a **legitimate objective** recognised under international law. Authorities cannot invoke national tradition, political ideology, religious orthodoxy or majoritarian preferences as independent legal grounds for limiting religious freedom. Democratic governments may legitimately regulate conduct to protect public interests, but they may not suppress religious communities merely because their beliefs differ from those of the majority.

Third, restrictions must be **necessary in a democratic society**. This requirement imposes a demanding evidentiary burden upon states. Governments must demonstrate that the proposed limitation addresses a genuine and pressing social need rather than a hypothetical or speculative concern. Mere discomfort, public disagreement or political sensitivity cannot justify interference with fundamental rights.

Finally, any limitation must satisfy the principle of **proportionality**. Even where regulation pursues a legitimate objective, the measures adopted must represent the least restrictive means available to achieve that objective. Authorities are therefore required to balance competing rights carefully and avoid unnecessary interference with religious freedom.

The principle of proportionality has become one of the defining characteristics of modern human rights adjudication. Courts increasingly recognise that democratic societies inevitably encounter situations in which multiple rights coexist rather than conflict absolutely. Freedom of religion, freedom of expression, equality before the law, privacy and public security frequently intersect in complex ways. The task of democratic institutions is therefore not to privilege one right categorically over another but to reconcile competing interests through proportionate and evidence-based decision-making.

The COVID-19 pandemic provides a useful illustration of this principle in practice. During the global public health emergency, numerous democratic states imposed temporary restrictions upon religious gatherings alongside comparable restrictions affecting schools, sporting events, concerts and other public assemblies. International human rights bodies generally accepted that such measures could be compatible with Article 18, provided they were lawful, proportionate, scientifically justified, non-discriminatory and temporary. Conversely, restrictions directed exclusively against particular religious communities without comparable treatment of secular activities would likely constitute discriminatory interference with religious freedom.

Similarly, governments may regulate issues such as fire safety within places of worship, building standards for religious institutions, public health requirements during epidemics or traffic management during large religious gatherings. Such regulations do not ordinarily violate freedom of religion when they apply equally across society and pursue legitimate public interests through proportionate means.

By contrast, international human rights law does not recognise broad political or ideological justifications for suppressing religious communities. States may not prohibit religious conversion to preserve national identity, criminalise peaceful evangelism to maintain religious homogeneity, deny registration to minority religious organisations because their doctrines differ from those of dominant faiths, or imprison individuals for abandoning a state religion. Such measures target the exercise of religious freedom itself rather than protecting legitimate public interests and therefore fall outside the permissible limitations established under Article 18.

This distinction becomes particularly important when assessing legislation concerning blasphemy, apostasy and religious defamation. Although governments often justify such laws as necessary to preserve public order or protect religious harmony, international human rights bodies have repeatedly warned that these provisions are frequently applied in discriminatory and disproportionate ways. In numerous jurisdictions, blasphemy laws have been used to prosecute religious minorities, political dissidents, journalists, academics and ordinary citizens whose

peaceful expression challenged prevailing religious or political orthodoxy. The Human Rights Committee has therefore concluded that prohibitions on displays of disrespect toward a religion or belief system are generally incompatible with the ICCPR unless they satisfy the narrow threshold established under Article 20 concerning advocacy of hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence (United Nations Human Rights Committee, 2011).

For NORF, these legal principles provide an operational framework for evaluating alleged restrictions upon religious freedom. The existence of government regulation alone does not automatically constitute persecution. Democratic societies necessarily regulate numerous aspects of public life, including activities undertaken by religious organisations. The critical analytical question is whether restrictions are **lawful, necessary, proportionate and applied equally**, or whether they are used selectively to suppress particular religious communities or beliefs.

Accordingly, NORF distinguishes between **legitimate regulation** and **religious persecution**. Legitimate regulation protects public interests while respecting equal rights and applying objective legal standards. Religious persecution occurs where state authorities or non-state actors intentionally interfere with religious freedom through coercion, discrimination, violence or systematic exclusion without satisfying the strict legal requirements recognised under international human rights law.

This distinction ensures that NORF's assessments remain legally consistent across countries with widely differing political systems, legal traditions and religious landscapes. Rather than evaluating governments according to ideological preference or theological agreement, the report measures state conduct against universally recognised principles of legality, necessity, proportionality and equality before the law. These principles provide the bridge between international legal standards and the empirical methodology employed throughout the remainder of this report.

APA 7 References

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United Nations Human Rights Committee. (2011). *General Comment No. 34: Article 19 (Freedoms of Opinion and Expression).* CCPR/C/GC/34

2.2.4 Freedom of Religion and the Shared Public Space

Freedom of religion does not exist in isolation from the broader constitutional framework of democratic society. Religious liberty is exercised alongside numerous other fundamental rights, including freedom of expression, freedom of association, equality before the law and the principle

of non-discrimination. In pluralistic democracies, these rights intersect most visibly within the shared public sphere, where citizens of different faiths and worldviews participate together in civic life.

International human rights law recognises that the state bears a dual responsibility. On the one hand, it must protect every individual's right to practise, manifest or reject religion without coercion. On the other hand, it must preserve the neutrality and accessibility of public institutions so that no citizen is disadvantaged because of religion or belief. This balance lies at the heart of democratic constitutionalism and represents one of the defining features of religious freedom under international law.

The European Court of Human Rights has repeatedly described pluralism as one of the essential characteristics of a democratic society. Genuine pluralism requires that individuals holding profoundly different religious and philosophical convictions are able to coexist peacefully under a common legal framework. Such coexistence inevitably involves disagreement, competing truth claims and differing moral values. Human rights law therefore seeks neither to eliminate religious differences nor to privilege particular beliefs, but to ensure that these differences can be expressed without undermining the equal rights of others.

Accordingly, freedom of religion cannot reasonably be interpreted as conferring an entitlement to exclusive control over public institutions or shared civic spaces. Individuals remain fully entitled to express their religious identity in public life, participate in democratic debate, establish places of worship, organise religious associations and contribute to society in accordance with their convictions. However, these freedoms do not create a legal right to transform public institutions into extensions of any particular religious tradition.

The distinction between public participation and public domination is therefore central to NORF's analytical framework. Democratic societies encourage religious participation in civil society while maintaining public institutions that remain equally accessible to citizens regardless of belief. Public schools, courts, hospitals, municipal authorities and other state institutions exist to serve the entire population rather than any single religious community.

This principle applies equally to every religion and worldview. Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, atheists, humanists and individuals of no religious affiliation possess identical legal status before the state. Equal treatment requires that governments neither suppress minority religions nor grant privileged legal authority to majority faiths beyond what is compatible with constitutional equality and international human rights obligations.

The principle of equality likewise means that the exercise of one person's religious freedom cannot negate the freedoms enjoyed by others. Religious manifestations that involve coercion, intimidation, discrimination or the denial of equal access to public institutions fall outside the scope of protected religious liberty. Human rights protect voluntary religious practice; they do not protect the imposition of religious norms upon unwilling individuals through state authority or unlawful coercion.

This distinction is particularly relevant in contemporary discussions concerning the use of shared public spaces. Democratic societies frequently accommodate religious expression in parks, streets, universities and other public settings. Peaceful religious processions, public worship, charitable

activities, evangelism, religious literature and cultural celebrations all constitute ordinary manifestations of religious freedom when conducted in accordance with generally applicable laws governing public assembly.

At the same time, public authorities retain a legitimate responsibility to regulate the use of shared civic spaces in a manner that protects the equal rights of all citizens. Regulations concerning public safety, noise, traffic management, access to public services, environmental protection or competing uses of public property may lawfully apply to religious activities, provided that such regulations are neutral, proportionate and applied without discrimination. Restrictions should regulate conduct rather than target particular religious identities.

NORF therefore distinguishes between **equal access to public space** and **exclusive occupation of public space**. Equal access permits individuals and communities to express their beliefs peacefully within the same civic environment enjoyed by others. Exclusive occupation occurs when one group seeks, through legal privilege, intimidation or sustained disruption, to prevent others from exercising equivalent rights or from accessing shared public institutions on equal terms. The former reflects democratic pluralism; the latter may undermine it.

This distinction also informs debates concerning integration within increasingly diverse societies. Religious freedom does not require citizens to abandon their religious identity upon entering public life, nor does it require states to erase their own historical or cultural traditions. Many democratic nations possess longstanding religious heritage reflected in architecture, public holidays, historical institutions or constitutional symbolism. International human rights law does not prohibit such historical characteristics provided that contemporary legal rights remain equally available to all citizens regardless of belief.

Equally, minority religious communities should neither be excluded from public participation nor expected to conceal their religious identity as a condition of citizenship. Democratic inclusion requires that individuals enjoy equal opportunities to contribute to public life while respecting the equal rights of fellow citizens whose beliefs differ from their own.

For NORF, the decisive analytical criterion is reciprocity. Every religious community should enjoy the same civil liberties that it recognises for others. A Christian should enjoy the freedom to worship in a Muslim-majority country to the same extent that a Muslim enjoys the freedom to worship in a historically Christian democracy. Likewise, a secular citizen should enjoy the same legal protection to reject religion as a believer enjoys to practise it. Universal human rights require consistency rather than reciprocity between states, but reciprocity provides a valuable ethical benchmark for evaluating genuine commitment to pluralism.

This report therefore rejects two equally incompatible extremes. It rejects systems in which states suppress or marginalise religious belief as incompatible with freedom of conscience. It also rejects approaches in which religious communities seek legal or social dominance that diminishes the equal freedoms of others within shared democratic institutions. Neither coercive secularism nor religious supremacy satisfies the universal standards established under international human rights law.

NORF's methodological approach consequently evaluates restrictions upon religious freedom according to objective legal criteria rather than political preference. The central question is not whether religious expression is visible within society, but whether every individual enjoys equal

access to fundamental rights under conditions of legality, proportionality, reciprocity and democratic equality. These principles apply without distinction to Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, members of indigenous religions, humanists, atheists and every other community examined throughout this report.

Maintaining this balanced framework is particularly important for a report focusing on the persecution of Christians. Credibility depends upon demonstrating that advocacy for one persecuted community is grounded not in theological preference but in universal legal principles that would apply equally were the victims members of any other faith. By consistently applying these standards across all contexts, NORF seeks to strengthen both the protection of persecuted Christians and the broader international framework of freedom of religion or belief upon which their protection ultimately depends.

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2.2.5 Equal Protection of Individuals in Diverse Constitutional Systems

One of the recurring misunderstandings in discussions of freedom of religion concerns the relationship between international human rights law and national constitutional traditions. International law guarantees equal protection of every individual's freedom of religion or belief. It does **not** require all states to organise the relationship between religion and government according to a single constitutional model. Democratic societies have developed different historical arrangements regarding religion, and these arrangements may all be compatible with international human rights obligations provided that the fundamental rights of individuals are effectively protected.

Across Europe and elsewhere, constitutional systems range from formally secular republics to states maintaining established churches or other forms of institutional cooperation with religious communities. France, for example, is founded upon the constitutional principle of *laïcité*, emphasising institutional separation between religion and the state. By contrast, Denmark recognises the Evangelical Lutheran Church as the Established Church under Section 4 of the Danish Constitution, while the United Kingdom maintains an established church through the

Church of England. Other democracies adopt intermediate models involving varying degrees of state cooperation with religious organisations.

These constitutional differences are matters of national constitutional identity rather than indicators of compliance with international human rights law. Neither the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights nor the European Convention on Human Rights requires states to abolish established churches, prohibit religious symbolism within constitutional institutions or eliminate historical religious traditions. Instead, international law evaluates whether individuals belonging to all religions and beliefs enjoy equal protection of their fundamental rights.

The European Court of Human Rights has consistently recognised that member states possess a **margin of appreciation** in organising the relationship between religion and the state. This doctrine acknowledges Europe's considerable constitutional diversity while requiring governments to respect the minimum standards established by the Convention. Consequently, the existence of an established church does not, in itself, constitute discrimination or a violation of religious freedom. The decisive legal question is whether individuals belonging to minority religions—or holding no religion at all—can exercise their rights freely and without unlawful discrimination.

Denmark illustrates this principle clearly. The Danish Constitution recognises the Evangelical Lutheran Church as the Established Church and provides for state support of that institution. At the same time, Denmark is bound by the European Convention on Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Muslims, Jews, Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, humanists, atheists and members of all other faith communities enjoy the same fundamental legal protection of their individual freedom of religion. While institutional arrangements differ, the state's obligation to protect the equal rights of individuals remains unchanged.

This distinction between **institutional arrangements** and **individual rights** is fundamental to NORF's analytical approach. The report does not evaluate countries according to whether they have an established church, a secular constitution or another historical model of church-state relations. Nor does it advocate a particular constitutional philosophy concerning religion. Rather, the report assesses whether governments protect every individual's internationally recognised right to adopt, change, practise or reject a religion without coercion, violence or discrimination.

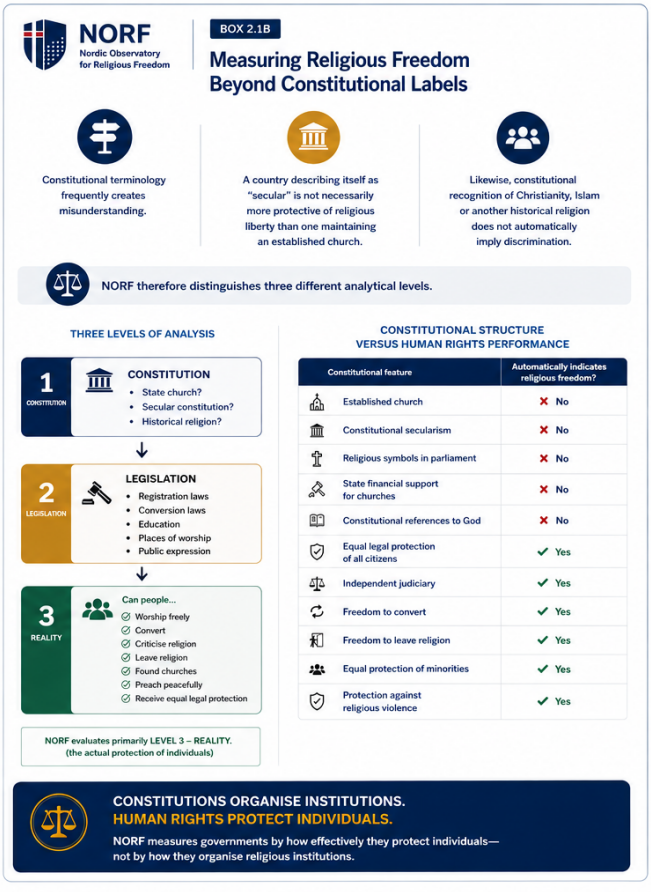
Likewise, constitutional recognition of one religion does not provide legal justification for restricting the rights of adherents of other faiths. A state may legitimately acknowledge its historical religious heritage while simultaneously ensuring that all citizens enjoy equal access to education, employment, public services, political participation and legal protection regardless of religious affiliation. International human rights law requires equality before the law, not constitutional uniformity.

Conversely, formally secular constitutions do not automatically guarantee effective religious freedom. Several states maintaining constitutional separation between religion and government have nevertheless imposed severe restrictions upon religious communities through administrative regulation, discriminatory legislation or political repression. Likewise, some states with established churches provide extensive protection for religious minorities and maintain robust systems of constitutional rights. Constitutional design alone therefore offers an incomplete measure of religious liberty.

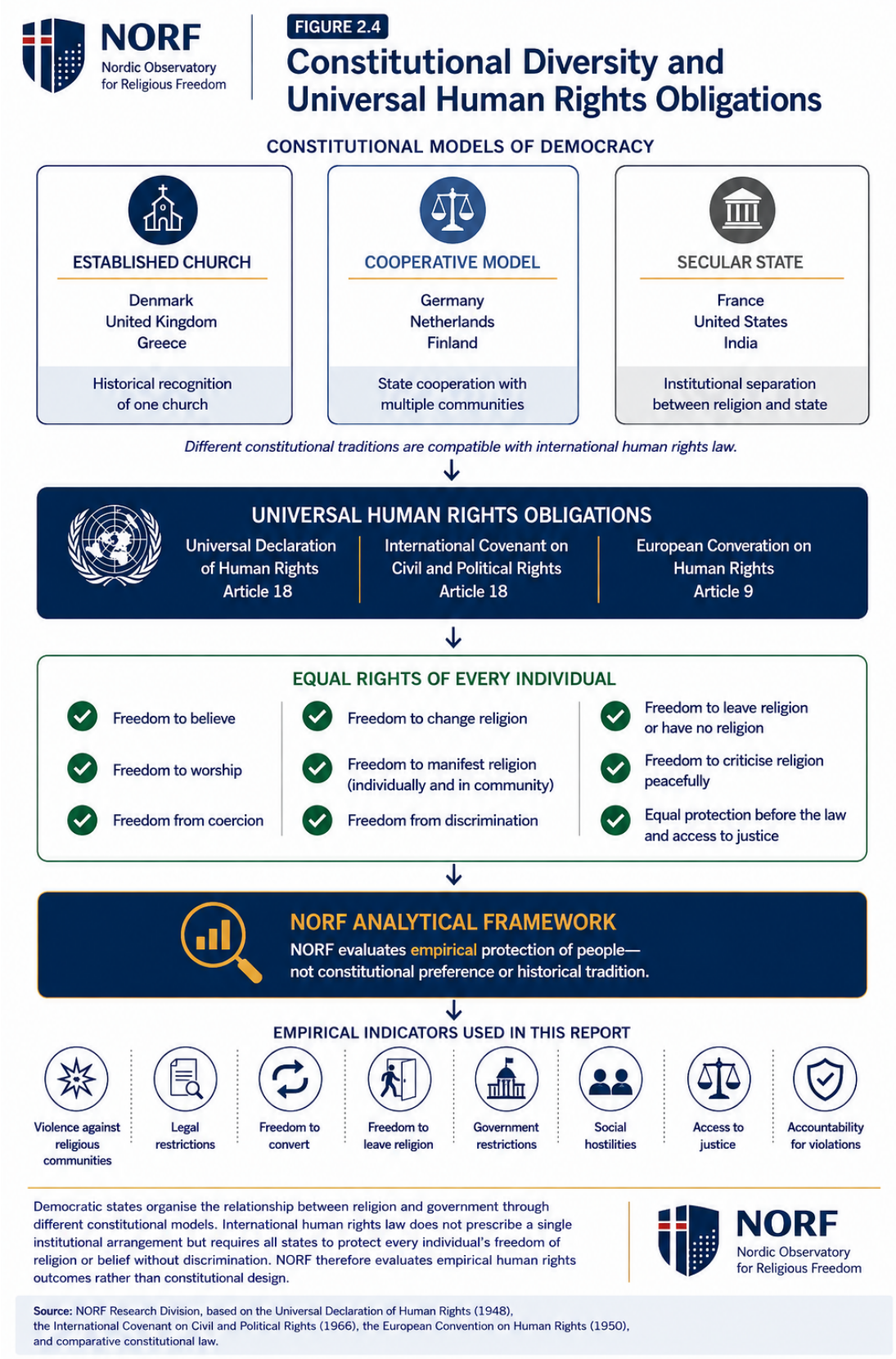
NORF consequently distinguishes between **constitutional structure** and **human rights performance**. Constitutional arrangements describe how a state organises the institutional relationship between religion and public authority. Human rights performance concerns how effectively that state protects the freedoms of individuals in everyday practice. Throughout this report, it is the latter that forms the primary object of empirical analysis.

This distinction reinforces the report's commitment to legal neutrality. NORF neither endorses nor opposes established religions, secular constitutions or alternative models of church-state relations. Instead, it evaluates all governments according to the same universal criteria derived from international human rights law: legality, equality before the law, non-discrimination, proportionality and effective protection of freedom of religion or belief. Applying these principles consistently across diverse constitutional traditions enables meaningful comparison between states while respecting their differing historical and cultural identities.





NORF Figure 2.4



APA 7 References

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2.5 Data Sources, Validation and Analytical Limitations

2.5.1 Introduction

Reliable policy recommendations depend upon reliable evidence. International debates concerning freedom of religion or belief are often characterised by competing narratives, political interests and selective use of information. Governments may underreport violations occurring within their own jurisdictions, advocacy organisations may concentrate on specific victim groups, while media coverage frequently prioritises exceptional events over long-term structural developments. These challenges require a research methodology capable of distinguishing isolated incidents from sustained patterns and verified evidence from unconfirmed allegations.

NORF therefore adopts an evidence-based methodology built upon three fundamental principles. First, no single source is considered sufficient for documenting violations of religious freedom. Second, quantitative datasets must be interpreted alongside qualitative legal and contextual evidence. Third, every empirical conclusion should, wherever possible, be supported through triangulation using multiple independent sources.

This methodological approach reflects internationally recognised standards for social science research and human rights documentation. Rather than attempting to establish an independent global event database, NORF systematically evaluates, compares and synthesises information produced by established institutions with recognised expertise in conflict monitoring, human rights documentation, legal analysis and religious freedom research.

Accordingly, the report combines quantitative event datasets with qualitative assessments of legal frameworks, institutional capacity, judicial independence, constitutional protections and documented patterns of discrimination or persecution. This mixed-method approach allows both statistical comparison and contextual interpretation, reducing the risk of overreliance on any single indicator while improving analytical validity.

The methodology further recognises that freedom of religion or belief cannot be adequately measured through violence statistics alone. Severe restrictions may exist without widespread

physical violence, while violent conflict may arise from multiple interacting political, ethnic and religious factors. NORF therefore analyses religious freedom through a multidimensional framework incorporating legal protection, governmental restrictions, societal discrimination, violent persecution and institutional accountability.

2.5.2 Primary Data Sources

The empirical analysis presented throughout this report draws upon a combination of internationally recognised governmental, intergovernmental, academic and non-governmental sources. Each contributes distinct methodological strengths while also possessing identifiable limitations. Combining these datasets increases overall reliability and reduces the influence of institutional bias.

Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED)

ACLED constitutes the principal quantitative source for documenting conflict-related violence, protests, riots and attacks against civilians. The database records individual events using standardised coding procedures, enabling longitudinal comparison across countries and regions. During preparation of the 2026 NORF Annual Report, ACLED data were used to identify geographic concentrations of violence, changes in conflict intensity and temporal developments relevant to religious minorities.

The ACLED database should not be interpreted as a direct measure of religious persecution. Rather, it provides objective information concerning violent incidents that must subsequently be analysed within legal, political and religious contexts.

United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)

USCIRF provides detailed country-level assessments concerning violations of freedom of religion or belief, legislative developments, prisoner cases, government restrictions and policy recommendations. Unlike event databases, USCIRF emphasises institutional behaviour, legal frameworks and systematic governmental practices.

The Commission's annual reports constitute one of the most comprehensive publicly available sources concerning international religious freedom and are widely utilised by policymakers, researchers and governments.

Open Doors World Watch List

Open Doors provides the world's largest continuous dataset specifically documenting persecution affecting Christian communities. Its methodology combines field research, expert assessment and structured questionnaires measuring pressure across family life, community life, national life, church life and violence.

Although focusing specifically on Christians rather than all religious communities, Open Doors offers uniquely detailed longitudinal evidence concerning patterns of persecution that are frequently unavailable through general human rights reporting.

Pew Research Center

Pew Research Center contributes comparative indicators measuring government restrictions on religion and social hostilities involving religion across nearly all countries worldwide. These datasets provide valuable comparative context and enable longitudinal analysis of broader international trends.

United Nations Human Rights Mechanisms

NORF systematically incorporates findings from United Nations Special Rapporteurs, Treaty Bodies, Universal Periodic Review recommendations and reports issued by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. These sources provide authoritative interpretations of international legal obligations while documenting governmental compliance with treaty commitments.

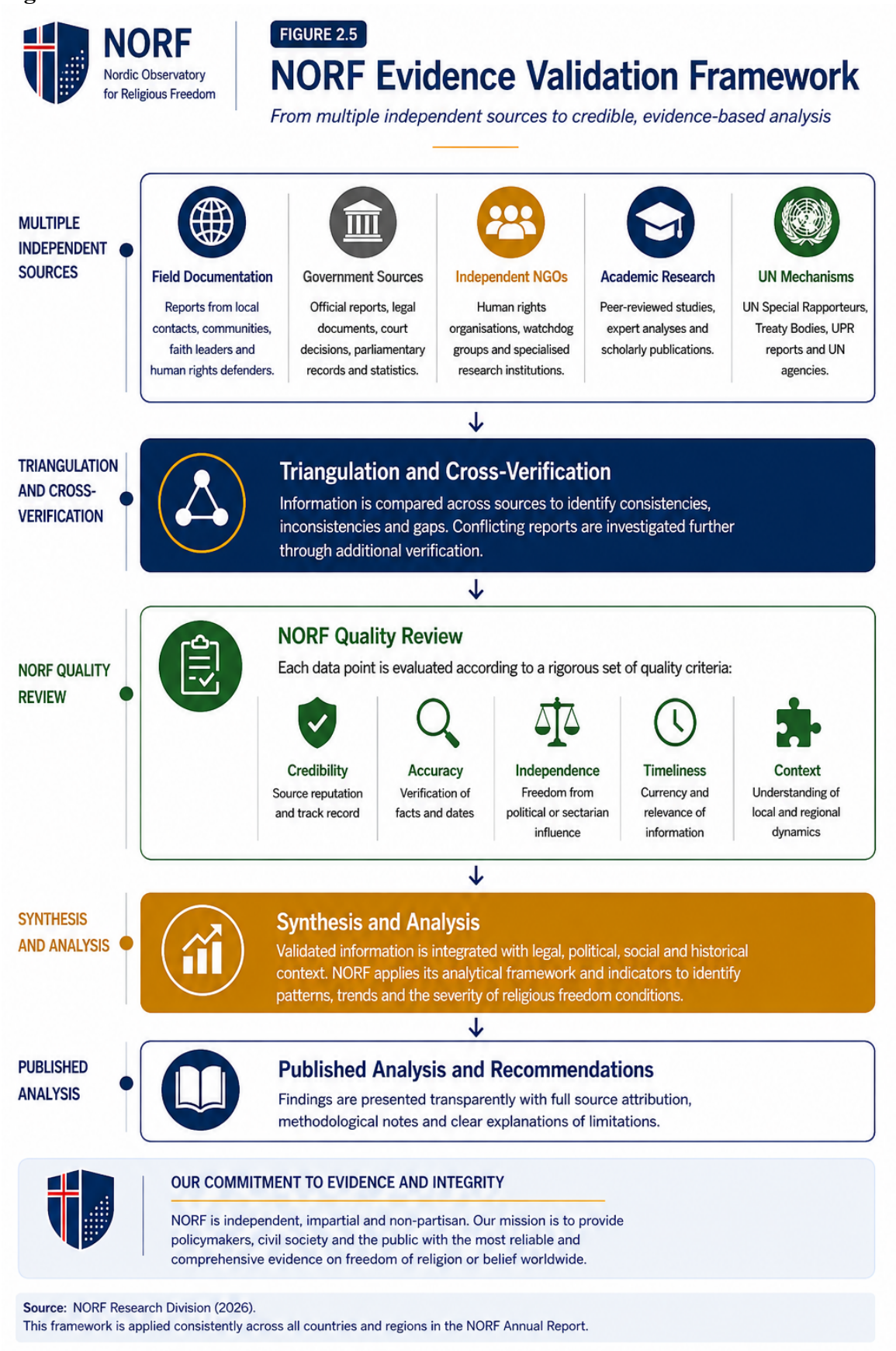
Academic Literature

Peer-reviewed academic publications provide theoretical frameworks, methodological guidance and comparative research findings supporting the analytical framework adopted throughout this report. Particular emphasis has been placed upon internationally recognised scholarship concerning religious freedom, constitutional law, comparative politics, conflict studies and international human rights law.

Table 2.3 Primary Data Sources Used in the NORF Annual Report

Source	Primary Contribution	Strengths	Limitations
ACLED	Conflict event data	Daily geocoded events; global coverage	Does not independently classify religious motivation
USCIRF	Religious freedom assessment	Detailed legal and policy analysis	Focuses primarily on countries of concern
Open Doors	Christian persecution	Extensive field networks; longitudinal data	Limited to Christian communities
Pew Research Center	Comparative restrictions and hostilities	Global comparability	Annual aggregated indicators
United Nations	International legal standards	Normative authority	Reporting intervals vary
Academic literature	Theory and methodology	Peer-reviewed quality	Publication lag

Fig. 2.5


NORF
Nordic Observatory for Religious Freedom
FIGURE 2.5
NORF Evidence Validation Framework
From multiple independent sources to credible, evidence-based analysis
MULTIPLE INDEPENDENT SOURCES
Field Documentation
Reports from local contacts, communities, faith leaders and human rights defenders.
Government Sources
Official reports, legal documents, court decisions, parliamentary records and statistics.
Independent NGOs
Human rights organisations, watchdog groups and specialised research institutions.
Academic Research
Peer-reviewed studies, expert analyses and scholarly publications.
UN Mechanisms
UN Special Rapporteurs, Treaty Bodies, UPR reports and UN agencies.
TRIANGULATION AND CROSS-VERIFICATION
Triangulation and Cross-Verification
Information is compared across sources to identify consistencies, inconsistencies and gaps. Conflicting reports are investigated further through additional verification.
NORF QUALITY REVIEW
NORF Quality Review
Each data point is evaluated according to a rigorous set of quality criteria:
Credibility
Source reputation and track record
Accuracy
Verification of facts and dates
Independence
Freedom from political or sectarian influence
Timeliness
Currency and relevance of information
Context
Understanding of local and regional dynamics
SYNTHESIS AND ANALYSIS
Synthesis and Analysis
Validated information is integrated with legal, political, social and historical context. NORF applies its analytical framework and indicators to identify patterns, trends and the severity of religious freedom conditions.
PUBLISHED ANALYSIS
Published Analysis and Recommendations
Findings are presented transparently with full source attribution, methodological notes and clear explanations of limitations.
OUR COMMITMENT TO EVIDENCE AND INTEGRITY
NORF is independent, impartial and non-partisan. Our mission is to provide policymakers, civil society and the public with the most reliable and comprehensive evidence on freedom of religion or belief worldwide.
Source: NORF Research Division (2026).
This framework is applied consistently across all countries and regions in the NORF Annual Report.

APA 7 References

Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project. (2026). *ACLED data and methodology*. https://acleddata.com

Open Doors. (2026). *World Watch List 2026*. https://www.opendoors.org

Pew Research Center. (Latest edition). *Global Restrictions on Religion*. https://www.pewresearch.org

United Nations Human Rights Committee. (1993). *General Comment No. 22: Article 18 (Freedom of Thought, Conscience or Religion).*

United Nations. (1948). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights.*

United Nations. (1966). *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.*

United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. (2025). *Annual Report 2025.*

2.5.3 Data Triangulation and Reliability

From Information to Evidence

The availability of large quantities of information does not automatically produce reliable knowledge. Reports of religious persecution frequently emerge from conflict environments characterised by limited access, political polarisation, government censorship, restricted media freedom or competing narratives concerning responsibility for violence. Individual incidents may therefore be incompletely documented, reported differently by various actors, or interpreted according to political, religious or ideological perspectives.

For this reason, NORF does not rely upon single-source reporting when assessing patterns of religious freedom violations. Instead, the report adopts a structured process of **data triangulation**, whereby multiple independent sources are compared in order to increase confidence in factual findings and reduce the influence of reporting bias. Triangulation is a well-established methodological principle within the social sciences and human rights documentation, reflecting the understanding that convergence between independent sources generally provides stronger evidence than repeated reporting originating from a single source (Yin, 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Throughout this report, triangulation serves two complementary purposes. First, it strengthens factual accuracy by verifying whether multiple independent datasets describe comparable events or broader trends. Second, it improves analytical interpretation by combining quantitative indicators with qualitative legal, political and institutional analysis. The objective is therefore not merely to confirm that an incident occurred, but to understand its significance within a wider pattern of restrictions on freedom of religion or belief.

Levels of Evidence

NORF distinguishes between several levels of evidentiary confidence. This approach recognises that available documentation varies considerably across countries and that complete certainty is not always possible in environments affected by conflict, authoritarian governance or limited transparency.

The highest level of confidence is assigned to findings supported by multiple independent sources representing different methodological traditions. For example, an attack against a religious community documented simultaneously by ACLED, confirmed through reporting by a United Nations mechanism, analysed within a USCIRF country report and independently covered by reputable international media provides substantially stronger evidence than an isolated claim originating from a single organisation.

Conversely, allegations lacking independent corroboration are treated with greater caution. Such information may still be included where relevant, particularly when originating from credible local actors operating under difficult conditions, but its evidentiary status is clearly distinguished from fully verified findings. NORF seeks to minimise both false positives—accepting inaccurate claims—and false negatives—overlooking genuine violations because perfect documentation is unavailable.

This graduated approach reflects established principles within international fact-finding and human rights investigations, where assessments are frequently based upon the balance of available evidence rather than unattainable standards of absolute certainty.

Triangulation Across Different Types of Evidence

An important feature of the NORF methodology is that triangulation occurs not only between different organisations but also between different categories of evidence.

Quantitative datasets provide information concerning measurable developments such as violent incidents, arrests, demonstrations, attacks against civilians or geographic patterns of conflict. These indicators reveal trends that may not be apparent from individual case studies alone.

Qualitative documentation contributes legal analysis, eyewitness testimony, judicial decisions, governmental policies, constitutional developments and institutional practices. Such material enables interpretation of statistical findings within their broader legal and political context.

Historical evidence further assists in identifying long-term trajectories. Persistent restrictions documented across several years often provide stronger evidence of structural discrimination than temporary fluctuations caused by isolated political crises or local conflicts.

Finally, comparative analysis allows similar developments to be evaluated across multiple countries. Comparing legal frameworks, government practices and patterns of violence reduces the risk of interpreting unique national circumstances as universally applicable phenomena.

Managing Source Bias

Every information source contains potential biases arising from institutional mandates, political context, methodological choices or resource limitations. Recognising these limitations is essential for maintaining analytical integrity.

Government publications may understate violations occurring within their own jurisdictions. Opposition organisations may emphasise abuses committed by state authorities while underreporting violations committed by non-state actors. Religious organisations often possess exceptional access to affected communities but may naturally prioritise incidents involving their own members. Media reporting frequently concentrates upon high-profile incidents while overlooking less visible forms of discrimination.

NORF therefore evaluates sources according to four principal criteria:

- **Institutional credibility**, including demonstrated methodological transparency and recognised expertise.
- **Methodological quality**, including clear definitions, documented coding procedures and replicable analytical methods.
- **Independence**, assessing whether conclusions appear influenced by political, ideological or organisational interests.
- **Corroboration**, measuring the extent to which findings are confirmed through independent evidence.

No source is considered infallible. Likewise, no source is dismissed solely because it represents a governmental, academic, civil society or faith-based institution. Reliability is assessed through evidence rather than institutional identity.

Reliability Through Transparency

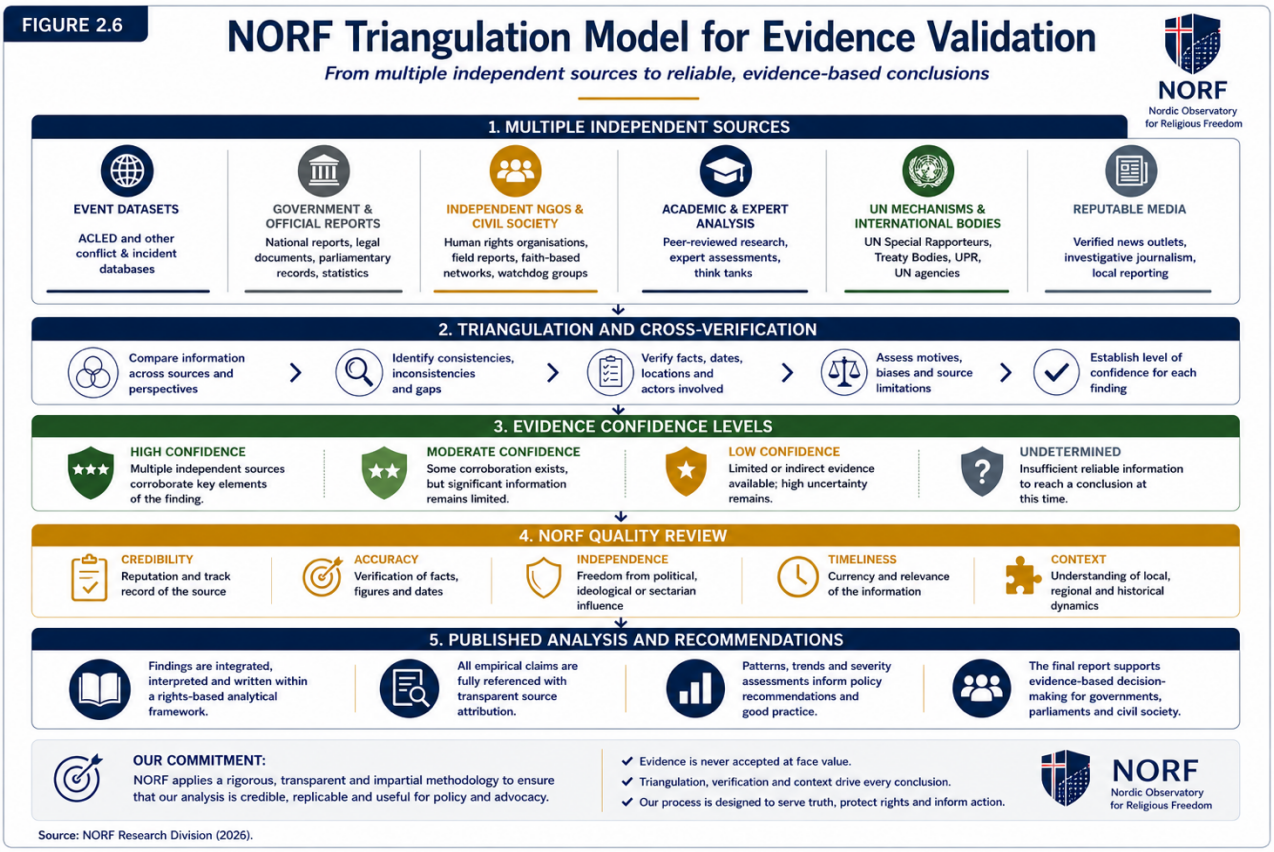
A central principle of the NORF methodology is that readers should be able to understand how conclusions have been reached. Wherever possible, empirical claims are therefore supported through transparent citation of original sources, allowing independent verification by researchers, policymakers and journalists.

This commitment to transparency also requires acknowledgement of uncertainty. In situations where available evidence remains incomplete or contradictory, the report explicitly identifies these limitations rather than presenting speculative conclusions as established facts. Such transparency strengthens rather than weakens the credibility of the analysis by distinguishing verified evidence from reasonable inference.

Accordingly, NORF seeks to provide policymakers with evidence that is not only comprehensive but also proportionate, transparent and intellectually honest.

Figure 2.6

NORF Triangulation Model for Evidence Validation



Key Takeaways

The triangulation framework adopted by NORF rests on five operational principles:

1. **No single source determines analytical conclusions.**
2. **Quantitative and qualitative evidence are interpreted together.**
3. **Independent corroboration increases evidentiary confidence.**
4. **Uncertainty is identified explicitly rather than concealed.**
5. **Transparency and replicability are essential for research credibility.**

These principles underpin the reliability of the country assessments presented in Chapter 3 and ensure that the report's findings are grounded in a systematic and reproducible analytical process rather than isolated reports or anecdotal evidence.

APA 7 References

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2023). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2021). *Manual on Human Rights Monitoring*. United Nations.

United Nations. (2015). *Minnesota Protocol on the Investigation of Potentially Unlawful Death (2016).* United Nations.

Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.

2.5.4 Ethical Considerations and Research Integrity

Ethics as a Foundation for Credible Research

Research concerning freedom of religion or belief inevitably involves individuals and communities experiencing discrimination, intimidation, violence and, in many cases, severe persecution. The ethical responsibilities of researchers therefore extend beyond conventional academic standards of accuracy and transparency. They include a duty to minimise harm, protect vulnerable individuals, avoid political instrumentalisation of evidence and present findings with fairness, proportionality and intellectual honesty.

NORF regards research ethics not as a procedural requirement but as an integral component of scientific credibility. The legitimacy of empirical findings depends not only upon methodological quality but also upon the ethical standards governing the collection, interpretation and communication of evidence. Throughout this report, ethical considerations have therefore informed decisions regarding source selection, data validation, interpretation of uncertainty and presentation of sensitive findings.

The report adopts internationally recognised principles of research integrity consistent with guidance issued by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity, and the Singapore Statement on Research Integrity. These principles emphasise honesty, reliability, transparency, accountability and respect for affected individuals as essential foundations of credible research

Protecting Vulnerable Individuals and Communities

Many incidents described throughout this report concern individuals who remain exposed to significant personal risk. Victims of religious persecution may continue to live under authoritarian governments, within conflict zones or in communities where public identification could increase their vulnerability.

For this reason, NORF does not seek to document individual experiences for their own sake. Instead, the report analyses verified patterns of violations while avoiding unnecessary disclosure of personally identifiable information unless such information is already part of the public record through official judicial proceedings, governmental documentation or internationally recognised reporting.

Particular caution has been exercised when evaluating reports originating from closed societies where independent verification remains difficult and disclosure may expose local sources to retaliation. In such circumstances, protecting individuals takes precedence over achieving exhaustive documentation.

This precautionary approach is consistent with established principles of human rights documentation and conflict research, recognising that evidence gathering should never increase the risks faced by those already subjected to persecution.

Independence from Political and Religious Interests

Freedom of religion or belief is frequently discussed within highly polarised political environments. Governments, opposition movements, religious institutions, advocacy organisations and media actors may each present competing narratives concerning the causes, severity or significance of alleged violations.

NORF therefore maintains institutional independence from governments, political parties, religious organisations and ideological movements. The analytical framework adopted throughout this report is grounded in international human rights law rather than theological doctrine, partisan preference or geopolitical alignment.

This commitment requires that identical analytical standards be applied irrespective of the religion, denomination, worldview or political orientation of those affected. Violations committed against Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Yazidis, Bahá'ís, atheists, humanists or members of any other belief community are assessed according to the same legal principles and evidentiary standards.

Likewise, violations committed by state authorities, non-state armed groups, religious organisations or private actors are evaluated through the same methodological framework. The objective is not to confirm pre-existing assumptions but to document empirical reality as accurately as available evidence permits.

Impartiality and Analytical Balance

The purpose of the NORF Annual Report is neither advocacy on behalf of a particular religious tradition nor criticism of any particular state, ideology or culture. Its purpose is to assess, as objectively as possible, whether internationally recognised standards of freedom of religion or belief are effectively protected in practice.

Accordingly, constitutional recognition of a historical religion, secular constitutional arrangements or cooperative models between states and religious communities are not evaluated as inherently preferable. As established earlier in this chapter, international human rights law does not prescribe a single constitutional model. The decisive question is whether every individual enjoys equal protection of fundamental rights.

NORF therefore distinguishes carefully between constitutional identity and human rights performance. A democratic state maintaining an established church may fully comply with

international human rights obligations, just as a constitutionally secular state may nevertheless impose significant restrictions upon religious liberty. Conversely, constitutional references to religious neutrality provide no guarantee that minorities are effectively protected in practice.

This analytical distinction reflects the report's broader commitment to evaluating empirical outcomes rather than constitutional terminology or political narratives.

Transparency, Uncertainty and Intellectual Honesty

No empirical study is free from methodological limitations. Countries differ significantly in their levels of transparency, media freedom, judicial independence and availability of reliable statistical information. Consequently, evidence is inevitably stronger in some jurisdictions than in others.

NORF considers explicit acknowledgement of uncertainty to be a strength rather than a weakness of rigorous research. Where evidence remains incomplete, contradictory or impossible to verify independently, this report identifies those limitations openly rather than presenting speculative conclusions with unwarranted certainty.

Similarly, the absence of documented violations should not automatically be interpreted as evidence that no violations occur. In highly restrictive political environments, limited reporting capacity may itself constitute an indicator of broader structural constraints affecting freedom of expression, civil society and access to information.

By distinguishing clearly between verified findings, informed interpretation and remaining uncertainty, NORF seeks to strengthen the credibility of its conclusions while enabling readers to assess the evidentiary basis of individual claims independently.

Commitment to Continuous Methodological Improvement

The NORF Annual Report is intended as a recurring publication. Accordingly, its methodology should be understood as an evolving framework subject to continuous refinement in light of new evidence, improved datasets, advances in comparative research and constructive scholarly critique.

Future editions will seek to expand quantitative indicators, improve geographical coverage, incorporate additional comparative datasets and further strengthen transparency concerning coding procedures and analytical decisions. This process reflects the understanding that scientific knowledge develops cumulatively through ongoing evaluation rather than methodological finality.

NORF therefore welcomes academic engagement, methodological discussion and evidence-based criticism as essential contributions to improving future editions of this report. Research integrity depends not upon claiming perfection but upon maintaining openness to revision when stronger evidence becomes available.

BOX 2.2

NORF Principles of Research Integrity



Source: NORF Research Methodology (2026).

APA 7 References

ALLEA. (2023). *The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity* (Revised ed.). All European Academies.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2021). *OECD Framework for Research Ethics and Integrity*. OECD Publishing.

Resnik, D. B. (2020). *The Ethics of Research with Human Subjects: Protecting People, Advancing Science, Promoting Trust*. Springer.

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World Medical Association. (2013). *Declaration of Helsinki: Ethical Principles for Medical Research Involving Human Subjects*. *JAMA, 310*(20), 2191–2194.

2.5.5 From Methodology to Country Assessment

Applying the NORF Analytical Framework

Having established the legal foundations, methodological principles, evidence validation procedures and ethical standards underpinning this report, the following chapter applies the NORF analytical framework to selected country case studies. The objective is not simply to describe individual incidents of religious persecution, but to identify broader structural patterns affecting the practical enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief.

The transition from methodology to empirical assessment represents an important stage in the research process. Methodological principles establish *how* evidence is evaluated; country analyses demonstrate *what* that evidence reveals. Maintaining a clear distinction between these stages strengthens both scientific credibility and policy relevance. Readers should therefore understand the country assessments not as isolated narratives, but as systematic applications of the common analytical framework developed throughout Chapter 2.

The methodology has been designed to ensure that countries with very different constitutional traditions, legal systems, demographic structures and political institutions can nevertheless be evaluated according to comparable human rights standards. A constitutional monarchy with an established church, a secular republic and a religious state may differ fundamentally in constitutional organisation while remaining subject to the same international obligations concerning freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

Accordingly, the country assessments focus upon outcomes rather than constitutional labels. The decisive analytical question is whether individuals are able, in practice, to exercise their internationally recognised rights without fear of discrimination, coercion or violence.

Applying Common Indicators

Every country included within Chapter 3 is assessed using a common analytical structure to maximise comparability across regions.

Each assessment incorporates five principal dimensions.

Legal Protection

Evaluation of constitutional guarantees, domestic legislation, judicial independence and incorporation of international human rights obligations.

Government Practice

Assessment of governmental restrictions affecting religious communities, including licensing requirements, registration systems, restrictions upon worship, blasphemy legislation, apostasy provisions and administrative discrimination.

Societal Conditions

Analysis of discrimination originating from non-state actors, including communal violence, social exclusion, intimidation and restrictions imposed by local authorities or informal community structures.

Security Environment

Evaluation of violence affecting religious communities using conflict-event datasets, terrorist incidents, attacks against places of worship and broader patterns of insecurity.

Institutional Capacity

Assessment of the ability and willingness of public institutions to investigate violations, prosecute perpetrators and provide effective protection for vulnerable religious communities.

Applying identical indicators across all countries strengthens the consistency of comparative analysis while allowing important contextual differences to remain visible.

Integrating Quantitative and Qualitative Evidence

One of the principal strengths of the NORF methodology lies in its integration of statistical indicators with contextual interpretation.

Conflict-event databases provide valuable information concerning the frequency, geographic distribution and intensity of violence. Legal analysis explains the institutional environment within which those events occur. Country reports produced by international organisations identify legislative developments, while academic literature contributes historical and comparative perspectives.

Taken individually, each source provides only partial understanding. Combined through systematic triangulation, they produce a considerably more reliable assessment of religious freedom conditions.

The country profiles therefore synthesise quantitative indicators, legal analysis, institutional evaluation and qualitative evidence into a coherent analytical narrative.

Interpreting Comparative Findings

Readers should avoid interpreting country comparisons as absolute rankings of religious freedom. No single indicator can capture the full complexity of constitutional practice, governmental behaviour or societal discrimination.

Instead, the comparative framework seeks to identify relative patterns of risk, resilience and institutional performance. Countries experiencing similar levels of conflict may differ significantly in governmental responses. Likewise, states with comparable constitutional protections may demonstrate very different practical outcomes.

The comparative analysis therefore supports evidence-based policy development rather than simplistic league tables.

This approach also acknowledges that freedom of religion or belief is dynamic rather than static. Conditions may improve through legal reform, democratic transition or institutional strengthening, while deterioration may occur because of armed conflict, authoritarian consolidation or increasing societal polarisation.

The annual publication cycle adopted by NORF therefore enables long-term monitoring of trends rather than isolated snapshots.

A Framework for Evidence-Based Policy

The principal objective of the country analyses is to support informed public policy.

Reliable comparative evidence enables governments to identify successful institutional practices, recognise emerging risks before they escalate into widespread persecution and evaluate the effectiveness of legislative reforms. International organisations may utilise comparable evidence to strengthen preventive diplomacy, while civil society organisations can better prioritise limited resources through objective assessment of regional developments.

Consequently, Chapter 3 should not be understood merely as a collection of country reports. It constitutes an integrated evidence base supporting democratic accountability, informed public debate and practical policy development concerning freedom of religion or belief.

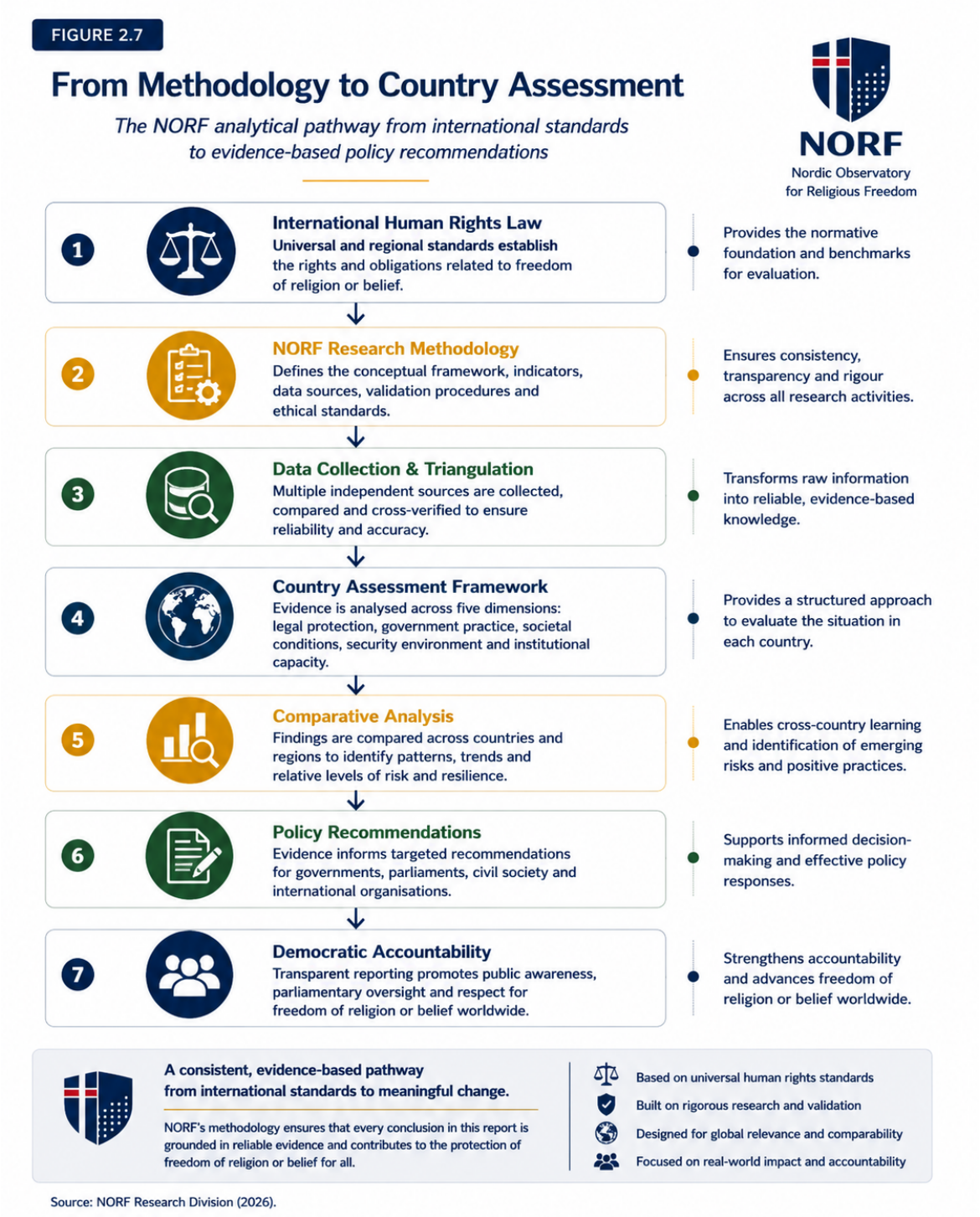
Transition to Chapter 3

The methodology presented throughout Chapter 2 provides the analytical architecture for the empirical assessment that follows.

Chapter 3 applies this framework to selected countries representing diverse constitutional traditions, political systems and patterns of religious persecution. Although particular attention is devoted to the situation of Christian communities—reflecting NORF's institutional mission—the analytical framework remains grounded in the universal principle that freedom of religion or belief belongs equally to every individual, irrespective of faith, denomination or worldview.

By combining internationally recognised legal standards with systematic empirical evidence, the following chapter seeks to contribute to a more informed understanding of one of the defining human rights challenges of the twenty-first century.

Figure 2.7



Chapter 2 Summary

Chapter 2 has established the methodological and normative foundation for the NORF Annual Report. Rather than relying upon isolated incidents or single-source reporting, the report adopts a structured mixed-method approach integrating international human rights law, quantitative conflict data, qualitative legal analysis and systematic evidence triangulation. This framework enables consistent comparison across countries with diverse constitutional traditions while maintaining a clear focus on the practical protection of individual freedom of religion or belief.

The chapter has demonstrated that constitutional models alone do not determine the level of religious freedom enjoyed within a society. Democratic states may legitimately adopt different institutional relationships between religion and government, provided that the fundamental rights of every individual are protected equally under international law. Consequently, NORF evaluates outcomes rather than constitutional labels, distinguishing carefully between historical constitutional identity and contemporary human rights performance.

Methodologically, the report combines data from recognised international organisations, governmental institutions, academic research and specialised monitoring initiatives. All significant findings are assessed through systematic triangulation designed to strengthen reliability, reduce institutional bias and improve analytical validity. Ethical considerations—including transparency, institutional independence and the protection of vulnerable sources—are integrated throughout the research process.

Together, these principles provide a robust analytical framework for the empirical country assessments presented in Chapter 3. By applying identical methodological standards across diverse national contexts, the report seeks to produce evidence that is both internationally comparable and sensitive to local historical, legal and political realities. The following chapter builds directly upon this foundation, moving from methodology to empirical analysis in order to assess contemporary patterns of religious freedom and persecution across selected countries.

APA 7 References for Sections 2.5.4–2.5.5

ALLEA. (2023). *The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity* (Revised ed.). All European Academies.

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2023). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.

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Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.

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SOMALIA:

3.1.1 Historical Development

Understanding Contemporary Somalia Through History

Modern Somalia cannot be understood solely through the political events of the past three decades. Contemporary patterns of governance, religious identity, clan organisation, conflict and religious freedom are the product of historical developments extending across more than a millennium. While the collapse of the Somali state in 1991 fundamentally transformed the country's political landscape, many of the institutions, social structures and religious norms shaping present-day Somalia originated centuries earlier.

For the purposes of this report, Somalia's historical development is analysed not as a complete national history but as an examination of those historical processes that continue to influence the practical enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief today. This approach reflects NORF's broader analytical framework established in Chapter 2: historical context is included only insofar as it contributes to understanding contemporary legal institutions, social norms, patterns of violence and state capacity.

Four historical developments are particularly significant.

First, Somalia developed as a society organised around kinship and clan structures rather than strong centralised state institutions. These structures have provided social cohesion, conflict resolution and economic cooperation for centuries, but they have also complicated the emergence of modern national governance and the consistent protection of individual rights.

Second, Islam became deeply embedded within Somali identity from an early period. Over many centuries, religious identity evolved alongside cultural and linguistic identity, resulting in a close association between Somali nationality and Sunni Islam. While this contributed to remarkable religious cohesion, it also reduced the historical visibility of religious minorities and influenced later constitutional approaches to religion.

Third, successive periods of foreign engagement—including commercial interaction across the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, European colonial administration and Cold War geopolitical competition—shaped Somalia's political institutions without fundamentally replacing indigenous social structures. External interventions repeatedly altered state institutions, yet local authority often remained rooted within traditional clan networks.

Finally, the collapse of the central government in 1991 created one of the longest periods of state fragmentation in modern history. The resulting security vacuum enabled armed non-state actors, including Al-Shabaab, to exercise significant territorial influence, profoundly affecting the practical protection of fundamental human rights, including freedom of religion or belief.

These four historical dynamics—clan governance, religious identity, external influence and state fragility—continue to define the environment within which religious communities live today.

Early Civilisations and the Formation of Somali Society

Human settlement in the Horn of Africa stretches back thousands of years, making the region one of the oldest continuously inhabited areas of the African continent. Archaeological evidence indicates that pastoralism, maritime trade and regional commerce connected communities along the Somali coast with Arabia, Persia, the Nile Valley and the wider Indian Ocean long before the emergence of Islam.

By the first millennium CE, Somali merchants participated actively in international trade networks linking East Africa with the Arabian Peninsula, India and the Mediterranean. Ports such as Zeila, Berbera and later Mogadishu developed into important commercial centres exporting livestock, frankincense, myrrh, hides and other commodities while importing textiles, ceramics and luxury goods. These commercial relationships exposed Somali society to diverse cultural and religious influences and established patterns of international engagement that would continue for centuries.

Unlike many neighbouring regions, pre-colonial Somalia did not develop a highly centralised territorial kingdom exercising authority across the entire Somali-speaking area. Instead, political authority remained decentralised and dispersed among clan confederations, local sultanates and commercial city-states. Governance depended largely upon customary law (*xeer*), negotiated agreements and kinship obligations rather than permanent bureaucratic institutions.

The *xeer* system represented one of the most enduring features of Somali society. Developed through customary practice rather than formal legislation, it regulated conflict resolution, compensation, property rights and relationships between clans. Although distinct from both Islamic jurisprudence and modern statutory law, *xeer* continues to influence dispute resolution in many parts of Somalia today, often operating alongside religious courts and state institutions.

This historical reliance upon customary governance helps explain an important feature of contemporary Somalia. In many regions, citizens continue to place greater trust in local clan elders or religious authorities than in formal governmental institutions. Consequently, the practical implementation of constitutional rights—including freedom of religion or belief—cannot be understood solely through national legislation but must also be examined within the context of local governance structures.

The Arrival and Consolidation of Islam

The introduction of Islam during the seventh century constitutes one of the most transformative developments in Somali history. Owing to the region's geographical proximity to the Arabian Peninsula and its extensive maritime connections across the Red Sea, Islam reached the Somali coast remarkably early, probably within decades of the emergence of the new faith.

Historical traditions describe early Muslim migration to the Horn of Africa during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad, while archaeological and historical evidence confirms sustained commercial and religious interaction between Arabian and Somali communities throughout the early Islamic period. Over subsequent centuries, Islam spread gradually through trade, scholarship, intermarriage and the establishment of religious institutions rather than through large-scale military conquest.

By the medieval period, Sunni Islam had become firmly established throughout much of the Somali-speaking region. Mosques, centres of Islamic learning and networks of religious scholars contributed to the development of a shared religious identity that transcended clan divisions while simultaneously reinforcing broader cultural cohesion.

Importantly, Islam in Somalia developed predominantly within the Shafi'i school of Sunni jurisprudence, complemented by influential Sufi traditions that played significant social, educational and spiritual roles for many centuries. These traditions shaped patterns of religious authority that continue to influence Somali society today, although they have increasingly been challenged by more conservative reform movements during recent decades.

The early integration of Islam into Somali society remains highly relevant for understanding contemporary religious freedom. Because religious identity became closely intertwined with national identity over many centuries, conversion away from Islam has frequently been perceived not merely as a personal religious decision but as a rejection of communal identity itself. This historical association continues to influence both legal debates and societal attitudes concerning religious conversion, minority faith communities and public expressions of religious diversity.

Historical Perspective

The historical development of Somalia demonstrates that contemporary challenges relating to freedom of religion or belief cannot be explained solely through recent armed conflict or political instability. Rather, they reflect the cumulative interaction of long-term historical processes, including decentralised governance, the early establishment of Islam as the dominant religious tradition, enduring customary institutions and repeated external intervention. Understanding these historical foundations provides the essential context for analysing Somalia's contemporary constitutional framework, governmental practice and the lived experiences of religious communities examined in the following sections.

Colonial Partition and the Fragmentation of the Somali People

The nineteenth century marked one of the most consequential periods in Somali history. While Somali society had historically been organised through autonomous clans, local sultanates and commercial city-states rather than a unified nation-state, European colonial expansion fundamentally altered the political geography of the Horn of Africa.

During the "Scramble for Africa," the Somali-speaking territories were divided among several colonial powers. Britain established control over the northern coast, creating British Somaliland, while Italy gradually expanded its authority across the southern territories that became Italian Somaliland. France retained what is now Djibouti, and Ethiopian and British colonial administrations incorporated large Somali-inhabited regions into present-day Ethiopia and Kenya respectively.

This partition had profound long-term consequences. Colonial borders divided communities sharing common language, religion and cultural traditions into separate political entities governed by different legal systems and administrative structures. Unlike many colonial boundaries elsewhere in Africa, the partition of the Somali people fragmented a relatively homogeneous ethno-linguistic community across five jurisdictions.

For the development of religious freedom, the colonial period produced mixed effects. Colonial administrations introduced new legal institutions, educational systems and bureaucratic governance, yet generally avoided direct interference with the overwhelmingly Muslim character of Somali society. Islamic courts continued to function in many areas, while customary *xeer* remained influential in local dispute resolution.

Missionary activity was comparatively limited. Although Christian missions established schools, hospitals and charitable institutions—particularly in Italian Somaliland—their influence remained modest when compared with other African colonies. Strong Islamic traditions, limited colonial penetration into rural areas and resistance from local communities constrained large-scale missionary expansion. Consequently, Somalia entered the twentieth century with its Islamic identity largely intact despite decades of European administration.

The colonial legacy nevertheless left enduring institutional divisions that would complicate later efforts to establish a unified Somali state.

Independence and the Vision of a Greater Somalia

On 26 June 1960, British Somaliland achieved independence. Five days later, on 1 July 1960, it voluntarily united with the former Italian Somaliland to form the Somali Republic. The creation of the new state represented an important moment of optimism, symbolising the aspiration to unite Somali-speaking peoples under a single democratic government.

The new republic adopted a parliamentary system inspired by European constitutional models while simultaneously recognising the central place of Islam within Somali society. During its first decade,

Somalia experienced competitive elections, active political participation and relatively peaceful transfers of power compared with many newly independent African states.

Yet the new republic also inherited significant structural challenges. British and Italian colonial administrations had left behind different legal systems, administrative cultures and educational structures, complicating national integration. More fundamentally, the state struggled to reconcile modern governmental institutions with deeply rooted clan-based political organisation.

The ambition to create a "Greater Somalia" further shaped the country's political trajectory. Somali governments asserted claims over Somali-inhabited territories in Ethiopia, Kenya and Djibouti, contributing to regional tensions that influenced domestic politics throughout the 1960s and beyond.

These early years illustrate an important theme running throughout Somali history: the tension between imported state institutions and indigenous systems of authority. Although constitutional democracy appeared promising, formal governmental institutions often lacked the legitimacy and capacity enjoyed by traditional clan structures.

Military Rule Under Siad Barre

In October 1969, following the assassination of President Abdirashid Ali Shermarke, Major General Mohamed Siad Barre seized power through a military coup. The new regime suspended the constitution, dissolved parliament and established the Supreme Revolutionary Council, inaugurating more than two decades of authoritarian rule.

Barre promoted what he described as "Scientific Socialism," seeking to modernise Somalia through centralised state control while emphasising Somali nationalism over clan identity. Although officially secular in orientation, the government also affirmed Islam as an important component of national culture and sought to demonstrate compatibility between Islamic values and socialist policies.

The Barre government implemented ambitious literacy campaigns, expanded public education and invested in infrastructure. These reforms produced measurable improvements in literacy and state capacity during the 1970s. At the same time, political repression intensified. Opposition movements were suppressed, independent civil society became increasingly restricted and state security institutions expanded their powers.

Religious institutions generally continued to operate, but the government closely monitored public religious activity and limited the political influence of religious leaders when perceived as challenging state authority. While Somalia did not adopt the extensive anti-religious policies observed in some other socialist states, the regime nevertheless asserted significant governmental control over public institutions, including aspects of religious life.

The relationship between state authority, Islam and customary governance during the Barre era remains significant for understanding contemporary Somalia. The regime attempted to strengthen central governmental institutions while simultaneously weakening alternative sources of authority, including traditional clan leadership. Many of these efforts proved unsustainable after the collapse of the state.

The Ogaden War and the Weakening of the Somali State

The Ogaden War of 1977–1978 marked a decisive turning point in modern Somali history. Seeking to unite Somali-speaking populations, Somalia invaded Ethiopia's Ogaden region. Initial military successes were reversed after Ethiopia received substantial military assistance from the Soviet Union and Cuba.

The defeat had far-reaching consequences. Economically, the war imposed enormous financial burdens upon the Somali state. Politically, it weakened confidence in the Barre government and accelerated internal opposition. Militarily, it exposed structural weaknesses within state institutions that would become increasingly apparent during the following decade.

The war also intensified regional instability, generated significant refugee movements and reinforced militarisation across Somali society. These developments contributed to the gradual erosion of state legitimacy and increased reliance upon clan-based networks for security and governance.

State Collapse and Civil War

By the late 1980s, armed opposition movements had gained momentum throughout Somalia. Growing political repression, economic decline, regional inequalities and renewed clan rivalries undermined the authority of the central government.

In January 1991, Siad Barre's regime collapsed. Unlike many states experiencing governmental transition, Somalia did not witness the orderly transfer of power to successor institutions. Instead, the collapse of the central government was followed by the fragmentation of political authority among competing armed factions, clan militias and regional administrations.

The consequences were unprecedented. National governmental institutions effectively ceased functioning across much of the country. Judicial systems collapsed, public administration disintegrated and security responsibilities shifted to local actors. Humanitarian crises, armed conflict and widespread displacement followed, prompting repeated international interventions during the 1990s.

For freedom of religion or belief, the absence of effective state institutions created an environment in which constitutional guarantees, judicial protections and international human rights obligations became extremely difficult to implement. The protection of fundamental rights increasingly depended upon local power structures rather than national legal institutions.

The Rise of Al-Shabaab and the Contemporary Era

The prolonged absence of effective central government created conditions conducive to the emergence of new armed movements. Among the most significant was Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen, commonly known as Al-Shabaab, which emerged during the mid-2000s following the collapse of the Islamic Courts Union.

Al-Shabaab seeks to establish governance based upon its interpretation of Islamic law and has exercised territorial control over significant parts of Somalia at various times. The organisation has been responsible for numerous attacks against civilians, government institutions, humanitarian organisations and religious figures. Its activities have had profound consequences for the enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief, particularly for individuals perceived as deviating from the group's interpretation of Islam or maintaining contact with Christian organisations.

Since 2012, Somalia has pursued a gradual process of rebuilding federal institutions with substantial support from the African Union, the United Nations and international partners. Although measurable progress has been achieved in certain areas, governmental authority remains uneven across the country, and significant security challenges persist.

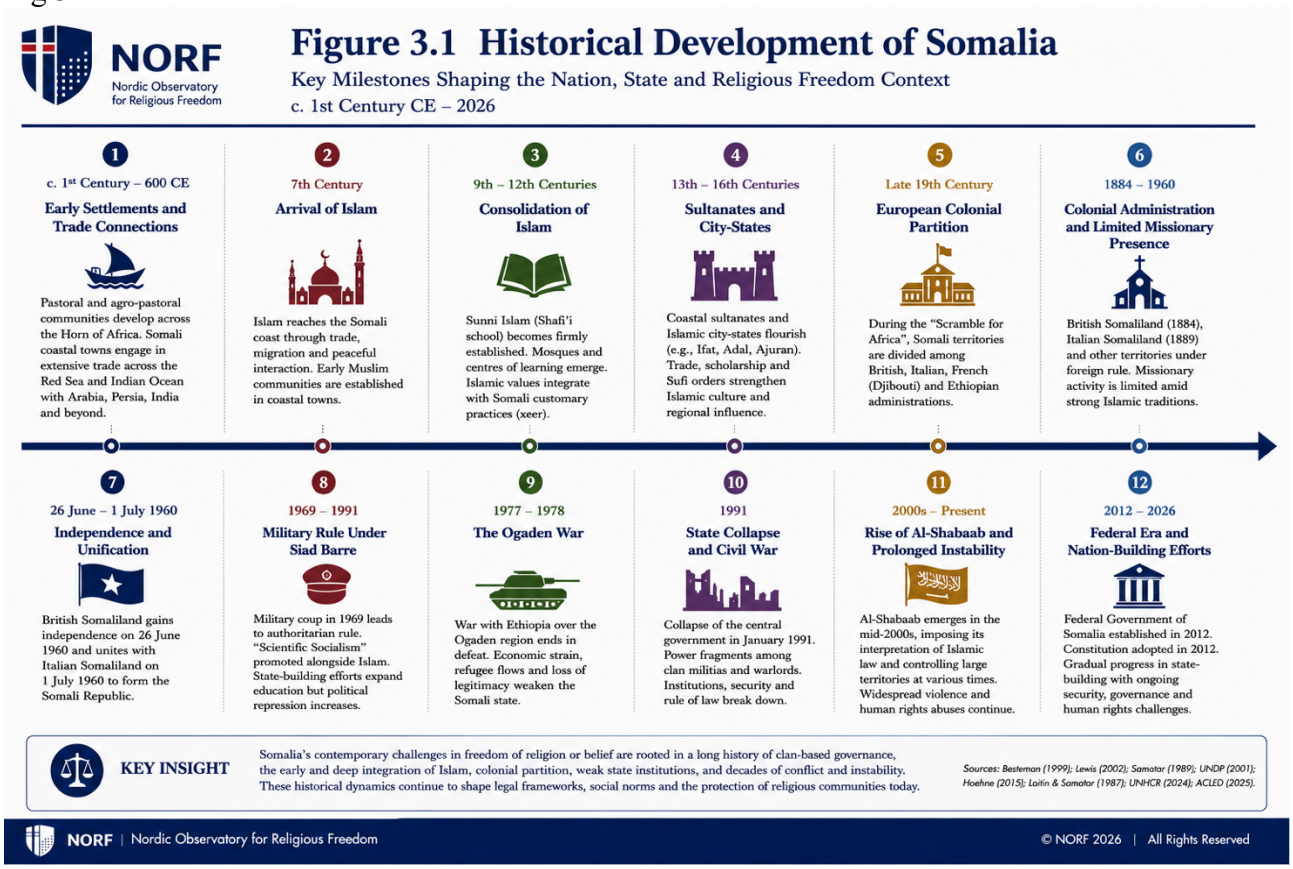
Today, Somalia represents one of the world's most fragile states. Formal constitutional institutions coexist with customary governance, religious authority, federal structures and non-state armed actors. Understanding this complex institutional landscape is essential for interpreting the country's contemporary human rights situation and the practical realities facing religious communities.

Historical Legacy

Somalia's contemporary challenges relating to freedom of religion or belief are rooted not in a single historical event but in the interaction of multiple long-term processes. The early integration of Islam into Somali identity, the endurance of clan-based governance, the fragmentation produced by colonial partition, the difficulties of post-independence state-building and the prolonged consequences of state collapse have collectively shaped the environment in which religious communities live today.

The historical record demonstrates that constitutional provisions alone cannot explain the realities of religious freedom. Effective protection depends equally upon institutional capacity, public trust, security, judicial independence and the relationship between formal law and longstanding social structures. These themes recur throughout the remainder of this chapter and provide the analytical bridge from historical development to Somalia's cultural identity, legal framework and contemporary human rights situation.

Fig 3.1



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3.1.2 Religious Development

Religion as a Foundation of Somali Society

Religion has shaped Somali society for more than thirteen centuries and remains one of the country's most significant cultural and social institutions. Unlike many states where religious identity developed alongside competing confessional traditions, Somalia evolved into one of the world's most religiously homogeneous societies. Today, Sunni Islam is both the overwhelmingly dominant faith and a central component of national identity, influencing constitutional arrangements, legal institutions, social norms and everyday life.

Understanding contemporary freedom of religion or belief in Somalia therefore requires more than documenting present-day restrictions. It requires examining the historical processes through which religion became integrated into Somali culture, governance and collective identity. The relationship between religion and society in Somalia is the product of gradual historical development rather than a single defining event. Commercial exchange, religious scholarship, customary governance, regional politics and international influences all contributed to shaping the religious landscape that exists today.

For NORF, this historical perspective is essential because contemporary debates concerning religious conversion, minority communities, constitutional law and freedom of religion cannot be understood independently of the historical role that Islam has played in the formation of Somali society.

Early Religious Traditions Before Islam

Before the arrival of Islam during the seventh century, communities inhabiting the Horn of Africa practised a variety of indigenous belief systems. Although written documentation is limited, archaeological findings, oral traditions and comparative anthropological research suggest that early Somali communities maintained religious practices closely connected to pastoral life, ancestor veneration and the natural environment.

Religious authority appears to have been decentralised, reflecting the broader political organisation of Somali society. Spiritual leadership was exercised within local communities rather than through centralised religious institutions, and customary traditions governed many aspects of social and communal life.

The geographical position of the Somali coast nevertheless exposed local populations to diverse religious influences. Commercial contact with southern Arabia, Egypt, Persia and the wider Indian Ocean world introduced new cultural and religious ideas long before Islam became established. Christian kingdoms in neighbouring Ethiopia, Jewish trading communities, Arabian merchants and various indigenous African traditions all contributed to the broader religious environment of the Horn of Africa.

Although direct evidence concerning pre-Islamic religious practice remains limited, it is clear that Somali society was already deeply integrated into international trade networks before Islam arrived. These connections facilitated the relatively peaceful transmission of religious ideas through commerce and migration rather than conquest.

The Arrival of Islam

The arrival of Islam during the seventh century represents one of the defining turning points in Somali history. Owing to the Horn of Africa's immediate proximity to the Arabian Peninsula, Somalia became one of the earliest regions outside Arabia to encounter the new religion.

Islam spread primarily through maritime trade, commercial partnerships, migration and religious scholarship. Merchants travelling between Arabian ports and the East African coast established enduring economic and cultural relationships that gradually facilitated the adoption of Islam among coastal communities before its subsequent expansion into inland regions.

Islam's introduction into Somalia differed significantly from patterns observed elsewhere in history. Rather than resulting primarily from military conquest or state-directed conversion, Islam became established through centuries of interaction between merchants, scholars, local rulers and ordinary communities. Conversion therefore occurred progressively and often alongside existing customary institutions rather than through their immediate replacement.

Historical traditions concerning the First Hijra—the migration of early Muslims to the Kingdom of Aksum—also highlight the long-standing religious connections between Arabia and the Horn of Africa. Although most refugees settled in present-day Ethiopia rather than Somalia itself, these early interactions illustrate the close geographical and cultural relationship between the regions during the formative period of Islam.

By the twelfth century, Islam had become firmly established throughout most Somali territories, laying the foundations for the religious identity that continues to characterise Somalia today.

Islam and the Formation of Somali Identity

Over subsequent centuries, Islam became more than a system of religious belief. It evolved into a defining element of Somali civilisation.

Mosques developed into centres of education, legal interpretation and community life. Religious scholars (*ulama*) acquired significant moral authority, while Islamic jurisprudence increasingly interacted with the traditional *xeer* system of customary law. Rather than replacing customary

governance entirely, Islamic principles and clan-based legal traditions frequently coexisted, producing a distinctive legal culture that remains visible in contemporary Somalia.

The Shafi'i school of Sunni Islam emerged as the dominant legal tradition throughout Somali society. At the same time, several influential Sufi brotherhoods—including the Qadiriyya, Ahmadiyya (a Sufi order distinct from the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community) and Salihiyya—played important roles in education, charitable activity, conflict mediation and spiritual life.

These religious institutions also contributed to literacy by promoting the study of Arabic and Qur'anic education. Religious schools became among the most enduring educational institutions across Somali territories, often functioning where formal state institutions remained absent.

Perhaps most importantly, Islam gradually became intertwined with conceptions of Somali identity itself. Being Somali increasingly came to imply belonging to the Muslim community. While this strengthened social cohesion across clan divisions, it also reduced the historical visibility of alternative religious identities. Over many generations, religious belonging became closely associated with cultural continuity, communal solidarity and national identity.

This historical development remains highly relevant today. Contemporary attitudes towards religious conversion frequently reflect not only theological considerations but also perceptions that leaving Islam represents a rejection of family, community and national identity. Understanding this historical relationship between religion and identity is therefore essential for interpreting present-day challenges affecting freedom of religion or belief.

Christianity in Somali History

Although contemporary Somalia is often described as religiously homogeneous, Christianity has maintained a presence in the region for many centuries, albeit on a much smaller scale than Islam.

Historical evidence suggests that Christian communities existed in parts of the Horn of Africa through interaction with the neighbouring Kingdom of Aksum, one of the earliest states to adopt Christianity as an official religion during the fourth century. However, Christianity never became deeply rooted across the Somali-speaking territories to the same extent as it did within the Ethiopian highlands.

During the colonial period, European missionary organisations established limited educational, medical and humanitarian activities, particularly in territories administered by Italy and Britain. Their influence remained comparatively modest due to strong Islamic traditions and widespread local resistance to missionary expansion.

Following independence in 1960, Somalia continued to exhibit exceptionally high levels of religious homogeneity. Christian communities remained extremely small and consisted primarily of expatriates, foreign aid workers and a limited number of Somali converts. After the collapse of the Somali state in 1991 and the subsequent deterioration of security conditions, the already small Christian presence declined further.

Today, reliable demographic data concerning Somalia's Christian population are extremely limited. Public identification as a Christian may expose individuals to severe social stigma, violence or

persecution, making accurate statistical measurement inherently difficult. Estimates therefore vary considerably between sources and should be interpreted with caution.

Religion, Society and Contemporary Religious Freedom

The historical development of religion in Somalia demonstrates that contemporary questions concerning freedom of religion or belief cannot be understood solely through constitutional provisions or recent security developments.

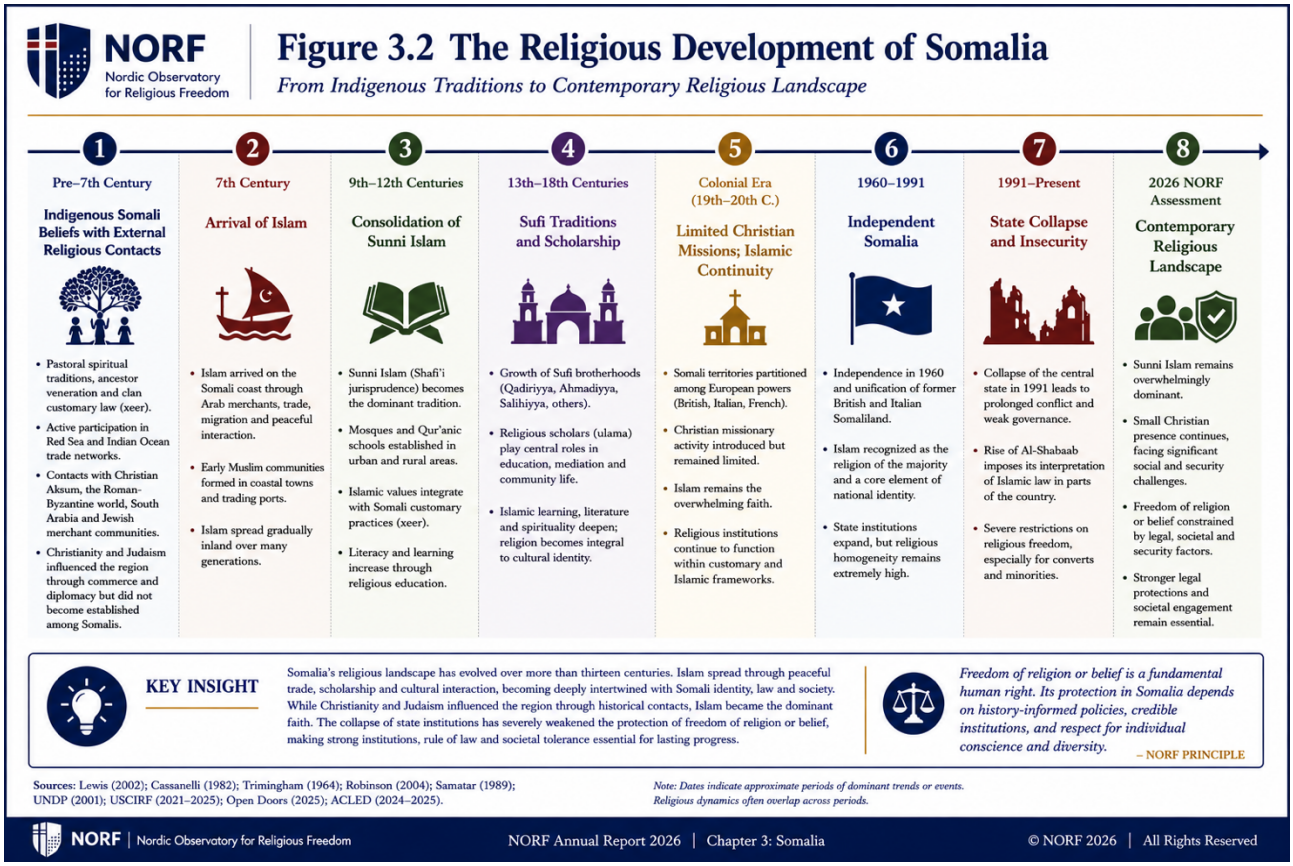
Religion has functioned simultaneously as a source of moral authority, communal cohesion, education, legal tradition and national identity. These historical roles continue to shape public attitudes towards religious diversity, conversion and minority communities.

Consequently, discussions concerning freedom of religion in Somalia often involve questions extending beyond formal legal rights. They touch upon deeply rooted understandings of family, clan solidarity, cultural continuity and social belonging that have developed over many centuries.

Recognising these historical realities neither justifies nor excuses restrictions upon internationally recognised human rights. Rather, it enables a more accurate understanding of the social context within which legal reform, institutional development and efforts to strengthen freedom of religion or belief must operate.

As NORF has argued throughout this report, effective policy begins with accurate understanding. Appreciating the historical evolution of Somalia's religious landscape therefore represents an essential prerequisite for evaluating the country's contemporary human rights situation.

Fig 3.2 The religious development of Somalia (7th century-2026)



Religion and National Identity

One of the defining characteristics of Somali history is the close relationship between religion and national identity. Over many centuries, Sunni Islam became not only the dominant faith but also a central marker of cultural belonging, social legitimacy and communal cohesion. This historical development helps explain why questions of religious conversion or public expression of minority faiths are frequently perceived through both religious and social lenses. For policymakers, this distinction is important: legal reforms alone are unlikely to transform lived realities unless accompanied by broader societal engagement, education and institutional trust-building.

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3.1.3 Historical Legacy and Contemporary Religious Identity

The historical evolution of Somalia has produced one of the most religiously homogeneous societies in the contemporary world. More than thirteen centuries of Islamic tradition, combined with the absence of large-scale historical immigration by other religious communities and the enduring influence of clan-based social structures, have resulted in a national identity in which religion, culture and ethnicity are closely interconnected. Understanding this relationship is essential for interpreting both the strengths and the challenges affecting freedom of religion or belief in Somalia today.

Unlike many states where national identity developed around territorial boundaries or civic institutions, Somali identity has historically rested upon three mutually reinforcing foundations: a common Somali language, shared clan affiliations and an overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim religious tradition. These elements have evolved together over centuries and continue to shape political legitimacy, social cohesion and public expectations regarding religious life.

Islam therefore functions in Somalia not merely as a personal belief system but also as an important marker of national identity. Religious affiliation is commonly understood as an integral component of belonging to Somali society, while conversion away from Islam is frequently perceived as both a religious and a social rupture. This distinction is significant because many restrictions experienced by religious minorities arise not solely from formal legislation but from deeply embedded social expectations regarding community identity and collective responsibility.

The persistence of customary *xeer* law further illustrates the interaction between historical tradition and contemporary governance. Although Somalia possesses a federal constitution and statutory legal institutions, many disputes continue to be resolved through customary mechanisms administered by clan elders. In numerous regions, customary law operates alongside Islamic jurisprudence and formal governmental institutions, creating a plural legal environment in which different normative systems coexist.

This institutional pluralism has important implications for freedom of religion or belief. Constitutional guarantees may exist in principle, yet their practical implementation depends upon the interaction between state authorities, religious institutions, customary governance and local security conditions. Consequently, the experience of religious freedom varies considerably across different regions of Somalia.

The collapse of the central state in 1991 further transformed the relationship between religion and governance. During the subsequent decades, religious institutions assumed expanded social functions by providing education, humanitarian assistance and community leadership in areas where governmental capacity had deteriorated. At the same time, extremist organisations exploited institutional weakness to promote violent interpretations of religion that differ substantially from Somalia's longstanding traditions of Sunni scholarship and Sufi practice.

This distinction is analytically important. Contemporary religious violence in Somalia should not be interpreted as a continuation of historical Somali Islam. Rather, organisations such as Al-Shabaab represent relatively recent ideological movements that emerged within the context of prolonged conflict, state fragility and transnational jihadist networks. Their interpretation of Islam differs significantly from the historically diverse religious traditions that characterised Somali society for centuries.

Somalia's demographic composition also influences the practical operation of freedom of religion or belief. According to the most widely cited international estimates, virtually the entire resident population identifies as Muslim, with Sunni Islam constituting the overwhelming majority. Christian communities remain extremely small and often practise their faith privately due to security concerns, while adherents of other religions are few in number. Because reliable census data are unavailable, precise estimates remain uncertain; nevertheless, the overall demographic picture is remarkably consistent across international sources.

From a human rights perspective, religious homogeneity should not itself be understood as evidence of either strong or weak religious freedom. International law protects the rights of every individual regardless of whether a country is religiously homogeneous or highly pluralistic. The decisive question is therefore whether individuals are able to adopt, change, practise or reject a religion without coercion, discrimination or violence. NORF consequently evaluates Somalia on the basis of the practical protection afforded to individuals rather than the demographic composition of society.

The historical legacy outlined in this chapter demonstrates that Somalia's contemporary religious landscape is the product of long-term historical development rather than recent political change alone. Early integration into the Islamic world, centuries of commercial exchange, colonial partition, state-building efforts, prolonged conflict and institutional fragmentation have collectively shaped the conditions under which freedom of religion or belief is exercised today. These historical dynamics provide the essential context for the legal and empirical assessment presented in the following sections.

Figure 3.3



Key Historical Findings (NORF Summary Box)

Key Historical Findings: Somalia

Historical Development

Somalia's contemporary religious landscape is the product of more than two millennia of cultural interaction, commercial exchange and political transformation. Indigenous Somali traditions developed within extensive Red Sea and Indian Ocean trade networks that connected the Horn of Africa with Arabia, the Roman-Byzantine world, Persia and East Africa long before the arrival of Islam.

Christianity and Judaism reached the region through merchants, diplomacy and neighbouring civilisations, particularly the Christian Kingdom of Aksum and Jewish communities in South Arabia. While these contacts influenced coastal trading centres, neither religion became firmly established among the wider Somali population.

The gradual introduction of Islam from the seventh century onward fundamentally transformed Somali society. Over subsequent centuries, Sunni Islam (predominantly following the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence) became deeply integrated with Somali language, culture, customary governance and political legitimacy. Religious identity gradually evolved into one of the principal foundations of Somali national identity.

Colonial partition during the nineteenth century fragmented Somali-speaking populations across multiple administrations but left the Islamic character of society largely intact. Following independence in 1960, efforts to establish modern democratic institutions were challenged by competing political visions, military rule, regional conflict and ultimately the collapse of the central state in 1991.

The subsequent emergence of Al-Shabaab represents a modern security phenomenon rather than a continuation of Somalia's historical Islamic tradition. Contemporary religious extremism developed within conditions of prolonged conflict, institutional weakness and transnational militant networks rather than through the historical evolution of Somali religious life.

NORF Assessment

From a freedom of religion or belief perspective, Somalia demonstrates that religious homogeneity alone does not determine the level of human rights protection. International law protects every individual's freedom of religion or belief irrespective of the religious composition of society.

NORF therefore evaluates Somalia according to the practical protection of individuals rather than constitutional labels or demographic characteristics. The empirical evidence presented throughout this report examines whether individuals are able to adopt, practise, change or reject a religion without coercion, discrimination or violence, consistent with Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

3.2 Constitutional and Legal Framework

3.2.1 Constitutional Framework

The constitutional framework of the Federal Republic of Somalia provides the formal legal foundation for the protection of freedom of religion or belief. However, unlike many constitutional democracies, Somalia's constitutional order combines commitments to internationally recognised human rights with an explicit constitutional recognition of Islam as the state religion. This dual character makes Somalia's constitutional framework both distinctive and legally complex.

Following more than two decades of state collapse and transitional governance, Somalia adopted a **Provisional Constitution** on **1 August 2012**. The Constitution established the Federal Republic of Somalia as a federal parliamentary republic and created the legal basis for rebuilding national institutions after the prolonged civil conflict. Although designated as "provisional," the Constitution remains the country's supreme law and continues to regulate the organisation of government, the protection of fundamental rights and the relationship between religion and the state.

Unlike constitutions founded upon strict institutional separation between religion and government, Somalia's Constitution expressly identifies Islam as an integral component of the constitutional order. **Article 2** declares that Islam is the religion of the State, that no religion other than Islam may be propagated within the country, and that no law may be enacted which is inconsistent with the general principles and objectives of Sharia. Consequently, constitutional interpretation takes place within a legal framework in which Islamic jurisprudence occupies a constitutionally recognised position alongside statutory law.

This constitutional model differs from both classical secular constitutions and constitutions establishing a national church. Rather than creating an established religious institution comparable to the constitutional arrangements found in Denmark or the United Kingdom, Somalia constitutionally incorporates Islamic legal principles as a normative source guiding legislation and constitutional interpretation. Religious authority therefore functions primarily through constitutional recognition of Sharia rather than through a formally established religious hierarchy.

At the same time, the Constitution also contains a comprehensive catalogue of fundamental rights. **Article 11** guarantees equality before the law and prohibits discrimination on several grounds. **Article 15** protects personal liberty and security, while **Article 16** safeguards freedom of association. Most directly relevant to the present report, **Article 17** recognises freedom of religion, stating that every person is free to practise his or her religion, subject to limitations prescribed by law that are necessary to protect public order, health or morality.

The interaction between Articles 2 and 17 illustrates one of the defining constitutional characteristics of Somalia. On the one hand, the Constitution recognises an individual freedom to practise religion. On the other hand, it constitutionally limits the public propagation of religions other than Islam and requires legislation to remain consistent with Sharia. The practical scope of religious freedom therefore depends not only upon the wording of Article 17 but also upon the constitutional status accorded to Islam throughout the constitutional system.

The Constitution further recognises Islam as an important source of national values and identity. The preamble emphasises the Islamic heritage of the Somali people, while several constitutional provisions refer to Islamic principles in relation to legislation, education and public institutions. Consequently, religion performs both a legal and a symbolic constitutional function, reflecting Somalia's historical development as an overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim society.

The federal nature of Somalia also affects constitutional implementation. Although the Constitution establishes federal institutions, considerable authority remains exercised by Federal Member States whose administrative capacity and legal institutions vary significantly. In practice, the implementation of constitutional guarantees differs across regions depending upon governmental effectiveness, judicial capacity, security conditions and the interaction between statutory law, customary *xeer* and Islamic jurisprudence.

Constitutional guarantees should therefore not be understood in isolation from Somalia's broader legal environment. Formal constitutional rights coexist with multiple normative systems, including statutory legislation, Sharia, customary law and local administrative practices. The practical enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief consequently depends upon the interaction of these overlapping legal frameworks rather than constitutional text alone.

From an international human rights perspective, Somalia's constitutional framework reflects both convergence and divergence with international standards. The Constitution recognises numerous civil and political rights that correspond to obligations contained in the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**, the **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)** and the **African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights**. At the same time, constitutional restrictions concerning the propagation of non-Islamic religions and the incorporation of Sharia as a constitutional source of legislation raise important questions regarding compatibility with the full scope of freedom of religion or belief as protected under Article 18 of the ICCPR.

NORF does not evaluate constitutional design itself. International human rights law permits considerable constitutional diversity among democratic states. Some states maintain established churches, others adopt strict secularism, while still others recognise historical or religious traditions within their constitutional orders. The decisive legal question is therefore not whether a constitution recognises a particular religion, but whether every individual enjoys equal protection of the internationally recognised right to freedom of religion or belief in law and in practice.

Accordingly, the constitutional provisions examined in this section constitute the legal baseline for the empirical assessment undertaken later in this chapter. Subsequent sections analyse how constitutional guarantees are implemented through legislation, judicial institutions, administrative practice and the lived experience of religious communities across Somalia.

NORF Analytical Observation

Somalia's Constitution illustrates a central principle of the NORF analytical framework: **constitutional text alone does not determine the level of religious freedom**. Constitutional guarantees, religious provisions, institutional capacity and practical implementation must all be assessed together. Throughout this report, NORF therefore distinguishes between **constitutional commitments**, **legislative implementation** and **empirical protection** of the individual's freedom of religion or belief.

Figure 3.4


FIGURE 3.4
Constitutional Architecture of Freedom of Religion in Somalia
How constitutional provisions shape the legal framework for freedom of religion or belief
PROVISIONAL CONSTITUTION (2012)
Supreme Law of the Federal Republic of Somalia
ARTICLE 2
Religion of the State
Islam is the religion of the State
No law may be enacted which is contrary to the general principles and objectives of Sharia
Public propagation of any religion other than Islam is prohibited
ARTICLE 11
Equality Before the Law
All persons are equal before the law
Citizens shall not be discriminated against on the basis of race, color, clan, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status
Equal protection and benefit of the law
ARTICLE 17
Freedom of Religion
Every person has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion
The right includes freedom to manifest one's religion in worship, observance, practice and teaching
Subject only to limitations prescribed by law that are necessary to protect public order, health or morality
CONSTITUTIONAL IMPLEMENTATION
FEDERAL PARLIAMENT
Enacts legislation consistent with the Constitution and Sharia principles
JUDICIARY
Interprets the Constitution and laws; safeguards fundamental rights
EXECUTIVE
Implements laws and policies consistent with constitutional obligations
FEDERAL MEMBER STATES
Exercise powers in accordance with the Constitution and federal principles
NORF CONSTITUTIONAL ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK
Constitutional Guarantees
Rights and freedoms affirmed in the Constitution, including freedom of religion
Constitutional Restrictions
Provisions that limit religious freedom, including Article 2 and consistency with Sharia
Interaction with Sharia
Constitutional requirement that laws comply with the general principles and objectives of Sharia
Regional Implementation
Variation in application across Federal Member States and local authorities
Judicial Practice
Role of courts in interpreting rights and resolving religious cases
Practical Protection of Individuals
Focus on the real enjoyment of rights in law and in practice
NORF ANALYTICAL CONCLUSION
Constitutional text establishes the legal framework, but the effective protection of freedom of religion or belief depends upon legislation, judicial interpretation, administrative implementation and the interaction between constitutional law, Sharia and customary xeer.
NORF
Nordic Observatory for Religious Freedom
Source:
Federal Republic of Somalia (2012); ICCPR Article 18; UDHR Article 18.

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3.2.2 Sources of Law

Understanding freedom of religion or belief in Somalia requires an appreciation of the country's plural legal order. Unlike many constitutional democracies where legislation enacted by parliament constitutes the primary source of law, Somalia's legal system combines constitutional law, statutory legislation, Islamic jurisprudence (*Sharia*), customary clan law (*xeer*) and, to a lesser extent, international legal obligations. The practical application of law therefore varies considerably across regions and depends upon the interaction between these overlapping legal systems.

This legal pluralism reflects Somalia's historical development. Prior to colonial administration, disputes were primarily resolved through customary clan-based mechanisms and Islamic legal principles. Colonial authorities introduced elements of European statutory law, while post-independence governments sought to establish a unified national legal system. Following the collapse of the Somali state in 1991, however, formal legal institutions deteriorated significantly, allowing customary law and religious authorities to assume an increasingly important role in local governance. Although federal institutions have gradually been re-established since 2012, Somalia continues to operate through a combination of formal and informal legal systems.

Constitutional Law

The **Provisional Constitution of 2012** constitutes the supreme law of the Federal Republic of Somalia. It establishes the structure of government, distributes powers between the federal government and Federal Member States, and recognises a range of fundamental rights and freedoms.

At the same time, the Constitution explicitly incorporates Islamic principles into the constitutional order. Article 2 declares Islam to be the religion of the State, prohibits the propagation of religions other than Islam and requires legislation to remain consistent with the general principles and objectives of Sharia. Consequently, constitutional supremacy exists within a framework that constitutionally recognises Islamic law as an authoritative normative source.

In principle, all legislation and governmental action must therefore comply simultaneously with constitutional provisions and the constitutional recognition of Sharia.

Statutory Law

Statutory legislation enacted by the Federal Parliament forms the second principal source of law. Parliament has adopted legislation governing criminal justice, civil administration, elections, public finance and numerous aspects of governmental organisation.

However, Somalia's legislative framework remains incomplete in many areas due to prolonged institutional disruption and the continuing constitutional review process. In practice, numerous legal questions continue to be governed through older legislation inherited from previous governments, regional legislation adopted by Federal Member States or local administrative practice.

The uneven development of statutory law contributes to significant regional variation in the implementation of constitutional rights, including freedom of religion or belief.

Islamic Law (Sharia)

Islamic law occupies a unique constitutional position within Somalia's legal order. Unlike many Muslim-majority states where Sharia primarily influences family law or personal status matters, Somalia's Constitution expressly requires legislation to be consistent with the general principles and objectives of Sharia.

In practice, Sharia influences numerous legal fields, including family law, inheritance, aspects of criminal justice and questions relating to public morality. Religious courts and Islamic scholars also continue to exercise considerable influence in many communities, particularly where formal judicial institutions remain weak or inaccessible.

It is important to distinguish between the constitutional recognition of Sharia and its practical application. Interpretation of Islamic law is neither uniform nor centralised. Different regions, courts and religious authorities may apply Islamic jurisprudence differently, while extremist organisations such as Al-Shabaab advocate interpretations that differ significantly from those accepted by the Federal Government and mainstream Somali religious institutions.

Accordingly, references to "Sharia" within Somalia should not be understood as describing a single uniform legal system but rather a body of Islamic jurisprudence interpreted and applied within varying institutional contexts.

Customary Law (*Xeer*)

Alongside constitutional and statutory law, customary clan law—known as *xeer*—continues to play a central role in Somali society. Developed over centuries, *xeer* regulates relationships between clans, resolves disputes concerning property, compensation, grazing rights and local security, and provides mechanisms for conflict resolution through negotiation and collective responsibility.

Unlike statutory legislation, *xeer* is not codified in a single legal text. Instead, it consists of customary principles transmitted through community practice and administered by clan elders. Although varying between regions and clans, *xeer* remains one of the most influential legal institutions within Somali society.

From the perspective of freedom of religion or belief, *xeer* presents both opportunities and challenges. Local dispute resolution mechanisms may contribute to social stability and peaceful conflict management. At the same time, customary expectations concerning clan membership, family honour and community cohesion may reinforce social pressure against religious conversion or public expression of minority religious identities. These societal dynamics often operate independently of formal constitutional provisions.

NORF therefore evaluates *xeer* not as a substitute for constitutional law but as an influential normative system affecting the practical enjoyment of individual rights.

Regional and Federal Legal Variation

Somalia's federal structure further contributes to legal diversity. Federal Member States possess varying degrees of legislative authority and administrative capacity, while Somaliland—although internationally recognised as part of Somalia—maintains separate governmental institutions and its own legal framework in practice. Puntland likewise operates with substantial administrative autonomy.

As a consequence, judicial practice, law enforcement and administrative implementation may differ considerably across regions. Security conditions also influence the effective application of legal norms, particularly in areas affected by armed conflict or limited governmental control.

NORF therefore distinguishes between national legislation and actual implementation at regional and local levels.

International Law

Somalia is party to several major international and regional human rights treaties, including the **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)**, the **Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)** and the **African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights**. These treaties impose binding obligations upon the State concerning the protection of freedom of religion or belief and related civil and political rights.

Nevertheless, implementation remains dependent upon domestic legislation, judicial capacity and administrative effectiveness. International obligations therefore constitute an important legal benchmark for NORF's assessment but do not automatically determine the practical protection enjoyed by individuals.

Interaction Between Legal Sources

Rather than operating within a strict legal hierarchy, Somalia's legal systems frequently interact. Constitutional provisions may be interpreted alongside Islamic principles; statutory legislation may

coexist with customary dispute resolution; and international human rights obligations provide external standards against which domestic law may be evaluated.

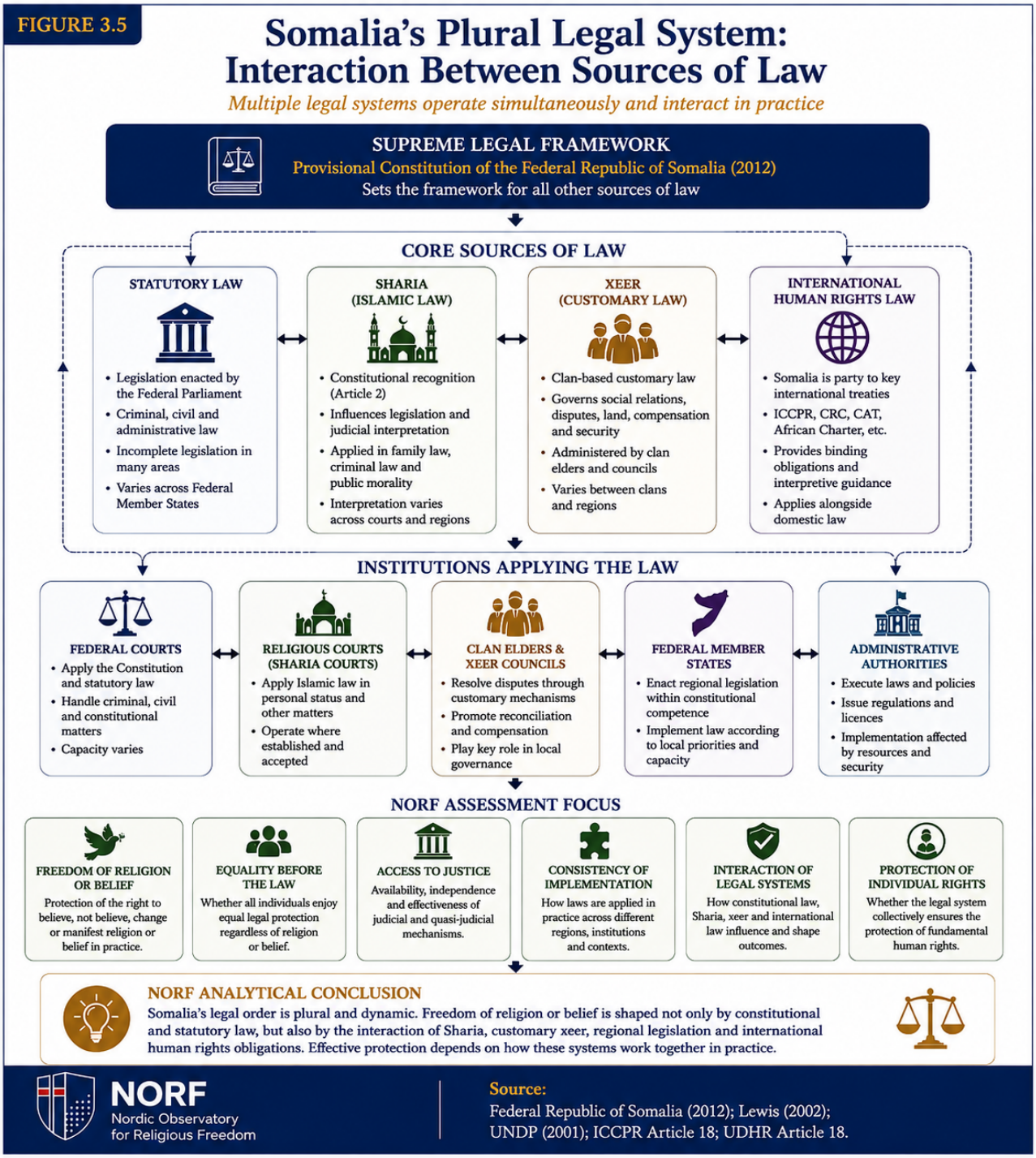
This interaction creates a legally complex environment in which the practical exercise of freedom of religion or belief depends not only upon formal legislation but also upon local governance, judicial interpretation, customary authority and prevailing security conditions.

For this reason, NORF does not evaluate Somalia solely on the basis of constitutional provisions or statutory law. The assessment presented in this report examines how these multiple legal systems function together in practice and whether they collectively ensure effective protection of every individual's freedom of religion or belief.

NORF Analytical Observation

Somalia exemplifies **legal pluralism** rather than legal uniformity. Constitutional law, parliamentary legislation, Islamic jurisprudence, customary *xeer* and international human rights obligations coexist within a dynamic legal environment. Understanding religious freedom in Somalia therefore requires analysing not only what the law provides, but also which legal system is applied in practice, by whom and under what circumstances.

Figure 3.5



APA 7 References

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3.2.3 International Human Rights Obligations

Although Somalia's constitutional framework recognises Islam as the religion of the State and incorporates Sharia as an important source of legislation, the Federal Republic of Somalia is simultaneously bound by a range of international and regional human rights obligations. These commitments establish internationally recognised standards for the protection of freedom of religion or belief and provide an important benchmark for evaluating domestic legislation, governmental practice and institutional performance.

For NORF, international human rights law serves as the principal normative framework against which national legal systems are assessed. Constitutional traditions vary considerably among democratic and non-democratic states alike, but the obligations arising from international human rights treaties establish common minimum standards that all State Parties undertake to respect, protect and fulfil. Consequently, NORF evaluates Somalia not according to a preferred constitutional model, but according to the international legal obligations that the Somali government has voluntarily accepted.

United Nations Human Rights Framework

Somalia became a member of the United Nations on **20 September 1960**, shortly after independence. Membership entails a commitment to the principles of the **United Nations Charter**, including the promotion of human rights, fundamental freedoms and equal dignity for all persons.

Although the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)** is not a legally binding treaty, it remains the cornerstone of the modern international human rights system. **Article 18** of the Declaration establishes that:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."

The Universal Declaration has subsequently been incorporated into numerous binding international treaties and is widely regarded as reflecting customary international law. Throughout this report, Article 18 serves as one of NORF's principal normative reference points.

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)

The most important legally binding instrument concerning freedom of religion or belief is the **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)**, to which Somalia is a State Party. The Covenant transforms the principles contained in the Universal Declaration into legally binding obligations and requires States to respect a broad range of civil and political rights.

For the purposes of this report, **Article 18 of the ICCPR** is of particular significance. It protects four interrelated dimensions of religious freedom:

- freedom to hold a religion or belief;
- freedom to adopt or change religion or belief;
- freedom to manifest religion individually or collectively, publicly or privately;
- freedom from coercion impairing religious choice.

Importantly, the Human Rights Committee has clarified in **General Comment No. 22** that the freedom to adopt or change religion is absolute and cannot be restricted by governments. Likewise, coercion designed to compel individuals to maintain or abandon a particular religion is incompatible with Article 18.

The Covenant permits certain limitations on the external manifestation of religion, but only where such restrictions are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, public order, health, morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others. These limitations must also satisfy the principles of legality, necessity and proportionality.

This distinction between the **internal freedom of belief (forum internum)** and the **external manifestation of religion (forum externum)** constitutes one of the central principles underlying NORF's legal assessment methodology.

Other Core United Nations Human Rights Treaties

Beyond the ICCPR, Somalia has assumed obligations under several additional international human rights conventions that influence the protection of freedom of religion or belief.

The **Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)** recognises children's freedom of thought, conscience and religion while balancing these rights with the responsibilities of parents or legal guardians. Given Somalia's young population, the CRC has particular relevance for questions concerning religious education, parental authority and the rights of children belonging to minority communities.

Somalia is also a State Party to the **Convention against Torture (CAT)**, which reinforces protections against coercion, cruel treatment and inhuman punishment. These protections are directly relevant where individuals face violence, intimidation or punishment because of their religious beliefs or religious identity.

The **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)** requires equal enjoyment of human rights without discrimination based on sex. Within the context

of freedom of religion or belief, CEDAW is particularly relevant where religious norms or legal practices affect women's ability to exercise equal civil liberties, participate in public life or determine their own religious affiliation.

Together, these treaties demonstrate that freedom of religion or belief cannot be examined in isolation but intersects with broader questions concerning equality, education, family life, personal liberty and protection from discrimination.

African Regional Human Rights System

Somalia is likewise bound by the **African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights**, the principal regional human rights instrument of the African Union.

Article 8 of the African Charter guarantees:

Freedom of conscience, the profession and free practice of religion shall be guaranteed.

The African Charter complements the universal human rights framework by recognising both individual rights and broader communal responsibilities within African societies. While its language differs somewhat from Article 18 of the ICCPR, both instruments recognise religious freedom as a fundamental human right deserving effective legal protection.

The **African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights** has repeatedly emphasised that states must protect individuals from discrimination, coercion and violence based upon religion while ensuring equal access to justice and effective legal remedies.

For NORF, the African Charter provides an important regional benchmark that complements universal international standards.

Domestic Implementation of International Obligations

Ratification of international treaties does not automatically guarantee their effective implementation. International obligations must be reflected through domestic legislation, functioning institutions, independent courts and administrative practice.

Somalia continues to face significant structural challenges in implementing international human rights commitments. Decades of armed conflict, institutional fragility, limited judicial capacity and uneven governmental control have constrained the practical enforcement of constitutional rights and treaty obligations across many parts of the country.

Furthermore, the interaction between constitutional recognition of Sharia, customary *xeer*, statutory legislation and international human rights law creates a complex legal environment in which competing normative systems may influence judicial interpretation and administrative decision-making.

Consequently, assessing compliance requires consideration not only of formal treaty ratification but also of practical implementation.

NORF Analytical Framework

NORF distinguishes between three separate analytical levels when evaluating international human rights obligations.

First, treaty commitment examines whether the State has accepted legally binding international obligations through ratification or accession.

Second, legal incorporation evaluates whether domestic constitutional and legislative provisions reflect these international standards.

Third, empirical implementation assesses whether individuals can effectively exercise the protected rights in practice without discrimination, intimidation or violence.

This three-level approach recognises that a country may formally accept international obligations while implementation remains incomplete. Conversely, certain protections may exist in practice despite legislative shortcomings. NORF therefore evaluates all three dimensions before reaching an overall assessment.

Relevance for the Somalia Assessment

The international instruments examined in this section provide the normative benchmark against which Somalia's legal framework will be evaluated throughout the remainder of this report.

Subsequent sections analyse whether domestic legislation governing conversion, religious expression, places of worship, religious education, registration of religious organisations and protection of religious minorities is consistent with Somalia's obligations under international human rights law. Later empirical chapters then assess the extent to which these legal guarantees are realised in practice across different regions of the country.

Accordingly, international human rights law serves not merely as background information but as the principal legal standard underpinning NORF's assessment methodology.

NORF Analytical Observation

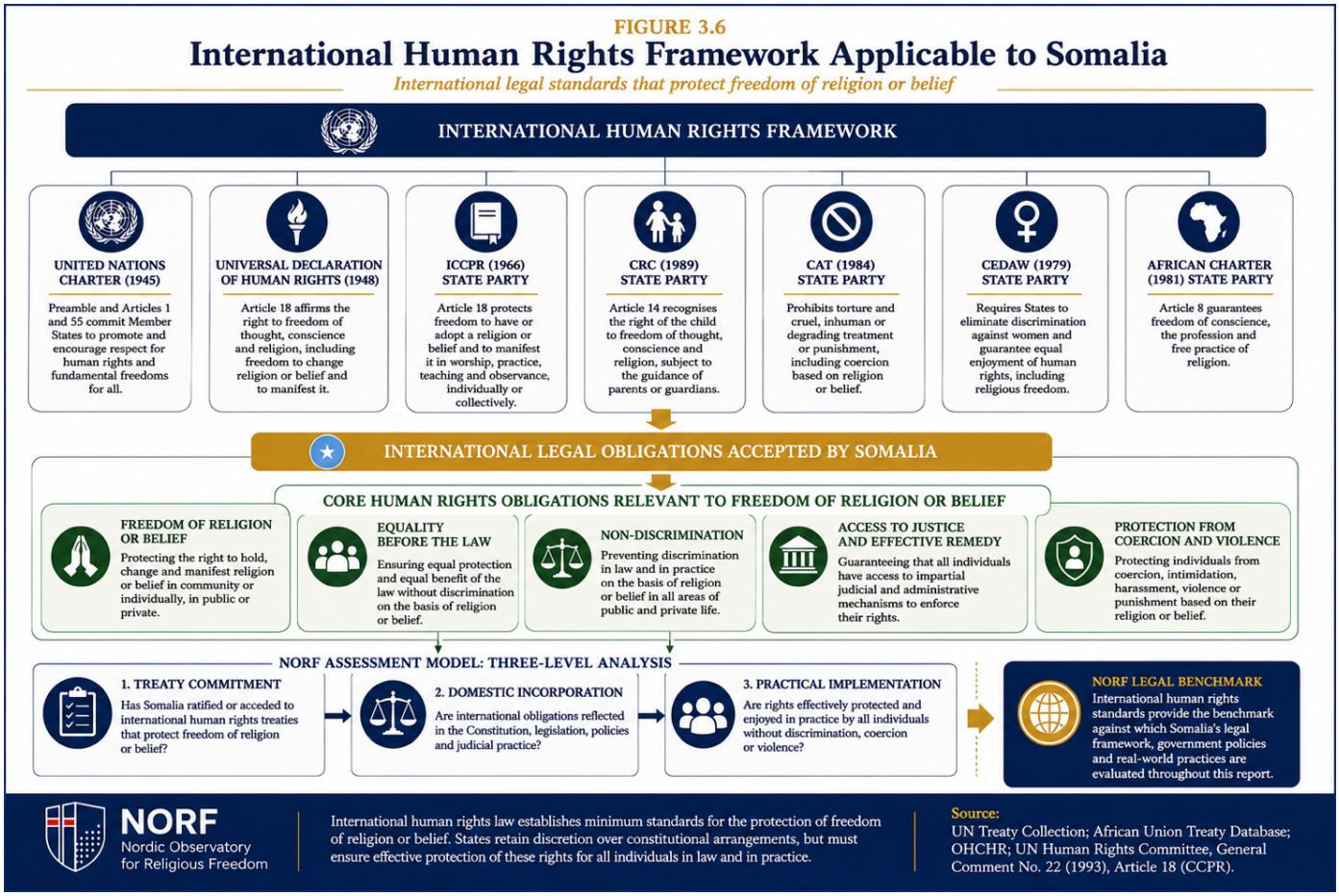
International human rights treaties establish **minimum legal standards**, not preferred constitutional models. States retain considerable discretion regarding their constitutional relationship between religion and government, provided that every individual enjoys the substantive rights protected under international law. NORF therefore distinguishes carefully between **treaty commitment**, **domestic legal incorporation** and **empirical implementation**, recognising that effective freedom of religion or belief depends upon all three dimensions.

Table 3.1 International Human Rights Obligations Relevant to Freedom of Religion or Belief

Instrument	Somalia Status	Key Provision	NORF Relevance
Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)	UN Member State	Article 18	Global normative benchmark
International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)	State Party	Article 18	Primary legal benchmark for freedom of religion or belief
Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)	State Party	Article 14	Religious freedom of children
Convention against Torture (CAT)	State Party	Multiple Articles	Protection against religious coercion and abuse
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)	State Party	Multiple Articles	Equality and non-discrimination
African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights	State Party	Article 8	Regional legal benchmark

Source: United Nations Treaty Collection; African Union Treaty Database.

Figure 3.6



APA 7 References

African Union. (1981). *African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights*.

Federal Republic of Somalia. (2012). *Provisional Constitution of the Federal Republic of Somalia*.

United Nations. (1945). *Charter of the United Nations*.

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3.2.4 Freedom of Religion or Belief in Domestic Law

The constitutional and legal protection of freedom of religion or belief in Somalia reflects the broader characteristics of the country's plural legal system. While the Constitution recognises certain individual rights and Somalia has accepted significant international human rights obligations, domestic law simultaneously establishes important legal limitations derived from the constitutional status of Islam and the recognised role of Sharia within the legal order.

Consequently, the legal framework governing religion in Somalia differs substantially from systems founded upon religious neutrality or institutional separation between religion and the state. Rather than guaranteeing unrestricted religious pluralism, Somali law provides constitutional recognition of individual rights within a framework that accords Islam a privileged constitutional position. Understanding this interaction is essential for assessing both the legal framework and its practical implications for religious communities.

Constitutional Protection of Religion

The principal constitutional provision concerning freedom of religion is **Article 17** of the Provisional Constitution, which recognises that every person has the right to practise his or her religion. This provision reflects the broader commitment to fundamental rights contained elsewhere in the Constitution and corresponds, in general terms, to internationally recognised principles protecting religious belief.

However, Article 17 cannot be interpreted independently of the Constitution as a whole. As discussed in Section 3.2.1, **Article 2** declares Islam to be the religion of the State, prohibits the propagation of religions other than Islam and requires all legislation to remain consistent with the general principles and objectives of Sharia.

Accordingly, constitutional protection of religious freedom exists within a legal framework that expressly limits the public manifestation of non-Islamic religions. The practical scope of Article 17 therefore depends upon its interaction with the Constitution's broader religious provisions.

Conversion and Apostasy

One of the most significant issues concerning freedom of religion or belief relates to the right to adopt or change one's religion.

International human rights law, particularly **Article 18 of the ICCPR**, explicitly protects the freedom to adopt a religion or belief of one's choice, including the freedom to change religion

without coercion. The United Nations Human Rights Committee has consistently interpreted this protection as extending to conversion between religions, abandonment of religion and the adoption of non-religious beliefs.

Somalia's constitutional framework does not expressly recognise a corresponding right to convert away from Islam. While the Constitution does not contain a specific statutory offence of apostasy, the constitutional recognition of Islam, combined with the requirement that legislation conform to Sharia, creates a legal environment in which conversion from Islam is highly sensitive.

In practice, individuals perceived as having abandoned Islam may face severe social consequences, threats from non-state actors, community exclusion and, in areas outside effective government control, violence from extremist groups such as Al-Shabaab. These practical realities are examined in detail in later empirical chapters. From a legal perspective, however, the absence of explicit constitutional protection for religious conversion represents a significant divergence from the standards articulated under Article 18 of the ICCPR.

Public Manifestation of Religion

International human rights law protects not only the right to hold religious beliefs but also the freedom to manifest religion through worship, teaching, observance and public expression.

Somalia's Constitution recognises religious practice while simultaneously prohibiting the public propagation of religions other than Islam. Consequently, public religious activities associated with non-Muslim communities are subject to significant legal and practical limitations.

This constitutional restriction primarily affects missionary activity, public evangelism, organised religious outreach and the establishment of visible non-Islamic religious institutions. Although small Christian communities continue to exist within Somalia, opportunities for public religious expression remain extremely limited.

The distinction between private belief and public manifestation is therefore central to understanding Somalia's domestic legal framework.

Registration of Religious Communities

Somalia does not operate a comprehensive legal framework governing the registration of religious organisations comparable to those found in many democratic states.

Instead, the legal status of religious communities is influenced by the constitutional recognition of Islam, administrative practice and local governance structures. Islamic institutions generally operate within established constitutional and societal frameworks, while non-Muslim communities often function on a very limited basis without extensive institutional recognition.

The absence of clear legislative procedures governing registration contributes to legal uncertainty concerning the operation of minority religious organisations, ownership of property and institutional development.

Religious Education

Religion occupies an important position within Somalia's educational system.

Islamic instruction forms an integral component of education in both public and private settings, reflecting the constitutional recognition of Islam and the religious composition of Somali society. Qur'anic schools (*dugsi*) continue to play a significant role in primary religious education throughout the country, while Islamic studies are incorporated into broader educational curricula.

International human rights law recognises the rights of parents to ensure religious and moral education consistent with their convictions. However, these rights must also be balanced with children's independent rights under the Convention on the Rights of the Child and broader principles of non-discrimination.

Given Somalia's overwhelmingly Muslim population, questions concerning alternative religious education for minority communities arise only to a limited extent but nevertheless remain relevant from the perspective of international human rights law.

Equality and Non-Discrimination

The Constitution guarantees equality before the law and prohibits discrimination in general terms. Nevertheless, constitutional recognition of Islam creates distinctions regarding the public status of religions that do not exist within systems based upon strict religious neutrality.

From the perspective of international human rights law, equal protection does not necessarily require identical constitutional arrangements for every religion. However, it does require that individuals enjoy equal protection of their fundamental rights regardless of religious affiliation.

The interaction between constitutional preference for Islam and broader guarantees of equality therefore constitutes one of the principal legal questions examined throughout this report.

Judicial Interpretation and Enforcement

The practical enforcement of constitutional rights depends upon judicial institutions capable of interpreting and applying constitutional guarantees consistently.

Somalia's judicial system continues to face significant institutional challenges arising from limited resources, uneven territorial control, security concerns and differing interactions between statutory law, Sharia and customary *xeer*. Consequently, judicial protection of freedom of religion or belief varies considerably across regions.

This institutional variation reinforces the importance of distinguishing between formal legal guarantees and their implementation in practice.

Preliminary NORF Legal Assessment

From a legal perspective, Somalia's domestic framework demonstrates both areas of convergence and areas of divergence with international human rights standards.

Areas broadly consistent with international standards include:

- constitutional recognition of certain fundamental rights;
- constitutional guarantees of equality before the law;
- recognition of individual religious practice;
- incorporation of broader civil liberties within the constitutional framework.

Areas raising significant legal concerns include:

- constitutional prohibition on the propagation of religions other than Islam;
- absence of explicit protection for the right to change religion;
- constitutional requirement that legislation remain consistent with Sharia;
- legal uncertainty concerning minority religious communities;
- limited institutional safeguards for public religious pluralism.

These observations do not, by themselves, determine the overall level of religious freedom within Somalia. Effective protection depends equally upon implementation, institutional capacity and conditions on the ground. Accordingly, NORF's final legal assessment integrates constitutional analysis with empirical evidence presented in subsequent chapters.

NORF Analytical Observation

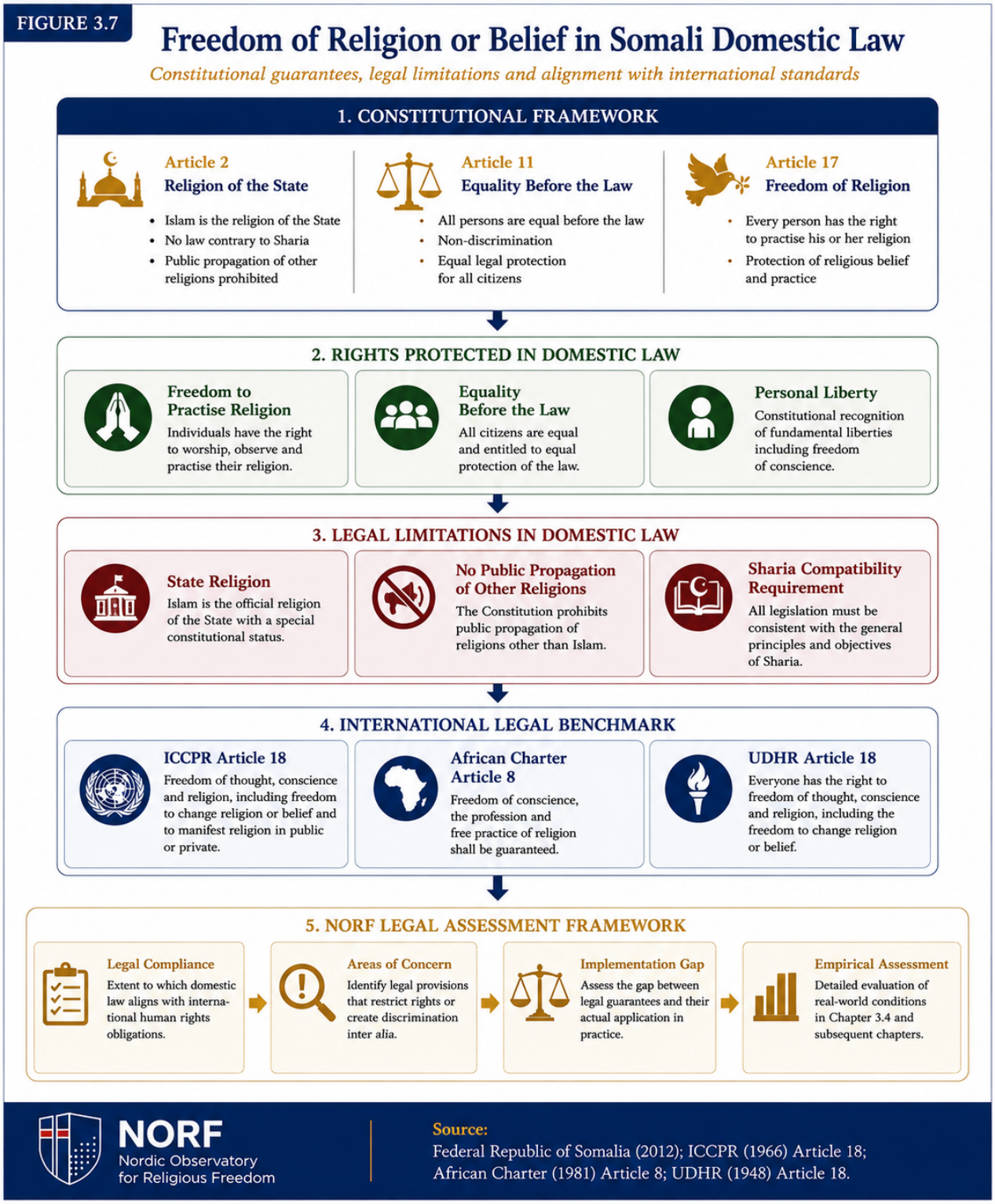
International human rights law protects both **freedom to hold a belief** and **freedom to manifest, change or abandon that belief**. Somalia's domestic legal framework provides constitutional protection for religious practice while simultaneously establishing legal restrictions arising from the constitutional status of Islam. NORF therefore evaluates not only whether rights are recognised in law, but whether individuals of all faiths—or none—can exercise those rights equally and safely in practice.

Constitutional Protection and Legal Restriction

Constitutional protection does not necessarily imply comprehensive religious freedom.
Somalia's Constitution contains provisions recognising individual rights while also embedding Islam within the constitutional order. This creates a legal framework in which rights and restrictions coexist.
NORF distinguishes four analytical questions (Only by examining all four dimensions can the actual level of freedom of religion or belief be accurately assessed):

1. **Are religious rights recognised in law?**
2. **Are legal limitations compatible with international human rights obligations?**
3. **Are rights applied equally to all individuals regardless of religion or belief?**
4. **Can individuals safely exercise these rights in practice?**

Figure 3.7


FIGURE 3.7
Freedom of Religion or Belief in Somali Domestic Law
Constitutional guarantees, legal limitations and alignment with international standards
1. CONSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK
Article 2
Religion of the State
Islam is the religion of the State
No law contrary to Sharia
Public propagation of other religions prohibited
Article 11
Equality Before the Law
All persons are equal before the law
Non-discrimination
Equal legal protection for all citizens
Article 17
Freedom of Religion
Every person has the right to practise his or her religion
Protection of religious belief and practice
2. RIGHTS PROTECTED IN DOMESTIC LAW
Freedom to Practise Religion
Individuals have the right to worship, observe and practise their religion.
Equality Before the Law
All citizens are equal and entitled to equal protection of the law.
Personal Liberty
Constitutional recognition of fundamental liberties including freedom of conscience.
3. LEGAL LIMITATIONS IN DOMESTIC LAW
State Religion
Islam is the official religion of the State with a special constitutional status.
No Public Propagation of Other Religions
The Constitution prohibits public propagation of religions other than Islam.
Sharia Compatibility Requirement
All legislation must be consistent with the general principles and objectives of Sharia.
4. INTERNATIONAL LEGAL BENCHMARK
ICCPR Article 18
Freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change religion or belief and to manifest religion in public or private.
African Charter Article 8
Freedom of conscience, the profession and free practice of religion shall be guaranteed.
UDHR Article 18
Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including the freedom to change religion or belief.
5. NORF LEGAL ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK
Legal Compliance
Extent to which domestic law aligns with international human rights obligations.
Areas of Concern
Identify legal provisions that restrict rights or create discrimination inter alia.
Implementation Gap
Assess the gap between legal guarantees and their actual application in practice.
Empirical Assessment
Detailed evaluation of real-world conditions in Chapter 3.4 and subsequent chapters.
NORF
Nordic Observatory for Religious Freedom
Source:
Federal Republic of Somalia (2012); ICCPR (1966) Article 18; African Charter (1981) Article 8; UDHR (1948) Article 18.

APA 7 References

African Union. (1981). *African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights*.

Federal Republic of Somalia. (2012). *Provisional Constitution of the Federal Republic of Somalia*.

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3.2.5 NORF Legal Assessment

Having examined Somalia's constitutional framework, sources of law, international human rights obligations and domestic legislation relating to freedom of religion or belief, NORF concludes that Somalia presents a **complex legal environment characterised by both constitutional guarantees and significant legal restrictions**. The legal framework cannot be described simply as either protective or restrictive. Rather, it reflects the interaction of constitutional rights, Islamic constitutional principles, customary legal traditions and international legal commitments.

From a comparative perspective, Somalia differs from constitutional systems based upon institutional neutrality between religion and the state. Instead, the Constitution explicitly recognises Islam as the religion of the State while simultaneously incorporating fundamental rights provisions that apply to all citizens. Consequently, the legal analysis requires careful examination of how these constitutional provisions interact rather than isolated consideration of individual articles.

Constitutional Strengths

The Provisional Constitution establishes several important legal foundations consistent with internationally recognised constitutional governance.

First, the Constitution recognises the principle of constitutional supremacy and establishes a framework for democratic governance, separation of governmental powers and judicial institutions. Although these institutions continue to develop, they provide the legal architecture necessary for the protection of individual rights.

Second, the Constitution contains provisions recognising equality before the law, non-discrimination and fundamental civil liberties. These provisions are broadly consistent with international constitutional practice and provide an important legal basis for protecting individual rights.

Third, Somalia has voluntarily accepted significant international human rights obligations through its participation in the United Nations, ratification of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention against Torture, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. These commitments establish internationally recognised standards against which domestic legislation may be evaluated.

Collectively, these constitutional and international commitments provide a legal framework capable, in principle, of protecting freedom of religion or belief.

Areas of Legal Concern

At the same time, NORF identifies several legal provisions that raise significant questions regarding compatibility with international human rights standards.

The most significant concerns arise from the constitutional status accorded to Islam.

Article 2 establishes Islam as the religion of the State, prohibits the public propagation of religions other than Islam and requires legislation to remain consistent with the general principles and objectives of Sharia. These constitutional provisions distinguish Somalia from constitutional systems that maintain institutional neutrality between religion and government.

From the perspective of international human rights law, the existence of an official state religion is not, in itself, incompatible with Article 18 of the ICCPR. Numerous democratic states maintain established churches or constitutionally recognised religions while remaining parties to international human rights treaties.

However, restrictions affecting the public manifestation of non-Islamic religions and the absence of explicit constitutional protection for the right to adopt or change one's religion require careful examination under international legal standards. The Human Rights Committee has consistently interpreted Article 18 of the ICCPR as protecting freedom to adopt, change or abandon religion without coercion.

NORF therefore identifies these constitutional limitations as areas requiring particular attention during the subsequent empirical assessment.

Interaction Between Domestic and International Law

The legal analysis demonstrates that Somalia's international obligations and domestic constitutional framework are not always fully aligned.

International human rights law establishes universal minimum standards applicable to every individual regardless of religious affiliation. Somalia's Constitution, by contrast, reflects the country's historical, cultural and religious identity through explicit constitutional recognition of Islam.

This difference does not automatically imply legal non-compliance. International law permits constitutional diversity provided that the substantive rights guaranteed under international treaties are effectively protected.

Accordingly, the decisive question is not whether Somalia maintains a particular constitutional relationship between religion and the state, but whether every individual enjoys the rights guaranteed under Article 18 of the ICCPR and related international instruments.

This distinction represents one of the central methodological principles underlying NORF's analytical framework.

Legal Pluralism

Somalia's legal order is characterised by legal pluralism rather than legal uniformity.

Constitutional law, statutory legislation, Sharia, customary *xeer* and international human rights obligations all influence legal decision-making to varying degrees depending upon institutional context and geographical location.

This plurality complicates legal analysis but also reflects the realities of governance within Somalia. Effective legal protection therefore depends not solely upon constitutional text but also upon judicial interpretation, institutional capacity and the interaction between formal and informal legal systems.

NORF consequently evaluates the Somali legal framework as an integrated system rather than assessing individual legal sources in isolation.

Relationship Between Law and Practice

A central finding of this legal review is that constitutional analysis alone cannot determine the actual level of freedom of religion or belief enjoyed by individuals.

Legal guarantees may exist without effective implementation. Conversely, informal practices may either strengthen or undermine constitutional protections depending upon local institutional capacity, security conditions and societal dynamics.

For this reason, the legal assessment presented in this section should be regarded as a necessary but incomplete component of the overall country assessment. The subsequent empirical chapters examine whether constitutional rights are realised in practice across different regions and for different religious communities.

NORF Legal Assessment

Based solely upon the legal framework examined in this chapter, NORF reaches the following preliminary assessment.

Areas broadly consistent with international standards include:

- Constitutional recognition of fundamental rights and civil liberties.
- Constitutional guarantees of equality before the law.
- Participation in the principal international and regional human rights treaties.
- Recognition of judicial institutions and constitutional governance.

Areas requiring continued attention include:

- Constitutional prohibition on the public propagation of religions other than Islam.
- Absence of explicit constitutional protection for the freedom to change religion.
- Constitutional requirement that legislation remain compatible with Sharia.
- Legal uncertainty regarding the status and operation of minority religious communities.
- Regional variation in legal implementation resulting from legal pluralism and institutional capacity.

At this stage of the report, these observations should be understood as **legal findings rather than empirical conclusions**. Whether these constitutional provisions result in actual violations of freedom of religion or belief depends upon implementation in practice and is examined in the following chapters.

Transition to the Empirical Assessment

The legal framework establishes the normative environment within which freedom of religion or belief operates in Somalia. However, constitutions and legislation alone do not determine whether individuals can safely exercise their rights.

The next chapter therefore shifts from legal analysis to empirical assessment. Using the NORF methodology developed in Chapter 2, the report examines documented incidents, patterns of discrimination, violence, administrative practice and institutional performance in order to evaluate how freedom of religion or belief is experienced in practice throughout Somalia.

NORF Legal Observation

Somalia's constitutional framework demonstrates that **constitutional recognition of religion and international human rights obligations can coexist within the same legal system**. The decisive analytical question is therefore not whether Somalia has adopted a particular constitutional model, but whether its legal framework and institutional practice effectively protect the freedom of religion or belief of every individual, without discrimination and in accordance with its international commitments.

Key Findings from the Legal Assessment

Strengths

- Constitutional framework for governance and judicial institutions.
- Recognition of equality before the law.
- Ratification of key UN and African human rights treaties.
- Formal recognition of fundamental rights.

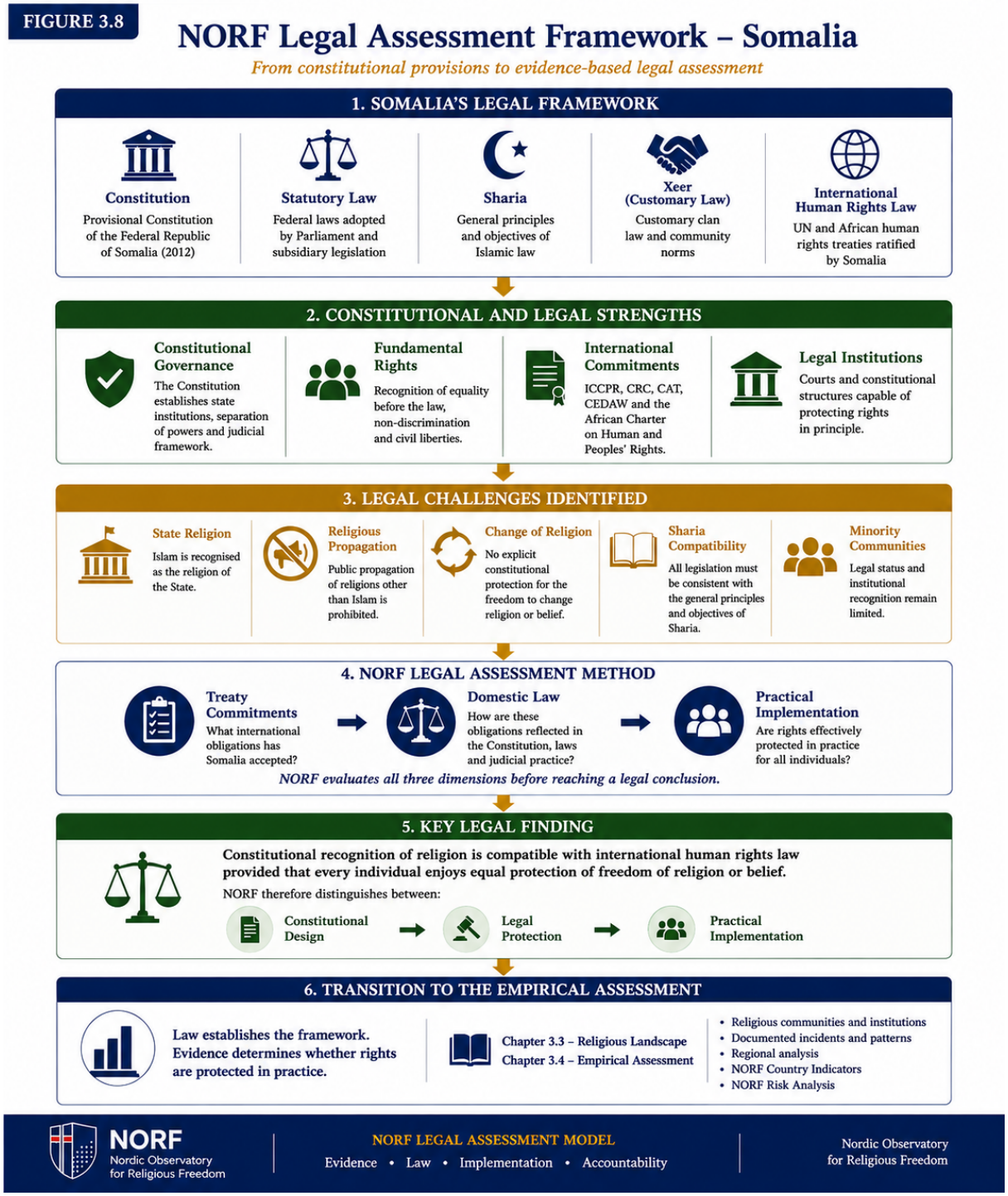
Legal Challenges

- State religion with constitutional preference for Islam.
- Prohibition on public propagation of non-Islamic religions.
- No explicit constitutional protection for changing religion.
- Interaction between Sharia, *xeer* and statutory law creates legal complexity.
- Regional differences in implementation.

NORF Assessment

- The legal framework provides a basis for rights protection but contains provisions that may restrict the full enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief under international human rights law. The extent to which these legal provisions affect individuals in practice requires empirical evaluation and cannot be determined from constitutional analysis alone.

Figure 3.8



APA 7 References

African Union. (1981). *African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights*.

Federal Republic of Somalia. (2012). *Provisional Constitution of the Federal Republic of Somalia*.

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3.3.1 Religious Demography

Understanding Somalia's religious demography is fundamental to any assessment of freedom of religion or belief. Demographic composition influences constitutional arrangements, public institutions, social norms and the practical experience of religious communities. At the same time, demographic statistics concerning religion must be interpreted cautiously. In countries affected by prolonged conflict, weak statistical institutions and security challenges, precise figures are often unavailable. Moreover, where religious identity is closely associated with national identity or where religious conversion carries significant social or legal consequences, official statistics may not fully reflect religious diversity.

For these reasons, NORF adopts a cautious approach to religious demographic data. Rather than presenting precise percentages as definitive facts, this report synthesises information from national authorities, United Nations agencies, academic research and international monitoring organisations to provide the most reliable assessment currently available.

Population Overview

According to the **United Nations Population Division**, Somalia's population in 2025 is estimated at approximately **19 million people**, although exact figures remain uncertain due to the absence of a comprehensive national census for several decades. Population growth remains among the highest globally, with a median age of approximately 16 years, making Somalia one of the world's youngest societies.

Population distribution is uneven. Significant urban populations are concentrated in Mogadishu, Hargeisa, Bosaso, Kismayo and Baidoa, while large rural populations continue to rely on

pastoralism and agro-pastoral livelihoods. Internal displacement resulting from conflict, drought and flooding has further complicated demographic measurement, with millions of internally displaced persons (IDPs) living in temporary settlements across the country.

These demographic characteristics have important implications for religious life, as displacement, urbanisation and humanitarian assistance often alter patterns of religious organisation and community interaction.

Religious Composition

Somalia is widely regarded as one of the world's most religiously homogeneous countries. The overwhelming majority of the population identifies as **Sunni Muslim**, and Islam occupies a central place in Somali national identity, constitutional law and public life.

The Constitution declares Islam to be the religion of the State, and both political institutions and social norms reflect this constitutional position. Religious affiliation is therefore not merely a matter of personal belief but is closely intertwined with cultural identity, language, family structures and national history.

Despite this apparent homogeneity, the religious landscape is more nuanced than aggregate statistics suggest.

Within Sunni Islam, considerable diversity exists regarding theological traditions, religious education, jurisprudential interpretation and organisational affiliation. These differences are explored further in Section 3.3.2.

Reliable estimates of non-Muslim populations are considerably more difficult to establish. International organisations generally estimate that Christians constitute **well below one per cent** of the population, while precise figures remain unavailable due to security concerns, social pressures and the largely private nature of Christian religious practice.

Similarly, there are no reliable statistics concerning individuals who privately identify with other religions or no religion. In contexts where religious conversion may carry serious social or security consequences, self-identification in official surveys is unlikely to reflect the full diversity of personal belief.

Christianity in Contemporary Somalia

Although Somalia is frequently described as religiously homogeneous, Christianity has maintained a historical presence in the region for many centuries, as discussed in Section 3.1.

Contemporary Christian communities are small and highly diverse. They include expatriate humanitarian workers, diplomats, foreign business personnel and a limited number of Somali Christians. The latter comprise both historic Christian families with longstanding regional connections and individuals who have converted from Islam.

Reliable demographic estimates remain difficult because many Somali Christians practise their faith discreetly for security reasons. House fellowships, private worship and informal support networks often replace publicly visible church structures. Consequently, the numerical size of Christian communities cannot be determined with precision.

From the perspective of freedom of religion or belief, the invisibility of many Christian communities represents an important analytical finding in itself. Religious demography is influenced not only by population size but also by the degree to which individuals can safely identify with a particular faith.

Islamic Diversity

While the Somali population is overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim, this should not be interpreted as indicating complete religious uniformity.

Historically, Somali Islam has been strongly influenced by **Shafi'i jurisprudence** and various **Sufi brotherhoods**, including the **Qadiriyya**, **Ahmadiyya (Idrisiyya)** and **Salihiyya** orders. These movements have shaped religious education, local leadership, social welfare and spiritual life across different regions for centuries.

During recent decades, reform-oriented Islamic movements inspired by broader Salafi traditions have gained increasing influence through educational institutions, charitable organisations and religious scholarship. These developments have diversified religious discourse within Somali Islam and occasionally generated theological debate regarding religious authority and interpretation.

This internal diversity demonstrates that religious freedom analysis cannot be limited to relations between different religions but must also consider diversity within majority religious communities.

Traditional Beliefs and Cultural Practices

Prior to the spread of Islam, Somali communities practised indigenous religious traditions centred on ancestor veneration, sacred landscapes and local spiritual customs. Although Islam gradually became dominant from the seventh century onwards, certain customary practices associated with healing, blessings and local traditions continue to exist alongside mainstream Islamic belief in some communities.

These practices are generally understood within an Islamic cultural framework rather than as separate religious systems. Nevertheless, they illustrate the complex interaction between religious belief, customary culture and local identity.

NORF therefore recognises that religious practice often reflects historical continuity rather than rigid categorical boundaries.

Religious Identity and National Identity

One of the defining characteristics of Somalia's religious demography is the close relationship between religion and national identity.

Unlike many pluralistic societies, where citizenship and religion are largely independent categories, Somali identity has historically developed around a combination of common language, shared cultural traditions and Islam. Consequently, religious identity frequently functions as an important marker of social belonging.

This relationship has significant implications for freedom of religion or belief. Individuals who adopt another religion may be perceived not only as changing their personal faith but also as departing from established communal identity. Such dynamics influence family relations, community acceptance and social cohesion independently of formal legal provisions.

Understanding these sociological dimensions is therefore essential for interpreting later empirical findings concerning conversion, religious minorities and social discrimination.

Data Limitations

Religious demographic analysis in Somalia is subject to several important methodological limitations.

First, no comprehensive national census has recently collected detailed religious affiliation data.

Second, ongoing conflict and displacement restrict access to certain regions, limiting independent verification.

Third, social sensitivity surrounding religious identity may discourage individuals from openly reporting minority beliefs.

Finally, estimates concerning Christian communities, converts and non-religious individuals necessarily rely upon indirect evidence gathered by humanitarian organisations, churches, academic researchers and international monitoring bodies.

NORF therefore treats demographic estimates as approximations rather than precise measurements and prioritises methodological transparency regarding evidential uncertainty.

NORF Demographic Assessment

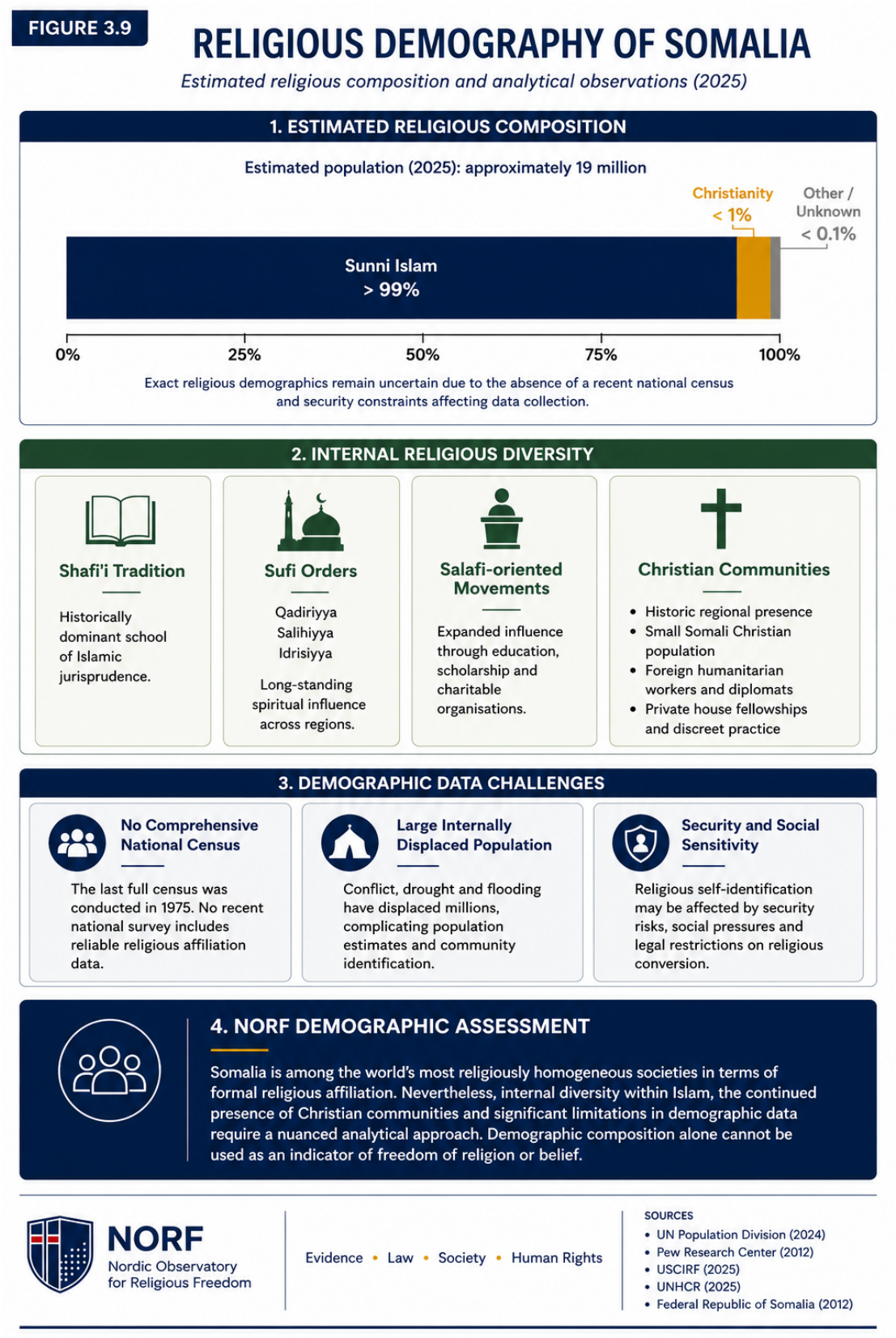
The available evidence indicates that Somalia remains one of the world's most religiously homogeneous societies in terms of formal religious affiliation. However, this apparent homogeneity should not obscure important internal diversity within Islam, the continued existence of small Christian communities or the methodological challenges associated with measuring religious identity in contexts characterised by legal restrictions, social pressure and security concerns.

For NORF, religious demography provides the contextual foundation for subsequent analysis. Demographic composition does not determine the level of freedom of religion or belief, but it significantly shapes the institutional, legal and social environment within which religious communities operate.

NORF Analytical Observation

Religious demography should not be confused with religious freedom. A country may exhibit high levels of religious homogeneity while still protecting individual freedom of religion or belief, just as a highly diverse society may experience significant religious discrimination. NORF therefore treats demographic composition as contextual evidence rather than as an indicator of religious liberty. The decisive question remains whether every individual—regardless of religious affiliation—can freely hold, change, manifest or decline religious belief without discrimination, coercion or violence.

Figure 3.9


FIGURE 3.9
RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY OF SOMALIA
Estimated religious composition and analytical observations (2025)
1. ESTIMATED RELIGIOUS COMPOSITION
Estimated population (2025): approximately 19 million
Christianity
< 1%
Other / Unknown
< 0.1%
Sunni Islam
> 99%
0%
25%
50%
75%
100%
Exact religious demographics remain uncertain due to the absence of a recent national census and security constraints affecting data collection.
2. INTERNAL RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY
Shafi'i Tradition
Historically dominant school of Islamic jurisprudence.
Sufi Orders
Qadiriyya
Salihiyya
Idrisiyya
Long-standing spiritual influence across regions.
Salafi-oriented Movements
Expanded influence through education, scholarship and charitable organisations.
Christian Communities
Historic regional presence
Small Somali Christian population
Foreign humanitarian workers and diplomats
Private house fellowships and discreet practice
3. DEMOGRAPHIC DATA CHALLENGES
No Comprehensive National Census
The last full census was conducted in 1975. No recent national survey includes reliable religious affiliation data.
Large Internally Displaced Population
Conflict, drought and flooding have displaced millions, complicating population estimates and community identification.
Security and Social Sensitivity
Religious self-identification may be affected by security risks, social pressures and legal restrictions on religious conversion.
4. NORF DEMOGRAPHIC ASSESSMENT
Somalia is among the world's most religiously homogeneous societies in terms of formal religious affiliation. Nevertheless, internal diversity within Islam, the continued presence of Christian communities and significant limitations in demographic data require a nuanced analytical approach. Demographic composition alone cannot be used as an indicator of freedom of religion or belief.
NORF
Nordic Observatory for Religious Freedom
Evidence • Law • Society • Human Rights
SOURCES
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Pew Research Center (2012)
USCIRF (2025)
UNHCR (2025)
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3.3.2 Religious Institutions

Religious institutions play a central role in shaping religious life in Somalia. Beyond serving as places of worship, they function as providers of education, social welfare, mediation, humanitarian assistance and moral guidance. In many communities, particularly where state institutions remain weak or absent, religious organisations enjoy a degree of public trust and influence that extends well beyond strictly religious matters.

The institutional landscape is, however, far from uniform. While Islamic institutions are deeply integrated into public life and benefit from constitutional recognition of Islam, non-Muslim institutions operate under markedly different circumstances. Their visibility, legal status and organisational capacity are constrained by both legal provisions and the broader social environment. Understanding these institutional differences is therefore essential for assessing the practical conditions under which freedom of religion or belief is exercised.

Islamic Institutions

Islamic institutions constitute the dominant religious infrastructure throughout Somalia. Mosques are present in virtually every town and village and serve not only as places of worship but also as centres for religious education, community meetings and dispute resolution. Friday sermons (*khutbah*) remain an important means through which religious scholars communicate ethical guidance and address contemporary social issues.

Religious leadership is exercised by a wide range of actors, including local imams, respected *sheikhs*, scholars trained in Somali institutions and graduates of universities in countries such as

Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Egypt and other parts of the Islamic world. The educational background of religious leaders contributes to diversity in theological interpretation and religious practice, reflecting both long-standing Somali traditions and more recent transnational influences.

Although Somalia has no single national religious authority comparable to an established church or centralised clerical hierarchy, Islamic institutions collectively exercise considerable influence over public life through their educational, judicial and social functions.

Qur'anic Schools and Religious Education

One of the most significant religious institutions in Somali society is the **Qur'anic school (*dugsi*)**. These schools have historically provided children with foundational instruction in Qur'anic recitation, Arabic literacy and basic Islamic teaching. Attendance at *dugsi* remains widespread across both urban and rural communities and often begins before children enter formal primary education.

Alongside traditional Qur'anic schools, Somalia has experienced significant growth in Islamic primary schools, secondary schools and universities over recent decades. Many combine national curricula with Islamic studies, while others receive financial or educational support from international Islamic charitable organisations and educational foundations.

Religious education therefore represents one of the principal mechanisms through which Islamic values, jurisprudence and social norms are transmitted across generations.

Sufi Institutions

For centuries, Sufi brotherhoods have constituted an important institutional component of Somali Islam. Orders such as the **Qadiriyya**, **Salihiyya** and **Idrisiyya** established networks of scholars, religious lodges (*zawiyas*), educational centres and charitable activities that shaped local religious life throughout much of Somalia.

These institutions have traditionally emphasised spiritual development, religious scholarship and community cohesion. Their influence has varied across regions and historical periods but remains visible in many local religious traditions and commemorative practices.

Although newer reform-oriented Islamic movements have expanded their influence during recent decades, Sufi institutions continue to represent an important element of Somalia's religious heritage.

Government Institutions and Religious Affairs

The Federal Government recognises Islam as the religion of the State, and religious affairs are incorporated into governmental structures through ministries and administrative bodies responsible for religious affairs, education and endowments.

Government institutions engage with religious leaders on issues including religious education, public holidays, mosque administration and broader questions concerning religion and society. In

practice, however, the capacity of federal institutions varies considerably across the country due to continuing security challenges, decentralised governance and differing levels of state authority.

Federal Member States likewise maintain varying institutional arrangements governing religious affairs, reflecting Somalia's federal constitutional system.

Christian Institutions

Christian institutional life in Somalia is extremely limited.

Unlike many neighbouring countries, Somalia has very few publicly visible churches, denominational headquarters or theological seminaries operating openly. Historical Christian institutions largely disappeared during successive periods of political instability and conflict, while contemporary Christian communities generally avoid establishing prominent public structures due to security concerns.

Where Christian institutional activity does exist, it is frequently associated with international humanitarian organisations, diplomatic communities or foreign personnel temporarily residing in Somalia. Somali Christians themselves often worship within private homes or small fellowship groups rather than formal church buildings.

Consequently, the institutional visibility of Christianity is considerably smaller than its historical presence might suggest.

Humanitarian Organisations and Faith-Based Actors

Faith-based humanitarian organisations have played a significant role in Somalia's development and humanitarian response for several decades.

Islamic charities, international Muslim relief organisations and Christian humanitarian agencies have all contributed to programmes addressing food security, healthcare, education and emergency relief. Many operate in cooperation with United Nations agencies, local authorities and community organisations.

Although humanitarian organisations generally deliver assistance irrespective of religious affiliation, their presence demonstrates that religious institutions contribute to Somali society through social services as well as spiritual leadership.

The interaction between humanitarian work and religious identity occasionally raises questions concerning neutrality, community perceptions and access to vulnerable populations, particularly in areas affected by armed conflict.

Informal Religious Networks

Formal institutions represent only part of Somalia's religious landscape.

Clan elders, respected religious scholars, women's religious study circles, youth groups and informal community networks frequently exercise significant religious influence without possessing formal organisational structures. These networks often facilitate conflict mediation, charitable assistance, religious instruction and community support.

Similarly, Somali diaspora communities maintain close religious connections with families and institutions inside Somalia through financial support, educational initiatives and religious scholarship. Digital communication has further strengthened these transnational religious networks, enabling sermons, educational materials and theological discussions to circulate across borders.

Recognising these informal structures is essential for understanding the practical organisation of religion within Somali society.

Institutional Capacity and Freedom of Religion or Belief

From the perspective of freedom of religion or belief, institutional diversity is not measured solely by the number of religious organisations but also by their ability to operate freely, maintain places of worship, educate members, organise charitable activities and participate in public life.

Islamic institutions generally enjoy extensive organisational capacity throughout Somalia. By contrast, Christian institutions and other minority religious communities possess only limited opportunities for public institutional development. This asymmetry reflects both the constitutional recognition of Islam and broader societal conditions affecting religious minorities.

Institutional capacity therefore constitutes an important analytical indicator for assessing the practical enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief.

NORF Institutional Assessment

Somalia possesses a rich and historically rooted network of Islamic religious institutions that continues to shape education, community leadership and public life across the country. These institutions provide significant social capital and often perform functions extending beyond purely religious activities.

At the same time, institutional opportunities for minority religious communities remain extremely limited. Publicly visible Christian institutions are scarce, organisational development is constrained and many believers rely upon informal or private networks for religious practice.

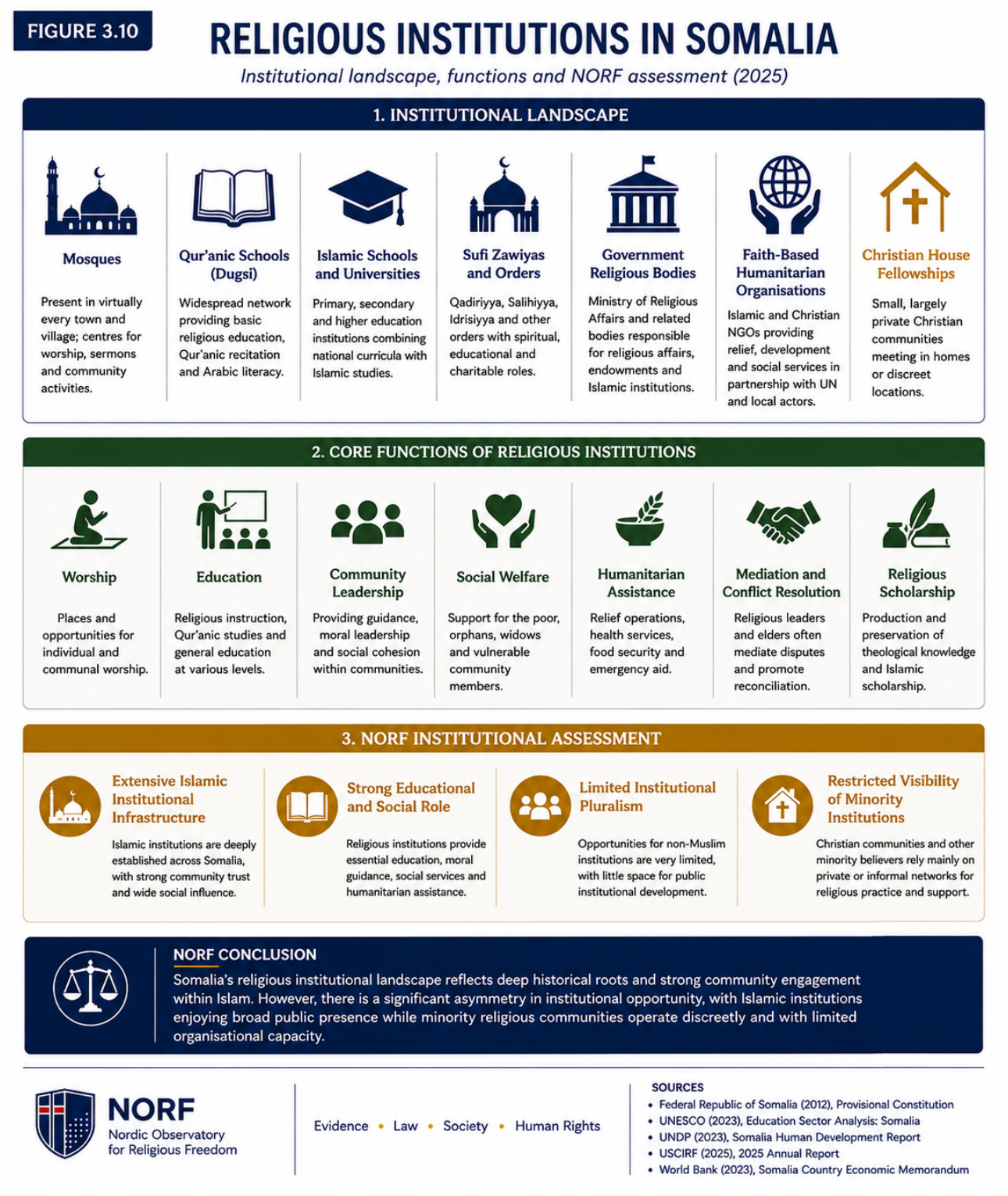
NORF therefore concludes that Somalia's institutional religious landscape is characterised by **high institutional development for the majority religion alongside very limited institutional pluralism for minority faith communities**. This finding provides an important context for the empirical assessment of religious freedom presented in subsequent chapters.

NORF Analytical Observation

Religious institutions are a key dimension of freedom of religion or belief. International human rights law protects not only individual belief but also the collective right of religious communities

to establish places of worship, educate clergy, organise charitable activities and maintain religious institutions. Assessing institutional capacity is therefore essential for evaluating whether freedom of religion or belief can be exercised collectively as well as individually.

Figure 3.10



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3.3.3 Religious Actors

The exercise of freedom of religion or belief in Somalia is shaped by a diverse range of religious, political and social actors. While the Constitution formally recognises Islam as the religion of the State, religious authority is not concentrated within a single institution. Instead, influence is distributed among governmental bodies, religious scholars, clan structures, educational institutions, civil society organisations and, in some areas, armed non-state actors.

Understanding this network of actors is essential for analysing religious freedom in practice. Formal legal provisions alone do not determine how religion is governed or experienced. Rather, the interaction between these actors influences religious education, community norms, dispute resolution, public discourse and the ability of individuals and religious communities to exercise their rights.

Federal Government Institutions

The Federal Government of Somalia establishes the constitutional framework within which religion operates. Through the Provisional Constitution and relevant ministries, the government recognises Islam as the state religion and provides the legal basis for the administration of religious affairs.

Government institutions influence religious life through legislation, education policy, public administration and cooperation with religious leaders. Their practical authority, however, varies across the country due to Somalia's federal system, security conditions and differing levels of state capacity.

Consequently, the government's ability to regulate religious affairs is strongest in areas under effective federal control and more limited in regions where local authorities or non-state actors exercise greater influence.

Federal Member States

Somalia's federal structure means that Federal Member States also play an important role in religious governance.

Regional administrations are responsible for implementing many aspects of public administration, including education, local governance and community relations. As a result, approaches to religious affairs may vary between regions depending on political leadership, local traditions and security conditions.

Although these differences generally occur within the broader constitutional framework recognising Islam, they illustrate that religious governance is not entirely uniform throughout Somalia.

Religious Scholars and Imams

Religious scholars (*ulama*) remain among the most influential actors in Somali society.

Imams, sheikhs and respected scholars provide religious guidance through sermons, legal opinions, educational activities and community mediation. Their authority is derived primarily from religious knowledge, personal reputation and public trust rather than formal state appointment.

Many scholars have received education in Somalia, while others have studied in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Türkiye, Malaysia and other countries. This international educational background contributes to theological diversity and facilitates the transmission of religious ideas across national borders.

In many communities, religious scholars are consulted not only on matters of faith but also on family disputes, ethical questions, social conflicts and community development.

Sufi Orders

Sufi brotherhoods continue to influence religious life in various parts of Somalia despite changes in the country's religious landscape during recent decades.

The **Qadiriyya**, **Salihiyya** and **Idrisiyya** orders maintain networks of scholars, religious centres and community leaders that emphasise spiritual development, education and social cohesion. While their influence differs between regions, Sufi leaders continue to play an important role in preserving historical religious traditions and providing local religious leadership.

Their contribution illustrates that religious authority within Somali Islam remains institutionally and theologically diverse.

Educational Institutions

Religious education represents one of the principal mechanisms through which religious authority is reproduced.

Qur'anic schools, Islamic secondary schools, universities and religious colleges educate future religious leaders and shape theological understanding among younger generations. These institutions vary considerably regarding curriculum, educational philosophy and international partnerships.

Foreign scholarships, international educational cooperation and digital learning platforms have further expanded opportunities for religious education while simultaneously increasing exposure to diverse theological perspectives.

Educational institutions therefore function not only as centres of learning but also as long-term producers of religious authority.

Clan Elders and Traditional Leadership

Although clan structures are not religious institutions in themselves, they frequently interact with religious authority in ways that influence religious life.

Clan elders often cooperate with religious leaders in conflict mediation, customary dispute resolution and community decision-making. In many rural areas, traditional leadership and religious leadership reinforce one another, contributing to local governance where formal state institutions remain limited.

The relationship between customary law (*xeer*) and Islamic law (*Sharia*) continues to shape community responses to questions involving marriage, inheritance, family disputes and social order.

Understanding this interaction is essential because many issues affecting freedom of religion or belief arise within community structures rather than through formal judicial processes alone.

Non-State Armed Actors

Armed non-state actors also influence the religious environment in parts of Somalia.

Most notably, **Al-Shabaab** seeks to impose its own interpretation of Islamic law in areas under its control or influence. Through violence, intimidation and parallel governance structures, the group has attempted to regulate religious practice, education and public behaviour according to its ideological objectives.

The presence of armed groups significantly affects the practical exercise of freedom of religion or belief, particularly in regions where government authority remains limited.

As discussed in later sections of this report, the impact of violent extremist organisations represents one of the principal factors shaping contemporary religious freedom conditions in Somalia.

International Organisations

International organisations influence Somalia's religious landscape primarily through humanitarian assistance, development cooperation and human rights monitoring.

United Nations agencies, international non-governmental organisations and diplomatic missions regularly engage with religious communities while supporting programmes related to education, healthcare, peacebuilding and social cohesion.

Although these organisations generally maintain political and religious neutrality, their activities contribute indirectly to the broader environment within which religious communities operate.

Somali Diaspora

Somalia possesses one of the world's largest diasporas relative to its population.

Diaspora communities maintain close connections with religious institutions inside Somalia through financial remittances, charitable donations, educational initiatives and theological exchange. Religious ideas circulate in both directions, with Somali communities abroad influencing domestic religious discourse while simultaneously remaining connected to developments within Somalia.

Digital communication, online sermons and international educational networks have further strengthened these transnational relationships.

The diaspora therefore constitutes an increasingly significant actor in the evolution of Somalia's religious landscape.

Interaction Between Religious Actors

Religious influence in Somalia should not be understood as a hierarchy but rather as an interconnected network.

Government institutions establish legal frameworks. Religious scholars interpret doctrine. Educational institutions train future leaders. Clan elders reinforce social norms. Humanitarian organisations provide community services. Diaspora networks facilitate international exchange. Armed groups challenge legitimate governance through coercion and violence.

These actors frequently cooperate, occasionally compete and sometimes operate independently depending upon regional circumstances.

This institutional complexity explains why freedom of religion or belief cannot be analysed solely through constitutional provisions or demographic statistics. Practical outcomes depend upon how these actors interact within specific local contexts.

NORF Actor Assessment

The evidence indicates that Somalia's religious environment is shaped by a broad ecosystem of actors whose influence varies geographically and institutionally. Religious authority remains highly decentralised, with significant interaction between formal government institutions, Islamic scholars, educational networks, traditional leadership and international actors.

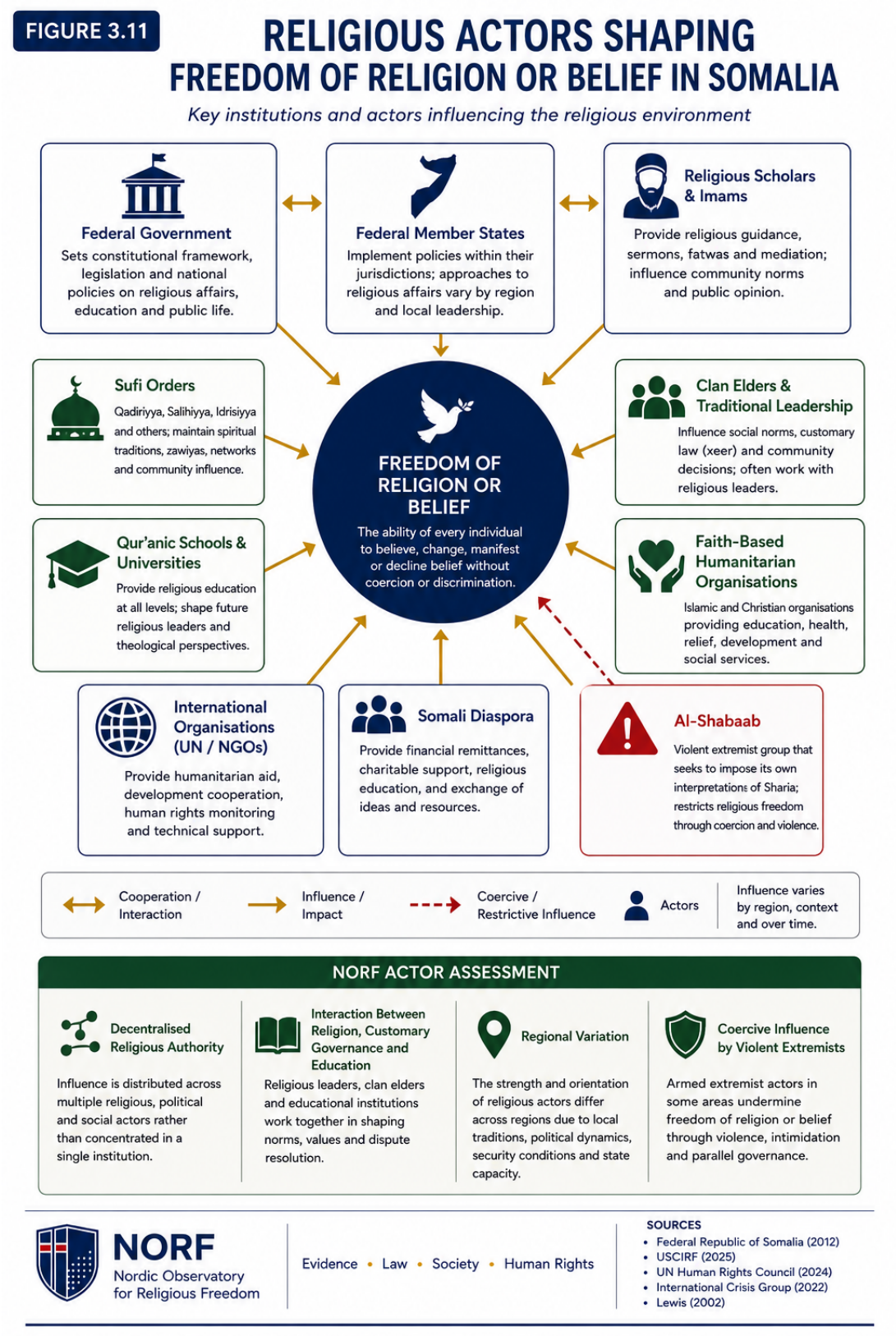
At the same time, armed extremist organisations continue to exert influence in certain regions, creating parallel systems of religious governance that fundamentally affect the exercise of freedom of religion or belief.

NORF therefore concludes that understanding religious freedom in Somalia requires analysis not only of legal institutions but also of the complex relationships among the diverse actors that shape religious life across the country.

NORF Analytical Observation

Freedom of religion or belief is influenced by those who exercise religious authority as much as by those who exercise political authority. Mapping religious actors helps explain why similar legal provisions may produce different outcomes across regions, communities and religious groups. NORF therefore considers actor analysis an essential component of evidence-based country assessment.

Figure 3.11


FIGURE 3.11
RELIGIOUS ACTORS SHAPING FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF IN SOMALIA
Key institutions and actors influencing the religious environment
Federal Government
Sets constitutional framework, legislation and national policies on religious affairs, education and public life.
Federal Member States
Implement policies within their jurisdictions; approaches to religious affairs vary by region and local leadership.
Religious Scholars & Imams
Provide religious guidance, sermons, fatwas and mediation; influence community norms and public opinion.
Sufi Orders
Qadiriyya, Salihiyya, Idrisiyya and others; maintain spiritual traditions, zawiyas, networks and community influence.
FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF
The ability of every individual to believe, change, manifest or decline belief without coercion or discrimination.
Clan Elders & Traditional Leadership
Influence social norms, customary law (xeer) and community decisions; often work with religious leaders.
Qur'anic Schools & Universities
Provide religious education at all levels; shape future religious leaders and theological perspectives.
Faith-Based Humanitarian Organisations
Islamic and Christian organisations providing education, health, relief, development and social services.
International Organisations (UN / NGOs)
Provide humanitarian aid, development cooperation, human rights monitoring and technical support.
Somali Diaspora
Provide financial remittances, charitable support, religious education, and exchange of ideas and resources.
Al-Shabaab
Violent extremist group that seeks to impose its own interpretations of Sharia; restricts religious freedom through coercion and violence.
Cooperation / Interaction
Influence / Impact
Coercive / Restrictive Influence
Actors
Influence varies by region, context and over time.
NORF ACTOR ASSESSMENT
Decentralised Religious Authority
Influence is distributed across multiple religious, political and social actors rather than concentrated in a single institution.
Interaction Between Religion, Customary Governance and Education
Religious leaders, clan elders and educational institutions work together in shaping norms, values and dispute resolution.
Regional Variation
The strength and orientation of religious actors differ across regions due to local traditions, political dynamics, security conditions and state capacity.
Coercive Influence by Violent Extremists
Armed extremist actors in some areas undermine freedom of religion or belief through violence, intimidation and parallel governance.
NORF
Nordic Observatory for Religious Freedom
Evidence • Law • Society • Human Rights
SOURCES
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UN Human Rights Council (2024)
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3.3.4 Religion in Society

Religion occupies a central position within Somali society and constitutes one of the country's most significant sources of social identity, moral authority and community cohesion. While Islam is formally recognised as the state religion under the Provisional Constitution, its influence extends far beyond constitutional provisions. Religious beliefs, institutions and leaders shape everyday life, education, family relations, customary law, political discourse and humanitarian action throughout much of the country.

For most Somalis, religious identity is closely intertwined with cultural identity and clan affiliation. Although clan membership remains the primary organising principle of Somali social structure, Islam functions as an important unifying element across clan divisions. Religious observance therefore represents not only an individual expression of faith but also a shared component of national identity and social belonging.

From a freedom of religion or belief perspective, this close relationship between religion and society has both positive and restrictive consequences. It contributes to strong social solidarity among the religious majority while simultaneously creating significant social expectations regarding religious conformity.

Religious Practice in Daily Life

Islamic practices are deeply embedded in everyday life throughout Somalia.

The five daily prayers structure the rhythm of daily activities in both urban and rural communities. Friday congregational prayer remains one of the most visible expressions of community life, with mosques serving as important centres for worship, education and social interaction.

Religious observance is particularly visible during Ramadan, when fasting, communal prayers and charitable activities become central features of public life. Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha are observed nationwide and constitute major religious and social celebrations.

Islamic greetings, religious expressions and references to God are also integrated into ordinary communication, reflecting the extent to which religion permeates daily social interaction.

Religion and Family Life

Religion plays a significant role in regulating family life in Somalia.

Marriage, inheritance, child upbringing and funeral practices are largely understood through Islamic legal and cultural traditions. Religious leaders frequently participate in marriage ceremonies, family mediation and advice concerning personal status matters.

Parents generally consider religious education an essential component of childhood development, and attendance at Qur'anic schools remains widespread alongside formal education.

Family expectations regarding religious observance are often reinforced by broader community norms, making religious identity a shared rather than purely individual matter.

Religion and Community Cohesion

Religious institutions contribute significantly to social cohesion across Somali society.

Mosques, Qur'anic schools and religious organisations frequently organise charitable activities, support vulnerable households and facilitate local conflict resolution. During periods of humanitarian crisis, religious institutions have often mobilised assistance through community networks, charitable collections and cooperation with humanitarian organisations.

Religious leaders also play an important role in peacebuilding efforts, reconciliation initiatives and mediation between communities affected by conflict.

These functions demonstrate that religion in Somalia serves not only theological purposes but also important social and humanitarian roles.

Religious Norms and Social Expectations

Because religious identity is closely connected with community belonging, Somali society generally exhibits strong expectations regarding public adherence to Islamic norms.

Dress, behaviour, public worship and participation in religious celebrations are often influenced by prevailing community expectations. Individuals who publicly challenge dominant religious norms

may encounter social criticism, family pressure or community disapproval, even where no formal legal sanction exists.

From an analytical perspective, these informal mechanisms are significant because freedom of religion or belief is affected not only by state regulation but also by societal attitudes and expectations.

NORF therefore distinguishes carefully between **legal restrictions** imposed by the state and **social pressures** arising within communities.

Religious Minorities in Society

The social position of religious minorities differs markedly from that of the Muslim majority.

Christian communities remain very small and generally avoid public visibility for security and social reasons. Many Somali Christians practise their faith privately or within trusted family and fellowship networks. Foreign Christians associated with diplomatic missions, international organisations or humanitarian agencies may enjoy somewhat greater practical freedom within secure compounds, although public evangelism remains highly sensitive.

Because minority communities are small and often deliberately discreet, reliable demographic information remains limited.

The restricted public visibility of minority religions should therefore not be interpreted as evidence of their complete absence but rather as an indication of the broader social environment in which they operate.

Women and Religious Life

Women play an essential role in Somalia's religious life through family education, charitable activities, Qur'anic instruction and community engagement.

Women's religious study circles, educational initiatives and humanitarian work contribute significantly to the transmission of religious knowledge and community support. At the same time, gender roles within religious institutions often reflect broader cultural and religious traditions that influence leadership opportunities and participation in public religious life.

Questions relating to women's rights, family law and religious interpretation remain subjects of ongoing discussion within Somali society and among Islamic scholars.

Youth and Religious Identity

Somalia possesses one of the youngest populations in the world, making youth an important dimension of the country's religious future.

Young Somalis increasingly encounter religious ideas through multiple channels, including traditional scholars, formal education, online platforms, social media and the global Somali

diaspora. Digital communication has expanded access to diverse theological perspectives while simultaneously exposing young people to both constructive religious scholarship and extremist propaganda.

Educational opportunities, employment prospects and security conditions therefore influence not only social development but also the religious environment experienced by younger generations.

Urbanisation and Social Change

Rapid urbanisation has transformed patterns of religious life in Somalia during recent decades.

Cities such as Mogadishu, Hargeisa, Garowe and Kismayo have experienced population growth, increased educational opportunities and expanding digital connectivity. These developments have diversified sources of religious authority and facilitated greater interaction between local religious traditions and global Islamic scholarship.

Nevertheless, urbanisation has not fundamentally altered the central role of religion within Somali society. Instead, it has contributed to a more dynamic and interconnected religious landscape.

NORF Societal Assessment

The evidence indicates that religion remains one of the principal organising forces within Somali society. Religious institutions, beliefs and practices influence family life, education, community leadership, charitable activities and public discourse throughout the country.

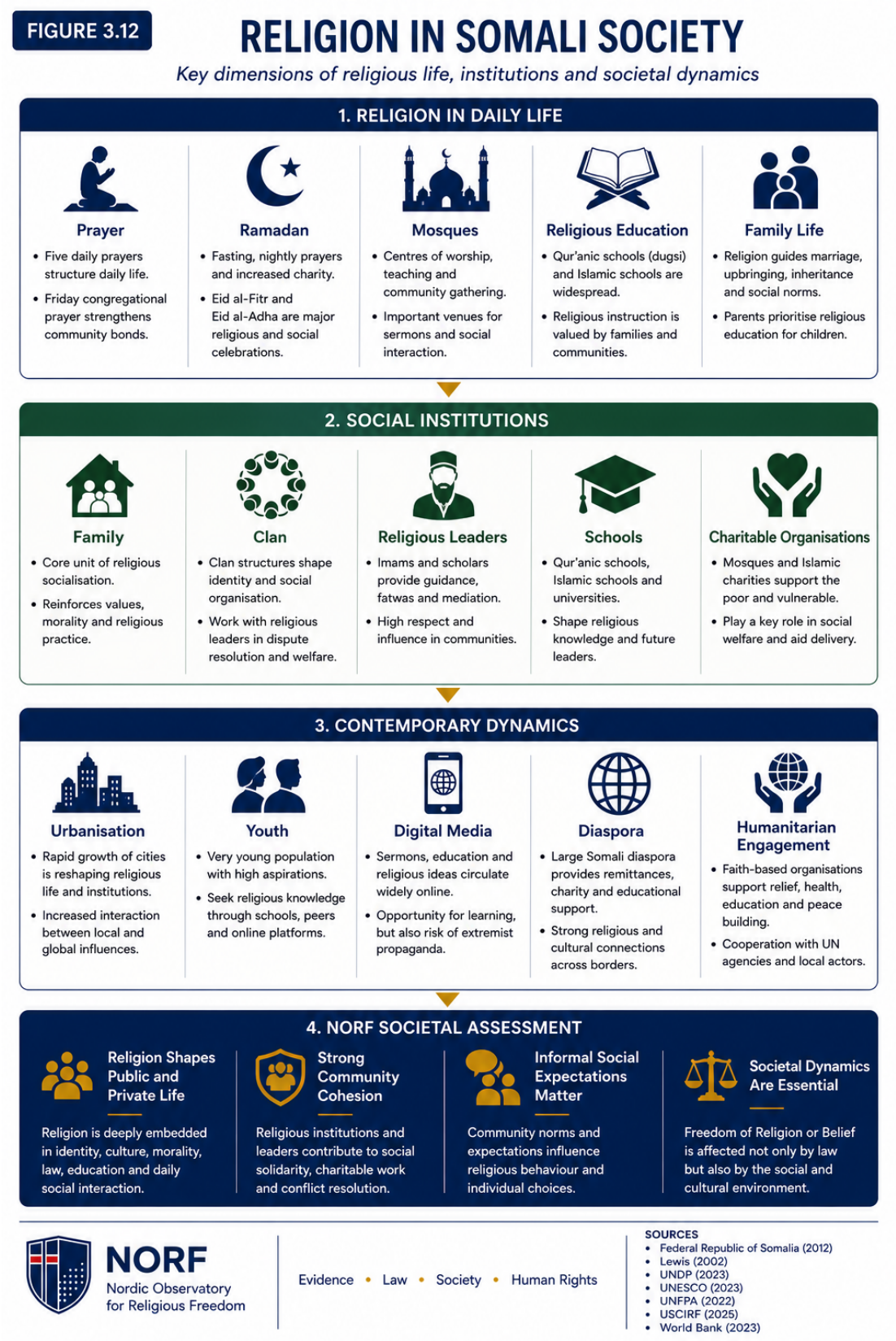
This strong societal role contributes to social cohesion but also reinforces expectations of religious conformity that may affect individuals belonging to minority faith communities or those holding different religious beliefs.

NORF therefore concludes that understanding freedom of religion or belief in Somalia requires analysis not only of constitutional guarantees and institutional structures but also of the social environment within which religion is practised. Informal societal pressures may significantly shape the practical exercise of religious freedom alongside formal legal regulation.

NORF Analytical Observation

International human rights law recognises that freedom of religion or belief may be affected by both **state action** and **societal pressure**. Assessing religious freedom therefore requires examination of how communities, families, religious institutions and social norms influence the ability of individuals to adopt, change, manifest or refrain from religious belief. NORF incorporates both legal and societal dimensions into its country assessments to provide a comprehensive understanding of religious freedom in practice.

Figure 3.12


FIGURE 3.12
RELIGION IN SOMALI SOCIETY
Key dimensions of religious life, institutions and societal dynamics
1. RELIGION IN DAILY LIFE
Prayer
• Five daily prayers structure daily life.
• Friday congregational prayer strengthens community bonds.
Ramadan
• Fasting, nightly prayers and increased charity.
• Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha are major religious and social celebrations.
Mosques
• Centres of worship, teaching and community gathering.
• Important venues for sermons and social interaction.
Religious Education
• Qur'anic schools (dugsi) and Islamic schools are widespread.
• Religious instruction is valued by families and communities.
Family Life
• Religion guides marriage, upbringing, inheritance and social norms.
• Parents prioritise religious education for children.
2. SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS
Family
• Core unit of religious socialisation.
• Reinforces values, morality and religious practice.
Clan
• Clan structures shape identity and social organisation.
• Work with religious leaders in dispute resolution and welfare.
Religious Leaders
• Imams and scholars provide guidance, fatwas and mediation.
• High respect and influence in communities.
Schools
• Qur'anic schools, Islamic schools and universities.
• Shape religious knowledge and future leaders.
Charitable Organisations
• Mosques and Islamic charities support the poor and vulnerable.
• Play a key role in social welfare and aid delivery.
3. CONTEMPORARY DYNAMICS
Urbanisation
• Rapid growth of cities is reshaping religious life and institutions.
• Increased interaction between local and global influences.
Youth
• Very young population with high aspirations.
• Seek religious knowledge through schools, peers and online platforms.
Digital Media
• Sermons, education and religious ideas circulate widely online.
• Opportunity for learning, but also risk of extremist propaganda.
Diaspora
• Large Somali diaspora provides remittances, charity and educational support.
• Strong religious and cultural connections across borders.
Humanitarian Engagement
• Faith-based organisations support relief, health, education and peace building.
• Cooperation with UN agencies and local actors.
4. NORF SOCIETAL ASSESSMENT
Religion Shapes Public and Private Life
Religion is deeply embedded in identity, culture, morality, law, education and daily social interaction.
Strong Community Cohesion
Religious institutions and leaders contribute to social solidarity, charitable work and conflict resolution.
Informal Social Expectations Matter
Community norms and expectations influence religious behaviour and individual choices.
Societal Dynamics Are Essential
Freedom of Religion or Belief is affected not only by law but also by the social and cultural environment.
NORF
Nordic Observatory for Religious Freedom
Evidence • Law • Society • Human Rights
SOURCES
• Federal Republic of Somalia (2012)
• Lewis (2002)
• UNDP (2023)
• UNESCO (2023)
• UNFPA (2022)
• USCIRF (2025)
• World Bank (2023)

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World Bank. (2023). *Somalia Country Economic Memorandum*.

3.3.5 NORF Assessment of the Religious Landscape

The preceding sections have examined Somalia's religious demography, institutional framework, principal religious actors and the role of religion in society. Taken together, these elements present a complex picture that extends beyond the frequently used description of Somalia as a "religiously homogeneous" country.

From a demographic perspective, Somalia is overwhelmingly Muslim, with Sunni Islam—predominantly following the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence—representing the faith of the vast majority of the population. At the same time, the country contains theological diversity within Islam, including long-established Sufi traditions, reform-oriented movements and differing local religious practices. Although numerically very small, Christian communities continue to exist, alongside expatriate believers and other minority religious groups whose public visibility remains limited.

Institutionally, Islamic organisations form one of the country's most extensive and resilient social infrastructures. Mosques, Qur'anic schools, universities, charitable organisations and religious scholars provide education, humanitarian assistance, mediation and community leadership across much of Somalia. In many areas, religious institutions continue to fulfil functions that might otherwise be performed by state institutions, particularly where governmental capacity remains limited.

The religious landscape is also characterised by decentralised authority. Unlike countries with highly centralised religious hierarchies, Somalia's religious leadership is distributed among scholars, local imams, educational institutions, Sufi orders, customary leaders and governmental authorities. This decentralised structure contributes both to resilience and to regional variation in religious practice and interpretation.

Religion further occupies a central place within Somali society. Religious belief influences family life, education, social norms, public ceremonies and community organisation. Islamic values remain deeply integrated into everyday life, while religious institutions frequently act as trusted providers of social welfare, humanitarian assistance and local dispute resolution. For many Somalis, religious identity forms an integral part of both personal belief and collective national identity.

At the same time, the evidence demonstrates that the country's religious environment is not characterised solely by religious vitality but also by significant constraints on religious diversity.

Although the Constitution guarantees certain fundamental rights, it simultaneously establishes Islam as the state religion, prohibits the propagation of religions other than Islam and requires that legislation comply with the general principles of Sharia. These constitutional provisions contribute to an institutional environment in which minority religions possess limited opportunities for public institutional development.

Beyond formal legal structures, societal expectations also shape the practical exercise of freedom of religion or belief. Strong community norms surrounding religious identity, combined with close relationships between religion, family and clan structures, may significantly influence the ability of individuals to express religious dissent, change religion or openly identify with minority faith communities.

Security conditions further affect the religious landscape. The continuing presence of Al-Shabaab in parts of Somalia introduces an additional layer of coercive religious governance that differs fundamentally from both constitutional institutions and traditional Islamic scholarship. Through violence and intimidation, the group has sought to impose its own interpretation of Islam while severely restricting religious pluralism in areas under its influence.

Consequently, Somalia presents a religious environment in which constitutional recognition of one religion, strong societal religiosity, decentralised religious authority and continuing security challenges interact to shape the practical experience of religion across the country.

From the perspective of international human rights law, however, religious diversity alone neither guarantees nor prevents freedom of religion or belief. International standards do not prescribe particular constitutional models, religious demographics or institutional arrangements. Rather, they require that every individual enjoy the rights protected under Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and related international instruments without discrimination.

Accordingly, the decisive analytical question for NORF is not whether Somalia possesses a particular religious tradition or constitutional identity. Instead, the central question is whether individuals and religious communities are able to exercise their internationally protected rights in practice.

This distinction forms the foundation of the empirical assessment presented in the following chapter.

NORF Overall Assessment of the Religious Landscape

Based on the available evidence, NORF assesses Somalia's religious landscape as characterised by five principal features:

1. **Religious homogeneity at the national level**, accompanied by meaningful diversity within Islamic traditions.
2. **Highly developed Islamic institutions** that provide religious, educational and humanitarian functions throughout society.
3. **Decentralised religious authority**, shared among scholars, educational institutions, customary leaders and government bodies.
4. **Limited institutional and public space for minority religions**, resulting from the interaction of constitutional provisions, societal expectations and security conditions.
5. **A complex relationship between religion and human rights**, requiring empirical assessment based upon actual protection of individual freedoms rather than constitutional terminology alone.

These findings establish the analytical baseline from which the remainder of this country assessment evaluates freedom of religion or belief in practice.

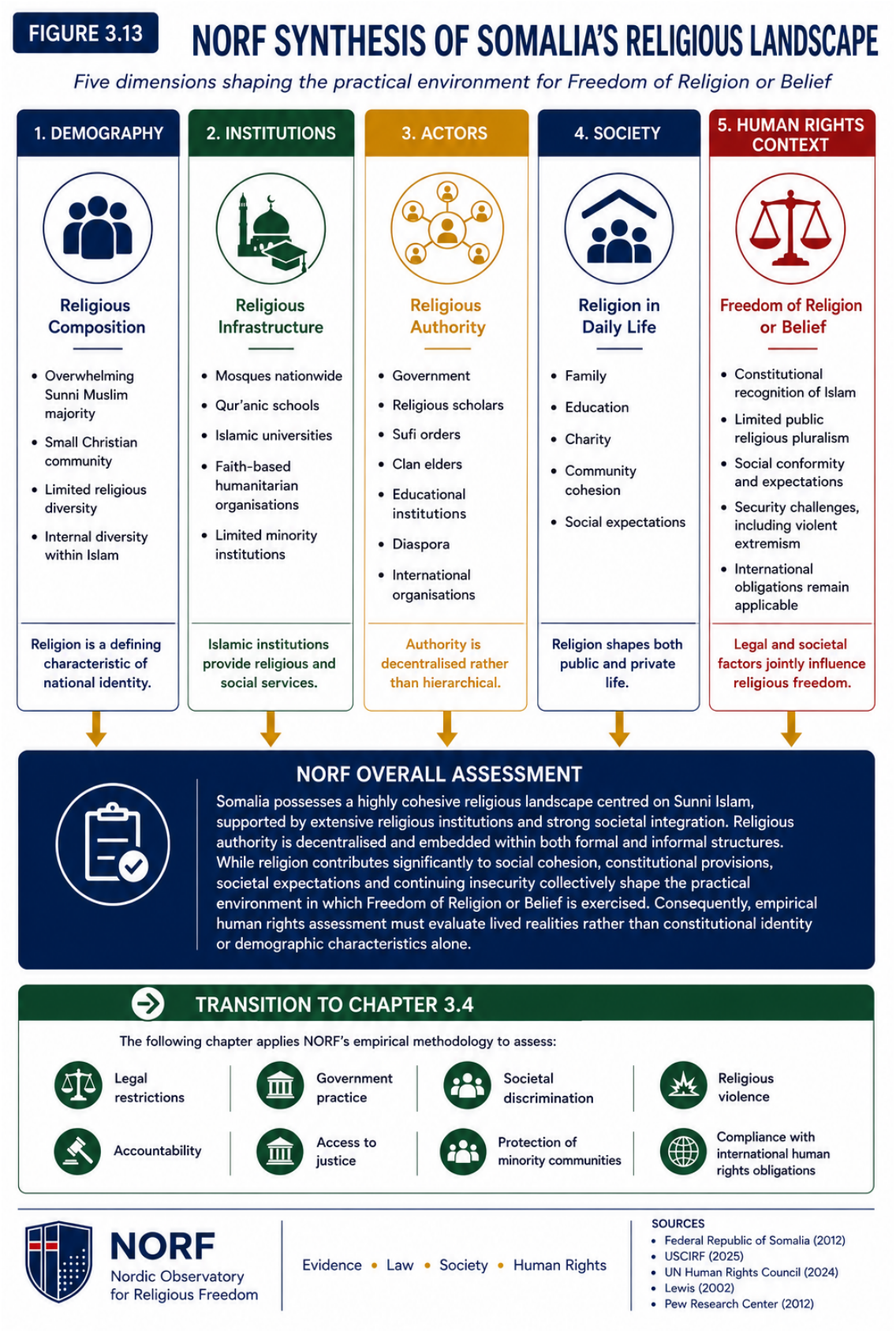
Transition to Chapter 3.4

Having established the historical, constitutional and societal context, the report now turns to the empirical assessment of freedom of religion or belief in Somalia.

The following chapter applies the NORF analytical framework developed in Chapter 2 to evaluate how international human rights standards are implemented in practice. Rather than analysing constitutional design or religious demography alone, the assessment examines measurable indicators including legal restrictions, state practice, societal discrimination, violence, accountability, access to justice and the lived experiences of individuals and religious communities.

This evidence-based approach enables a systematic comparison between Somalia's international legal obligations and the practical enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief.

Figure 3.13


FIGURE 3.13
NORF SYNTHESIS OF SOMALIA'S RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE
Five dimensions shaping the practical environment for Freedom of Religion or Belief
1. DEMOGRAPHY
Religious Composition
• Overwhelming Sunni Muslim majority
• Small Christian community
• Limited religious diversity
• Internal diversity within Islam
Religion is a defining characteristic of national identity.
2. INSTITUTIONS
Religious Infrastructure
• Mosques nationwide
• Qur'anic schools
• Islamic universities
• Faith-based humanitarian organisations
• Limited minority institutions
Islamic institutions provide religious and social services.
3. ACTORS
Religious Authority
• Government
• Religious scholars
• Sufi orders
• Clan elders
• Educational institutions
• Diaspora
• International organisations
Authority is decentralised rather than hierarchical.
4. SOCIETY
Religion in Daily Life
• Family
• Education
• Charity
• Community cohesion
• Social expectations
Religion shapes both public and private life.
5. HUMAN RIGHTS CONTEXT
Freedom of Religion or Belief
• Constitutional recognition of Islam
• Limited public religious pluralism
• Social conformity and expectations
• Security challenges, including violent extremism
• International obligations remain applicable
Legal and societal factors jointly influence religious freedom.
NORF OVERALL ASSESSMENT
Somalia possesses a highly cohesive religious landscape centred on Sunni Islam, supported by extensive religious institutions and strong societal integration. Religious authority is decentralised and embedded within both formal and informal structures. While religion contributes significantly to social cohesion, constitutional provisions, societal expectations and continuing insecurity collectively shape the practical environment in which Freedom of Religion or Belief is exercised. Consequently, empirical human rights assessment must evaluate lived realities rather than constitutional identity or demographic characteristics alone.
TRANSITION TO CHAPTER 3.4
The following chapter applies NORF's empirical methodology to assess:
Legal restrictions
Government practice
Societal discrimination
Religious violence
Accountability
Access to justice
Protection of minority communities
Compliance with international human rights obligations
NORF
Nordic Observatory for Religious Freedom
Evidence • Law • Society • Human Rights
SOURCES
• Federal Republic of Somalia (2012)
• USCIRF (2025)
• UN Human Rights Council (2024)
• Lewis (2002)
• Pew Research Center (2012)

APA 7 References

Federal Republic of Somalia. (2012). *Provisional Constitution of the Federal Republic of Somalia*.

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3.4.1 Assessment Methodology

The assessment presented in this chapter applies the NORF analytical framework developed in Chapter 2 to evaluate the practical implementation of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in Somalia. Rather than relying solely on constitutional provisions, religious demographics or isolated incidents, NORF employs a structured evidence-based methodology that integrates legal analysis, empirical data and multiple independent sources to assess how internationally protected rights are experienced in practice.

The methodology is grounded in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, and other applicable international human rights instruments. These standards recognise every individual's right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including the freedom to adopt, change, manifest or refrain from religious belief, subject only to the narrow limitations permitted under international law.

Accordingly, NORF does not assess whether a country possesses a particular constitutional model, official religion or historical religious tradition. States may organise the relationship between religion and government in different ways while remaining consistent with international human rights law. Instead, the assessment examines whether individuals and religious communities are able to exercise their internationally protected rights without unlawful restriction, discrimination or violence.

Analytical Framework

The NORF methodology evaluates freedom of religion or belief across six interrelated analytical domains.

First, the legal framework is examined to determine whether constitutional provisions, legislation and administrative regulations are consistent with international human rights obligations.

Second, government practice is assessed to evaluate how laws are implemented by executive authorities, courts, law enforcement agencies and public institutions.

Third, societal conditions are analysed to determine whether social norms, community structures or non-state actors influence the practical enjoyment of religious freedom beyond formal legal regulation.

Fourth, documented incidents of religiously motivated violence, intimidation and discrimination are examined to assess the security environment affecting religious communities.

Fifth, accountability mechanisms are evaluated to determine whether violations are investigated, prosecuted and remedied through judicial or administrative processes.

Finally, the combined evidence is measured against Somalia's international legal obligations in order to assess the degree of practical compliance with internationally recognised human rights standards.

Together, these domains provide a comprehensive assessment of both the formal legal environment and the lived realities experienced by individuals and religious communities.

Evidence Collection

NORF applies a triangulation methodology requiring that findings be supported, wherever possible, by multiple independent and credible sources.

Primary sources include constitutional provisions, legislation, judicial decisions, government publications and official statistical material.

Secondary sources include reports from United Nations bodies, treaty-monitoring mechanisms, independent governmental organisations, academic publications and recognised human rights organisations.

For Somalia, particular emphasis has been placed on evidence from:

- United Nations Human Rights Council
- Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)
- United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)
- Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)
- Human Rights Watch

- Amnesty International
- Freedom House
- Open Doors International
- Aid to the Church in Need
- World Bank
- African Union documentation
- Peer-reviewed academic research

Where multiple sources report the same event or pattern, the confidence level assigned to that finding increases. Conversely, where evidence is limited, contradictory or insufficiently verified, NORF explicitly identifies the lower level of evidentiary confidence.

Triangulation and Source Validation

No individual source is considered sufficient to establish a factual finding where independent verification is reasonably available.

Instead, reported incidents, legal developments and statistical information are compared across multiple independent datasets and documentary sources. Differences between sources are analysed rather than ignored, and where uncertainty remains, findings are presented with appropriate qualifications.

This approach reduces the risk of political bias, advocacy bias or reporting limitations associated with any single source and improves the reliability of the final assessment.

Evidence is further evaluated according to the NORF quality criteria described in Chapter 2, including source credibility, factual accuracy, independence, timeliness and contextual relevance.

Indicators Assessed

To ensure methodological consistency across future country assessments, NORF evaluates each country using a common set of empirical indicators.

These indicators include:

- Constitutional and legislative protections
- Restrictions on religious conversion
- Restrictions on manifestation of religion or belief
- Registration of religious organisations
- Construction and operation of places of worship
- Religious education
- Government restrictions on religious activities
- Societal discrimination
- Violence against religious communities
- Hate crimes and intimidation
- Arbitrary arrest or detention on religious grounds
- Access to justice

- Investigation and prosecution of violations
- Protection of religious minorities
- Compliance with international treaty obligations

Applying identical indicators across all assessed countries enables systematic comparison while recognising national historical, legal and cultural differences.

Confidence Assessment

NORF distinguishes between the **severity of a human rights concern** and the **strength of the available evidence**.

A serious allegation supported by limited documentation is not treated in the same manner as a finding corroborated by multiple independent sources.

Accordingly, each analytical domain is assigned an evidence confidence level based upon:

- Number of independent sources
- Quality of documentation
- Consistency across reporting
- Availability of primary evidence
- Temporal proximity to reported events

This approach reflects internationally recognised practices employed by organisations such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which distinguishes evidentiary confidence from policy conclusions.

Where evidence remains incomplete, NORF explicitly identifies uncertainties rather than drawing conclusions unsupported by the available data.

Scope and Limitations

Somalia presents particular methodological challenges due to prolonged armed conflict, varying levels of state authority and restricted access to certain geographical areas.

Some incidents occurring in territories controlled by non-state armed groups cannot be independently verified through direct observation. Similarly, the small size and limited public visibility of minority religious communities mean that some violations may be underreported.

NORF addresses these limitations through extensive source triangulation, transparent attribution and explicit recognition of evidentiary uncertainty where appropriate. The report therefore seeks to provide the most reliable assessment currently possible while recognising that future evidence may refine particular findings.

NORF Methodological Assessment

The methodology applied throughout this chapter is designed to ensure that conclusions are based upon verifiable evidence rather than assumptions, perceptions or constitutional classifications alone.

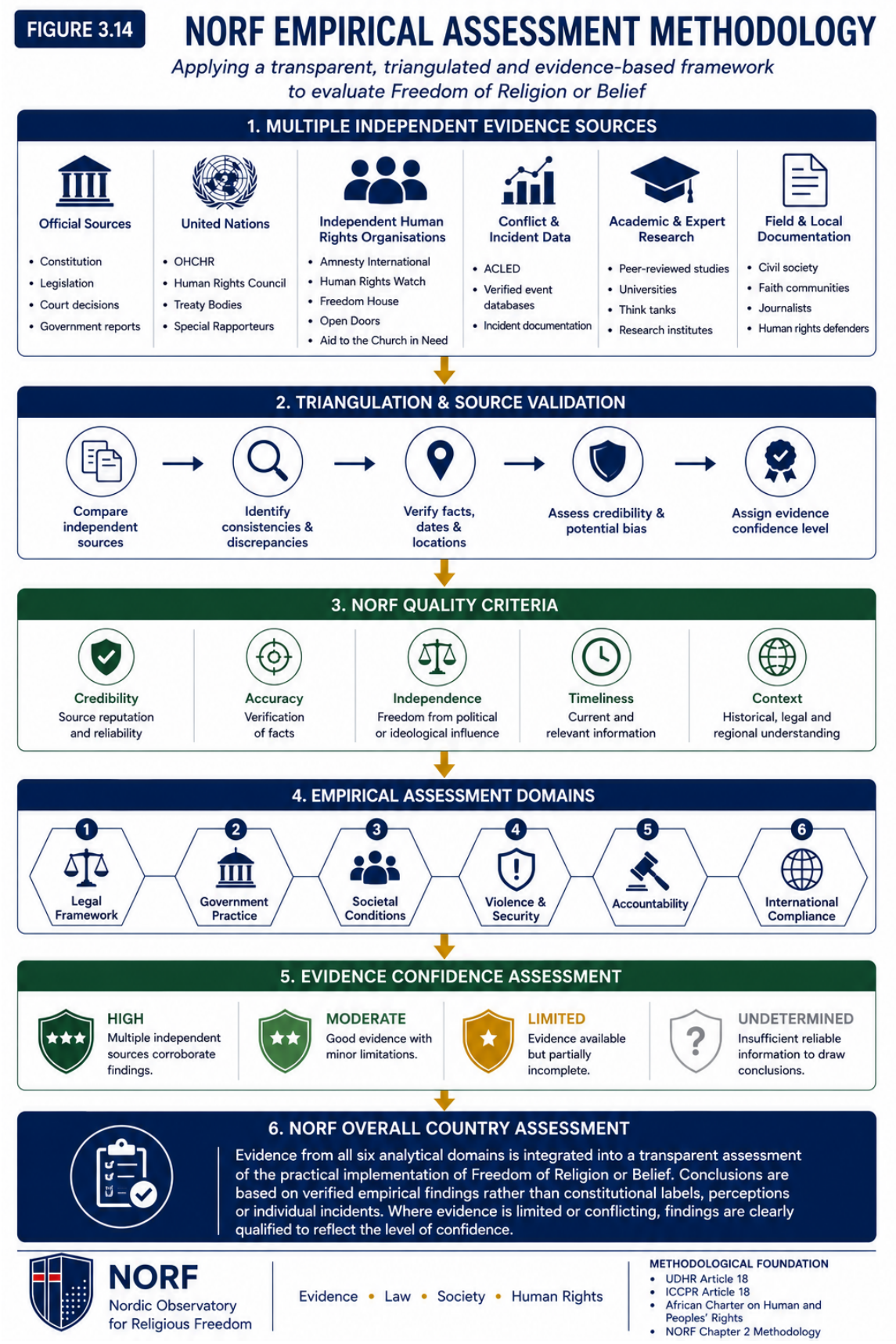
By integrating legal analysis, institutional assessment, documented incidents, societal conditions and international human rights standards, NORF evaluates freedom of religion or belief as an empirical human rights outcome rather than a theoretical constitutional principle.

This approach enhances transparency, facilitates comparison across countries and reporting periods, and provides policymakers, researchers and civil society with a robust analytical foundation for evidence-based decision-making.

NORF Methodological Observation

Freedom of religion or belief cannot be assessed accurately through legislation, demographics or individual incidents in isolation. Reliable evaluation requires the integration of legal analysis, documented practice, societal conditions, verified incident data and international human rights standards. NORF therefore applies a transparent, replicable methodology that prioritises triangulated evidence, explicit confidence assessments and empirical verification to ensure that conclusions remain objective, comparable and grounded in internationally recognised legal norms.

Figure 3.14


FIGURE 3.14
NORF EMPIRICAL ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY
Applying a transparent, triangulated and evidence-based framework to evaluate Freedom of Religion or Belief
1. MULTIPLE INDEPENDENT EVIDENCE SOURCES
Official Sources
Constitution
Legislation
Court decisions
Government reports
United Nations
OHCHR
Human Rights Council
Treaty Bodies
Special Rapporteurs
Independent Human Rights Organisations
Amnesty International
Human Rights Watch
Freedom House
Open Doors
Aid to the Church in Need
Conflict & Incident Data
ACLED
Verified event databases
Incident documentation
Academic & Expert Research
Peer-reviewed studies
Universities
Think tanks
Research institutes
Field & Local Documentation
Civil society
Faith communities
Journalists
Human rights defenders
2. TRIANGULATION & SOURCE VALIDATION
Compare independent sources
Identify consistencies & discrepancies
Verify facts, dates & locations
Assess credibility & potential bias
Assign evidence confidence level
3. NORF QUALITY CRITERIA
Credibility
Source reputation and reliability
Accuracy
Verification of facts
Independence
Freedom from political or ideological influence
Timeliness
Current and relevant information
Context
Historical, legal and regional understanding
4. EMPIRICAL ASSESSMENT DOMAINS
1 Legal Framework
2 Government Practice
3 Societal Conditions
4 Violence & Security
5 Accountability
6 International Compliance
5. EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE ASSESSMENT
HIGH
Multiple independent sources corroborate findings.
MODERATE
Good evidence with minor limitations.
LIMITED
Evidence available but partially incomplete.
UNDETERMINED
Insufficient reliable information to draw conclusions.
6. NORF OVERALL COUNTRY ASSESSMENT
Evidence from all six analytical domains is integrated into a transparent assessment of the practical implementation of Freedom of Religion or Belief. Conclusions are based on verified empirical findings rather than constitutional labels, perceptions or individual incidents. Where evidence is limited or conflicting, findings are clearly qualified to reflect the level of confidence.
NORF
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METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATION
UDHR Article 18
ICCPR Article 18
African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights
NORF Chapter 2 Methodology

APA 7 References

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3.4.2 Legal Restrictions

The legal framework constitutes the foundation upon which freedom of religion or belief is either protected or restricted. Constitutional provisions, legislation and administrative regulations establish the formal legal environment within which individuals and religious communities exercise their rights. Although legal protections do not necessarily guarantee effective implementation, restrictive legislation may itself constitute a limitation on internationally protected freedoms irrespective of enforcement.

This section therefore evaluates Somalia's legal framework against the standards established under Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and relevant interpretations issued by the United Nations Human Rights Committee.

The assessment considers constitutional provisions, statutory legislation and administrative regulations affecting the freedom to adopt, change, manifest or refrain from religious belief.

Constitutional Recognition of Religion

The **Provisional Constitution of the Federal Republic of Somalia (2012)** establishes Islam as the religion of the State. Article 2 provides that no religion other than Islam may be propagated within Somalia and further states that no law may be enacted that is inconsistent with the general principles and objectives of Sharia.

At the same time, the Constitution contains provisions recognising fundamental rights and freedoms, including equality before the law and freedom of expression, while also affirming that these rights must be interpreted within the broader constitutional framework.

From an international human rights perspective, the existence of an official state religion is **not, in itself, incompatible with international law**. The United Nations Human Rights Committee has repeatedly affirmed that states may recognise an official religion provided that such recognition does not impair the enjoyment of rights protected under Article 18 of the ICCPR or result in discrimination against persons belonging to other religions or beliefs.

Accordingly, NORF does not assess the existence of a state religion as a restriction per se. Instead, the assessment focuses on whether associated constitutional provisions limit the practical enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief.

Restrictions on Religious Propagation

One of the most significant constitutional provisions affecting freedom of religion or belief concerns the prohibition on propagating religions other than Islam.

Article 2 explicitly provides that "no religion other than Islam can be propagated in the country." This provision directly affects activities such as public evangelism, missionary work, organised dissemination of non-Islamic religious materials and other forms of public religious outreach by minority communities.

International human rights law protects not only the freedom to hold religious beliefs but also the freedom to manifest religion individually or in community with others through teaching, practice, worship and observance. The Human Rights Committee has clarified that the manifestation of religion includes the communication of religious beliefs, provided that such activities respect the rights of others and public order.

The constitutional prohibition on propagation therefore represents a legal restriction on one aspect of the manifestation of religion protected under Article 18 of the ICCPR.

Freedom to Change Religion

International human rights law recognises that every individual possesses the freedom to adopt, retain or change religion or belief without coercion.

The Somali Constitution does not expressly recognise a right to change religion. Nor does it contain provisions specifically protecting individuals who convert from Islam to another religion.

Although the Constitution does not establish an explicit criminal offence of apostasy, the absence of constitutional protection, combined with the constitutional status of Islam and the incorporation of Sharia principles, creates legal uncertainty regarding the practical exercise of the right to change religion.

NORF therefore distinguishes between the absence of explicit statutory criminalisation and the broader constitutional environment within which conversion is assessed by courts, authorities and society.

Registration of Religious Organisations

Somalia possesses limited legal mechanisms governing the registration of non-Muslim religious organisations.

Islamic institutions operate openly throughout the country, while publicly recognised institutional structures for minority religions remain extremely limited. Available evidence indicates that Christian organisations do not possess the same opportunities to establish publicly recognised places of worship or institutional networks as Islamic organisations.

Reliable information regarding formal registration procedures remains limited due to Somalia's evolving administrative framework and varying practices across federal member states.

Accordingly, NORF assesses this area with moderate evidentiary confidence and identifies it as requiring continued monitoring.

Places of Worship

The legal environment also influences the establishment and operation of places of worship.

Mosques operate throughout Somalia without legal impediment and constitute an integral component of public religious life.

Conversely, publicly identifiable churches are extremely limited. Available evidence indicates that the constitutional prohibition on propagating religions other than Islam, combined with security conditions and broader societal factors, significantly constrains the public establishment of Christian places of worship.

Because these limitations arise from an interaction of constitutional provisions, administrative practice and security considerations, subsequent sections distinguish between formal legal restrictions and practical implementation.

Religious Education

Religious education occupies a prominent position within Somalia's constitutional and educational framework.

Islamic instruction is widely available through Qur'anic schools, religious colleges and educational institutions. Religious education forms an important component of both formal and informal educational systems throughout the country.

The legal framework provides extensive opportunities for Islamic religious education but comparatively limited provision for public education associated with minority religions.

International human rights law recognises the liberty of parents to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions. Assessing the practical implementation of this principle requires consideration not only of legal provisions but also of educational policy and administrative practice, which are examined in the following section.

Incorporation of Sharia

A defining characteristic of Somalia's constitutional framework is the incorporation of the general principles of Sharia into the legal order.

Article 2 provides that no law may be enacted contrary to these principles. In practice, the application of Islamic law varies depending upon subject matter, institutional jurisdiction and regional administration.

International human rights law does not prohibit legal systems based wholly or partly upon religious law. However, the Human Rights Committee has consistently emphasised that any legal framework must ensure the equal protection of rights guaranteed under the ICCPR without discrimination.

NORF therefore evaluates not the existence of Sharia itself but its practical implications for the enjoyment of internationally protected rights.

Legal Protection Against Religious Discrimination

The Constitution contains general guarantees of equality before the law and recognises fundamental rights applicable to all persons.

Nevertheless, constitutional provisions recognising Islam as the state religion and prohibiting propagation of other religions create distinctions between the legal position of the Muslim majority and that of minority religious communities.

Whether these distinctions result in unlawful discrimination depends not only upon constitutional language but also upon administrative implementation, judicial interpretation and practical access to rights.

This interaction between legal text and practical implementation is examined further in Sections 3.4.3 and 3.4.4.

NORF Legal Assessment

The available evidence indicates that Somalia's constitutional framework combines recognition of fundamental rights with explicit constitutional provisions establishing Islam as the state religion and limiting certain manifestations of non-Islamic religions.

From an international human rights perspective, recognition of an official religion is not inherently incompatible with Article 18 of the ICCPR. However, restrictions on the propagation of religions other than Islam, the absence of explicit constitutional protection for changing religion, and limited legal recognition of minority religious institutions raise important questions concerning the full implementation of internationally protected freedom of religion or belief.

The legal framework therefore establishes an environment in which the scope of religious freedom is not determined solely by individual rights provisions but also by constitutional provisions defining the relationship between religion and the State.

NORF Analytical Observation

International human rights law permits constitutional diversity, including the recognition of an official religion. The critical analytical question is whether the legal framework enables all individuals to enjoy the rights guaranteed under Article 18 without discrimination. NORF therefore evaluates legal restrictions according to their practical implications for internationally protected freedoms rather than according to the constitutional model adopted by the State.

Figure 3.15

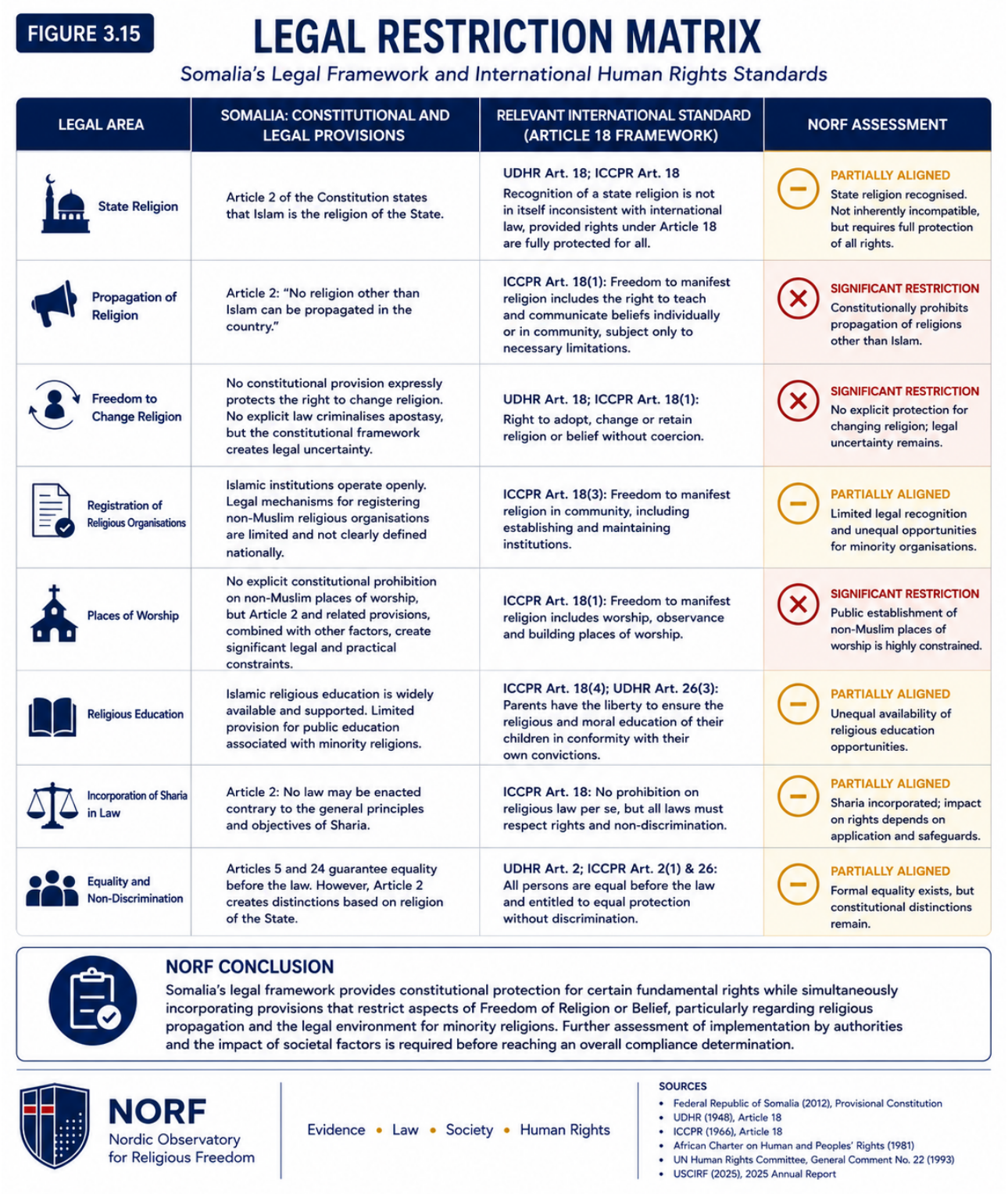


FIGURE 3.15

LEGAL RESTRICTION MATRIX

Somalia's Legal Framework and International Human Rights Standards

LEGAL AREA	SOMALIA: CONSTITUTIONAL AND LEGAL PROVISIONS	RELEVANT INTERNATIONAL STANDARD (ARTICLE 18 FRAMEWORK)	NORF ASSESSMENT
State Religion	Article 2 of the Constitution states that Islam is the religion of the State.	**UDHR Art. 18; ICCPR Art. 18** Recognition of a state religion is not in itself inconsistent with international law, provided rights under Article 18 are fully protected for all.	**PARTIALLY ALIGNED** State religion recognised. Not inherently incompatible, but requires full protection of all rights.
Propagation of Religion	Article 2: "No religion other than Islam can be propagated in the country."	**ICCPR Art. 18(1):** Freedom to manifest religion includes the right to teach and communicate beliefs individually or in community, subject only to necessary limitations.	**SIGNIFICANT RESTRICTION** Constitutionally prohibits propagation of religions other than Islam.
Freedom to Change Religion	No constitutional provision expressly protects the right to change religion. No explicit law criminalises apostasy, but the constitutional framework creates legal uncertainty.	**UDHR Art. 18; ICCPR Art. 18(1):** Right to adopt, change or retain religion or belief without coercion.	**SIGNIFICANT RESTRICTION** No explicit protection for changing religion; legal uncertainty remains.
Registration of Religious Organisations	Islamic institutions operate openly. Legal mechanisms for registering non-Muslim religious organisations are limited and not clearly defined nationally.	**ICCPR Art. 18(3):** Freedom to manifest religion in community, including establishing and maintaining institutions.	**PARTIALLY ALIGNED** Limited legal recognition and unequal opportunities for minority organisations.
Places of Worship	No explicit constitutional prohibition on non-Muslim places of worship, but Article 2 and related provisions, combined with other factors, create significant legal and practical constraints.	**ICCPR Art. 18(1):** Freedom to manifest religion includes worship, observance and building places of worship.	**SIGNIFICANT RESTRICTION** Public establishment of non-Muslim places of worship is highly constrained.
Religious Education	Islamic religious education is widely available and supported. Limited provision for public education associated with minority religions.	**ICCPR Art. 18(4); UDHR Art. 26(3):** Parents have the liberty to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.	**PARTIALLY ALIGNED** Unequal availability of religious education opportunities.
Incorporation of Sharia in Law	Article 2: No law may be enacted contrary to the general principles and objectives of Sharia.	**ICCPR Art. 18:** No prohibition on religious law per se, but all laws must respect rights and non-discrimination.	**PARTIALLY ALIGNED** Sharia incorporated; impact on rights depends on application and safeguards.
Equality and Non-Discrimination	Articles 5 and 24 guarantee equality before the law. However, Article 2 creates distinctions based on religion of the State.	**UDHR Art. 2; ICCPR Art. 2(1) & 26:** All persons are equal before the law and entitled to equal protection without discrimination.	**PARTIALLY ALIGNED** Formal equality exists, but constitutional distinctions remain.

NORF CONCLUSION

Somalia's legal framework provides constitutional protection for certain fundamental rights while simultaneously incorporating provisions that restrict aspects of Freedom of Religion or Belief, particularly regarding religious propagation and the legal environment for minority religions. Further assessment of implementation by authorities and the impact of societal factors is required before reaching an overall compliance determination.

NORF
Nordic Observatory for Religious Freedom

Evidence • Law • Society • Human Rights

SOURCES

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3.4.3 Government Practice

While the legal framework establishes the formal parameters governing freedom of religion or belief, the practical enjoyment of these rights ultimately depends upon the conduct of public authorities. Constitutional guarantees and statutory provisions have limited value if they are not implemented consistently, fairly and in accordance with international human rights obligations. Conversely, restrictive legal provisions may be mitigated in practice where authorities exercise restraint or provide effective protection for minority communities.

This section therefore evaluates how the Somali state applies and enforces laws affecting freedom of religion or belief. The assessment considers the performance of government institutions, including the executive, judiciary, law enforcement agencies and local authorities, while recognising that the Federal Government does not exercise uniform control throughout the country's territory. Variations in governance capacity, security conditions and the presence of non-state armed groups are therefore taken into account when interpreting the available evidence.

State Capacity and Territorial Control

The Federal Government of Somalia exercises varying degrees of authority across the country. While government institutions maintain administrative control in Mogadishu and many urban centres, their capacity remains constrained in several rural areas, particularly where Al-Shabaab continues to operate or exert influence.

This uneven territorial control has significant implications for the protection of freedom of religion or belief. In areas under effective government administration, state institutions bear primary responsibility for preventing violations, investigating abuses and ensuring equal protection under

the law. In areas outside effective government control, the state's ability to fulfil these obligations is substantially reduced, although its international legal responsibilities remain unchanged.

NORF therefore distinguishes between violations resulting from government action, government omission and circumstances in which the state's capacity to protect rights is severely limited by ongoing conflict.

Executive Authorities and Public Administration

Somalia's executive institutions administer a legal framework in which Islam occupies a constitutionally privileged position. Ministries responsible for education, religious affairs and internal administration operate within this constitutional context, and public policy generally reflects the country's Islamic identity.

Available evidence indicates that government institutions actively support Islamic religious education, facilitate the operation of mosques and cooperate with religious leaders on matters relating to public welfare, reconciliation and social development. These activities are consistent with the constitutional recognition of Islam and do not, in themselves, constitute violations of international human rights law.

However, publicly visible institutional support for minority religious communities remains limited. Available reporting provides little evidence of government initiatives specifically designed to facilitate the public exercise of non-Islamic religions or to strengthen institutional protections for minority faith communities.

Law Enforcement and Protection of Religious Communities

An essential component of government practice concerns the ability of law enforcement agencies to protect individuals and communities from religiously motivated violence and intimidation.

Somalia's police and security services continue to operate under significant operational constraints arising from prolonged conflict, limited institutional resources and continuing terrorist activity. These factors affect the capacity of authorities to prevent attacks, investigate incidents and ensure effective protection for vulnerable communities.

Available evidence suggests that security efforts are primarily directed towards counter-terrorism operations, particularly against Al-Shabaab. While these operations contribute to the protection of the general population, they do not necessarily provide targeted protection for individuals at heightened risk due to their religious identity or beliefs.

The available documentation indicates that religious minorities often remain dependent upon broader improvements in national security rather than specialised institutional protection mechanisms.

Judicial Practice

The Somali judicial system operates within a complex legal environment combining constitutional law, statutory legislation, customary law (*xeer*) and Islamic jurisprudence.

Judicial capacity remains uneven across the country, and access to formal courts varies considerably between regions. Limited institutional resources, insecurity and differing legal traditions may affect both the consistency and accessibility of judicial remedies.

Available public reporting identifies relatively few documented judicial decisions directly concerning freedom of religion or belief. Consequently, it remains difficult to evaluate the consistency with which courts interpret constitutional rights relating to religion, conversion or minority protection.

NORF therefore assigns a moderate level of evidentiary confidence to judicial practice while recognising the need for continued monitoring as additional case law becomes available.

Protection of Religious Minorities

International human rights law requires states to protect all individuals equally regardless of religion or belief.

Available evidence indicates that Somalia's institutional mechanisms for protecting religious minorities remain limited. Publicly identifiable Christian communities are extremely small, and there is little evidence of dedicated governmental structures addressing the specific security or administrative needs of minority religious groups.

At the same time, the limited size and public visibility of minority communities make comprehensive assessment challenging. Some reported incidents occur in areas affected by armed conflict or outside effective government control, complicating attribution of responsibility.

NORF therefore distinguishes between the existence of institutional protection mechanisms and the broader security environment within which minority communities operate.

Public Education and Religious Administration

Government practice also influences freedom of religion or belief through education and public administration.

Islamic instruction is widely integrated into educational institutions, reflecting Somalia's constitutional identity and religious demographics. Publicly supported educational opportunities associated with minority religions are considerably more limited.

International standards recognise both the right of parents to ensure the religious and moral education of their children according to their convictions and the obligation of states to respect freedom of religion without discrimination. Assessing compliance therefore requires consideration of both educational policy and the availability of practical alternatives for minority communities.

Available evidence indicates that opportunities for publicly organised non-Islamic religious education remain limited.

International Cooperation

The Federal Government of Somalia continues to cooperate with a range of international organisations, including United Nations agencies, the African Union and international humanitarian partners.

Somalia periodically participates in the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process of the United Nations Human Rights Council and has accepted a number of recommendations relating to governance, human rights and institutional reform. Implementation of these recommendations has progressed unevenly, reflecting broader governance challenges associated with state-building and security.

Continued engagement with international monitoring mechanisms provides opportunities for strengthening institutional protection of freedom of religion or belief through legislative reform, judicial capacity-building and improved administrative practice.

NORF Government Practice Assessment

The available evidence suggests that Somalia's government institutions operate within a constitutional framework that recognises Islam as the state religion while facing substantial challenges associated with conflict, limited institutional capacity and uneven territorial control.

Government authorities generally facilitate the practice of Islam through public institutions and administrative cooperation with religious leaders. Evidence of comparable institutional support for minority religions remains limited, and available reporting identifies few specialised mechanisms for protecting vulnerable religious communities.

At the same time, many documented challenges arise within a broader context of insecurity and limited state capacity rather than solely from deliberate government action. Distinguishing between institutional intent, administrative capacity and the impact of armed conflict is therefore essential to an objective assessment.

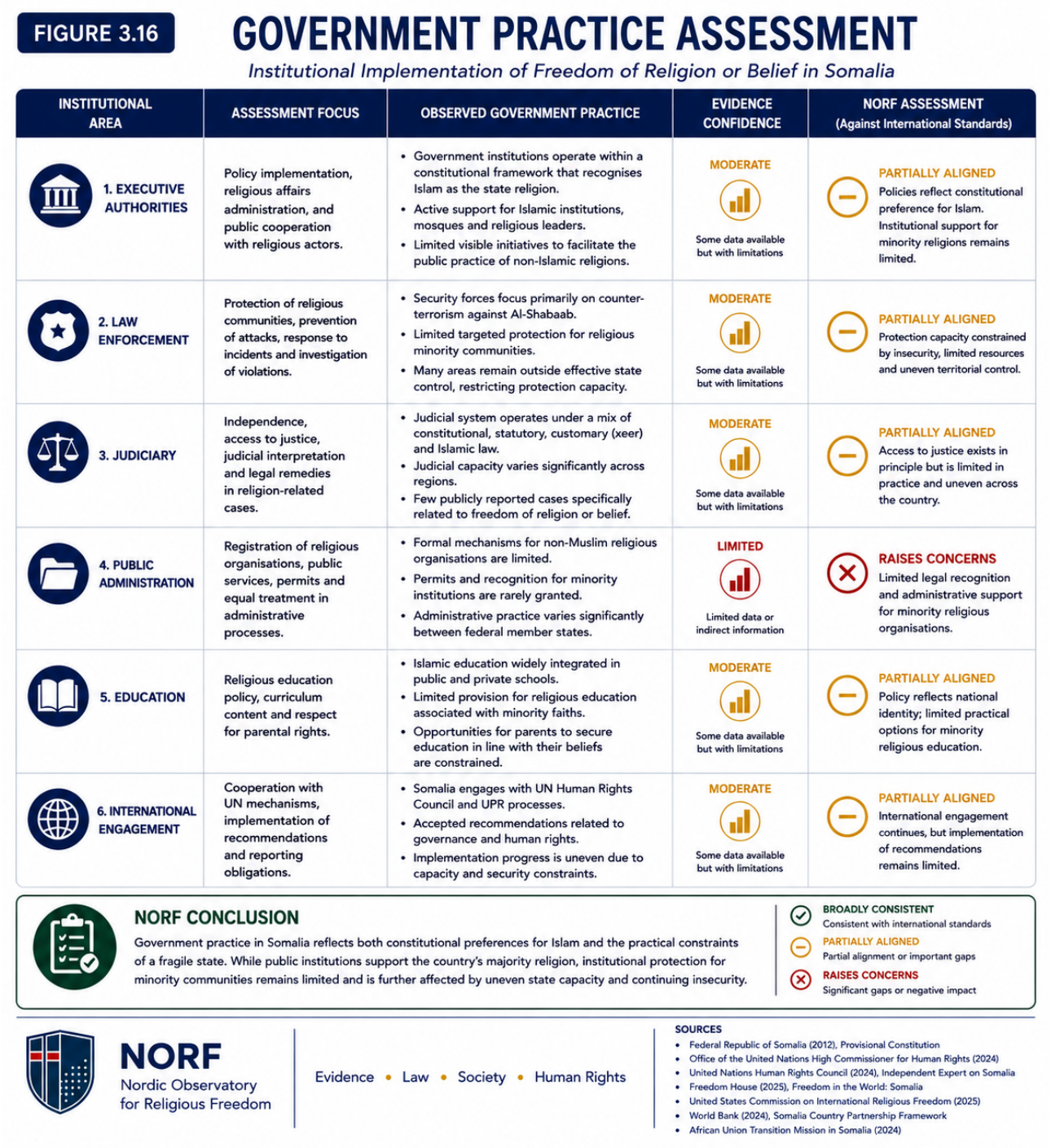
Overall, NORF concludes that government practice presents **moderate institutional limitations** in protecting the practical enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief. These limitations reflect both constitutional structures and the continuing constraints imposed by fragile governance and security conditions.

NORF Analytical Observation

Government performance should be evaluated not only according to legislative intent but also according to the state's capacity and willingness to protect internationally recognised rights in practice. In fragile states such as Somalia, institutional weakness, territorial fragmentation and armed conflict may significantly affect the implementation of freedom of religion or belief. A comprehensive assessment must therefore distinguish between legal obligations, governmental

action and structural limitations while maintaining the principle that international human rights obligations continue to apply throughout the state's territory.

Figure 3.16



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3.4.4 Societal Pressure and Religious Freedom

Freedom of religion or belief is exercised not only within legal and institutional frameworks but also within the broader social environment in which individuals live. Even where governments refrain from direct interference, societal expectations, communal norms and non-state actors may significantly influence an individual's ability to adopt, change, manifest or refrain from religious belief.

International human rights law recognises that states have a positive obligation to protect individuals from violations committed by both public authorities and private actors. Consequently, assessing Freedom of Religion or Belief requires consideration of the social conditions affecting everyday religious life.

In Somalia, religion is closely intertwined with family identity, clan affiliation, community cohesion and national culture. These relationships contribute significantly to social stability but may also create pressures affecting individual religious choice.

Religion as a Social Institution

Islam occupies a central place within Somali society and serves not only as a religious tradition but also as a source of social cohesion, cultural identity and moral authority.

Mosques, Qur'anic schools, religious scholars and local communities play important roles in education, mediation, charitable activities and conflict resolution. Religious festivals, family ceremonies and communal worship reinforce shared identity across much of the population.

For the overwhelming majority of Somali citizens, religion therefore represents an integral component of daily life rather than solely a matter of private belief.

International human rights law fully recognises the right of communities to preserve and express their religious traditions collectively. The analytical question is whether these social structures also permit individuals to exercise their personal freedom of religion or belief.

Family and Clan Expectations

Family and clan relationships remain among the strongest social institutions within Somali society.

Available evidence indicates that religious identity is generally regarded as inseparable from family membership and communal belonging. Consequently, individuals who publicly adopt beliefs differing from those of their families or communities may encounter significant social consequences.

Reported consequences documented by international organisations and human rights groups include:

- family rejection;
- loss of community support;
- exclusion from social networks;
- difficulties relating to marriage and inheritance;
- social isolation; and
- pressure to conform to prevailing religious expectations.

The extent of these pressures varies considerably according to locality, clan structures and individual circumstances. Nevertheless, available evidence consistently identifies family and community expectations as important factors influencing the practical exercise of freedom of religion or belief.

Community Norms and Social Conformity

Beyond the family, local communities play a significant role in regulating acceptable religious behaviour.

In many parts of Somalia, public expressions of non-Islamic religious identity remain uncommon. Community expectations regarding participation in Islamic practices and public religious observance contribute to an environment in which religious conformity is generally regarded as a normal aspect of social life.

International human rights law protects both the collective manifestation of religion and the individual's freedom not to be coerced into religious practice. The available evidence suggests that community expectations may, in some circumstances, influence the practical ability of individuals to exercise these rights freely.

NORF notes that these societal dynamics are primarily social rather than legal in nature, although they may interact with constitutional provisions and broader security conditions.

Religious Conversion and Social Consequences

The right to adopt or change one's religion or belief constitutes a core element of Article 18 of the ICCPR.

Although reliable statistical information concerning religious conversion in Somalia remains limited, numerous international reports indicate that individuals perceived to have converted from Islam may face significant societal consequences.

Documented risks include:

- ostracism;
- family separation;
- community intimidation;
- threats from non-state actors; and
- heightened personal security concerns.

These consequences often arise independently of formal judicial proceedings and illustrate the distinction between legal restrictions and societal pressures.

Because conversion is relatively uncommon and frequently concealed, comprehensive quantitative assessment remains difficult. NORF therefore assigns moderate evidentiary confidence to available reporting while recognising the likelihood of underreporting.

Employment, Education and Public Life

Societal attitudes may also influence opportunities within employment, education and public participation.

The available evidence does not indicate systematic nationwide legal exclusion of individuals based solely upon religious identity. However, members of minority religious communities may encounter practical challenges arising from limited public visibility, community expectations or concerns regarding social acceptance.

Evidence remains limited regarding the extent to which religious identity independently affects employment outcomes. Existing reporting suggests that broader social networks, clan affiliation and local conditions frequently interact with religious identity, making causal attribution difficult.

NORF therefore distinguishes between documented discriminatory practices and broader social dynamics that may indirectly affect equality of opportunity.

Women, Children and Vulnerable Groups

Societal pressures may affect different groups in different ways.

Women who depart from prevailing religious expectations may experience distinct social consequences associated with family honour, marriage and community reputation. Similarly, children generally participate in the religious traditions of their families, consistent with both cultural practice and parental rights recognised under international law.

International standards require that children gradually acquire the capacity to exercise freedom of thought, conscience and religion in accordance with their evolving capacities.

Available evidence remains limited regarding the experiences of individuals belonging simultaneously to religious minorities and other vulnerable groups. Continued research is therefore required to improve understanding of these intersecting factors.

Role of Religious Leaders

Religious leaders occupy influential positions within Somali society and frequently contribute positively to mediation, humanitarian assistance, peacebuilding and community reconciliation.

At the same time, public statements by influential religious figures may shape societal attitudes towards religious diversity, conversion and minority communities.

NORF does not evaluate theological positions but instead assesses the observable societal impact of public religious discourse where supported by reliable evidence.

The available evidence demonstrates that religious leaders remain important stakeholders in both promoting social cohesion and influencing public attitudes relating to freedom of religion or belief.

NORF Societal Assessment

The available evidence indicates that Somalia possesses a highly cohesive religious society in which Islam forms an integral component of national identity, community life and social organisation.

These characteristics contribute positively to social solidarity and community resilience. However, the same social structures may also create significant pressures affecting individuals whose beliefs differ from prevailing religious expectations.

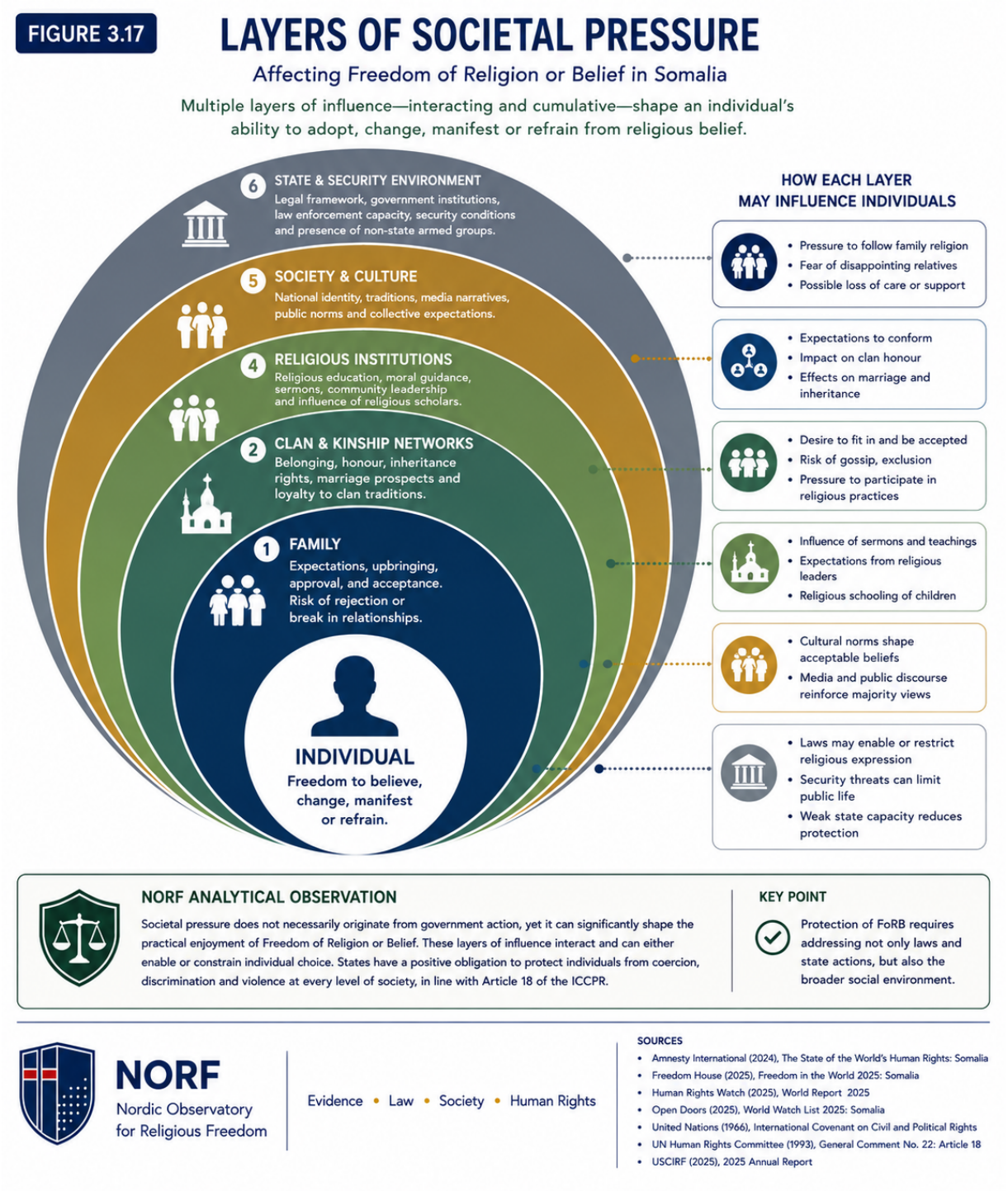
Documented societal pressures appear most pronounced in relation to religious conversion, public manifestation of minority religions and participation in community life outside established religious norms.

Overall, NORF concludes that societal factors constitute an important dimension of Freedom of Religion or Belief in Somalia and must be assessed alongside legal and governmental considerations. The practical enjoyment of internationally protected rights depends not only upon state institutions but also upon the willingness and ability of society to accommodate religious diversity and individual freedom of conscience.

NORF Analytical Observation

Societal pressure is often more difficult to quantify than legal restrictions or documented acts of violence, yet it may have an equally significant impact on the practical exercise of freedom of religion or belief. Empirical assessment should therefore consider both formal state action and the broader social environment in which individuals make religious choices. Understanding this interaction is particularly important in societies where religion, family, community and cultural identity are closely interconnected.

Figure 3.17


FIGURE 3.17
LAYERS OF SOCIETAL PRESSURE
Affecting Freedom of Religion or Belief in Somalia
Multiple layers of influence—interacting and cumulative—shape an individual's ability to adopt, change, manifest or refrain from religious belief.
6 STATE & SECURITY ENVIRONMENT
Legal framework, government institutions, law enforcement capacity, security conditions and presence of non-state armed groups.
5 SOCIETY & CULTURE
National identity, traditions, media narratives, public norms and collective expectations.
4 RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS
Religious education, moral guidance, sermons, community leadership and influence of religious scholars.
2 CLAN & KINSHIP NETWORKS
Belonging, honour, inheritance rights, marriage prospects and loyalty to clan traditions.
1 FAMILY
Expectations, upbringing, approval, and acceptance. Risk of rejection or break in relationships.
INDIVIDUAL
Freedom to believe, change, manifest or refrain.
HOW EACH LAYER MAY INFLUENCE INDIVIDUALS
• Pressure to follow family religion
• Fear of disappointing relatives
• Possible loss of care or support
• Expectations to conform
• Impact on clan honour
• Effects on marriage and inheritance
• Desire to fit in and be accepted
• Risk of gossip, exclusion
• Pressure to participate in religious practices
• Influence of sermons and teachings
• Expectations from religious leaders
• Religious schooling of children
• Cultural norms shape acceptable beliefs
• Media and public discourse reinforce majority views
• Laws may enable or restrict religious expression
• Security threats can limit public life
• Weak state capacity reduces protection
NORF ANALYTICAL OBSERVATION
Societal pressure does not necessarily originate from government action, yet it can significantly shape the practical enjoyment of Freedom of Religion or Belief. These layers of influence interact and can either enable or constrain individual choice. States have a positive obligation to protect individuals from coercion, discrimination and violence at every level of society, in line with Article 18 of the ICCPR.
KEY POINT
Protection of FoRB requires addressing not only laws and state actions, but also the broader social environment.
NORF
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3.4.5 Violence, Intimidation and Security

The practical enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief depends not only upon legal protections and government policy but also upon the physical security of individuals and religious communities. Violence, intimidation and the threat of violence may substantially restrict the exercise of internationally protected rights, even where formal legal guarantees exist.

International human rights law obliges states to protect individuals from violence committed by both state and non-state actors. Consequently, this assessment examines documented incidents of religiously motivated violence alongside the broader security environment in which such incidents occur.

In Somalia, this assessment must be understood within the context of a protracted armed conflict involving the Federal Government, regional authorities, clan-based actors and the Islamist armed group Al-Shabaab. These overlapping security dynamics complicate attribution of responsibility and require careful differentiation between conflict-related violence and violence specifically linked to religion or belief.

Security Environment

Somalia continues to experience one of the most complex security environments in the Horn of Africa. Although the Federal Government has, with support from international partners, regained territory from Al-Shabaab in recent years, the group remains capable of conducting attacks against civilian, governmental and security targets in several regions.

The continuing armed conflict affects the protection of a broad range of human rights, including freedom of religion or belief. Areas under limited government control frequently present greater challenges for the protection of vulnerable communities, the investigation of incidents and the provision of judicial remedies.

NORF therefore evaluates documented incidents within their broader security context rather than treating every incident as solely the result of religious policy.

Violence by Non-State Armed Groups

Available evidence consistently identifies **Al-Shabaab** as the principal non-state actor responsible for severe violations affecting freedom of religion or belief in Somalia.

The organisation seeks to impose its interpretation of Islamic law through violence, intimidation and coercion. Individuals perceived as departing from its religious doctrine, cooperating with government institutions or engaging in activities considered contrary to its interpretation of Islam have been subjected to threats, killings, abductions and other serious abuses documented by the United Nations, USCIRF, Human Rights Watch and other independent organisations.

Particularly vulnerable groups include:

- individuals accused of converting from Islam;
- members of Somalia's small Christian community;
- humanitarian workers associated with religious organisations;
- Muslim religious leaders opposing extremist interpretations; and
- civilians residing in contested areas.

These violations constitute serious restrictions on the practical exercise of freedom of religion or belief and are supported by high-confidence evidence from multiple independent sources.

Violence Affecting Religious Minorities

Reliable quantitative data concerning violence directed specifically against religious minorities remain limited due to the small size of these communities, underreporting and the broader conflict environment.

Nevertheless, independent reporting indicates that Christians and individuals perceived to have converted from Islam face elevated security risks. Available documentation includes incidents of targeted killings, threats, forced displacement and concealment of religious identity for personal safety.

Because many members of minority communities practise their faith privately, comprehensive measurement of incident frequency remains difficult. NORF therefore distinguishes between documented cases and the probable existence of additional unreported incidents.

The available evidence nevertheless supports the conclusion that security considerations significantly influence the ability of minority communities to manifest their religion openly.

Intimidation and Coercion

Violence affecting freedom of religion or belief is not limited to physical attacks.

International human rights law recognises that threats, intimidation and coercion may themselves interfere with the exercise of religious freedom by discouraging individuals from expressing or changing their beliefs.

Available evidence indicates that intimidation in Somalia may include:

- death threats;
- community surveillance;
- pressure to conceal religious identity;
- threats directed towards family members;
- coercion by extremist groups; and
- fear of retaliation following religious conversion.

Although such incidents are inherently more difficult to quantify than physical attacks, multiple independent reports indicate that fear itself constitutes a significant constraint on the practical exercise of freedom of religion or belief.

Geographic Variation

The security situation varies considerably across Somalia.

Urban areas under stronger government administration generally provide greater institutional protection than territories experiencing sustained insurgent activity. Conversely, areas in which Al-Shabaab exercises influence often present substantially higher risks for individuals whose beliefs or activities are perceived as inconsistent with the group's ideological objectives.

Regional variation therefore represents an important analytical consideration.

NORF avoids treating Somalia as a homogeneous security environment and instead recognises that practical enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief differs according to geography, state presence and local conflict dynamics.

Government Response to Religious Violence

The Somali Government continues to prioritise counter-terrorism operations against Al-Shabaab, often with support from the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) and international partners.

These operations contribute to improving the general security environment and, indirectly, the protection of religious communities. However, available evidence suggests that institutional mechanisms specifically designed to monitor, prevent and respond to religiously motivated violations remain limited.

Furthermore, insecurity, resource constraints and uneven territorial control reduce the ability of authorities to investigate incidents comprehensively and provide consistent protection throughout the country.

This distinction between general counter-terrorism efforts and targeted protection of freedom of religion or belief is important for evaluating government performance objectively.

Trends and Developments

Available evidence from recent reporting indicates that the overall security environment has remained volatile despite military gains against Al-Shabaab.

Patterns of violence affecting freedom of religion or belief continue to be characterised by:

- persistent attacks by extremist groups;
- ongoing insecurity in contested regions;
- limited public visibility of minority religious communities;
- continued concealment of religious identity by vulnerable individuals; and
- regional variation in levels of risk.

At the same time, improvements in government territorial control in some areas may create opportunities for strengthened institutional protection in the future. Continued monitoring will therefore be necessary to assess whether these developments produce measurable improvements in the practical enjoyment of internationally protected rights.

NORF Violence Assessment

The available evidence demonstrates that violence remains a significant factor affecting freedom of religion or belief in Somalia. The principal threat arises from non-state armed actors, particularly Al-Shabaab, whose documented actions directly target individuals and communities on religious grounds or seek to impose religious conformity through coercion and violence.

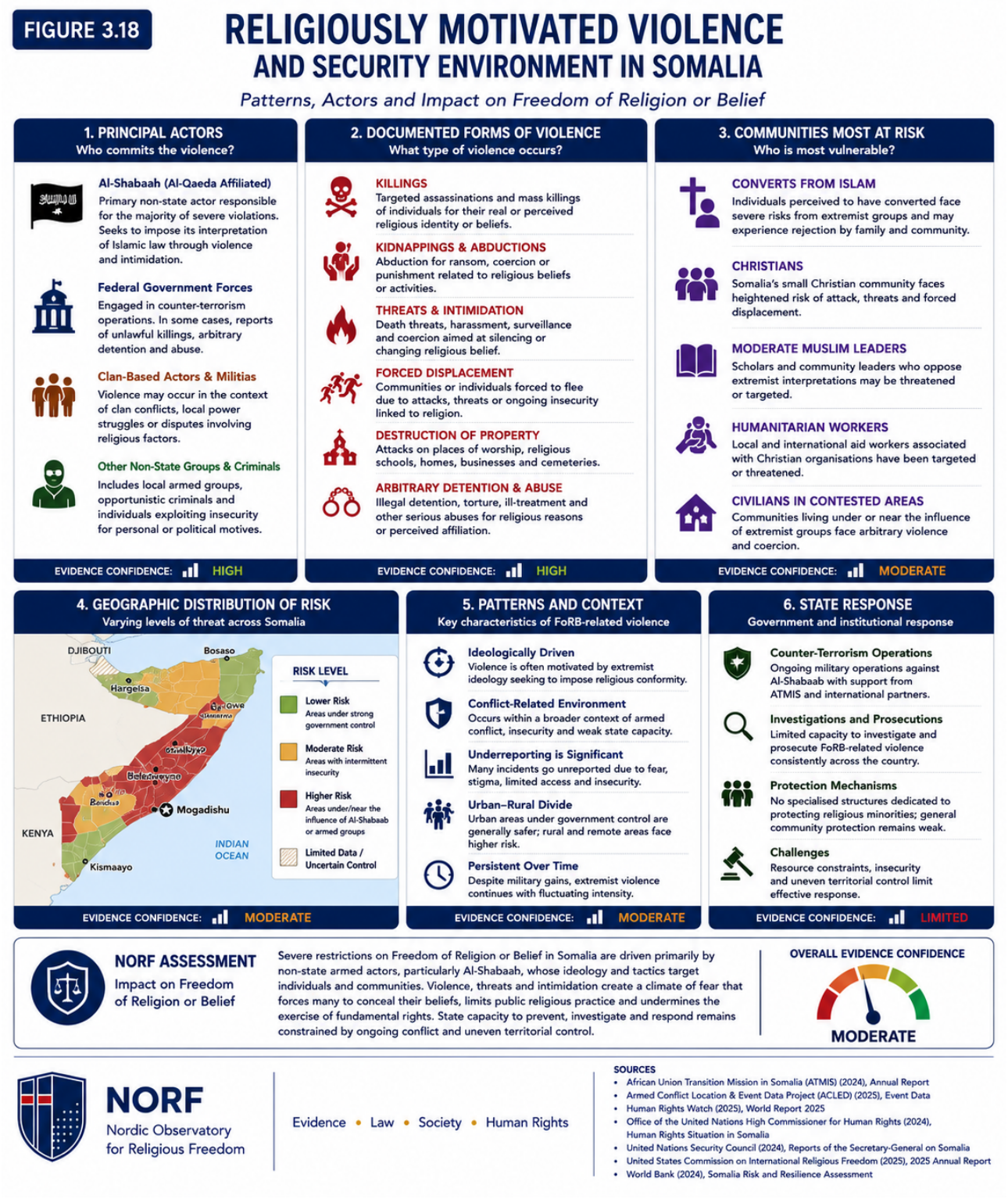
Although the Somali Government continues to undertake extensive counter-terrorism operations, institutional capacity to prevent, investigate and respond to religiously motivated violence remains constrained by ongoing conflict and uneven territorial control.

NORF therefore concludes that the security environment constitutes one of the most significant practical obstacles to the exercise of freedom of religion or belief in Somalia. This conclusion is supported by a high level of evidentiary confidence based on multiple independent international sources.

NORF Analytical Observation

Violence should not be assessed solely by counting documented incidents. Understanding freedom of religion or belief requires analysing the actors responsible, the motivations underlying attacks, the populations most affected and the broader security context in which violations occur. In fragile states, persistent insecurity may restrict religious freedom both directly, through targeted attacks, and indirectly, by creating conditions in which individuals conceal their beliefs or refrain from exercising their rights due to fear of violence.

Figure 3.18


FIGURE 3.18
RELIGIOUSLY MOTIVATED VIOLENCE
AND SECURITY ENVIRONMENT IN SOMALIA
Patterns, Actors and Impact on Freedom of Religion or Belief
1. PRINCIPAL ACTORS
Who commits the violence?
Al-Shabaab (Al-Qaeda Affiliated)
Primary non-state actor responsible for the majority of severe violations. Seeks to impose its interpretation of Islamic law through violence and intimidation.
Federal Government Forces
Engaged in counter-terrorism operations. In some cases, reports of unlawful killings, arbitrary detention and abuse.
Clan-Based Actors & Militias
Violence may occur in the context of clan conflicts, local power struggles or disputes involving religious factors.
Other Non-State Groups & Criminals
Includes local armed groups, opportunistic criminals and individuals exploiting insecurity for personal or political motives.
EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE: HIGH
2. DOCUMENTED FORMS OF VIOLENCE
What type of violence occurs?
KILLINGS
Targeted assassinations and mass killings of individuals for their real or perceived religious identity or beliefs.
KIDNAPPINGS & ABDUCTIONS
Abduction for ransom, coercion or punishment related to religious beliefs or activities.
THREATS & INTIMIDATION
Death threats, harassment, surveillance and coercion aimed at silencing or changing religious belief.
FORCED DISPLACEMENT
Communities or individuals forced to flee due to attacks, threats or ongoing insecurity linked to religion.
DESTRUCTION OF PROPERTY
Attacks on places of worship, religious schools, homes, businesses and cemeteries.
ARBITRARY DETENTION & ABUSE
Illegal detention, torture, ill-treatment and other serious abuses for religious reasons or perceived affiliation.
EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE: HIGH
3. COMMUNITIES MOST AT RISK
Who is most vulnerable?
CONVERTS FROM ISLAM
Individuals perceived to have converted face severe risks from extremist groups and may experience rejection by family and community.
CHRISTIANS
Somalia's small Christian community faces heightened risk of attack, threats and forced displacement.
MODERATE MUSLIM LEADERS
Scholars and community leaders who oppose extremist interpretations may be threatened or targeted.
HUMANITARIAN WORKERS
Local and international aid workers associated with Christian organisations have been targeted or threatened.
CIVILIANS IN CONTESTED AREAS
Communities living under or near the influence of extremist groups face arbitrary violence and coercion.
EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE: MODERATE
4. GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF RISK
Varying levels of threat across Somalia
DJIBOUTI
Bosaso
Hargeisa
ETHIOPIA
Baidoa
Mogadishu
KENYA
INDIAN OCEAN
Kismaayo
RISK LEVEL
Lower Risk
Areas under strong government control
Moderate Risk
Areas with intermittent insecurity
Higher Risk
Areas under/near the influence of Al-Shabaab or armed groups
Limited Data / Uncertain Control
EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE: MODERATE
5. PATTERNS AND CONTEXT
Key characteristics of FoRB-related violence
Ideologically Driven
Violence is often motivated by extremist ideology seeking to impose religious conformity.
Conflict-Related Environment
Occurs within a broader context of armed conflict, insecurity and weak state capacity.
Underreporting is Significant
Many incidents go unreported due to fear, stigma, limited access and insecurity.
Urban–Rural Divide
Urban areas under government control are generally safer; rural and remote areas face higher risk.
Persistent Over Time
Despite military gains, extremist violence continues with fluctuating intensity.
EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE: MODERATE
6. STATE RESPONSE
Government and institutional response
Counter-Terrorism Operations
Ongoing military operations against Al-Shabaab with support from ATMIS and international partners.
Investigations and Prosecutions
Limited capacity to investigate and prosecute FoRB-related violence consistently across the country.
Protection Mechanisms
No specialised structures dedicated to protecting religious minorities; general community protection remains weak.
Challenges
Resource constraints, insecurity and uneven territorial control limit effective response.
EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE: LIMITED
NORF ASSESSMENT
Impact on Freedom of Religion or Belief
Severe restrictions on Freedom of Religion or Belief in Somalia are driven primarily by non-state armed actors, particularly Al-Shabaab, whose ideology and tactics target individuals and communities. Violence, threats and intimidation create a climate of fear that forces many to conceal their beliefs, limits public religious practice and undermines the exercise of fundamental rights. State capacity to prevent, investigate and respond remains constrained by ongoing conflict and uneven territorial control.
OVERALL EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE
MODERATE
NORF
Nordic Observatory for Religious Freedom
Evidence • Law • Society • Human Rights
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3.4.6 Integrated NORF Assessment

The preceding sections have examined Somalia's legal framework, government practice, societal conditions and security environment through the NORF evidence-based methodology. Considered individually, each dimension provides only a partial understanding of the country's protection of freedom of religion or belief. When assessed collectively, however, they provide a comprehensive picture of the practical enjoyment of rights protected under Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and related international human rights instruments.

NORF's integrated assessment does not rely upon any single indicator. Constitutional provisions, documented incidents or individual case studies are insufficient on their own to determine overall compliance. Instead, conclusions are derived through systematic triangulation of legal analysis, institutional performance, societal dynamics and verified empirical evidence.

Integrated Assessment of the Legal Framework

Somalia's constitutional framework recognises Islam as the State religion and incorporates the general principles of Sharia into the legal order. While international human rights law does not prohibit the recognition of an official religion, several constitutional provisions limit important aspects of freedom of religion or belief, including the public propagation of religions other than Islam.

The Constitution does not explicitly guarantee the right to change religion, nor does it establish comprehensive legal protections for minority religious communities comparable to those enjoyed by the Muslim majority.

Accordingly, the legal framework provides **partial protection** for internationally recognised freedom of religion or belief while maintaining constitutional restrictions that affect the practical exercise of several rights protected under Article 18 of the ICCPR.

Evidence confidence: High

Integrated Assessment of Government Practice

Government institutions generally administer the constitutional framework consistently with Somalia's Islamic identity. Public authorities actively support Islamic religious institutions, education and community engagement.

At the same time, available evidence demonstrates comparatively limited institutional mechanisms specifically designed to facilitate or protect minority religious communities.

The assessment further recognises that the Federal Government's ability to implement constitutional obligations remains constrained by continuing armed conflict, limited administrative capacity and uneven territorial control.

Consequently, institutional limitations reflect both constitutional design and broader governance challenges rather than deliberate policy alone.

Evidence confidence: Moderate to High

Integrated Assessment of Societal Conditions

Religion remains deeply integrated into Somali society and functions as an important source of cultural identity, social cohesion and community organisation.

Available evidence indicates that family expectations, clan structures and local community norms significantly influence individual religious identity. Persons perceived as departing from prevailing religious expectations may experience social exclusion, family rejection or pressure to conceal their beliefs.

These societal dynamics do not necessarily originate from state policy, yet they have important implications for the practical enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief.

NORF therefore concludes that societal pressure constitutes a significant independent factor affecting the exercise of internationally protected rights.

Evidence confidence: Moderate

Integrated Assessment of Violence and Security

The available evidence demonstrates that violence remains one of the principal constraints on freedom of religion or belief in Somalia.

The overwhelming majority of severe violations documented by international organisations are attributed to non-state armed actors, particularly Al-Shabaab, rather than to formal government institutions.

Extremist violence targets individuals and communities perceived as departing from the group's interpretation of Islam and creates a climate of fear extending beyond those directly affected.

Government counter-terrorism operations have reduced extremist control in certain regions but have not eliminated the broader security challenges affecting religious freedom.

NORF therefore concludes that insecurity remains one of the most significant practical obstacles to the exercise of freedom of religion or belief.

Evidence confidence: High

Interaction Between the Four Dimensions

One of the principal findings of the NORF methodology is that restrictions on freedom of religion or belief in Somalia cannot be explained by any single factor.

Instead, limitations arise through the interaction of four mutually reinforcing dimensions:

- constitutional and legal provisions that privilege Islam and restrict aspects of religious manifestation;
- institutional constraints associated with fragile governance and uneven state capacity;
- societal norms rooted in family, clan and community structures that discourage religious diversity; and
- persistent violence and intimidation by extremist non-state actors.

Taken together, these dimensions create an environment in which the practical exercise of freedom of religion or belief differs substantially from the formal guarantees recognised under international human rights law.

This interaction demonstrates the value of NORF's multidimensional methodology. Focusing exclusively on legislation, violence or constitutional design would not adequately explain the overall human rights situation.

Overall NORF Assessment

The evidence indicates that Somalia provides constitutional recognition of certain fundamental rights while maintaining legal provisions that restrict aspects of freedom of religion or belief, particularly concerning public religious propagation and the legal environment for minority faith communities.

Government institutions operate under significant structural constraints arising from prolonged conflict and limited territorial control. Although authorities continue to strengthen national institutions and conduct extensive counter-terrorism operations, institutional protection for minority religious communities remains limited.

At the societal level, religious identity is closely linked to family, clan and national identity, contributing to significant social pressure affecting individuals who seek to change or publicly manifest beliefs outside prevailing norms.

Finally, the security environment continues to be characterised by serious violence perpetrated primarily by extremist non-state actors, creating substantial risks for vulnerable religious communities and individuals.

When assessed collectively, the available evidence indicates that the practical enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief in Somalia remains significantly constrained across multiple dimensions. These constraints arise from the combined effects of constitutional structures, institutional limitations, societal dynamics and persistent insecurity rather than from any single factor alone.

Evidence Confidence

The overall assessment is assigned **High Confidence**.

This confidence level reflects:

- extensive corroboration across independent governmental, intergovernmental and academic sources;
- consistent reporting over multiple years;
- convergence between legal analysis and documented practice;
- strong empirical evidence concerning security conditions and extremist violence; and
- transparent recognition of areas where evidence remains limited or subject to ongoing monitoring.

NORF Analytical Conclusion

The Somali case demonstrates that assessing freedom of religion or belief requires more than evaluating constitutional texts or documenting isolated violations. Legal structures, institutional capacity, societal norms and security conditions interact to shape the practical enjoyment of internationally protected rights.

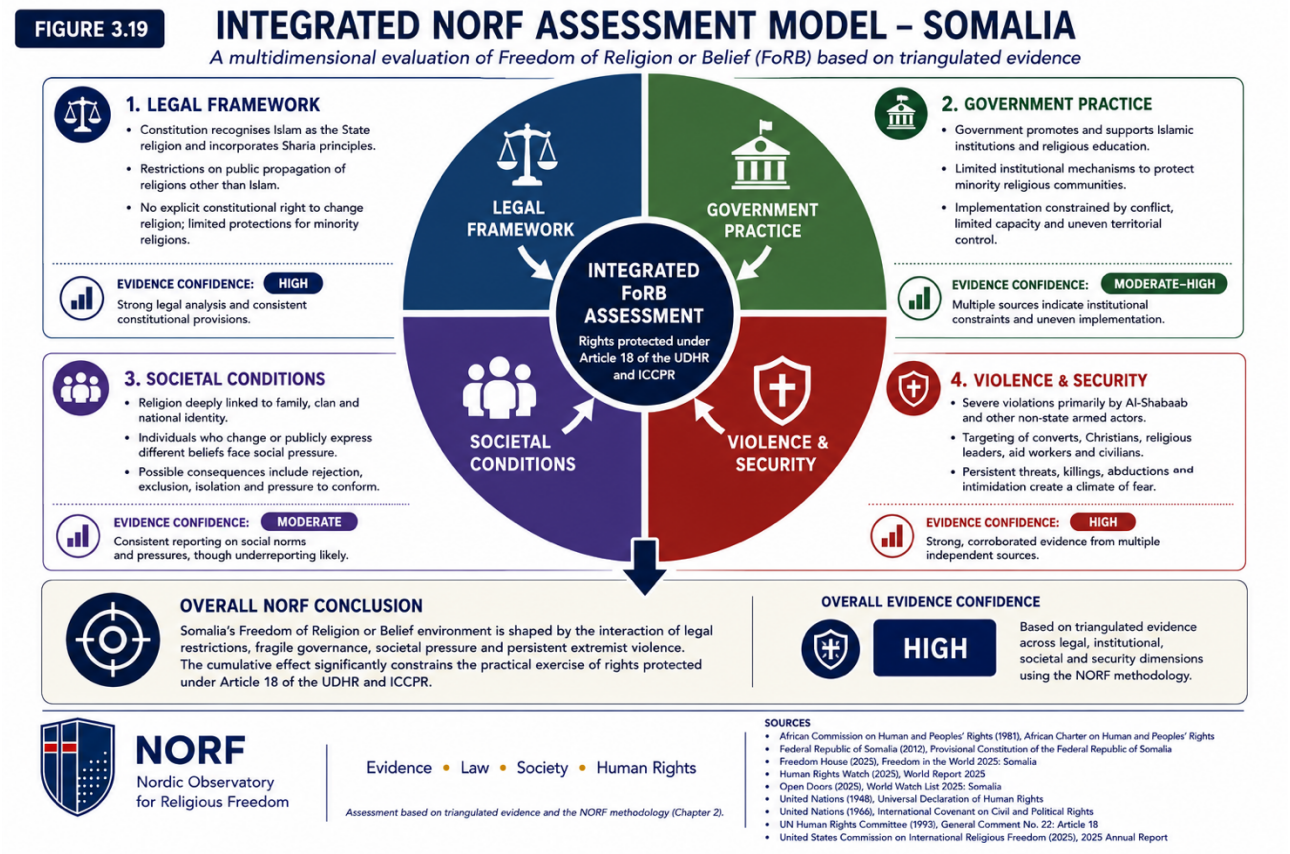
NORF's integrated methodology enables these relationships to be examined systematically and comparatively. Rather than reducing complex human rights environments to a single indicator, the methodology identifies the distinct contributions of law, governance, society and security while producing an overall assessment grounded in transparent empirical evidence.

This multidimensional approach provides policymakers, researchers and civil society organisations with a more accurate basis for understanding both the current state of freedom of religion or belief and the factors most likely to influence future developments.

NORF Methodological Observation

Freedom of Religion or Belief should be assessed as an interconnected human rights ecosystem rather than a collection of isolated indicators. Constitutional law, government performance, societal dynamics and security conditions each contribute to the practical enjoyment of religious freedom. Reliable assessment therefore requires integration of these dimensions through transparent evidence triangulation, explicit confidence assessment and internationally recognised human rights standards.

Figure 3.19



APA 7 References

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3.4.7 Future Outlook and Risk Assessment

Understanding the current state of freedom of religion or belief provides only part of the analytical picture. Policymakers, international organisations and civil society actors also require an assessment of the factors likely to influence future developments. While future events cannot be predicted with certainty, observable political, legal, social and security trends provide a basis for assessing potential risks and opportunities.

NORF therefore concludes each country assessment with a forward-looking analysis that identifies the principal drivers likely to affect freedom of religion or belief over the coming three to five years. Rather than predicting specific events, this assessment evaluates the probability that current trends will continue, improve or deteriorate based on the available evidence.

Political Outlook

Somalia continues to pursue state-building, constitutional reform and security-sector development following decades of conflict and institutional fragmentation. Progress in these areas has the potential to strengthen the protection of fundamental rights by improving administrative capacity, expanding judicial access and increasing government control over territory.

However, political progress remains vulnerable to continued security challenges, disputes between federal and state authorities, and broader governance constraints. The pace of institutional reform is therefore likely to remain uneven over the medium term.

NORF Risk Assessment: Moderate

Security Outlook

The security environment is expected to remain the single most significant variable influencing freedom of religion or belief.

Although military operations have reduced Al-Shabaab's territorial influence in several regions, the organisation continues to demonstrate operational capability through asymmetric attacks, targeted assassinations and intimidation.

Even if territorial control continues to improve, extremist groups are likely to retain the capacity to influence the practical exercise of freedom of religion or belief through violence and fear.

Consequently, significant improvements in religious freedom will remain closely linked to broader improvements in national security.

NORF Risk Assessment: High

Legal Outlook

The current constitutional framework continues to recognise Islam as the state religion and incorporates Sharia as a constitutional principle.

Although Somalia continues to engage with international human rights mechanisms, there is presently limited evidence suggesting imminent constitutional reforms relating specifically to freedom of religion or belief.

Incremental legislative development may occur as state institutions mature. Nevertheless, substantial legal changes affecting constitutional provisions on religion appear unlikely in the short term.

NORF Risk Assessment: Moderate

Government Capacity

International support from the African Union, the United Nations, the World Bank and bilateral partners continues to strengthen Somalia's public institutions.

Continued improvements in governance capacity could enhance law enforcement, judicial effectiveness and administrative protection for vulnerable communities.

However, institutional development is likely to remain uneven across regions, and implementation gaps may persist despite legislative progress.

NORF Risk Assessment: Moderate

Societal Developments

Somalia's religious identity remains deeply embedded within family structures, community life and national culture.

Social attitudes generally evolve more gradually than political institutions or legislation. Consequently, significant changes relating to public acceptance of religious diversity are likely to occur slowly.

Urbanisation, education, increased regional integration and digital communication may contribute to greater exposure to diverse perspectives over time. Nevertheless, available evidence does not presently indicate rapid societal transformation.

NORF Risk Assessment: Moderate

International Engagement

Somalia continues to cooperate with international organisations and participates in mechanisms such as the Universal Periodic Review, while receiving extensive international support for governance and institutional reform.

Continued engagement offers opportunities to strengthen legislative protections, improve institutional capacity and increase compliance with international human rights standards.

The extent to which these opportunities translate into measurable improvements will depend upon domestic political developments and continued international engagement.

NORF Opportunity Assessment: Moderate to High

Principal Drivers to Monitor

NORF identifies six indicators that should be monitored during the next reporting cycle because they are most likely to influence future developments:

1. Territorial control and the operational capacity of Al-Shabaab.
2. Progress in constitutional and legal reform.
3. Institutional strengthening of police, judiciary and public administration.
4. Protection of religious minorities and individuals who change religion.
5. Trends in religiously motivated violence and intimidation.
6. Continued engagement with international human rights mechanisms.

Monitoring these indicators enables future assessments to evaluate not only whether conditions change, but also why they change.

Overall Outlook

The available evidence suggests that Somalia is likely to experience gradual institutional improvement over the medium term while continuing to face significant security challenges. The principal risks affecting freedom of religion or belief are expected to remain associated with extremist violence, uneven governance capacity and the interaction between constitutional provisions and societal norms.

Meaningful improvements are therefore most likely to occur through cumulative progress across multiple sectors rather than through isolated legislative reforms. Continued strengthening of state institutions, enhanced protection of vulnerable communities and sustained reductions in extremist violence would together create the conditions necessary for measurable improvements in the practical enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief.

Conversely, deterioration in the security environment or setbacks in governance reform would likely have direct consequences for the protection of these rights.

NORF Strategic Assessment

The evidence indicates that **security remains the critical enabling variable** for future progress. Sustainable improvements in Freedom of Religion or Belief are unlikely to result from legal reform alone. They will depend upon the interaction of four mutually reinforcing factors:

- strengthened rule of law and judicial institutions;
- improved territorial control and civilian security;
- gradual institutional implementation of constitutional protections; and
- continued engagement with international human rights standards.

Accordingly, NORF assesses Somalia's overall trajectory as **cautiously improving but fragile**. Positive developments remain possible, yet progress is likely to be incremental and contingent upon continued advances in security, governance and institutional capacity.

Figure 3.20


FIGURE 3.20
NORF FUTURE OUTLOOK AND RISK MATRIX – SOMALIA
Evidence-based assessment of factors likely to influence Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB)
2026–2030
Outlook period reflects current trends, risks and opportunities over the next 3–5 years.
1 POLITICAL STABILITY
MODERATE RISK
Political progress continues but remains vulnerable to disputes between federal and state authorities, clan dynamics and delayed constitutional reform.
TREND
Stable
EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE
MODERATE
KEY EVIDENCE
• Ongoing state-building efforts
• Political agreements remain fragile
• Reform agenda moving slowly
2 SECURITY ENVIRONMENT
HIGH RISK
Al-Shabaab remains capable of attacks, intimidation and targeted violence. Security improvements are uneven and fragile across regions.
TREND
Deteriorating
EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE
HIGH
KEY EVIDENCE
• Persistent extremist violence
• Assassinations and intimidation
• Insecurity restricts religious life
OVERALL OUTLOOK
CAUTIOUSLY IMPROVING BUT FRAGILE
Progress is possible but depends on security, governance and institutional strengthening across all sectors.
3 LEGAL REFORM
MODERATE RISK
Constitution recognises Islam as State religion and restricts certain religious manifestations. Major legal reform appears unlikely in the short term.
TREND
Stable
EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE
MODERATE
KEY EVIDENCE
• Constitutional provisions unchanged
• Limited legislative reform activity
• Incremental legal development only
4 GOVERNMENT CAPACITY
MODERATE OPPORTUNITY
International support strengthens institutions. Improved capacity could enhance protection of rights, though implementation gaps persist.
TREND
Improving
EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE
MODERATE
KEY EVIDENCE
• Growing international support
• Police and judiciary reforms ongoing
• Capacity uneven across regions
High Risk
Moderate Risk
Stable / Uncertain
Moderate Opportunity
High Opportunity
ABOUT THIS ASSESSMENT
This outlook is based on current trends and the interaction of political, legal, societal and security factors that influence Freedom of Religion or Belief in Somalia. It is not a prediction but an evidence-based risk and opportunity assessment over the next 3–5 years.
5 SOCIETAL DEVELOPMENT
MODERATE RISK
Religion remains central to identity, family and community. Social change is gradual; pressure to conform is likely to persist in the near to medium term.
TREND
Stable
EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE
MODERATE
KEY EVIDENCE
• Deeply rooted social and clan norms
• Limited public acceptance of diversity
• Change likely to be gradual
6 INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT
MODERATE–HIGH OPPORTUNITY
Strong international involvement offers opportunities for reform, capacity building and alignment with human rights standards through sustained engagement.
TREND
Improving
EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE
MODERATE–HIGH
KEY EVIDENCE
• Active engagement in UN mechanisms
• Continued donor and AU support
• Opportunities for human rights reforms
KEY DRIVERS TO MONITOR (2026–2030)
1 TERRITORIAL CONTROL AND AL-SHABAAB CAPACITY
Changes in extremist control and operational capability will directly affect security and religious freedom.
2 CONSTITUTIONAL AND LEGAL REFORM
Legal and constitutional reforms will shape the extent of rights and protections available to individuals.
3 INSTITUTIONAL STRENGTHENING
Improvements in police, judiciary and public administration will determine protection and accountability.
4 PROTECTION OF VULNERABLE GROUPS
The safety of minorities, converts and religious communities remains a key indicator of progress.
5 TRENDS IN VIOLENCE AND INTIMIDATION
Frequency, severity and geographic spread of religiously motivated violence must be closely monitored.
6 INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS ENGAGEMENT
Sustained participation in international mechanisms can drive reform and strengthen accountability.
NORF
Nordic Observatory for Religious Freedom
Evidence • Law • Society • Human Rights
Assessment based on triangulated evidence and the NORF methodology (Chapter 2).
SOURCES
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• Federal Republic of Somalia (2012), Provisional Constitution
• Freedom House (2025), Freedom in the World 2025: Somalia
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3.4.8 Priority Areas for Engagement

The preceding assessment has identified a range of legal, institutional, societal and security-related factors influencing the enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief in Somalia. While all contribute to the overall human rights environment, available evidence indicates that some areas present greater opportunities for measurable improvement than others.

NORF therefore concludes each country assessment by identifying priority areas where sustained national and international engagement is most likely to strengthen the practical protection of freedom of religion or belief.

These priorities are derived from the empirical findings presented throughout this chapter. They are not policy prescriptions directed at any particular government or organisation but rather an analytical assessment of where future efforts may have the greatest impact.

Priority Area 1: Strengthening Civilian Security

The evidence consistently demonstrates that insecurity remains the most significant practical obstacle to the enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief in Somalia.

Persistent attacks by Al-Shabaab and other extremist actors continue to affect civilians across several regions, particularly individuals perceived as departing from prevailing religious norms or cooperating with state institutions.

Improved civilian security, expanded territorial control by legitimate authorities and strengthened protection of vulnerable communities would likely produce positive effects across multiple dimensions of freedom of religion or belief.

Expected impact: Very High

Priority Area 2: Strengthening Rule of Law

Effective protection of human rights depends upon functioning public institutions capable of preventing violations, investigating abuses and ensuring equal access to justice.

Continued investment in police professionalism, judicial independence, prosecutorial capacity and local administration may enhance protection not only for religious minorities but for all citizens.

Because institutional capacity remains uneven throughout Somalia, strengthening the rule of law represents a long-term priority.

Expected impact: High

Priority Area 3: Constitutional and Legal Development

Somalia's constitutional framework provides an important foundation for state-building while also containing provisions that influence the practical exercise of freedom of religion or belief.

Future constitutional review processes, legislative development and judicial interpretation may provide opportunities to strengthen legal certainty, clarify fundamental rights and improve consistency with international human rights obligations.

NORF recognises that constitutional reform is ultimately a sovereign national process. The analytical observation is simply that legal development represents an important variable influencing future protection of freedom of religion or belief.

Expected impact: Moderate to High

Priority Area 4: Protection of Vulnerable Communities

Available evidence indicates that the practical experience of freedom of religion or belief differs considerably between the religious majority and small minority communities.

Individuals who convert from Islam, publicly identify with minority religions or are perceived to hold non-conforming beliefs may experience heightened vulnerability arising from the interaction of legal provisions, societal expectations and security conditions.

Improved protection mechanisms, confidential reporting systems and strengthened institutional monitoring may contribute to reducing these vulnerabilities.

Expected impact: High

Priority Area 5: Community Dialogue and Social Cohesion

The assessment demonstrates that societal attitudes play an important role in shaping the practical enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief.

Religious leaders, educators, community organisations and civil society actors therefore represent important stakeholders in promoting peaceful coexistence, mutual understanding and respect for the rights of all individuals.

Evidence from other post-conflict societies suggests that long-term improvements in religious freedom frequently accompany broader efforts to strengthen social cohesion, reconciliation and inclusive civic participation.

Expected impact: Moderate

Priority Area 6: International Partnership

Somalia continues to cooperate with the United Nations, the African Union, international financial institutions and numerous bilateral partners.

These partnerships provide opportunities for institutional strengthening, judicial reform, security-sector development and improved implementation of international human rights obligations.

Continued international engagement is therefore likely to remain an important enabling factor supporting progress across multiple sectors.

Expected impact: Moderate to High

Cross-Cutting Observation

The evidence suggests that no single intervention is likely to produce substantial improvements in freedom of religion or belief on its own.

Instead, progress depends upon the interaction of several mutually reinforcing developments:

- improved security;
- stronger public institutions;
- continued constitutional evolution;
- enhanced protection of vulnerable communities;
- gradual societal change; and
- sustained international cooperation.

Accordingly, NORF concludes that integrated approaches are likely to produce greater long-term impact than isolated interventions focused exclusively on legal reform or security policy.

NORF Priority Matrix

Based on the integrated assessment presented in this chapter, NORF identifies the following priorities for continued monitoring and engagement:

Priority Area	Expected Impact	Time Horizon	Evidence Confidence
Civilian Security	Very High	Short–Medium	High
Rule of Law	High	Medium–Long	High
Protection of Vulnerable Communities	High	Medium	Moderate–High
Constitutional and Legal Development	Moderate–High	Long	Moderate
International Partnership	Moderate–High	Medium	High
Community Dialogue and Social Cohesion	Moderate	Long	Moderate

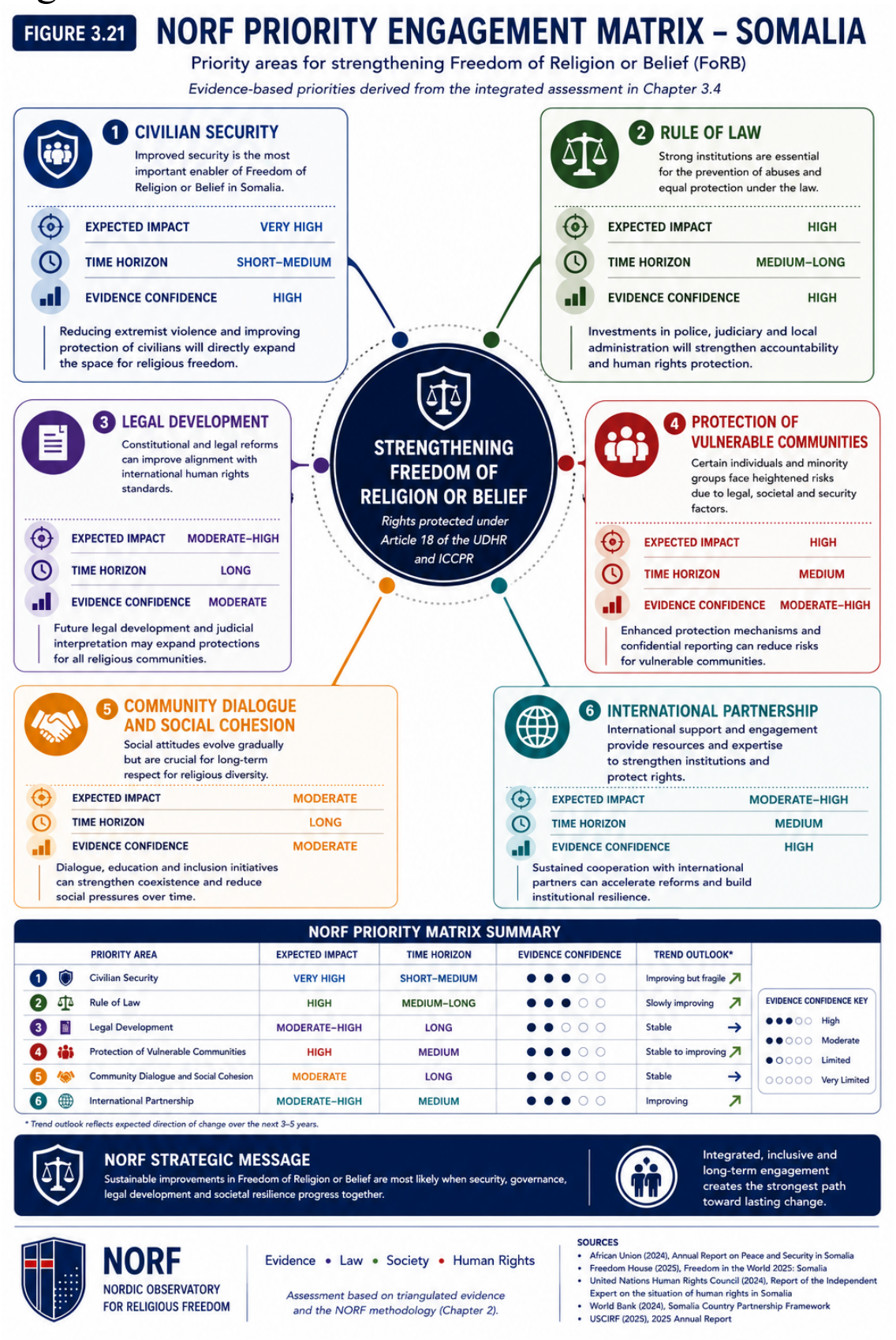
The table should be interpreted as an analytical prioritisation rather than a ranking of policy preferences.

NORF Strategic Conclusion

The Somalia assessment demonstrates that freedom of religion or belief is influenced by a combination of constitutional arrangements, institutional capacity, societal dynamics and persistent insecurity. The available evidence indicates that the greatest opportunities for measurable improvement lie not in isolated reforms but in coordinated progress across these interconnected domains.

NORF therefore concludes that future engagement should prioritise interventions capable of strengthening both the immediate protection of vulnerable individuals and the long-term resilience of Somalia's legal and institutional framework. Such an approach is consistent with international human rights standards and with the evidence-based methodology applied throughout this report.

Figure 3.21


FIGURE 3.21
NORF PRIORITY ENGAGEMENT MATRIX – SOMALIA
Priority areas for strengthening Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB)
Evidence-based priorities derived from the integrated assessment in Chapter 3.4
1 CIVILIAN SECURITY
Improved security is the most important enabler of Freedom of Religion or Belief in Somalia.
EXPECTED IMPACT VERY HIGH
TIME HORIZON SHORT–MEDIUM
EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE HIGH
Reducing extremist violence and improving protection of civilians will directly expand the space for religious freedom.
2 RULE OF LAW
Strong institutions are essential for the prevention of abuses and equal protection under the law.
EXPECTED IMPACT HIGH
TIME HORIZON MEDIUM–LONG
EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE HIGH
Investments in police, judiciary and local administration will strengthen accountability and human rights protection.
STRENGTHENING FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF
Rights protected under Article 18 of the UDHR and ICCPR
3 LEGAL DEVELOPMENT
Constitutional and legal reforms can improve alignment with international human rights standards.
EXPECTED IMPACT MODERATE–HIGH
TIME HORIZON LONG
EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE MODERATE
Future legal development and judicial interpretation may expand protections for all religious communities.
4 PROTECTION OF VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES
Certain individuals and minority groups face heightened risks due to legal, societal and security factors.
EXPECTED IMPACT HIGH
TIME HORIZON MEDIUM
EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE MODERATE–HIGH
Enhanced protection mechanisms and confidential reporting can reduce risks for vulnerable communities.
5 COMMUNITY DIALOGUE AND SOCIAL COHESION
Social attitudes evolve gradually but are crucial for long-term respect for religious diversity.
EXPECTED IMPACT MODERATE
TIME HORIZON LONG
EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE MODERATE
Dialogue, education and inclusion initiatives can strengthen coexistence and reduce social pressures over time.
6 INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIP
International support and engagement provide resources and expertise to strengthen institutions and protect rights.
EXPECTED IMPACT MODERATE–HIGH
TIME HORIZON MEDIUM
EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE HIGH
Sustained cooperation with international partners can accelerate reforms and build institutional resilience.
NORF PRIORITY MATRIX SUMMARY
PRIORITY AREA | EXPECTED IMPACT | TIME HORIZON | EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE | TREND OUTLOOK*
1 Civilian Security | VERY HIGH | SHORT–MEDIUM | ●●●○○ | Improving but fragile
2 Rule of Law | HIGH | MEDIUM–LONG | ●●●○○ | Slowly improving
3 Legal Development | MODERATE–HIGH | LONG | ●●○○○ | Stable
4 Protection of Vulnerable Communities | HIGH | MEDIUM | ●●●○○ | Stable to improving
5 Community Dialogue and Social Cohesion | MODERATE | LONG | ●●○○○ | Stable
6 International Partnership | MODERATE–HIGH | MEDIUM | ●●●○○ | Improving
EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE KEY
●●●○○ High
●●○○○ Moderate
●○○○○ Limited
○○○○○ Very Limited
* Trend outlook reflects expected direction of change over the next 3–5 years.
NORF STRATEGIC MESSAGE
Sustainable improvements in Freedom of Religion or Belief are most likely when security, governance, legal development and societal resilience progress together.
Integrated, inclusive and long-term engagement creates the strongest path toward lasting change.
NORF
NORDIC OBSERVATORY FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
Evidence • Law • Society • Human Rights
Assessment based on triangulated evidence and the NORF methodology (Chapter 2).
SOURCES
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3.4.9 NORF Country Assessment Summary

The assessment of Somalia has examined the historical, legal, institutional, societal and security dimensions shaping Freedom of Religion or Belief through the NORF evidence validation framework. Drawing upon multiple independent governmental, intergovernmental, academic and civil society sources, the chapter has sought to distinguish between constitutional provisions, government practice, societal dynamics and the broader security environment in order to provide a comprehensive evidence-based assessment.

The evidence demonstrates that Somalia remains one of the world's most religiously homogeneous societies, where Islam forms a central component of constitutional identity, public institutions and social organisation. Religion continues to contribute significantly to national cohesion, community life and cultural continuity. At the same time, the interaction of constitutional provisions, fragile governance, societal expectations and persistent extremist violence creates important constraints on the practical enjoyment of internationally recognised Freedom of Religion or Belief.

NORF's assessment does not identify a single causal factor explaining these constraints. Rather, the available evidence indicates that limitations arise through the cumulative interaction of several mutually reinforcing dimensions.

Historical Context

Historical analysis demonstrates that contemporary religious conditions cannot be understood without considering Somalia's long-term historical development. Indigenous religious traditions, centuries of Red Sea commerce, the gradual spread of Islam, colonial administration, state formation and prolonged conflict have together shaped the country's present religious landscape. This historical perspective provides essential context for understanding why constitutional arrangements, social expectations and institutional structures have developed as they have.

Legal Assessment

Somalia's constitutional framework recognises Islam as the State religion while incorporating the general principles of Sharia into the legal order. Although international human rights law permits states to recognise an official religion, certain constitutional provisions—including restrictions on the public propagation of religions other than Islam and the absence of explicit constitutional protection for changing religion—affect the practical scope of Freedom of Religion or Belief.

The legal framework therefore provides partial protection while maintaining restrictions relevant to Article 18 of the ICCPR.

Assessment: Moderate Legal Restriction

Evidence Confidence: High

Government Practice

Government institutions continue to strengthen administrative capacity under challenging security conditions. Public authorities generally facilitate Islamic religious life and cooperate extensively with religious institutions.

At the same time, institutional mechanisms specifically protecting minority religious communities remain limited, while uneven territorial control continues to constrain effective implementation of constitutional rights.

Assessment: Moderate Institutional Limitation

Evidence Confidence: Moderate–High

Societal Environment

Religion remains deeply embedded within Somali family structures, clan organisation and community life.

The evidence indicates that societal expectations significantly influence individual religious identity and may affect persons whose beliefs differ from prevailing norms, particularly converts from Islam and members of small minority communities.

These pressures are primarily social rather than legal but nevertheless influence the practical exercise of internationally recognised rights.

Assessment: Significant Societal Pressure

Evidence Confidence: Moderate

Violence and Security

Persistent insecurity remains the single greatest practical constraint affecting Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Available evidence consistently identifies Al-Shabaab as the principal actor responsible for severe religiously related violence, intimidation and coercion. Although government counter-terrorism operations have weakened the group's territorial control in some regions, extremist violence continues to create substantial risks for vulnerable communities.

Assessment: High Security Risk

Evidence Confidence: High

Integrated NORF Conclusion

The integrated assessment demonstrates that restrictions on Freedom of Religion or Belief in Somalia result from the interaction of legal structures, institutional limitations, societal dynamics and extremist violence.

No single dimension adequately explains the country's overall human rights situation. Rather, each reinforces the others, creating an environment in which the practical enjoyment of internationally protected rights remains significantly constrained.

At the same time, the assessment also identifies areas of gradual institutional improvement associated with state-building, international cooperation and expanding government capacity in certain regions.

NORF therefore concludes that Somalia's trajectory should be understood as one of **incremental institutional progress within a persistently fragile security environment**

Overall NORF Assessment Dashboard

Assessment Dimension	NORF Assessment	Evidence Confidence
Historical Context	Essential explanatory factor	High
Legal Framework	Moderate restriction	High
Government Practice	Moderate institutional limitation	Moderate–High
Societal Environment	Significant societal pressure	Moderate
Violence & Security	High security risk	High
Overall FoRB Environment	**Significantly Constrained**	**High**

Strategic Outlook

The evidence indicates that future improvements in Freedom of Religion or Belief are most likely to occur through sustained progress across four interconnected areas:

- improved civilian security;
- stronger public institutions;
- continued constitutional and legal development;
- gradual strengthening of societal resilience and inclusive governance.

The interaction of these factors will largely determine whether measurable improvements occur during the coming reporting cycles.

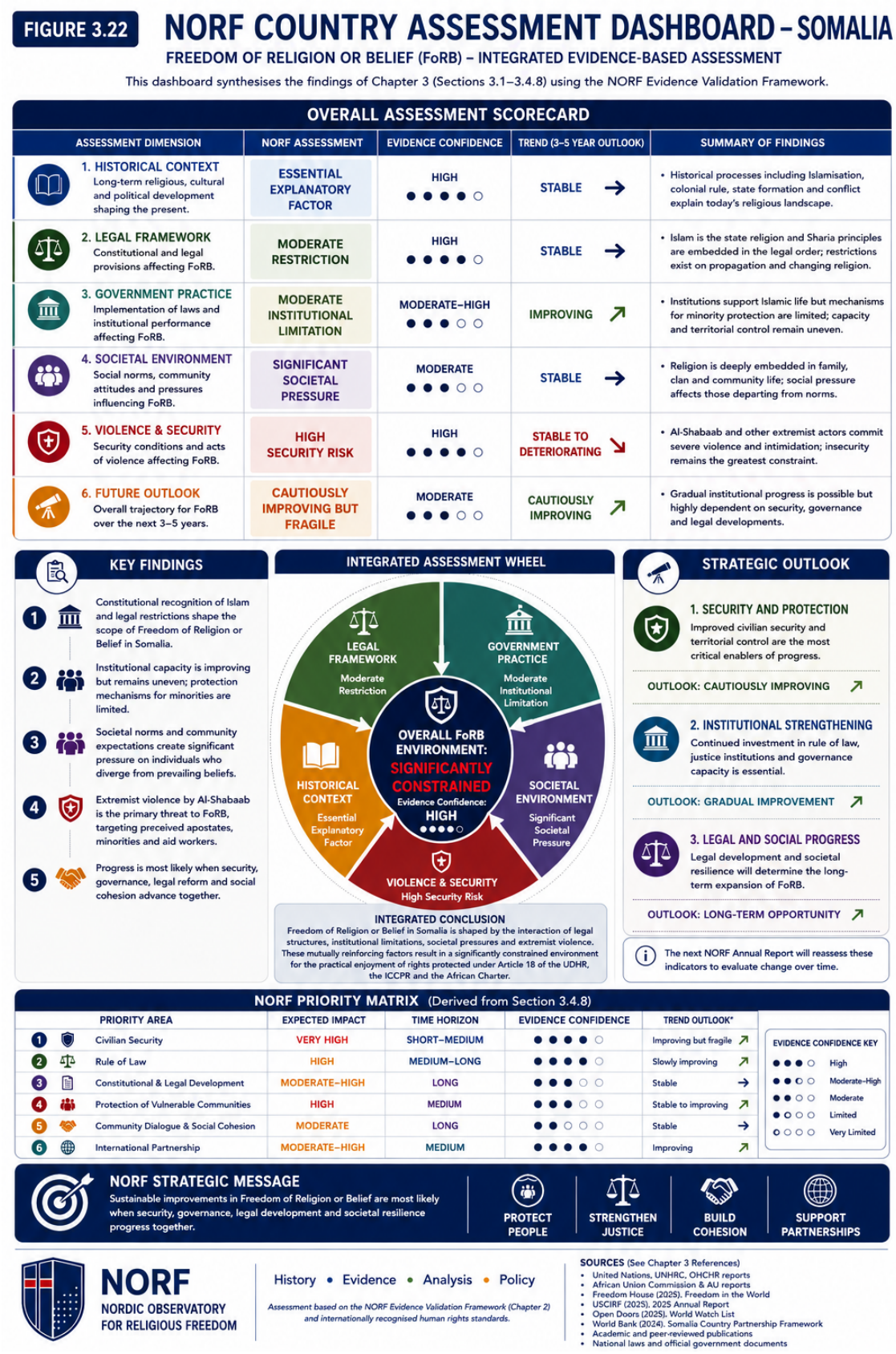
NORF Final Assessment

Based upon the available evidence, NORF concludes that Somalia currently provides **limited practical enjoyment of Freedom of Religion or Belief when assessed against international human rights standards**. This conclusion reflects not only constitutional and legal restrictions but also the cumulative effects of fragile governance, societal pressures and persistent extremist violence.

At the same time, the evidence demonstrates that Somalia is not a static environment. Ongoing state-building, institutional development and international engagement create opportunities for gradual improvement. Future assessments should therefore focus on whether these developments translate into measurable expansion of the rights protected under Article 18 of the UDHR, the ICCPR and the African Charter.

The purpose of this assessment is not to classify Somalia according to a single label but to provide a transparent, evidence-based understanding of the factors that shape Freedom of Religion or Belief. By applying a consistent methodology across all countries, NORF enables meaningful comparison over time while recognising the historical, legal and societal particularities that characterise each national context.

Figure 3.22


FIGURE 3.22
NORF COUNTRY ASSESSMENT DASHBOARD – SOMALIA
FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF (FoRB) – INTEGRATED EVIDENCE-BASED ASSESSMENT
This dashboard synthesises the findings of Chapter 3 (Sections 3.1–3.4.8) using the NORF Evidence Validation Framework.
OVERALL ASSESSMENT SCORECARD
ASSESSMENT DIMENSION
NORF ASSESSMENT
EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE
TREND (3–5 YEAR OUTLOOK)
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS
1. HISTORICAL CONTEXT
Long-term religious, cultural and political development shaping the present.
ESSENTIAL EXPLANATORY FACTOR
HIGH
STABLE
• Historical processes including Islamisation, colonial rule, state formation and conflict explain today's religious landscape.
2. LEGAL FRAMEWORK
Constitutional and legal provisions affecting FoRB.
MODERATE RESTRICTION
HIGH
STABLE
• Islam is the state religion and Sharia principles are embedded in the legal order; restrictions exist on propagation and changing religion.
3. GOVERNMENT PRACTICE
Implementation of laws and institutional performance affecting FoRB.
MODERATE INSTITUTIONAL LIMITATION
MODERATE–HIGH
IMPROVING
• Institutions support Islamic life but mechanisms for minority protection are limited; capacity and territorial control remain uneven.
4. SOCIETAL ENVIRONMENT
Social norms, community attitudes and pressures influencing FoRB.
SIGNIFICANT SOCIETAL PRESSURE
MODERATE
STABLE
• Religion is deeply embedded in family, clan and community life; social pressure affects those departing from norms.
5. VIOLENCE & SECURITY
Security conditions and acts of violence affecting FoRB.
HIGH SECURITY RISK
HIGH
STABLE TO DETERIORATING
• Al-Shabaab and other extremist actors commit severe violence and intimidation; insecurity remains the greatest constraint.
6. FUTURE OUTLOOK
Overall trajectory for FoRB over the next 3–5 years.
CAUTIOUSLY IMPROVING BUT FRAGILE
MODERATE
CAUTIOUSLY IMPROVING
• Gradual institutional progress is possible but highly dependent on security, governance and legal developments.
KEY FINDINGS
1 Constitutional recognition of Islam and legal restrictions shape the scope of Freedom of Religion or Belief in Somalia.
2 Institutional capacity is improving but remains uneven; protection mechanisms for minorities are limited.
3 Societal norms and community expectations create significant pressure on individuals who diverge from prevailing beliefs.
4 Extremist violence by Al-Shabaab is the primary threat to FoRB, targeting perceived apostates, minorities and aid workers.
5 Progress is most likely when security, governance, legal reform and social cohesion advance together.
INTEGRATED ASSESSMENT WHEEL
LEGAL FRAMEWORK
Moderate Restriction
GOVERNMENT PRACTICE
Moderate Institutional Limitation
HISTORICAL CONTEXT
Essential Explanatory Factor
SOCIETAL ENVIRONMENT
Significant Societal Pressure
VIOLENCE & SECURITY
High Security Risk
OVERALL FoRB ENVIRONMENT:
SIGNIFICANTLY CONSTRAINED
Evidence Confidence:
HIGH
INTEGRATED CONCLUSION
Freedom of Religion or Belief in Somalia is shaped by the interaction of legal structures, institutional limitations, societal pressures and extremist violence. These mutually reinforcing factors result in a significantly constrained environment for the practical enjoyment of rights protected under Article 18 of the UDHR, the ICCPR and the African Charter.
STRATEGIC OUTLOOK
1. SECURITY AND PROTECTION
Improved civilian security and territorial control are the most critical enablers of progress.
OUTLOOK: CAUTIOUSLY IMPROVING
2. INSTITUTIONAL STRENGTHENING
Continued investment in rule of law, justice institutions and governance capacity is essential.
OUTLOOK: GRADUAL IMPROVEMENT
3. LEGAL AND SOCIAL PROGRESS
Legal development and societal resilience will determine the long-term expansion of FoRB.
OUTLOOK: LONG-TERM OPPORTUNITY
The next NORF Annual Report will reassess these indicators to evaluate change over time.
NORF PRIORITY MATRIX (Derived from Section 3.4.8)
PRIORITY AREA
EXPECTED IMPACT
TIME HORIZON
EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE
TREND OUTLOOK*
1 Civilian Security — VERY HIGH — SHORT–MEDIUM — Improving but fragile
2 Rule of Law — HIGH — MEDIUM–LONG — Slowly improving
3 Constitutional & Legal Development — MODERATE–HIGH — LONG — Stable
4 Protection of Vulnerable Communities — HIGH — MEDIUM — Stable to improving
5 Community Dialogue & Social Cohesion — MODERATE — LONG — Stable
6 International Partnership — MODERATE–HIGH — MEDIUM — Improving
EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE KEY
High
Moderate–High
Moderate
Limited
Very Limited
NORF STRATEGIC MESSAGE
Sustainable improvements in Freedom of Religion or Belief are most likely when security, governance, legal development and societal resilience progress together.
PROTECT PEOPLE
STRENGTHEN JUSTICE
BUILD COHESION
SUPPORT PARTNERSHIPS
NORF
NORDIC OBSERVATORY FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
History • Evidence • Analysis • Policy
Assessment based on the NORF Evidence Validation Framework (Chapter 2) and internationally recognised human rights standards.
SOURCES (See Chapter 3 References)
• United Nations, UNHRC, OHCHR reports
• African Union Commission & AU reports
• Freedom House (2025). Freedom in the World
• USCIRF (2025). 2025 Annual Report
• Open Doors (2025). World Watch List
• World Bank (2024). Somalia Country Partnership Framework
• Academic and peer-reviewed publications
• National laws and official government documents

APA 7 References

3.B Nigeria

3.B.1 Historical Development

From Ancient Kingdoms to a Multi-Religious Federal Republic

Understanding Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in contemporary Nigeria requires a long-term historical perspective. Nigeria's current religious landscape did not emerge suddenly through modern politics or recent conflict. Rather, it reflects more than a millennium of interaction between indigenous belief systems, Islam, Christianity, colonial governance, demographic change and post-independence state formation.

The NORF methodology therefore examines Nigeria's historical development not simply as chronology, but as an analysis of the historical drivers that continue to shape the country's legal framework, religious demography, societal relations and security environment. This historical perspective provides the essential context for understanding both present challenges and future developments relating to Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Indigenous Civilisations Before Islam and Christianity

Long before the arrival of Islam or Christianity, the territory now known as Nigeria was home to numerous sophisticated societies with diverse political systems, economies and religious traditions.

Archaeological evidence from the **Nok Culture** (c. 1500 BCE–300 CE) demonstrates the existence of one of sub-Saharan Africa's earliest complex societies, known for advanced ironworking and distinctive terracotta sculpture. Although little is known about Nok religious practice, archaeological findings indicate ritual activity associated with ancestor veneration, sacred landscapes and spiritual authority.

Following the decline of the Nok civilisation, several powerful kingdoms and city-states emerged across present-day Nigeria, including the Hausa city-states in the north, the Kanem–Bornu Empire to the northeast, the Yoruba kingdoms of Ife and Oyo in the southwest, the Kingdom of Benin in the south, and numerous Igbo political communities in the southeast.

Despite their political diversity, these societies generally shared religious traditions characterised by belief in a supreme creator, veneration of ancestors, reverence for spiritual intermediaries and a close relationship between religious authority and political leadership. Religious practice was deeply integrated into governance, justice, agriculture and communal identity.

Unlike the exclusive monotheistic traditions that later entered the region, indigenous religions generally accommodated considerable local variation while remaining closely connected to ethnicity, kinship and territory.

The Arrival and Expansion of Islam

Islam reached northern Nigeria gradually between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries through trans-Saharan trade networks linking the central Sudan with North Africa and the wider Islamic world.

Merchants, scholars and jurists introduced Islamic learning alongside commercial exchange. The Kanem–Bornu Empire became one of the earliest major political entities in West Africa to adopt Islam, followed by several Hausa kingdoms whose rulers increasingly incorporated Islamic scholarship and legal principles into state administration.

The spread of Islam was not primarily achieved through military conquest but through trade, diplomacy, scholarship and political patronage. Islamic education flourished, and cities such as Kano and Katsina developed into important centres of learning connected to broader intellectual networks extending across North Africa, Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula.

A decisive turning point occurred in the early nineteenth century with the **Sokoto Jihad** (1804–1808), led by the Islamic scholar **Usman dan Fodio**. The movement criticised corruption, inconsistent application of Islamic law and perceived deviations from Islamic teaching among the Hausa rulers. Its success resulted in the establishment of the **Sokoto Caliphate**, which became one of the largest pre-colonial states in Africa.

The Caliphate institutionalised Islamic governance across much of northern Nigeria, expanding Islamic courts, religious education and administrative structures that continued to influence governance well into the colonial period.

This historical development remains highly significant because many contemporary debates concerning Sharia, Islamic courts and religious authority in northern Nigeria trace their institutional origins to this period.

Christianity and European Contact

Christianity first reached the Nigerian coast through Portuguese traders during the late fifteenth century. Early missionary activity, however, remained geographically limited and achieved relatively modest long-term influence.

The substantial expansion of Christianity occurred during the nineteenth century, particularly following the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Missionary societies from Britain and other European countries established churches, schools, printing presses and medical facilities across southern Nigeria.

Unlike the earlier spread of Islam through trans-Saharan networks, Christian expansion became closely associated with European colonial influence and the rapid development of Western-style education.

Mission schools played a particularly important role in shaping modern Nigeria. They educated many of the country's future political leaders, civil servants and professionals while significantly expanding literacy and access to formal education.

The concentration of missionary activity in southern Nigeria contributed to the emergence of distinct regional patterns of religious affiliation that remain evident today.

Colonial Rule and Religious Geography

British colonial rule fundamentally reshaped Nigeria's political and religious landscape.

Following the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914, British authorities governed an extraordinarily diverse territory comprising hundreds of ethnic groups, multiple legal traditions and distinct religious communities.

The colonial administration adopted a policy of **indirect rule**, particularly in northern Nigeria, where existing Islamic institutions and traditional rulers were largely preserved. Islamic courts continued to function in many areas, while Christian missionary activity was significantly more restricted than in the south.

In contrast, southern Nigeria experienced extensive missionary expansion, rapid educational development and increasing integration into colonial administrative structures.

Although this policy contributed to political stability from the colonial administration's perspective, it also reinforced regional differences in educational attainment, administrative development and religious affiliation.

Many of the constitutional and legal debates concerning religion in contemporary Nigeria therefore have historical roots in these differing colonial governance models.

Independence, Civil War and Democratic Development

Nigeria achieved independence from the United Kingdom on 1 October 1960 as a federal state reflecting its extraordinary ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity.

The early post-independence period was characterised by political instability culminating in military coups and the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), also known as the Biafran War. Although the conflict was primarily political and ethnic rather than religious, it significantly influenced national identity, federalism and state-building.

Subsequent decades alternated between military rule and civilian government before the restoration of constitutional democracy in 1999.

The 1999 Constitution established Nigeria as a secular federal republic while guaranteeing freedom of thought, conscience and religion. At the same time, several northern states subsequently expanded the application of Sharia within their legal systems, creating ongoing debates concerning the relationship between constitutional guarantees, religious law and federal authority.

These developments continue to shape contemporary discussions concerning Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Contemporary Nigeria

Today, Nigeria is Africa's most populous country and one of the world's most religiously diverse states. Islam predominates in much of the north, Christianity in much of the south, while indigenous religious traditions continue to influence cultural life across many communities.

This diversity has contributed to a vibrant religious landscape but has also generated complex legal, political and societal challenges. Regional differences in governance, competition over land and resources, demographic change, insurgent violence, communal conflict and constitutional debates all interact with religious identity in ways that influence the practical enjoyment of Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Accordingly, contemporary Nigeria cannot be understood through a single explanatory framework. The country's FoRB environment reflects the cumulative effects of more than a thousand years of historical development, during which indigenous traditions, Islam, Christianity, colonial governance and modern federalism have each left enduring institutional and societal legacies.

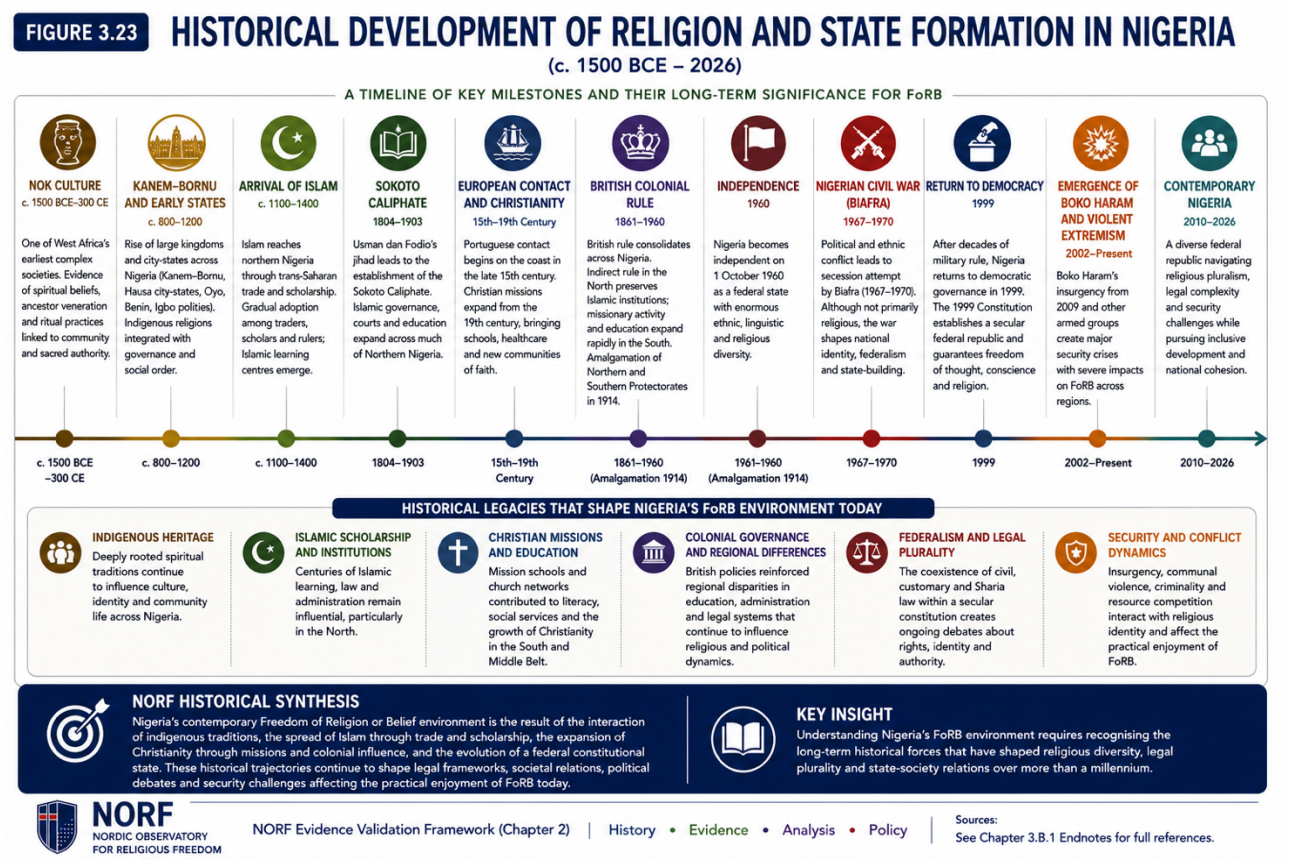
NORF Historical Assessment

The historical evidence demonstrates that Nigeria's contemporary religious landscape is the product of successive historical layers rather than a single transformative event. Indigenous religious traditions established enduring cultural foundations before the gradual spread of Islam through trans-Saharan trade and scholarship and the later expansion of Christianity through missionary activity and colonial administration.

British indirect rule institutionalised regional differences in governance, education and religious development, while post-independence federalism sought to accommodate this diversity within a single constitutional framework. These historical trajectories continue to influence legal institutions, political debates, religious demographics and patterns of intercommunal relations.

NORF therefore concludes that Nigeria's current Freedom of Religion or Belief environment can only be understood through a long-term historical perspective integrating pre-colonial state formation, religious expansion, colonial governance and modern constitutional development. This historical continuity constitutes a foundational analytical framework for the subsequent assessment of legal structures, government practice, societal dynamics and security conditions.

Fig. 3.23



3.B.2 Religious Landscape

Religious Diversity in a Federal and Multi-Ethnic State

Nigeria possesses one of the most religiously diverse societies in Africa. Unlike countries where a single religious tradition overwhelmingly predominates, Nigeria is characterised by the coexistence of large Muslim and Christian populations alongside enduring Indigenous religious traditions and smaller minority faith communities. Religion influences not only personal belief and worship but also education, healthcare, civil society, political mobilisation, customary governance and legal institutions. Consequently, religious affiliation constitutes an important dimension of both individual identity and public life.

From a Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) perspective, Nigeria's religious diversity presents both opportunities and challenges. The coexistence of multiple major religious communities has fostered a vibrant religious environment with extensive institutional development, yet it has also created areas of legal complexity, political contestation and communal tension. Understanding the country's religious landscape therefore requires an assessment that extends beyond demographic composition to examine the interaction between religion, society and the state.

Religious Demography

Nigeria has an estimated population exceeding 230 million people, making it Africa's most populous country. Religious affiliation is generally understood to be divided primarily between Islam and Christianity, with Indigenous religious traditions and smaller minority communities continuing to play an important role in the country's cultural and religious life.

Unlike many countries, Nigeria has not included questions on religious affiliation in recent national censuses. Consequently, no official government statistics exist regarding the precise religious composition of the population. Estimates therefore rely upon independent demographic research, household surveys and international institutions such as the Pew Research Center, the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA), and academic demographic studies. While exact percentages differ between sources, there is broad agreement that Muslims and Christians each constitute approximately half of the national population, with Indigenous religions and other communities representing a much smaller proportion.

This absence of official census data requires careful interpretation of demographic estimates. NORF therefore applies an evidence-validation approach based upon triangulation of multiple independent sources rather than relying upon any single dataset.

The principal religious communities include:

- **Islam**, predominantly Sunni, with significant Sufi traditions, smaller Shi'a communities and reform-oriented Salafi movements.
- **Christianity**, comprising Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Evangelical, Pentecostal and numerous African Independent Churches.
- **Indigenous religions**, particularly among Yoruba, Igbo and Middle Belt communities, often existing alongside Christianity or Islam through varying forms of religious syncretism.
- Smaller religious communities including the Bahá'í Faith, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism and non-religious individuals.

Although religious diversity is considerable, the relative balance between Muslims and Christians distinguishes Nigeria from most countries examined in FoRB assessments and contributes to a unique institutional and societal environment.

Evidence Note

Nigeria has not published official statistics on religious affiliation in recent population censuses. Demographic estimates presented throughout this report should therefore be understood as evidence-based approximations derived through triangulation of multiple independent research institutions rather than definitive government figures.

Geographical Distribution

Religious affiliation in Nigeria demonstrates pronounced regional variation, although these patterns are considerably more complex than the commonly used distinction between a "Muslim north" and a "Christian south."

Islam predominates across much of the northern states, reflecting centuries of Islamic scholarship, trans-Saharan trade and the historical influence of the Sokoto Caliphate and Kanem–Bornu Empire. Northern Nigeria contains numerous historic centres of Islamic education, including Kano, Katsina and Maiduguri.

Christianity predominates throughout much of southern Nigeria, where missionary expansion during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries established extensive church networks, educational institutions and healthcare services. Southern states contain substantial Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Baptist and rapidly growing Pentecostal communities.

Between these regions lies the **Middle Belt**, one of Nigeria's most religiously and ethnically diverse areas. Here, Muslim, Christian and Indigenous communities often live in close proximity. The Middle Belt has consequently become a focal point for many of Nigeria's most complex intercommunal conflicts, although these conflicts frequently involve multiple interacting factors including land use, political representation, ethnicity, climate-related resource pressures and local governance in addition to religion.

Rapid urbanisation has also altered traditional patterns of religious geography. Major metropolitan centres such as Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt and Kaduna contain highly diverse populations where religious communities interact extensively in commerce, education and public administration.

Major Religious Communities

Islam

Islam has shaped northern Nigeria for nearly a millennium and continues to play a central role in religious, educational and social life. The overwhelming majority of Nigerian Muslims identify as Sunni, although religious practice encompasses considerable theological and organisational diversity.

Traditional Sufi brotherhoods, particularly the **Qadiriyya** and **Tijaniyya** orders, have historically exercised significant influence over Islamic scholarship and community leadership. Alongside these traditions, reform-oriented Salafi movements have expanded during recent decades, advocating different approaches to religious interpretation and practice.

Nigeria also contains one of Africa's largest Shi'a Muslim populations, represented primarily by the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN), whose relationship with federal and state authorities has periodically generated legal and security concerns.

Islamic educational institutions, charitable organisations, religious courts operating within constitutionally recognised state-level jurisdictions and traditional religious authorities remain influential components of public life across many northern states.

Christianity

Christianity in Nigeria encompasses extraordinary institutional diversity. Historic denominations established during the colonial period continue to play prominent roles alongside rapidly expanding Pentecostal and Evangelical movements.

The Roman Catholic Church remains one of Nigeria's largest religious institutions and operates extensive educational, healthcare and humanitarian networks throughout the country. Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian and Lutheran churches likewise maintain longstanding institutional presence and contribute significantly to civil society.

Since the late twentieth century, Pentecostal and Evangelical churches have experienced remarkable growth, particularly within urban centres. These churches often emphasise evangelism, social engagement, youth participation and extensive media outreach. Several Nigerian Pentecostal organisations have also developed significant international influence through global missionary activity and diaspora communities.

Christian institutions collectively represent major providers of education, healthcare, humanitarian assistance and social services across Nigeria.

Indigenous Religious Traditions

Indigenous religious traditions continue to form an important component of Nigeria's religious landscape despite the predominance of Islam and Christianity.

Traditional Yoruba religion, Igbo spiritual traditions and numerous Indigenous belief systems across the Middle Belt and southern regions remain integral to cultural identity, traditional authority and community life. Many practices involve reverence for ancestors, sacred natural sites, ritual specialists and belief in a supreme creator alongside spiritual intermediaries.

Religious syncretism is also common. Many Nigerians who identify as Christian or Muslim continue to participate in cultural practices rooted in Indigenous traditions, reflecting centuries of interaction between religious systems rather than strict replacement of earlier beliefs.

From a FoRB perspective, Indigenous religious communities warrant equal consideration alongside larger religious groups, consistent with international human rights standards protecting freedom of religion or belief for all persons.

Religion and Society

Religion occupies a prominent position within Nigerian society and extends well beyond places of worship.

Faith-based organisations are among the country's largest providers of education, healthcare, humanitarian assistance and poverty alleviation. Churches, mosques and religious charities frequently supplement public services, particularly in underserved rural communities.

Religious leaders often exercise considerable influence within local communities and regularly participate in public debates concerning governance, ethics, education, family life and national development. Interfaith dialogue initiatives have likewise expanded over recent decades, particularly through organisations seeking to reduce communal tensions and strengthen peaceful coexistence.

At the same time, religious identity frequently intersects with ethnicity, regional identity, political competition and socio-economic conditions. Consequently, religion cannot be analysed in isolation from broader societal dynamics. Many incidents commonly characterised as purely religious conflict involve multiple overlapping drivers, including disputes concerning land, political representation, migration, resource competition and local governance.

Recognising these interacting factors represents a central component of the NORF analytical framework and avoids reducing complex social conflicts to religious affiliation alone.

Religion and the State

Nigeria's Constitution establishes the country as a secular federal republic while guaranteeing freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including the right to change one's religion or belief and to manifest religion individually or collectively.

At the same time, Nigeria's federal system permits significant legal diversity among its thirty-six states. Since 1999, several northern states have expanded the application of Sharia to include aspects of criminal law for Muslims, while customary courts continue to operate in many parts of the country alongside statutory legal institutions. Traditional rulers likewise retain important advisory and cultural roles within many communities, often working alongside elected authorities and religious leaders. The interaction between constitutional guarantees, federalism, state-level legal diversity and traditional institutions creates one of the most complex governance environments for Freedom of Religion or Belief in Africa. These institutional arrangements are examined in greater detail in Section **3.B.4 Legal and Institutional Framework**.

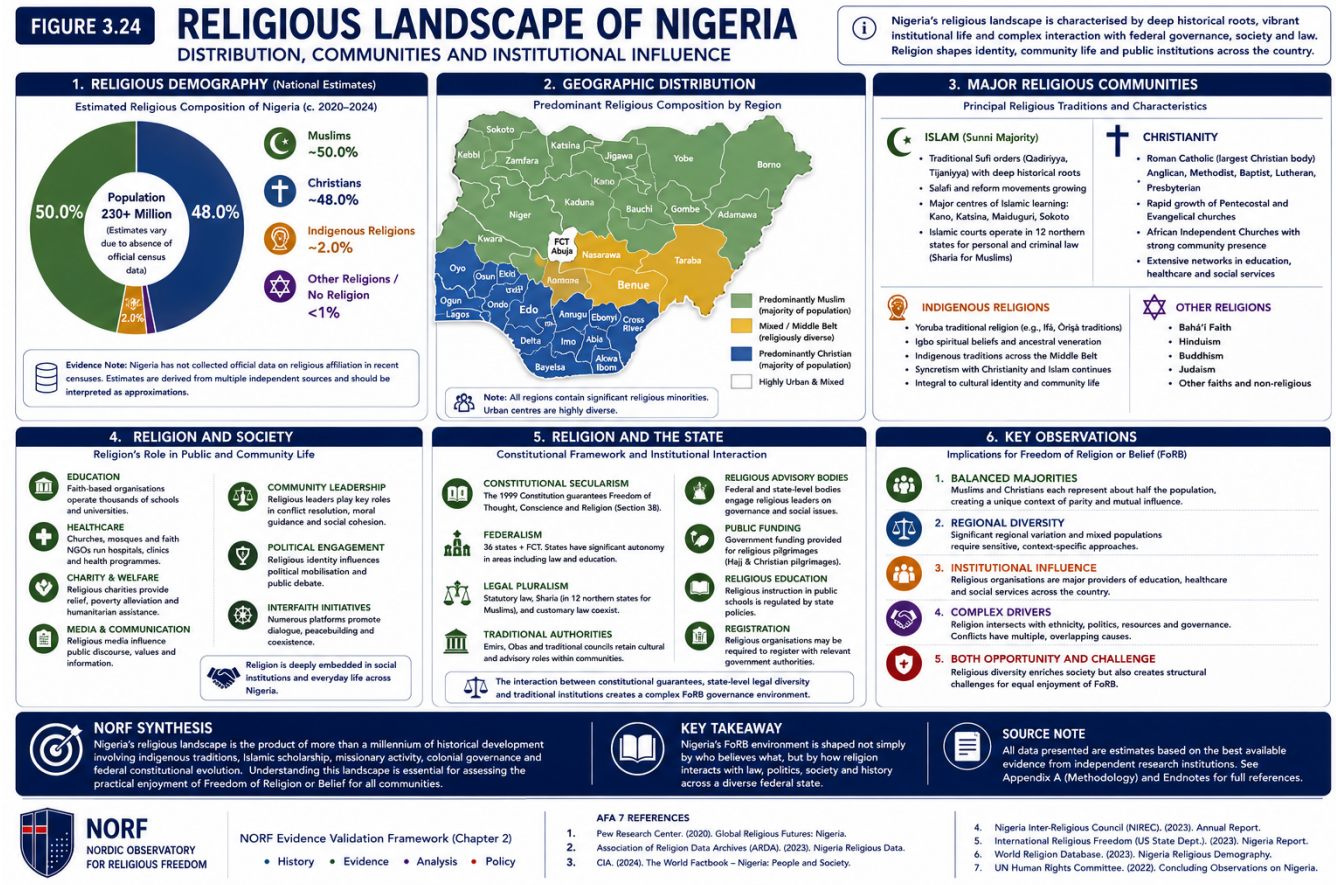
NORF Religious Landscape Assessment

Nigeria possesses one of the world's most institutionally developed and religiously diverse societies. Islam, Christianity and Indigenous religious traditions each contribute substantially to the country's cultural heritage, public institutions and community life. Religious organisations remain among Nigeria's most influential providers of education, healthcare, humanitarian assistance and social support.

At the same time, religious diversity intersects with federalism, legal pluralism, ethnicity, demographic change and regional socio-economic disparities in ways that shape the practical enjoyment of Freedom of Religion or Belief. Consequently, religious affiliation alone rarely explains patterns of cooperation or conflict. A comprehensive FoRB assessment must instead consider the interaction between religious identity, constitutional structures, governance, historical development and local socio-political conditions.

NORF therefore concludes that Nigeria's religious landscape should be understood not simply as a demographic distribution of faith communities, but as a complex institutional ecosystem in which religion functions simultaneously as a source of personal belief, communal identity, public service provision and political influence. This integrated understanding provides the analytical foundation for the subsequent assessment of legal frameworks, government practice, societal dynamics and security conditions throughout the remainder of the Nigeria country assessment.

Figure 3.24. Religious Landscape of Nigeria: Distribution, Communities and Institutional Influence



3.B.3 Historical Drivers

Understanding the Historical Forces Shaping Contemporary Freedom of Religion or Belief in Nigeria

The historical development of Nigeria has produced a religious landscape of exceptional diversity and institutional complexity. However, chronology alone does not explain the contemporary Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) environment. The NORF methodology therefore identifies the principal historical drivers that continue to influence religious coexistence, legal structures, political institutions and societal relations.

These drivers are not independent variables but interacting historical processes that have accumulated over centuries. Together they explain why contemporary Nigeria exhibits significant regional variation in legal systems, religious demographics, governance structures and security challenges.

The following analysis identifies six historical drivers that continue to shape Nigeria's FoRB environment.

Driver 1: The Independent Expansion of Islam and Christianity

Unlike many countries where one religious tradition largely replaced another, Nigeria experienced the expansion of Islam and Christianity through different historical pathways, geographical regions and periods.

Islam expanded gradually across northern Nigeria between the eleventh and nineteenth centuries through trans-Saharan trade, scholarship, diplomacy and later political consolidation under the Sokoto Caliphate. Christianity expanded primarily during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through missionary activity associated with European colonial administration, educational institutions and healthcare services concentrated in southern Nigeria.

Because these two major religious traditions developed largely independently rather than sequentially, Nigeria emerged as a society characterised by multiple well-established religious institutions with distinct historical identities rather than a dominant national religion.

This historical trajectory continues to influence regional religious demographics, educational institutions, legal traditions and public life.

NORF Observation

Nigeria's contemporary religious diversity reflects parallel historical development rather than religious replacement. This has created enduring institutional pluralism that distinguishes Nigeria from many other FoRB contexts.

Driver 2: British Colonial Indirect Rule

British colonial administration profoundly influenced Nigeria's constitutional and religious development through the policy of indirect rule.

Rather than replacing existing political structures, colonial authorities preserved many traditional institutions in northern Nigeria, including Islamic judicial systems and established emirates, while permitting comparatively limited Christian missionary expansion. In contrast, southern Nigeria experienced extensive missionary activity, rapid educational development and greater integration into colonial administrative structures.

Although intended to facilitate efficient governance, these differing administrative approaches reinforced regional disparities in education, legal development and religious institutional capacity.

The resulting asymmetries remain visible within contemporary debates concerning constitutional authority, legal pluralism and regional governance.

NORF Observation

Colonial governance institutionalised regional differences that continue to influence Nigeria's legal framework and practical implementation of Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Driver 3: Federalism and Legal Pluralism

Following independence in 1960, Nigeria adopted a federal constitutional system intended to accommodate its extraordinary ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity.

Federalism allowed substantial autonomy for individual states while maintaining national constitutional guarantees. Since 1999, several northern states have expanded the application of Sharia law to aspects of criminal law for Muslims, while customary courts continue to operate in many parts of the country alongside statutory legal institutions.

Consequently, the practical experience of Freedom of Religion or Belief may vary across jurisdictions despite the existence of common constitutional protections.

Legal pluralism therefore represents one of the defining structural characteristics of Nigeria's FoRB environment.

NORF Observation

Federalism provides mechanisms for accommodating diversity while simultaneously creating regional variation in the practical implementation of constitutional rights.

Driver 4: Religion, Ethnicity and Political Identity

Religion in Nigeria cannot be understood independently of ethnicity and regional identity.

Many of the country's largest ethnic communities—including the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo—possess distinct historical religious trajectories. However, no simple relationship exists between ethnicity and religion. The Yoruba population, for example, includes substantial Muslim, Christian and Indigenous religious communities, while numerous minority ethnic groups demonstrate considerable internal religious diversity.

Political competition, electoral mobilisation and public discourse frequently involve overlapping religious, ethnic and regional identities. Consequently, religious affiliation may reinforce existing social identities without necessarily constituting the primary driver of political or communal disputes.

Recognising this interaction is essential for avoiding overly simplified explanations of complex societal dynamics.

NORF Observation

Religion frequently interacts with ethnicity and regional identity rather than functioning as an isolated explanatory factor.

Driver 5: Demographic Change and Urbanisation

Nigeria possesses one of the fastest-growing populations globally and continues to experience rapid urbanisation.

Large-scale internal migration has increased religious diversity within major cities such as Lagos, Abuja, Kano, Port Harcourt and Kaduna. Urban centres increasingly bring together populations with differing religious, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, creating new opportunities for cooperation while also generating pressures associated with housing, employment, political representation and access to public services.

Demographic growth also affects education, land use, infrastructure and local governance, factors that may indirectly influence Freedom of Religion or Belief where resource competition intersects with communal identity.

NORF emphasises that demographic change should not be interpreted as a cause of religious conflict in itself but as a structural factor capable of influencing broader social dynamics.

NORF Observation

Rapid demographic transformation increases the importance of inclusive governance capable of managing religious diversity within expanding urban environments.

Driver 6: Insurgency, Insecurity and State Capacity

Since the early twenty-first century, armed insurgency and widespread insecurity have become major factors affecting the practical enjoyment of Freedom of Religion or Belief in several regions of Nigeria.

Groups including Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have deliberately targeted civilians, religious leaders, places of worship, educational institutions and humanitarian organisations. At the same time, communal violence, criminal banditry, farmer-herder conflicts and other forms of insecurity have created complex protection challenges affecting multiple religious communities.

The interaction between insecurity and uneven state capacity has significant implications for FoRB. Where government institutions struggle to provide effective protection, communities may experience reduced access to education, religious practice, humanitarian assistance and justice.

Importantly, NORF distinguishes between ideologically motivated religious violence and violence arising primarily from criminal, political or resource-related drivers, recognising that these categories frequently overlap but should not automatically be conflated.

NORF Observation

The principal contemporary challenge to Freedom of Religion or Belief in many parts of Nigeria arises not solely from religious difference, but from the interaction between insecurity, governance capacity and multiple overlapping conflict drivers.

Integrated NORF Assessment

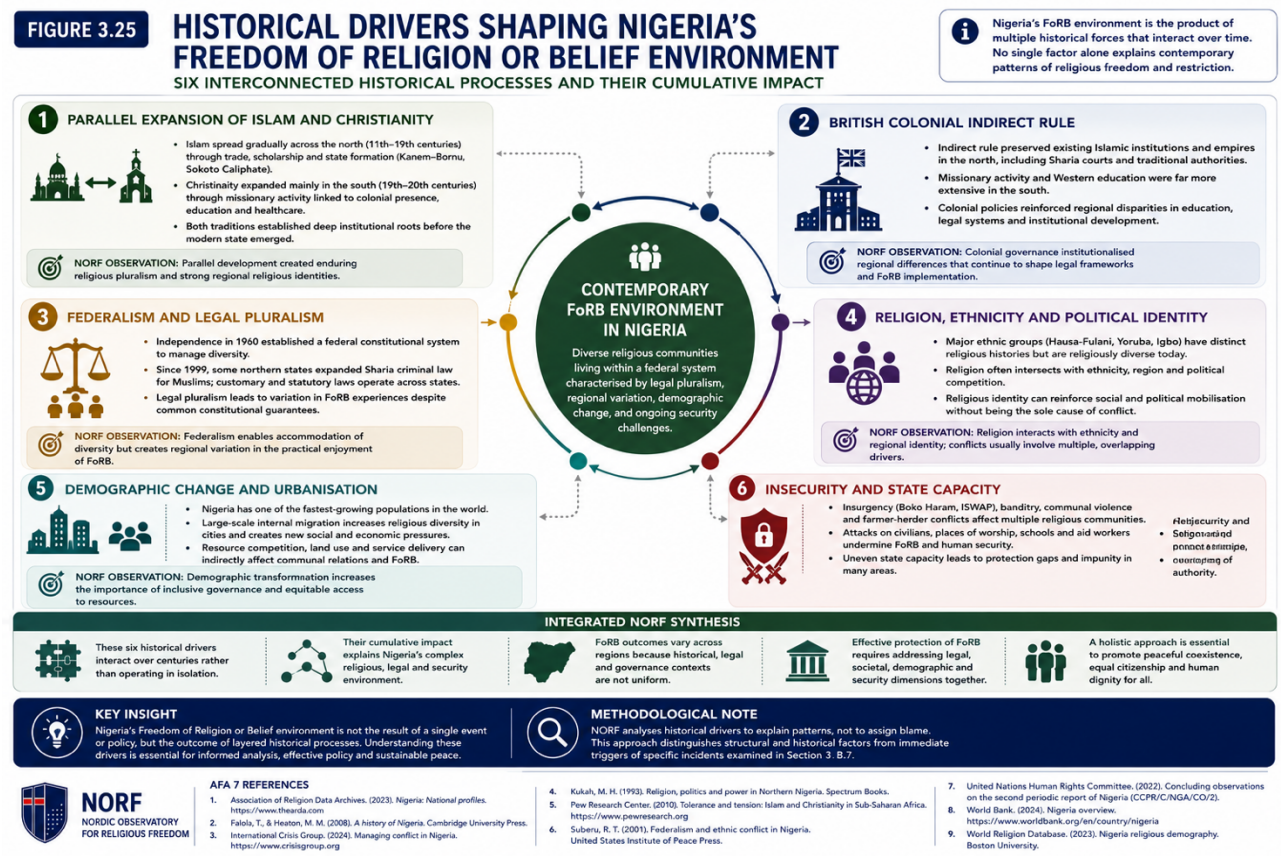
The historical evidence demonstrates that Nigeria's contemporary Freedom of Religion or Belief environment has been shaped by six interrelated historical drivers: the independent expansion of Islam and Christianity; British colonial indirect rule; federalism and legal pluralism; the interaction of religion with ethnicity and regional identity; rapid demographic transformation; and the emergence of prolonged insecurity in parts of the country.

No single driver adequately explains Nigeria's contemporary FoRB landscape. Rather, the country's institutional complexity reflects the cumulative interaction of historical, constitutional, demographic and security-related developments over more than a millennium.

From a methodological perspective, these drivers provide the analytical bridge between Nigeria's historical development and the empirical assessment presented in subsequent chapters. They explain why constitutional guarantees, legal implementation, government practice, societal dynamics and security conditions vary across regions while remaining embedded within a common federal framework.

NORF therefore concludes that contemporary FoRB challenges in Nigeria should be understood as the product of interacting historical processes rather than isolated contemporary events. This historical perspective provides the essential analytical foundation for the legal, governmental, societal and security assessments that follow.

Figure 3.25. Historical Drivers Shaping Nigeria's Freedom of Religion or Belief Environment



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3.B.4 Legal and Institutional Framework

The Constitutional and Legal Framework for Freedom of Religion or Belief

The legal framework governing Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in Nigeria is characterised by constitutional guarantees, federal legal pluralism and the coexistence of statutory, customary and Islamic legal systems. This institutional complexity reflects Nigeria's historical development as a multi-ethnic, multi-religious federal republic and represents one of the defining characteristics of its governance structure.

From a FoRB perspective, the existence of multiple legal systems does not, in itself, constitute a restriction on religious freedom. Rather, the practical enjoyment of FoRB depends upon the interaction between constitutional protections, legislative frameworks, judicial independence and administrative implementation across Nigeria's thirty-six states and the Federal Capital Territory.

Accordingly, the NORF methodology distinguishes between **legal guarantees** (the normative framework established by law) and **government practice** (the practical implementation of those guarantees), which is examined in Section **3.B.5**.

Constitutional Guarantees

The **Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999, as amended)** provides the principal legal foundation for the protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Section 38 guarantees every individual:

- freedom of thought, conscience and religion;
- freedom to change religion or belief;
- freedom to manifest religion individually or collectively;
- freedom to worship, teach, practise and observe religion.

These protections broadly reflect the standards established under **Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)** and **Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)**, to which Nigeria is a State Party.

The Constitution also prohibits the adoption of a state religion by the federal government or by individual states under **Section 10**, thereby establishing Nigeria as a constitutionally secular state despite its deeply religious society.

In addition, constitutional protections relating to equality before the law, freedom of expression, freedom of association and protection from discrimination reinforce the broader legal environment supporting FoRB.

NORF Observation

Nigeria's constitutional framework provides comprehensive formal protection for Freedom of Religion or Belief that is broadly consistent with international human rights standards.

Federalism and Legal Pluralism

Nigeria's federal structure permits considerable legislative autonomy at the state level while maintaining constitutional supremacy.

This has resulted in the coexistence of three principal legal systems:

- statutory law;
- customary law;
- Islamic (Sharia) law.

Customary courts continue to operate in many parts of Nigeria, particularly concerning family law, inheritance and traditional community matters.
Islamic courts similarly exercise jurisdiction within states that have established Sharia legal systems, primarily regarding personal status matters for Muslims.
Since 1999, twelve northern states have expanded the application of Sharia beyond personal status to include aspects of criminal law applicable to Muslims.
This legal pluralism reflects Nigeria's constitutional accommodation of cultural and religious diversity but also contributes to significant regional variation in legal practice.

NORF Observation

Legal pluralism represents an institutional feature of Nigeria's constitutional order rather than an exception to it. The principal FoRB question is therefore how these parallel legal systems operate in practice and whether they provide equal protection consistent with constitutional and international standards.

Sharia within the Constitutional Framework

The expansion of Sharia criminal law in several northern states has generated considerable domestic and international discussion concerning its compatibility with constitutional protections and international human rights obligations.

Under Nigeria's constitutional framework, Sharia courts exercise jurisdiction primarily over Muslims who voluntarily fall within their competence. In practice, however, questions have periodically arisen regarding procedural safeguards, equal protection, freedom of conversion, gender equality and the practical interaction between Sharia, statutory courts and constitutional rights.

Judicial review by higher courts provides an important constitutional mechanism for resolving conflicts between state legislation and constitutional guarantees.

The legal existence of Sharia should therefore be distinguished from questions concerning its implementation, judicial oversight and consistency with human rights obligations.

NORF Observation

The presence of Sharia courts does not automatically determine the level of Freedom of Religion or Belief. Assessment requires examination of jurisdiction, procedural safeguards, constitutional review and practical implementation.

International Human Rights Commitments

Nigeria has ratified numerous international and regional human rights instruments relevant to Freedom of Religion or Belief, including:

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (as a UN member state);
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR);
- International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR);
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW);
- Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC);
- African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.

These instruments oblige Nigeria to protect freedom of religion, equality before the law, non-discrimination and related civil liberties.
Implementation of treaty obligations, however, depends upon domestic legislation, judicial interpretation, institutional capacity and administrative practice.

NORF Observation

Nigeria demonstrates broad formal commitment to international human rights law, although implementation remains uneven across sectors and jurisdictions.

Institutions Relevant to Freedom of Religion or Belief

Protection of FoRB involves multiple governmental and judicial institutions.

These include:

- the Federal Government;
- the National Assembly;
- state governments;
- federal and state courts;
- Sharia Courts of Appeal;
- Customary Courts of Appeal;
- the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC);
- law enforcement agencies;
- state justice ministries.

Religious organisations themselves also interact extensively with public authorities through advisory councils, educational institutions, humanitarian activities and civil society initiatives. The effectiveness of these institutions varies considerably depending upon resources, regional capacity and security conditions.

Legal Challenges

Despite comprehensive constitutional protections, several legal challenges continue to influence the practical enjoyment of Freedom of Religion or Belief.

These include:

- differing implementation of constitutional guarantees across states;
- legal uncertainty arising from overlapping jurisdictions;
- procedural differences between statutory and religious courts;
- unequal institutional capacity;
- delays within the judicial system;
- challenges associated with insecurity affecting access to justice.

These issues do not necessarily indicate deficiencies within the constitutional framework itself but rather illustrate the complexity of implementing constitutional rights across a large federal state characterised by significant regional diversity.

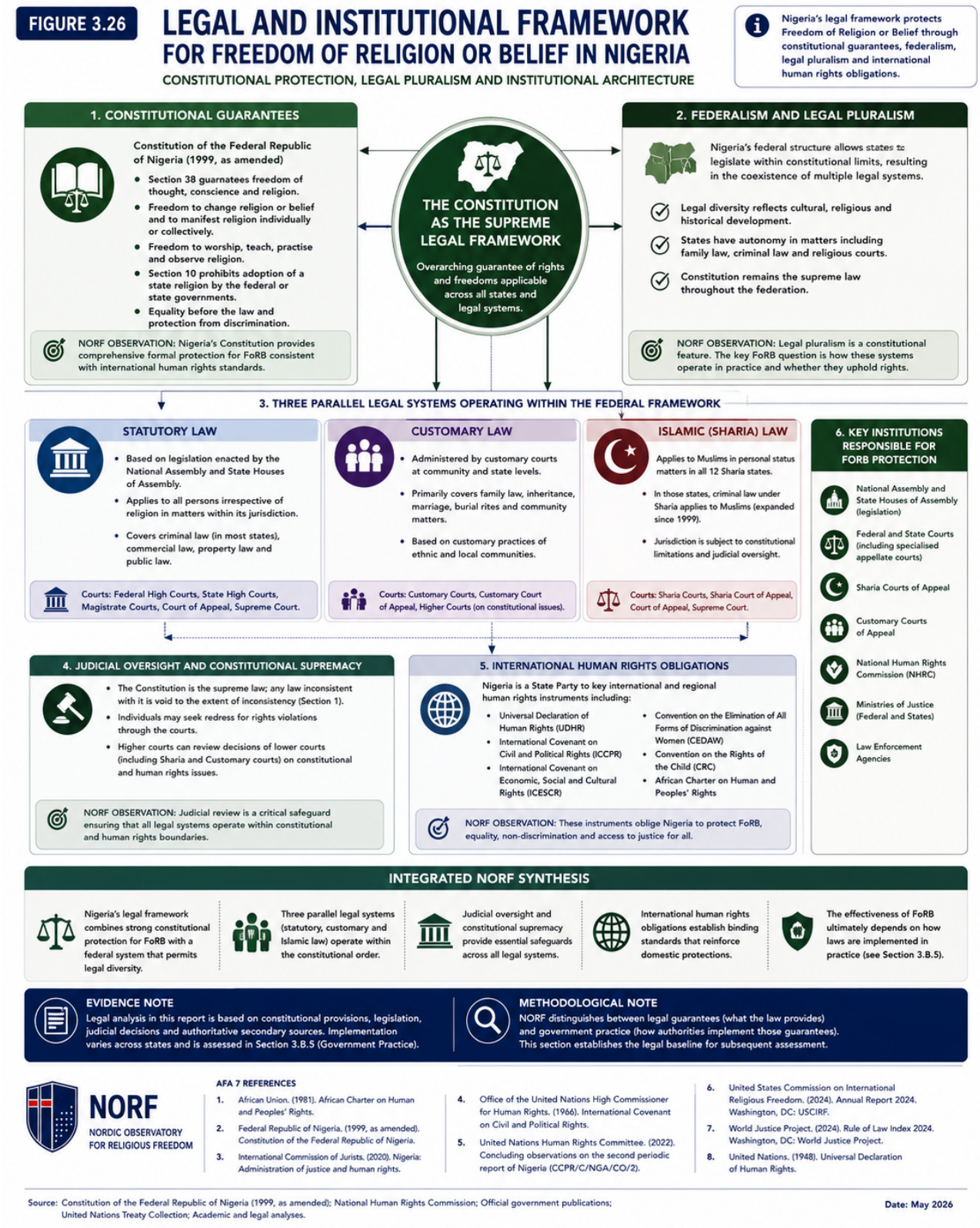
Integrated NORF Legal Assessment

Nigeria possesses one of Africa's most comprehensive constitutional frameworks for protecting Freedom of Religion or Belief. Constitutional guarantees broadly reflect international human rights standards and establish a legal foundation supporting religious freedom, equality and non-discrimination.

At the same time, Nigeria's federal constitutional structure permits substantial legal diversity through the coexistence of statutory, customary and Islamic legal systems. This legal pluralism represents a defining institutional characteristic rather than an inherent restriction on FoRB. Nevertheless, regional variation in legislation, institutional capacity and judicial practice may influence how constitutional guarantees are experienced by individuals and communities.

NORF therefore concludes that the principal analytical challenge lies not in identifying constitutional protections, but in assessing the consistency with which those protections are implemented across different jurisdictions. Accordingly, the legal framework should be understood as providing the normative baseline against which subsequent evaluation of government practice, societal dynamics and security conditions can be measured.

Figure 3.26


FIGURE 3.26
LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF IN NIGERIA
CONSTITUTIONAL PROTECTION, LEGAL PLURALISM AND INSTITUTIONAL ARCHITECTURE
Nigeria's legal framework protects Freedom of Religion or Belief through constitutional guarantees, federalism, legal pluralism and international human rights obligations.
1. CONSTITUTIONAL GUARANTEES
Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999, as amended)
Section 38 guarantees freedom of thought, conscience and religion.
Freedom to change religion or belief and to manifest religion individually or collectively.
Freedom to worship, teach, practise and observe religion.
Section 10 prohibits adoption of a state religion by the federal or state governments.
Equality before the law and protection from discrimination.
NORF OBSERVATION: Nigeria's Constitution provides comprehensive formal protection for FoRB consistent with international human rights standards.
THE CONSTITUTION AS THE SUPREME LEGAL FRAMEWORK
Overarching guarantee of rights and freedoms applicable across all states and legal systems.
2. FEDERALISM AND LEGAL PLURALISM
Nigeria's federal structure allows states to legislate within constitutional limits, resulting in the coexistence of multiple legal systems.
Legal diversity reflects cultural, religious and historical development.
States have autonomy in matters including family law, criminal law and religious courts.
Constitution remains the supreme law throughout the federation.
NORF OBSERVATION: Legal pluralism is a constitutional feature. The key FoRB question is how these systems operate in practice and whether they uphold rights.
3. THREE PARALLEL LEGAL SYSTEMS OPERATING WITHIN THE FEDERAL FRAMEWORK
STATUTORY LAW
Based on legislation enacted by the National Assembly and State Houses of Assembly.
Applies to all persons irrespective of religion in matters within its jurisdiction.
Covers criminal law (in most states), commercial law, property law and public law.
Courts: Federal High Courts, State High Courts, Magistrate Courts, Court of Appeal, Supreme Court.
CUSTOMARY LAW
Administered by customary courts at community and state levels.
Primarily covers family law, inheritance, marriage, burial rites and community matters.
Based on customary practices of ethnic and local communities.
Courts: Customary Courts, Customary Court of Appeal, Higher Courts (on constitutional issues).
ISLAMIC (SHARIA) LAW
Applies to Muslims in personal status matters in all 12 Sharia states.
In those states, criminal law under Sharia applies to Muslims (expanded since 1999).
Jurisdiction is subject to constitutional limitations and judicial oversight.
Courts: Sharia Courts, Sharia Court of Appeal, Court of Appeal, Supreme Court.
4. JUDICIAL OVERSIGHT AND CONSTITUTIONAL SUPREMACY
The Constitution is the supreme law; any law inconsistent with it is void to the extent of inconsistency (Section 1).
Individuals may seek redress for rights violations through the courts.
Higher courts can review decisions of lower courts (including Sharia and Customary courts) on constitutional and human rights issues.
NORF OBSERVATION: Judicial review is a critical safeguard ensuring that all legal systems operate within constitutional and human rights boundaries.
5. INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS OBLIGATIONS
Nigeria is a State Party to key international and regional human rights instruments including:
Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)
International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)
International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)
African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights
NORF OBSERVATION: These instruments oblige Nigeria to protect FoRB, equality, non-discrimination and access to justice for all.
6. KEY INSTITUTIONS RESPONSIBLE FOR FORB PROTECTION
National Assembly and State Houses of Assembly (legislation)
Federal and State Courts (including specialised appellate courts)
Sharia Courts of Appeal
Customary Courts of Appeal
National Human Rights Commission (NHRC)
Ministries of Justice (Federal and States)
Law Enforcement Agencies
INTEGRATED NORF SYNTHESIS
Nigeria's legal framework combines strong constitutional protection for FoRB with a federal system that permits legal diversity.
Three parallel legal systems (statutory, customary and Islamic law) operate within the constitutional order.
Judicial oversight and constitutional supremacy provide essential safeguards across all legal systems.
International human rights obligations establish binding standards that reinforce domestic protections.
The effectiveness of FoRB ultimately depends on how laws are implemented in practice (see Section 3.B.5).
EVIDENCE NOTE
Legal analysis in this report is based on constitutional provisions, legislation, judicial decisions and authoritative secondary sources. Implementation varies across states and is assessed in Section 3.B.5 (Government Practice).
METHODOLOGICAL NOTE
NORF distinguishes between legal guarantees (what the law provides) and government practice (how authorities implement those guarantees). This section establishes the legal baseline for subsequent assessment.
NORF
NORDIC OBSERVATORY FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
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Date: May 2026

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3.B.5 Government Practice

Implementation of Freedom of Religion or Belief

From Legal Protection to Practical Implementation

While Nigeria's Constitution establishes comprehensive protections for Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB), the practical enjoyment of these rights depends upon how public authorities implement constitutional guarantees across the country's diverse federal system. Accordingly, the NORF methodology distinguishes between **legal protections** and **government practice**, recognising that the existence of constitutional rights does not automatically ensure their effective implementation.

Government practice encompasses the actions of public institutions responsible for protecting constitutional rights, maintaining public order, administering justice and ensuring equal treatment before the law. These include the Federal Government, state governments, law enforcement agencies, judicial institutions and regulatory authorities.

Assessment under this section therefore focuses not on individual incidents but on institutional patterns that influence the practical enjoyment of Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Constitutional Implementation

Federal authorities generally recognise the constitutional protection of religious freedom and publicly affirm Nigeria's commitment to religious diversity and equality before the law. Religious organisations representing Islam, Christianity and other faith communities operate openly throughout much of the country and participate extensively in public life.

At the same time, implementation varies considerably between federal, state and local authorities. Administrative capacity, regional security conditions, political priorities and institutional resources all influence the consistency with which constitutional guarantees are realised in practice.
The federal system grants substantial authority to state governments, resulting in differing approaches to religious administration, education, dispute resolution and public order.

NORF Observation

Nigeria demonstrates broad constitutional recognition of Freedom of Religion or Belief; however, implementation is not uniform across jurisdictions.

Administration of Religious Affairs

Nigeria does not maintain a single national ministry responsible for religious affairs. Instead, responsibility is distributed among federal institutions, state governments and independent regulatory bodies.

Religious organisations generally enjoy the ability to establish places of worship, educational institutions, charitable organisations and humanitarian programmes. Registration requirements primarily relate to legal incorporation, taxation and governance rather than approval of religious doctrine.

Government authorities also cooperate with religious institutions in areas including:

- education;
- healthcare;
- humanitarian assistance;
- disaster response;
- public health campaigns;
- community mediation.

This cooperation reflects the significant role played by faith-based organisations in providing public services throughout Nigeria.

NORF Observation

Government interaction with religious organisations is generally characterised by institutional cooperation rather than direct administrative control.

Judicial Protection and Access to Justice

Nigeria's judiciary represents an important mechanism for protecting constitutional rights relating to Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Individuals may challenge governmental actions through the courts where constitutional rights are alleged to have been violated. Higher courts possess authority to review decisions of lower courts and assess the constitutionality of legislation and administrative actions.

In practice, however, access to justice varies across regions due to:

- judicial capacity;
- procedural delays;
- financial constraints;
- geographical accessibility;
- security conditions.

These factors may affect the timely resolution of cases involving constitutional rights, including matters relating to religious freedom.

NORF Observation

Judicial review provides an important constitutional safeguard, although practical access to effective remedies varies across the federation.

Law Enforcement and Protection of Religious Communities

Law enforcement agencies bear primary responsibility for protecting individuals and religious communities from violence, intimidation and criminal activity.

The effectiveness of policing differs considerably across Nigeria. In many urban areas, police institutions provide routine protection for religious gatherings, major public events and places of worship. However, in several conflict-affected regions, particularly parts of the North East and North West, security institutions continue to face significant operational challenges arising from insurgency, organised crime and communal violence.

Government responses to attacks against religious communities have generally included military operations against insurgent organisations, increased deployment of security personnel and collaboration with local authorities. Nevertheless, concerns have periodically been raised by domestic and international observers regarding the consistency, effectiveness and timeliness of protective measures in some areas.

The NORF methodology emphasises that evaluation of government practice should focus upon institutional capacity and operational effectiveness rather than attributing responsibility solely on the basis of individual incidents.

NORF Observation

Protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief is closely linked to broader state capacity. Security challenges in some regions affect the state's ability to provide equal protection for all religious communities.

Public Administration and Religious Neutrality

Nigeria's constitutional framework requires public institutions to maintain neutrality regarding religion while respecting the country's religious diversity.

In practice, public authorities regularly engage with religious leaders during national ceremonies, conflict mediation initiatives and policy consultations. Government support for religious pilgrimages, including administrative assistance for both the Hajj and Christian pilgrimages to Jerusalem, reflects longstanding public policy intended to ensure equal treatment of the country's two largest religious communities.

At the same time, debates continue regarding the appropriate relationship between religion and public institutions, particularly concerning religious education, public funding and symbolic representation.

These issues illustrate the ongoing balance between constitutional neutrality and recognition of religion's prominent role within Nigerian society.

NORF Observation

Government practice generally seeks to accommodate major religious communities while maintaining constitutional neutrality, although implementation remains subject to political and regional variation.

Institutional Capacity

The effectiveness of governmental protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief depends significantly upon institutional capacity.

Several structural factors influence implementation, including:

- administrative resources;
- judicial efficiency;
- law enforcement capability;
- coordination between federal and state authorities;
- availability of trained personnel;
- security conditions.

In regions experiencing prolonged insecurity, institutional capacity is frequently constrained, reducing the state's ability to prevent violence, investigate offences and ensure accountability. Conversely, in many stable regions, governmental institutions function effectively and religious communities exercise constitutional freedoms with comparatively limited interference.

NORF Observation

Variation in institutional capacity represents one of the principal factors influencing the practical implementation of constitutional guarantees across Nigeria.

Evidence-Based Assessment of Government Practice

Assessment of government practice requires distinguishing between isolated administrative shortcomings and broader institutional patterns.

The available evidence indicates that Nigeria possesses functioning constitutional institutions committed to protecting Freedom of Religion or Belief. However, implementation is influenced by regional disparities in governance capacity, security conditions and judicial effectiveness.

Importantly, most documented challenges relate to uneven implementation rather than systematic national policies restricting religious freedom. This distinction is essential for an accurate assessment of Nigeria's FoRB environment.

Integrated NORF Assessment

Government practice in Nigeria demonstrates a mixed but institutionally functioning implementation of constitutional protections for Freedom of Religion or Belief. Federal authorities formally recognise religious freedom, public institutions generally cooperate with diverse religious communities and constitutional mechanisms exist for judicial review and legal redress.

Nevertheless, implementation remains uneven across Nigeria's federal system. Institutional capacity, regional insecurity, administrative resources and local governance conditions influence the consistency with which constitutional guarantees are realised in practice. These variations should not be interpreted as evidence of a uniform national policy but rather as reflecting the operational challenges associated with governing a large, religiously diverse federation facing significant security pressures.

NORF therefore concludes that the principal governmental challenge is strengthening the consistent implementation of existing constitutional protections across all jurisdictions. The legal framework provides a robust normative foundation; however, its practical effectiveness ultimately depends upon institutional capacity, accountability and equal access to justice.

Figure 3.27



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3.B.6 Societal Environment

Societal Conditions Affecting Freedom of Religion or Belief

Introduction

Freedom of Religion or Belief is shaped not only by constitutional protections and government practice but also by the attitudes, institutions and interactions that exist within society. In Nigeria, religious communities coexist within one of Africa's most diverse social environments, characterised by significant regional variation, ethnic diversity, rapid urbanisation and extensive participation of religious institutions in public life.

The NORF methodology therefore distinguishes societal conditions from governmental action. While governments establish legal frameworks and public policy, society influences the practical exercise of religious freedom through community relations, education, economic participation, civil society, media, traditional institutions and everyday interaction between religious communities.

Accordingly, this section evaluates the societal environment affecting FoRB without conflating societal dynamics with government responsibility or violent conflict.

Interreligious Relations

Relations between Nigeria's religious communities are highly diverse and cannot be characterised by a single national pattern.

Across much of the country, Muslims, Christians and adherents of Indigenous religions interact peacefully through shared markets, educational institutions, workplaces and local governance structures. Numerous interfaith organisations promote dialogue, conflict mediation and community cooperation, particularly in urban centres and areas with longstanding religious diversity.

At the same time, local tensions periodically emerge where religious identity intersects with political competition, historical grievances, land ownership, migration or resource allocation. Such tensions vary significantly between regions and should not be interpreted as evidence of nationwide interreligious hostility.

The available evidence indicates that patterns of coexistence substantially outnumber episodes of organised communal confrontation, although the latter often receive disproportionate international attention because of their severity.

NORF Observation

The societal environment in Nigeria is characterised by extensive everyday interreligious coexistence alongside geographically concentrated areas of recurring tension.

Religion and Community Life

Religious institutions occupy a central position within Nigerian society.

Churches, mosques and Indigenous religious communities function not only as places of worship but also as providers of:

- education;
- healthcare;
- humanitarian assistance;
- social welfare;
- vocational training;
- youth programmes;
- disaster relief;
- mediation and reconciliation.

Faith-based organisations therefore contribute significantly to community resilience and local development.
Religious leaders frequently hold positions of considerable public trust and often participate in mediation efforts during periods of political instability or communal tension.

NORF Observation

Religious communities represent major components of Nigerian civil society and contribute substantially to social cohesion and public service delivery.

Education and Religious Formation

Education plays a significant role in shaping long-term societal attitudes towards religious diversity.

Nigeria's educational landscape includes:

- public schools;
- mission schools;
- Islamic schools;
- Qur'anic schools;
- private religious institutions;
- universities operated by religious organisations.

These institutions collectively educate millions of Nigerians each year.

Educational curricula generally include religious studies, although implementation varies between states and educational systems.

Interfaith educational initiatives have expanded in several regions, while civil society organisations continue to promote tolerance, citizenship and peaceful coexistence through educational programmes.

NORF Observation

Education represents both an opportunity for strengthening interreligious understanding and an important area requiring continued attention to ensure inclusive approaches consistent with constitutional principles.

Media and Public Discourse

Traditional media, digital media and social media increasingly shape public discussion concerning religion in Nigeria.

Religious organisations maintain extensive media networks through television, radio, print publications and online platforms. These networks play an important role in religious education, public communication and humanitarian outreach.

At the same time, digital platforms may contribute to the rapid dissemination of misinformation, inflammatory rhetoric or unverified reports during periods of communal tension.

The societal impact of media therefore depends upon responsible journalism, effective communication by community leaders and public confidence in reliable sources of information.

NORF Observation

Media serve both as an important platform for religious expression and as a potential amplifier of societal tensions when inaccurate information circulates during periods of insecurity.

Social Inclusion and Equal Participation

Freedom of Religion or Belief includes the ability of individuals and communities to participate equally in public life regardless of religious affiliation.
The available evidence indicates that religious organisations from multiple traditions actively participate in Nigerian society through business, education, healthcare, civil society and humanitarian activities.
Nevertheless, perceptions of unequal representation or unequal access to political influence occasionally arise within local contexts, particularly where religion intersects with ethnicity, regional identity or electoral competition.
NORF emphasises that these issues should be analysed within their specific political and historical contexts rather than interpreted solely through a religious lens.

NORF Observation

The principal societal challenges affecting FoRB frequently arise where religious identity intersects with broader questions of representation, governance and social inclusion.

Traditional Institutions and Community Leadership

Traditional rulers continue to play an influential role throughout many parts of Nigeria.

Emirs, Obas, Obis and numerous local traditional authorities frequently cooperate with elected officials, religious leaders and civil society organisations in conflict prevention, customary dispute resolution and community development.

These traditional institutions often facilitate dialogue between religious communities and contribute to local stability.

Their influence varies considerably across regions but remains an important component of Nigeria's societal governance landscape.

NORF Observation

Traditional institutions continue to provide locally legitimate mechanisms for dialogue and conflict prevention alongside formal governmental institutions.

Societal Resilience

Despite periodic episodes of communal violence and insecurity, Nigerian society demonstrates considerable resilience.
Across much of the country, religious communities cooperate in commerce, education, humanitarian assistance and neighbourhood life.
Interfaith organisations, women's groups, youth initiatives and community leaders frequently engage in peacebuilding efforts designed to reduce tensions before they escalate.
These societal mechanisms represent important protective factors supporting the long-term enjoyment of Freedom of Religion or Belief.

NORF Observation

Evidence indicates that local resilience and interfaith cooperation remain significant strengths within Nigerian society and should be recognised alongside documented challenges.

Integrated NORF Assessment

Nigeria's societal environment presents a complex but generally resilient context for the practical enjoyment of Freedom of Religion or Belief. Religious institutions are deeply embedded within community life and make substantial contributions to education, healthcare, humanitarian assistance and social cohesion. Across much of the country, everyday interaction between Muslims, Christians and adherents of Indigenous religions is characterised by cooperation rather than confrontation.

At the same time, societal dynamics are influenced by historical grievances, demographic change, political competition, economic inequality and regional diversity. Religious identity frequently interacts with these broader factors, making it difficult to attribute social tensions to religion alone. This complexity underscores the importance of analysing societal conditions within their wider political, economic and cultural contexts.

NORF therefore concludes that Nigeria's societal environment contains both significant strengths and persistent vulnerabilities. Interfaith cooperation, strong religious institutions and active civil society provide substantial foundations for peaceful coexistence, while localised tensions demonstrate the continuing need for inclusive governance, dialogue and equal participation. Importantly, the available evidence suggests that societal relations should not be assessed solely through episodes of conflict but through the broader pattern of everyday coexistence that characterises much of Nigerian society.

Figure 3.28



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3.B.7 Violence, Intimidation and Security

Empirical Patterns Affecting Freedom of Religion or Belief

Introduction

Violence is one of the most serious constraints on Freedom of Religion or Belief in Nigeria. Its scale is substantial: Nigeria Watch recorded **12,162 deaths in violent incidents during 2024**, compared with 11,869 in 2023. Approximately **75% of recorded fatalities occurred in northern Nigeria**. The highest absolute totals were reported in Borno State, with 1,263 deaths, followed by Katsina with 1,130, Zamfara with 1,126, Kaduna with 1,078 and Niger with 943. (nigeriawatch.org)

These national totals must not be interpreted as religious-persecution figures. They include insurgency, banditry, criminal violence, counter-insurgency operations, communal disputes and other forms of lethal violence. Establishing the FoRB component requires a second analytical stage: identifying whether victims, institutions or communities were targeted because of religion, or whether wider insecurity materially prevented religious practice.

NORF therefore applies the following sequence:



3.B.7.1 Empirical Baseline

Selected indicators

Indicator	Period	Recorded value	Interpretation
Deaths in violent incidents nationwide	2024	**12,162**	All recorded lethal violence; not a FoRB-only total
Increase from previous year	2023–2024	**2.5%**	From 11,869 to 12,162
Share occurring in northern Nigeria	2024	**~75%**	Demonstrates strong geographic concentration
Deaths attributed to crime	2024	**6,018**	Banditry and criminal violence were major components
Boko Haram/ISWAP/Ansaru violence and related counter-operations	2024	**1,254 deaths**	Includes militants, civilians and security personnel
Farmer–herder violence	2024	**567 deaths**	Down from 860 in 2023
Ethno-communal violence	2024	**170 deaths**	166 were connected to land disputes in the Nigeria Watch classification
Fatalities associated with kidnapping incidents	2024	**425**	Does not represent the total number abducted

Indicator	Period	Recorded value	Interpretation
Children abducted in conflict-related violence	Approximately 2014–2024	**More than 1,680**	Includes abductions at schools and elsewhere
Children killed in attacks on schools	Approximately 2014–2024	**180**	UN-verified reporting cited by UNICEF
Recorded attacks on schools	Approximately 2014–2024	**More than 70**	Religious identity of victims is not consistently coded

Nigeria Watch recorded 6,018 deaths classified under crime in 2024, 567 in farmer–herder violence and 170 in ethno-communal violence. Its report attributed 1,254 deaths to attacks by Boko Haram, ISWAP and Ansaru together with related government counter-operations. (nigeriawatch.org)

UNICEF reported in April 2024 that conflict-related violence over the preceding decade had resulted in more than 1,680 child abductions, 180 children killed in attacks on schools, approximately 60 school personnel abducted, 14 school staff killed and more than 70 verified attacks on schools. Only 37% of assessed schools across ten states had early-warning systems for threats such as armed attacks. (UNICEF)

NORF Evidence Assessment

Evidence confidence: High for the broad scale and geographical concentration of violence.

Evidence confidence: Medium or low for national victim totals disaggregated by religion, because the principal event datasets do not consistently record every victim's faith or determine whether religion was the principal motive.

3.B.7.2 Pattern One: Islamist Insurgency

Actors and geographical concentration

Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province remain concentrated mainly in Borno, Yobe and neighbouring areas, although related extremist activity has also been documented elsewhere. Nigeria Watch recorded **1,254 deaths in 2024** arising from Boko Haram, ISWAP and Ansaru attacks and associated security-force counter-operations. Borno accounted for 960 of these deaths, Yobe for 123, Niger for 118 and Kaduna for 53. At least 15 local government areas in Borno were affected. (nigeriawatch.org)

This total includes different victim categories and cannot be treated as a civilian or religious-persecution total. Nigeria Watch also recorded the deaths of 218 Boko Haram or ISWAP commanders and combatants during internal clashes, illustrating why aggregate insurgency figures must be disaggregated before drawing conclusions concerning civilian religious victimisation. (nigeriawatch.org)

Christian victims

Christian civilians, clergy, churches, schools and predominantly Christian communities have been deliberately targeted by jihadist actors. The European Union Agency for Asylum found that Christians in the North East have been subjected to extreme violence by Boko Haram and identified jihadist organisations, including Boko Haram and ISWAP, among the principal perpetrators of violence against Christians. (European Union Agency for Asylum)

Open Doors recorded **3,100 Nigerian Christians killed for faith-related reasons** and **2,830 abducted** during its World Watch List 2025 reporting period. It also reported at least 1,000 cases of rape or sexual assault and more than 10,000 cases of physical or psychological abuse, while marking the latter categories as minimum estimates. These figures come from a Christian persecution-monitoring methodology and should not be treated as equivalent to ACLED or Nigeria Watch's nationwide conflict totals. (Open Doors)

For the subsequent World Watch List 2026 reporting period, Open Doors reported **3,490 Christians killed in Nigeria**, representing approximately 72% of the 4,849 Christians it classified as killed for their faith globally. (Open Doors)

Muslim victims

Muslim civilians are also killed by Boko Haram and ISWAP, particularly where communities resist insurgent authority, reject extremist doctrine, cooperate with the state or are accused of informing security forces. USCIRF states that non-state actors regularly kill, kidnap and attack Christians, Muslims and practitioners of traditional religions. (USCIRF)

However, NORF did not identify a sufficiently robust, current nationwide dataset that produces a directly comparable annual number of Muslim and Christian civilian victims using the same definitions and coding rules. It would therefore be methodologically unsound to conclude that Muslim and Christian populations suffer equally—or to establish a national ratio using unrelated datasets.

Comparative evidence

One monitoring project cited by the European Union Agency for Asylum estimated that between October 2019 and September 2024, **2.4 Christians were killed for every Muslim recorded as killed** in its Nigerian dataset. In states where attacks against Christians occurred, it reported a ratio of 5.2 Christian victims for every Muslim victim. EUAA also cautioned that some more recent high Christian casualty estimates could not be corroborated independently. (European Union Agency for Asylum)

This evidence suggests disproportionate Christian victimisation within the monitored attack categories, but it should not be presented as a definitive national mortality ratio. The estimate depends on the project's classification of perpetrators, victims, religious identity and motive.

NORF Assessment

Islamist insurgency is both a broad civilian-protection crisis and a direct FoRB threat. It affects Muslims as well as Christians, but the available religion-specific evidence shows that Christians are deliberately targeted and may experience a disproportionately high burden of faith-related killing and abduction in particular regions.

Evidence strength

- Deliberate attacks on Christian communities and institutions: **High**
- Severe Muslim civilian victimisation by jihadist organisations: **High**
- Claim that both communities are affected equally: **Unsupported**
- Precise national Christian-to-Muslim casualty ratio: **Medium–Low**

3.B.7.3 Pattern Two: Farmer–Herder and Middle Belt Violence

Nigeria Watch recorded approximately **567 deaths in farmer–herder clashes during 2024**, down from 860 in 2023. Incidents were recorded across 20 states and the Federal Capital Territory. Benue recorded the highest total, with 376 deaths, followed by Plateau and Kogi. (nigeriawatch.org)

Many affected farming communities in Benue, Plateau, Kaduna and adjacent areas are predominantly Christian, while many pastoralist communities are predominantly Muslim and ethnically Fulani. This overlap makes religious interpretation unavoidable but also creates a high risk of misclassification. Disputes may involve land access, grazing routes, cattle theft, retaliation, local political representation, criminal networks, ethnic mobilisation and religious identity simultaneously.

Religion-specific monitoring nevertheless indicates that Christian communities bear a severe burden. EUAA's review identifies armed Fulani groups, jihadist groups, Boko Haram and ISWAP among actors reported to target Christians and notes persistent allegations that authorities fail to protect affected communities or prosecute perpetrators effectively. (European Union Agency for Asylum)

At the same time, not every attack involving Fulani perpetrators is religiously motivated, and Fulani Muslim communities have themselves suffered killings, cattle theft, displacement and retaliatory violence. Treating "Fulani," "Muslim," "herder," "bandit" and "jihadist" as interchangeable categories would be empirically inaccurate and could reinforce collective blame.

NORF Assessment

The data support three simultaneous conclusions:

1. Predominantly Christian communities in parts of the Middle Belt experience repeated, severe and sometimes deliberately targeted attacks.
2. Religion interacts with ethnicity, land, livelihood, political representation and criminality rather than acting as the sole driver in every incident.
3. Aggregate farmer–herder casualty figures cannot automatically be classified as either Christian persecution or Muslim–Christian conflict.

Evidence strength

- High concentration of fatalities in Benue and Plateau: **High**
- Serious and repeated harm to Christian communities: **High**
- Religious motive in every farmer–herder attack: **Low**
- Presence of multiple overlapping drivers: **High**

3.B.7.4 Pattern Three: Banditry, Kidnapping and Criminal Violence

Crime accounted for **6,018 recorded violent deaths in 2024**, nearly half of Nigeria Watch's national total. Katsina recorded 1,092 crime-related deaths, Zamfara 1,005, Kaduna 844, Niger 451 and Benue 317. Fatalities associated with kidnapping incidents declined from 536 in 2023 to 425 in 2024, although these figures measure deaths connected to kidnapping events rather than the total number of people abducted. (nigeriawatch.org)

Banditry affects Christians, Muslims and traditional religious communities. Religious leaders and institutions may be especially visible targets because churches, seminaries, mosques and religious organisations are perceived as capable of mobilising ransom payments. Abduction of clergy can therefore be financially motivated, religiously motivated or both.

From a FoRB perspective, criminal motivation does not eliminate religious-freedom consequences. Repeated kidnapping of clergy, attacks near places of worship, insecurity on pilgrimage routes and displacement of communities can prevent worship, religious education, pastoral care and humanitarian activity.

NORF Assessment

Banditry is principally a security and organised-crime phenomenon, but it produces significant indirect and sometimes direct FoRB harm. NORF will record separately:

- abducted or killed Christian clergy;
- abducted or killed Muslim clerics;
- attacks on churches, mosques and religious schools;
- events in which a religious motive is established;
- events where the motive remains uncertain.

Evidence strength

- Banditry as a major source of national mortality: **High**
- Substantial FoRB consequences for religious institutions: **High**
- Religious motivation in most bandit kidnappings: **Low–Medium**

3.B.7.5 Pattern Four: Attacks on Religious and Educational Institutions

Schools and religious institutions are important targets because they combine symbolic importance, concentrated civilian presence and limited physical protection.

UNICEF's verified ten-year data recorded more than 70 attacks on schools, over 1,680 abducted children, 180 children killed, approximately 60 abducted school personnel and 14 staff members killed. The data do not consistently disaggregate victims by religion, and many attacked schools were public rather than explicitly religious institutions. (UNICEF)

Nigeria Watch recorded that insurgency-related deaths during 2024 occurred in attacks affecting rural communities, military installations, extremist positions, churches and schools. Its report does not provide a complete national 2024 count of churches and mosques attacked. (nigeriawatch.org)

This evidentiary gap matters. Claims about hundreds or thousands of destroyed churches or mosques often differ substantially because sources count different periods and categories, including damaged buildings, abandoned congregations, closed institutions and structures destroyed during wider village attacks.

NORF Assessment

NORF should publish a religious-institution attack total only where individual events can be deduplicated and coded by:

- date and location;
- institution type;
- religious affiliation;
- perpetrator;
- deaths and injuries;
- apparent motive;
- source confidence.

Until such a dataset is constructed, the report should not offer a single nationwide total that implies more precision than the evidence permits.

3.B.7.6 Geographic Risk Distribution

North East

The principal threat is jihadist insurgency. Borno recorded 1,263 violent deaths in 2024 and 960 of the deaths associated with Boko Haram, ISWAP and Ansaru violence and counter-operations. (nigeriawatch.org)

North West

The dominant threats are banditry, kidnapping and expanding extremist activity. Zamfara recorded the country's highest violent-fatality rate in 2024, at **19.52 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants**, while Katsina and Kaduna also recorded high absolute death totals. (nigeriawatch.org)

Middle Belt and North Central

Benue recorded 376 farmer–herder-related deaths in 2024. Violence in Benue, Plateau and parts of Kaduna combines communal, criminal, ethnic, livelihood and religious dimensions, with predominantly Christian farming communities among those suffering severe repeated attacks. (nigeriawatch.org)

South East

Nigeria Watch recorded 379 deaths associated with pro-Biafra agitation and related security operations in 2024. This violence affects a predominantly Christian region but is primarily classified as political and separatist rather than anti-Christian violence. (nigeriawatch.org)

Southern coastal states

Organised religion-related violence is generally less prevalent than in the northern and central regions, although kidnapping, cult violence, separatist conflict and local disputes can constrain religious life.

NORF Observation

Nigeria should not receive a single undifferentiated violence description. The type, intensity, perpetrators, victims and FoRB implications vary sharply by region.

3.B.7.7 State Response and Accountability

Nigeria has deployed military forces against Boko Haram and ISWAP, conducted operations against bandit groups and supported security and humanitarian interventions. These operations have reduced insurgent territorial control compared with the insurgency's earlier peak, but they have not eliminated attacks or restored secure civilian life across all affected areas.

Nigeria Watch's 2024 figures combine insurgent attacks and government counter-operations in some categories, underscoring that civilian risk can arise from both armed groups and state responses. It also identified criminal gangs and government security forces as the actors involved in more fatal incidents than other protagonist categories during 2024. (nigeriawatch.org)

USCIRF assesses Nigeria's response as inadequate, citing failures to prevent attacks and hold perpetrators accountable. The Nigerian government disputes interpretations that characterise the violence as a coordinated campaign to exterminate Christians, arguing that terrorism, banditry and organised crime affect communities across religious and ethnic lines. Both positions contain elements supported by evidence: the security crisis is multi-causal and affects several communities, while Christian communities are also deliberately and disproportionately targeted in identifiable settings. (USCIRF)

NORF Assessment

The principal state-response weaknesses are:

- insufficient early warning and rapid response;
- low arrest and prosecution rates;
- weak victim-level data;
- uneven rural security presence;
- incomplete protection of displaced communities;
- limited transparency concerning civilian casualties.

Evidence strength: High that protection and accountability remain inadequate in several high-risk regions.

3.B.7.8 FoRB and Human-Rights Impact

The impact of violence extends beyond fatalities. Documented consequences include:

- inability to attend worship safely;
- destruction or abandonment of churches, mosques and schools;
- displacement from religiously significant communities;
- disruption of clergy, pastoral and humanitarian work;
- interruption of religious education;
- forced behavioural conformity under extremist control;
- heightened risks for converts and minority believers;
- fear-driven restrictions on religious dress, speech and assembly.

Humanitarian displacement further weakens religious and community institutions. OCHA estimated that **7.8 million people required humanitarian assistance in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe states in 2025**, illustrating the scale of the environment in which FoRB rights must be exercised. (OCHA)

3.B.7.9 Evidence-Strength Matrix

Finding	NORF confidence
Nigeria experiences extremely high levels of lethal violence	**High**
Violence is concentrated disproportionately in northern and central states	**High**
Christians are deliberately targeted by jihadist and other armed actors	**High**
Muslims are also extensively killed and abducted by jihadists and bandits	**High**
Christians and Muslims suffer equal victimisation nationally	**Unsupported**
Christian victims are disproportionately represented in some religion-specific datasets	**Medium–High**
All farmer–herder violence is religious persecution	**Low**
State protection and accountability are insufficient in several high-risk areas	**High**
A precise national annual FoRB casualty total is currently possible	**Low**

Integrated NORF Violence Assessment

Nigeria's violence environment is not accurately described either as a purely religious war or as ordinary criminal insecurity with no religious dimension.

The empirical evidence supports a more differentiated conclusion.

First, violence is extensive: Nigeria Watch recorded **12,162 violent deaths in 2024**, of which approximately three quarters occurred in northern Nigeria. Crime and banditry accounted for the largest classified component, while Boko Haram, ISWAP and related counter-operations accounted for 1,254 deaths and farmer–herder clashes for 567. (nigeriawatch.org)

Second, Christians experience clear, deliberate and severe targeting. Open Doors recorded 3,100 Nigerian Christians killed for faith-related reasons in its World Watch List 2025 period and 3,490 in the subsequent reporting period. A separate religion-specific monitoring dataset cited by EUAA found substantially more recorded Christian than Muslim victims between October 2019 and September 2024. These estimates carry methodological limitations but cannot responsibly be omitted from an assessment of Nigeria. (Open Doors)

Third, Muslims are also major victims of insurgency, banditry and communal violence. Boko Haram and ISWAP kill Muslims who reject their authority, while Muslim communities suffer mass abduction, displacement and criminal violence. The evidence therefore rejects any claim that only Christians are affected. It does **not**, however, justify the earlier implication that the two populations are victimised to the same extent or in the same manner.

NORF concludes that **Christian communities face a particularly acute and, in several regions, disproportionate FoRB threat**, especially from jihadist organisations and armed attacks on predominantly Christian communities. Muslim communities simultaneously face severe violence, principally from jihadist coercion, banditry, communal retaliation and general insecurity. The correct analytical conclusion is therefore not equivalence but **differentiated victimisation**.

The policy response must likewise be differentiated: counter-insurgency in the North East; civilian protection and accountability in the Middle Belt; anti-kidnapping and rural security measures in the North West; protection of religious institutions and clergy nationwide; and systematic collection of victim-level data disaggregated by religion, sex, age, location, perpetrator and probable motive.

Figure 3.29



APA 7 References

European Union Agency for Asylum. (2025). *Nigeria country focus: Christians in areas where they are a minority*.

Nigeria Watch. (2025). *Fourteenth report on violence in Nigeria: 2024*. French Institute for Research in Africa.

Open Doors International. (2025). *Nigeria: World Watch List 2025 country dossier*.

Open Doors International. (2026). *World Watch List 2026: Nigeria country dossier*.

United Nations Children's Fund. (2024, April 15). *On the 10-year mark of the Chibok abductions, UNICEF urges action to secure children's education in Nigeria*.

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (2025). *Nigeria humanitarian needs and response plan 2025*.

United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. (2025). *Religious freedom conditions in Nigeria*.

Publication caution for the reader

Since the values from Nigeria Watch, Open Doors and other monitoring organisations measure different populations and use different inclusion thresholds, they must remain in separate columns in the report. Adding them together would produce a misleading number. Since this does not comply with the NORF methodology, we have separated them accordingly.

3.B.8 Integrated NORF Assessment: Nigeria

3.B.8.1 Purpose and Method

This section integrates the evidence presented in Sections 3.B.1–3.B.7 to determine the overall condition of Freedom of Religion or Belief in Nigeria.

The assessment considers seven dimensions:

1. constitutional and legal protection;
2. government implementation;
3. societal conditions;
4. violence and intimidation;
5. differential impact on religious communities;
6. state protection and accountability;
7. evidentiary confidence.

The integrated assessment does not treat all incidents involving religious communities as religious persecution. NORF distinguishes between:

- violence motivated principally by religion;
- violence in which religion is one of several interacting drivers;
- criminal or political violence that nevertheless restricts religious practice;
- state actions that directly limit Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Particular attention is given to the persecution of Christians, including Christian fatalities, abductions, attacks on churches, clergy and predominantly Christian communities. These findings are presented separately wherever reliable religion-specific data exist.

3.B.8.2 Overall Freedom of Religion or Belief Conditions

Nigeria presents a marked contradiction between **formal constitutional protection** and **uneven practical protection**.

Section 38 of the Constitution guarantees freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including the freedom to change, manifest and propagate a religion or belief. Section 10 prohibits both the federal government and state governments from adopting an official state religion. (nigeriarights.gov.ng)

These protections provide a substantial legal foundation for FoRB. In practice, however, the ability to exercise those rights varies considerably by:

- state and region;
- majority or minority religious status;
- exposure to armed conflict;
- local political and social conditions;
- access to law enforcement and judicial protection;
- gender, age and displacement status.

The most severe restrictions occur in parts of the North East, North West and Middle Belt, where insurgency, targeted community attacks, banditry, kidnapping and weak state protection combine to constrain worship, religious education, movement and community life.

USCIRF characterises Nigerian religious-freedom conditions as particularly severe and reports that non-state actors regularly kill, abduct and attack Christians, Muslims and practitioners of traditional religions, while schools, missions and houses of worship remain targets. It also assesses the government response and accountability mechanisms as inadequate. (uscirf.gov)

NORF Finding

Nigeria possesses meaningful constitutional FoRB guarantees, but these guarantees are not reliably translated into effective protection in high-risk regions.

Evidence confidence: High

3.B.8.3 National Violence and Security Context

Nigeria Watch recorded **12,162 deaths in violent incidents during 2024**, an increase from 11,869 in 2023. Borno State recorded the largest absolute number, with 1,263 fatalities. Crime accounted for 6,018 deaths nationally, while Boko Haram, ISWAP, Ansaru and related counter-operations accounted for 1,254 deaths. (nigeriawatch.org)

These figures describe Nigeria's wider security environment and are not themselves totals for religious persecution. Nevertheless, they establish the scale of insecurity within which FoRB must be exercised.

The violence is also geographically differentiated:

Region	Principal threat patterns	Primary FoRB implications
North East	Boko Haram and ISWAP insurgency	Targeted attacks, coercion, displacement and destruction of religious institutions
North West	Banditry, abduction and emerging extremist activity	Kidnapping of clergy and worshippers, interrupted worship and community displacement

Region	Principal threat patterns	Primary FoRB implications
Middle Belt	Community attacks, farmer–herder conflict and organised armed violence	Severe harm to predominantly Christian farming communities and retaliatory violence
Southern regions	Crime, separatist violence and localised intimidation	Generally lower organised religion-related violence, but significant local restrictions occur

NORF Finding

Nigeria's national FoRB risk cannot be represented accurately by a single uniform description. Risk is severe but highly dependent on location, perpetrator and religious identity.

Evidence confidence: High

3.B.8.4 Persecution and Victimisation of Christians

Scale of documented Christian victimisation

The evidence demonstrates that Christians face deliberate and severe persecution in several Nigerian regions.

Open Doors recorded the following under its World Watch List 2025 methodology:

Indicator	Recorded Christian victims
Christians killed for faith-related reasons	**3,100**
Christians abducted	**2,830**
Christians raped or sexually assaulted	**At least 1,000**
Christians subjected to physical or psychological abuse	**At least 10,000**

These figures cover the organisation's specified reporting period and reflect its own faith-related persecution methodology. They must not be added directly to general conflict figures from Nigeria Watch or other datasets. (opendoors.org)

For the subsequent World Watch List 2026 reporting period, Open Doors reported **3,490 Nigerian Christians killed for faith-related reasons**, an increase from 3,100 in the preceding reporting period. Nigeria accounted for approximately 72% of the 4,849 Christian deaths recorded globally by the organisation during that period. (opendoors.org)

EUAA reports that Christians are especially vulnerable in northern states and that violence affecting Christian communities has extended into the Middle Belt and further south. It identifies Boko Haram, ISWAP and armed groups involved in attacks on predominantly Christian farming communities among the principal threats. (European Union Agency for Asylum)

Forms of Christian persecution

Documented forms include:

- killings of Christian civilians;
- abduction and killing of clergy;
- attacks during worship;
- destruction or abandonment of churches;
- attacks on predominantly Christian villages;
- sexual violence;
- forced displacement;
- pressure on converts;
- restrictions on constructing or maintaining churches;
- inadequate protection following threats or previous attacks.

The nature of the risk varies by region. In the North East, jihadist organisations explicitly regard Christian communities as legitimate targets. In parts of the Middle Belt, predominantly Christian farming communities face recurring armed attacks whose motives may combine religious identity, ethnicity, land, local politics and organised criminality. (European Union Agency for Asylum)

Disproportionate impact

Religion-specific monitoring indicates that Christians are disproportionately represented among victims in several categories and regions. However, NORF does not present a precise national Christian-to-Muslim fatality ratio because no single comprehensive national dataset consistently codes the religion of every victim, perpetrator and motive.

The appropriate conclusion is therefore:

Christian communities face particularly acute and, in several regions, disproportionate risks of faith-related killing, abduction, displacement and institutional destruction.

This conclusion does not imply that every Christian killed in Nigeria was killed because of religion. It reflects the combination of:

- specifically documented anti-Christian attacks;
- the targeting of churches, clergy and Christian villages;
- high Christian casualty figures in religion-specific datasets;
- the geographic concentration of violence in areas where Christians are vulnerable minorities or exposed rural communities.

NORF Finding

The persecution of Christians is a central and independently evidenced component of Nigeria's FoRB crisis. It must not be obscured by describing all violence solely as criminality, climate conflict or general insecurity.

Evidence confidence: High for deliberate Christian targeting.

Evidence confidence: Medium–High for disproportionate Christian victimisation nationally, owing to incomplete victim-level religious coding.

3.B.8.5 Other Religious Communities at Risk

Muslim civilians also suffer extensive violence, particularly from Boko Haram, ISWAP, bandit groups and retaliatory communal attacks. Jihadist organisations have killed Muslims accused of rejecting extremist ideology, cooperating with state authorities or resisting insurgent taxation and control. USCIRF reports that Muslims, Christians and traditional religious practitioners are all victims of killing, kidnapping and attacks by non-state actors. (uscirf.gov)

EUAA has also documented attacks against Fulani Muslims and other Muslim populations in areas where they are minorities. (European Union Agency for Asylum)

Traditional religious practitioners, converts, atheists and members of smaller denominations may face additional risks from:

- local social pressure;
- accusations of blasphemy;
- family or community coercion;
- discriminatory access to institutions;
- weak political representation;
- insecurity affecting small and less-protected religious communities.

The recognition of these victims does not reduce the importance of documenting Christian persecution. NORF's methodology requires differentiated analysis rather than forced equivalence.

NORF Finding

Nigeria's FoRB crisis affects several religious communities, but the form, motive, scale and regional concentration of victimisation differ substantially.

Evidence confidence: High

3.B.8.6 Legal and Institutional Protection

Nigeria's constitutional framework is stronger than its implementation.

Institutional strengths

- an explicit constitutional right to freedom of religion or belief;
- constitutional prohibition of an official state religion;
- functioning federal and state courts;
- religious institutions operating throughout most of the country;

- extensive Christian–Muslim civil-society engagement;
- government security operations against jihadist and criminal organisations.

Institutional weaknesses

- uneven enforcement of constitutional protections;
- slow or absent intervention during attacks;
- limited prosecutions and convictions;
- poor public data on the religion of victims and probable motives;
- inconsistent protection of rural communities;
- insufficient security for places of worship and religious schools;
- legal restrictions involving blasphemy in northern states;
- gaps in reconstruction, compensation and support for displaced communities.

USCIRF reported in 2025 that twelve state governments and the federal government enforce blasphemy provisions and that four Muslims were then incarcerated under blasphemy laws, including two religious leaders. (uscirf.gov)

The existence of victims from the Muslim community under blasphemy laws illustrates that FoRB restrictions cannot be reduced to a Christian–Muslim binary. Nevertheless, Christian communities remain especially exposed to non-state violence in numerous northern and central locations.

NORF Finding

Nigeria's principal institutional failure is not the absence of constitutional protection but the state's inability or unwillingness to provide consistent prevention, protection, investigation and accountability.

Evidence confidence: High

3.B.8.7 Government Protection and Accountability

Federal and state authorities conduct military, police, intelligence and stabilisation operations. These actions have constrained insurgent territorial control and disrupted armed groups, but they have not prevented recurrent attacks on vulnerable communities.

The principal protection deficiencies are:

1. inadequate early warning;
2. delayed security deployment;
3. insufficient permanent rural security presence;
4. low prosecution and conviction rates;
5. limited public reporting on investigations;
6. inadequate victim support and compensation;
7. weak protection for displaced persons returning to insecure areas.

USCIRF's 2025 country update stated that attacks on religious communities were increasing in frequency and remained a major ongoing threat. It also highlighted deficiencies in prevention and accountability. (uscirf.gov)

Government authorities have disputed descriptions of the violence as a coordinated national campaign against Christians, stressing that terrorism, banditry and communal violence affect Nigerians across religious groups. The available evidence supports part of this position: Nigeria's conflicts are multi-causal and Muslims also suffer extensively. It does not negate the substantial evidence that Christian civilians and institutions are deliberately targeted in identifiable regions and event patterns.

NORF Finding

The Nigerian state is actively engaged against armed actors but does not currently provide adequate or equal protection to all religious communities. Protection failures are especially consequential for exposed Christian communities in northern and central states.

Evidence confidence: High

3.B.8.8 Communities and Profiles at Greatest Risk

Very high risk

- Christian communities in parts of Borno, Adamawa and Yobe;
- predominantly Christian farming communities in parts of Benue, Plateau, Kaduna and neighbouring states;
- Christian clergy and church personnel exposed to kidnapping;
- Christian converts in highly restrictive local environments;
- communities previously attacked and lacking permanent security protection.

High risk

- Muslims resisting Boko Haram or ISWAP authority;
- Muslim minorities exposed to retaliatory communal violence;
- schoolchildren and religious students in conflict-affected states;
- internally displaced Christians and Muslims;
- women and girls exposed to abduction, forced marriage and sexual violence;
- local religious leaders involved in mediation or public criticism of armed actors.

Elevated but geographically variable risk

- practitioners of traditional religions;
- atheists and humanists;
- members of small religious denominations;
- persons accused of blasphemy;
- individuals changing or leaving their religion.

NORF Finding

Religious identity interacts with location, occupation, ethnicity, sex, age and displacement. Christian identity is an especially significant risk factor in a number of northern and Middle Belt environments.

3.B.8.9 Integrated NORF Rating

Nigeria FoRB Assessment Matrix

Dimension	NORF rating	Evidence confidence
Constitutional protection	**Strong**	High
Legal consistency	**Mixed**	High
Government implementation	**Uneven**	High
Judicial access	**Available but inconsistent**	Medium–High
Societal religious coexistence	**Mixed and regionally variable**	High
Violence affecting FoRB	**Severe**	High
Persecution risk for Christians	**Severe in several northern and central regions**	High
Risk to Muslims opposing jihadist or communal actors	**Severe in affected regions**	High
Protection of religious institutions	**Inadequate in high-risk areas**	High
Investigation and accountability	**Weak**	High
Reliability of national religion-disaggregated casualty data	**Limited**	High
Overall national FoRB risk	**High**	High
Risk in selected North-East and Middle Belt localities	**Very High to Extreme**	High

3.B.8.10 Country Evidence Dashboard

Key indicator	Verified value or assessment
Violent deaths nationwide	**12,162 in 2024**
Crime-related deaths	**6,018 in 2024**
Boko Haram, ISWAP, Ansaru and related counter-operation deaths	**1,254 in 2024**
Christians killed under WWL 2025 methodology	**3,100**
Christians abducted under WWL 2025 methodology	**2,830**
Christians killed under WWL 2026 methodology	**3,490**

Key indicator	Verified value or assessment
Constitutional FoRB guarantee	**Yes — Section 38**
Prohibition of state religion	**Yes — Section 10**
Principal Christian risk areas	**North East and parts of the Middle Belt/North Central**
Principal perpetrators affecting Christians	**Jihadist organisations, armed attackers of Christian communities, bandits and kidnappers**
Overall state protection	**Uneven and inadequate in high-risk areas**
Overall NORF risk level	**High nationally; Very High to Extreme in selected localities**

Data warning

The Christian persecution figures and nationwide conflict figures use different methodologies, time periods and inclusion criteria. They must be displayed separately and must not be added together.

3.B.8.11 Integrated NORF Conclusion

Nigeria has an extensive constitutional framework for Freedom of Religion or Belief, a highly religious civil society and many examples of peaceful Christian–Muslim coexistence. These strengths are substantial and should not be overlooked.

They are, however, undermined by severe and geographically concentrated violence, weak accountability, inconsistent state protection, local legal restrictions and the destruction or displacement of religious communities.

The evidence establishes that Christians face a particularly serious threat. Christian civilians, clergy, churches, schools and predominantly Christian settlements are deliberately attacked in parts of northern and central Nigeria. Open Doors recorded 3,100 Nigerian Christians killed and 2,830 abducted under its World Watch List 2025 methodology, rising to 3,490 Christians killed in the subsequent reporting period. These data are methodology-dependent but provide strong evidence that Christian persecution is extensive, lethal and central to Nigeria's FoRB crisis. (opendoors.org)

Muslim communities also experience grave victimisation, particularly from jihadist organisations, banditry and communal retaliation. The evidence therefore does not support an exclusively Christian victim narrative. Nor does it support an assumption of equal or identical victimisation.

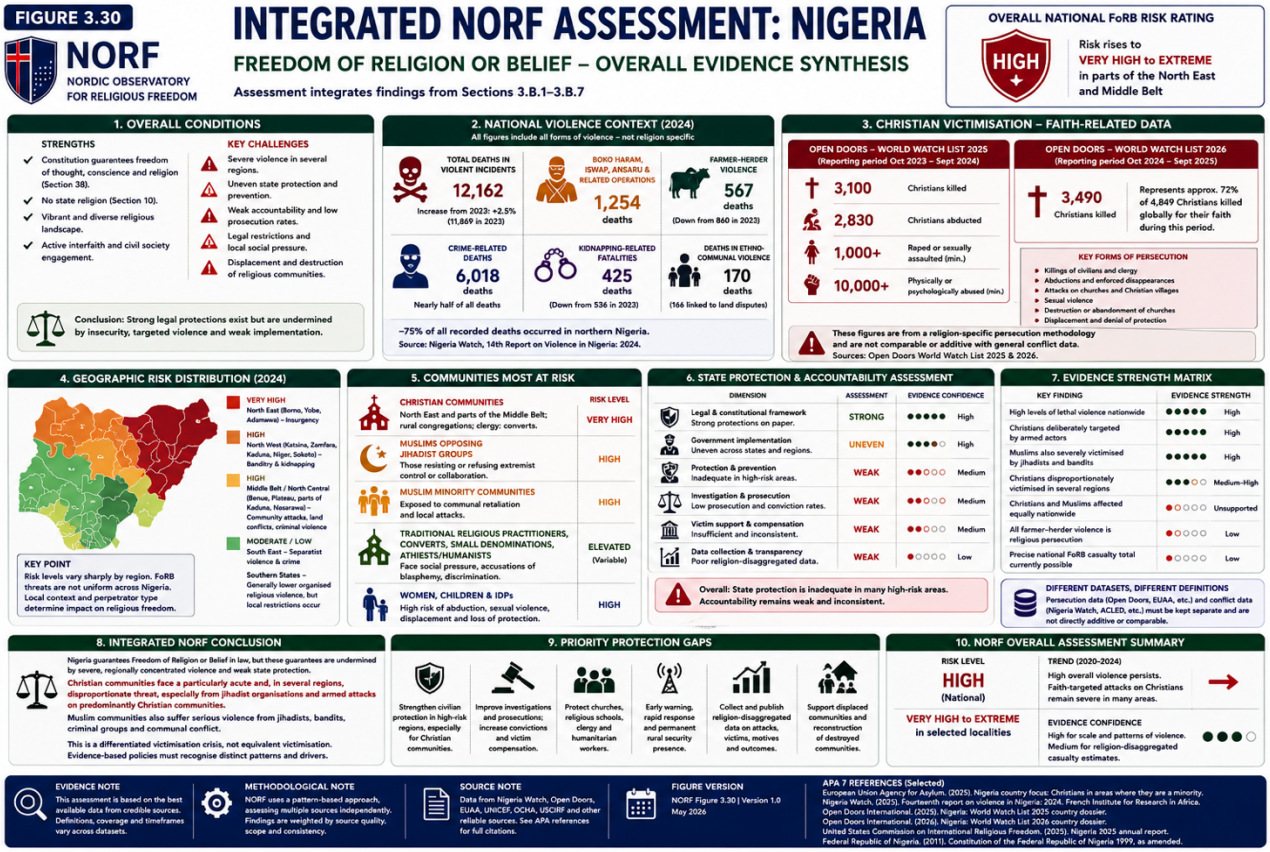
The most empirically defensible conclusion is one of **differentiated victimisation**:

Christians face deliberate, severe and in several regions disproportionate persecution, while Muslims and other religious communities experience distinct but also serious forms of violence, coercion and insecurity.

NORF consequently rates Nigeria's overall FoRB risk as **High**, rising to **Very High or Extreme** for exposed Christian communities and other vulnerable populations in selected parts of the North East and Middle Belt.

The decisive policy challenge is the gap between rights formally guaranteed by the Constitution and the state's practical ability to protect people exercising those rights. Nigeria's FoRB situation will not improve materially without stronger civilian protection, systematic prosecution of perpetrators, transparent religion-disaggregated victim data, protection of churches and other religious institutions, and sustained assistance to communities displaced or destroyed by violence.

Figure 3.30



APA 7 References

European Union Agency for Asylum. (2025). *Nigeria country focus: Christians in areas where they are a minority*.

Federal Republic of Nigeria. (2011). *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999, as amended*.

Nigeria Watch. (2025). *Fourteenth report on violence in Nigeria: 2024*. French Institute for Research in Africa.

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3.B.9 Future Outlook and Risk Assessment

3.B.9.1 Purpose and Method

The NORF Future Outlook and Risk Assessment evaluates the likely trajectory of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in Nigeria over the coming three to five years. Rather than attempting to predict specific events, the assessment identifies structural trends, emerging risks and resilience factors that are likely to influence the ability of individuals and communities to exercise their right to freedom of religion or belief.

The assessment is based on the evidence presented throughout Sections 3.B.1–3.B.8 and incorporates recent conflict, governance and humanitarian data. Risk ratings are expressed qualitatively and reflect the current state of evidence rather than deterministic forecasts.

NORF evaluates six dimensions:

- Security;
- Government capacity;
- Legal and institutional developments;
- Societal relations;
- Christian persecution;
- Overall FoRB risk.

3.B.9.2 Key Drivers Shaping the Future

The evidence indicates that Nigeria's FoRB environment will be shaped primarily by six structural drivers.

Driver 1 – Persistence of Armed Islamist Groups

Although Boko Haram has lost much of the territory it once controlled, both Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) retain the capacity to conduct attacks against civilians, religious communities, humanitarian actors and government forces.

Recent security operations have degraded command structures, but attacks continue across Borno and neighbouring states. The persistence of insurgent networks suggests that jihadist violence will remain one of the principal threats to FoRB in north-eastern Nigeria.

Risk Assessment

Future Risk: High

Driver 2 – Violence Against Christian Communities

Evidence presented in Section 3.B.7 demonstrates that Christian communities continue to experience severe and, in several regions, disproportionate levels of faith-related violence.

Open Doors documented:

- **3,100 Christians killed** under the World Watch List 2025 methodology;
- **2,830 Christians abducted**;
- **more than 1,000 cases of sexual violence**;
- **more than 10,000 cases of physical or psychological abuse**.

The continuation of attacks on churches, clergy and predominantly Christian villages suggests that these risks are unlikely to disappear in the short term.

The greatest concern is not only casualty numbers but also the cumulative effects of displacement, fear, destruction of religious infrastructure and declining confidence in state protection.

Risk Assessment

Future Risk: Very High

Driver 3 – Banditry and Organised Criminal Violence

North-western Nigeria continues to experience widespread banditry, kidnapping and organised criminal activity.

Nigeria Watch attributed **6,018 deaths to crime during 2024**, making organised criminal violence one of the country's largest sources of insecurity.

Although most criminal groups are financially motivated rather than ideologically driven, their activities increasingly affect:

- churches;
- clergy;
- mosques;
- schools;
- humanitarian organisations;
- rural communities.

The expansion of criminal violence into previously less affected areas could increase indirect restrictions on FoRB.

Risk Assessment

Future Risk: High

Driver 4 – Weak Accountability

Despite ongoing military operations, prosecution and conviction rates remain comparatively low relative to the scale of violence.

Repeated attacks without effective investigation contribute to:

- community mistrust;
- cycles of retaliation;
- continued displacement;
- reduced confidence in state institutions.

Unless accountability mechanisms improve significantly, insecurity is likely to remain self-reinforcing.

Risk Assessment

Future Risk: High

Driver 5 – Demographic and Environmental Pressures

Nigeria's population exceeded **230 million** in 2024 and is projected to continue growing rapidly over the coming decades. Combined with climate variability, land degradation and increasing competition for natural resources, demographic growth is expected to intensify pressures in several conflict-prone regions.

These dynamics are particularly relevant in parts of the Middle Belt, where disputes over land use, grazing routes and local political authority intersect with religious and ethnic identities.

The evidence does not support reducing these conflicts to climate or religion alone; rather, they reflect interacting structural pressures that may heighten local FoRB risks if left unresolved.

Risk Assessment

Future Risk: Moderate–High

Driver 6 – Institutional Resilience

Nigeria possesses important institutional strengths that may reduce future risks.

These include:

- constitutional protection of FoRB;
- an independent judiciary;
- active religious organisations;
- interfaith initiatives;
- civil society engagement;

- international cooperation;
- expanding early-warning mechanisms in some states.

These institutions provide a foundation for improvement if supported by sustained political commitment and adequate resources.

Risk Assessment

Future Risk: Moderate (Protective Factor)

3.B.9.3 Risk Assessment by Community

Community	Current Risk	Five-Year Outlook	Evidence Confidence
Christians in North East	**Very High**	**Very High**	High
Christians in Middle Belt	**Very High**	**Very High**	High
Christian clergy	**High**	**High**	High
Christian converts	**High**	**High**	Medium–High
Muslims opposing jihadist organisations	**High**	**High**	High
Muslim minority communities	**Moderate–High**	**Moderate–High**	Medium
Traditional religious communities	**Moderate**	**Moderate**	Medium
Internally displaced persons	**High**	**High**	High
Women and girls	**High**	**High**	High
Children	**High**	**High**	High

3.B.9.4 Early Warning Indicators

NORF identifies several indicators that should be monitored to detect deterioration or improvement in FoRB conditions.

Indicators of Deterioration

- increasing attacks on churches and clergy;
- rising numbers of Christian abductions;
- expansion of ISWAP operations;
- spread of banditry into new regions;
- declining prosecution rates;
- increased displacement of religious communities;
- attacks on schools and religious education;
- heightened intercommunal mobilisation along religious lines.

Indicators of Improvement

- declining attacks on religious institutions;
- increased arrests and convictions;
- improved civilian protection in rural areas;
- reduced kidnapping rates;
- strengthened community mediation;
- improved early-warning systems;
- increased safe return of displaced communities;
- enhanced transparency in reporting violence.

3.B.9.5 Future Scenarios (2026–2030)

Scenario A – Gradual Improvement (Probability: Moderate)

Security operations continue to weaken insurgent organisations, prosecution improves, rural policing expands and interfaith cooperation reduces local tensions.

Under this scenario:

- attacks gradually decline;
- displacement decreases;
- FoRB protection improves incrementally;
- Christian communities regain greater confidence in state protection.

Scenario B – Continued Stalemate (Probability: High)

Violence remains geographically concentrated but persistent.

Government institutions prevent major territorial expansion of insurgent groups but struggle to protect rural populations consistently.

Banditry continues at high levels.

Christian communities remain disproportionately exposed in several northern and central regions.

Overall FoRB conditions improve only marginally.

Scenario C – Escalation (Probability: Moderate–Low)

Renewed insurgent activity, worsening communal violence, expanding criminal networks and declining institutional capacity produce broader insecurity.

Possible consequences include:

- increased displacement;
- more attacks on religious institutions;
- reduced humanitarian access;
- declining trust in public institutions;
- increased restrictions on FoRB.

Although not considered the most likely scenario, it remains plausible if security conditions deteriorate significantly.

3.B.9.6 NORF Strategic Risk Matrix

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Overall Risk
Islamist insurgency	High	Very High	**Very High**
Violence against Christian communities	High	Very High	**Very High**
Banditry and kidnapping	High	High	**High**
Farmer–herder violence	Moderate–High	High	**High**
Weak accountability	High	High	**High**
Attacks on religious institutions	Moderate–High	High	**High**
Blasphemy-related restrictions	Moderate	Moderate	**Moderate**
Interfaith deterioration	Moderate	High	**Moderate–High**
National constitutional rollback	Low	Very High	**Moderate**

3.B.9.7 NORF Outlook Dashboard

Dimension	Current Status	Trend
Constitutional protection	Strong	→ Stable
Government implementation	Uneven	→ Stable
Security	Poor in conflict regions	→ Stable to Slight Improvement
Christian persecution	Severe	→ Persistent
Muslim victimisation by insurgents	Severe	→ Persistent
Banditry	High	→ Persistent
Accountability	Weak	→ Limited Improvement
Overall FoRB	High Risk	→ Stable

3.B.9.8 Integrated NORF Future Assessment

The evidence suggests that Nigeria will continue to experience significant challenges to Freedom of Religion or Belief over the medium term. The country's constitutional framework remains comparatively strong, and active civil society, interfaith engagement and ongoing security operations provide important foundations for improvement. However, these strengths are offset by

persistent insurgency, widespread criminal violence, uneven state protection and limited accountability.

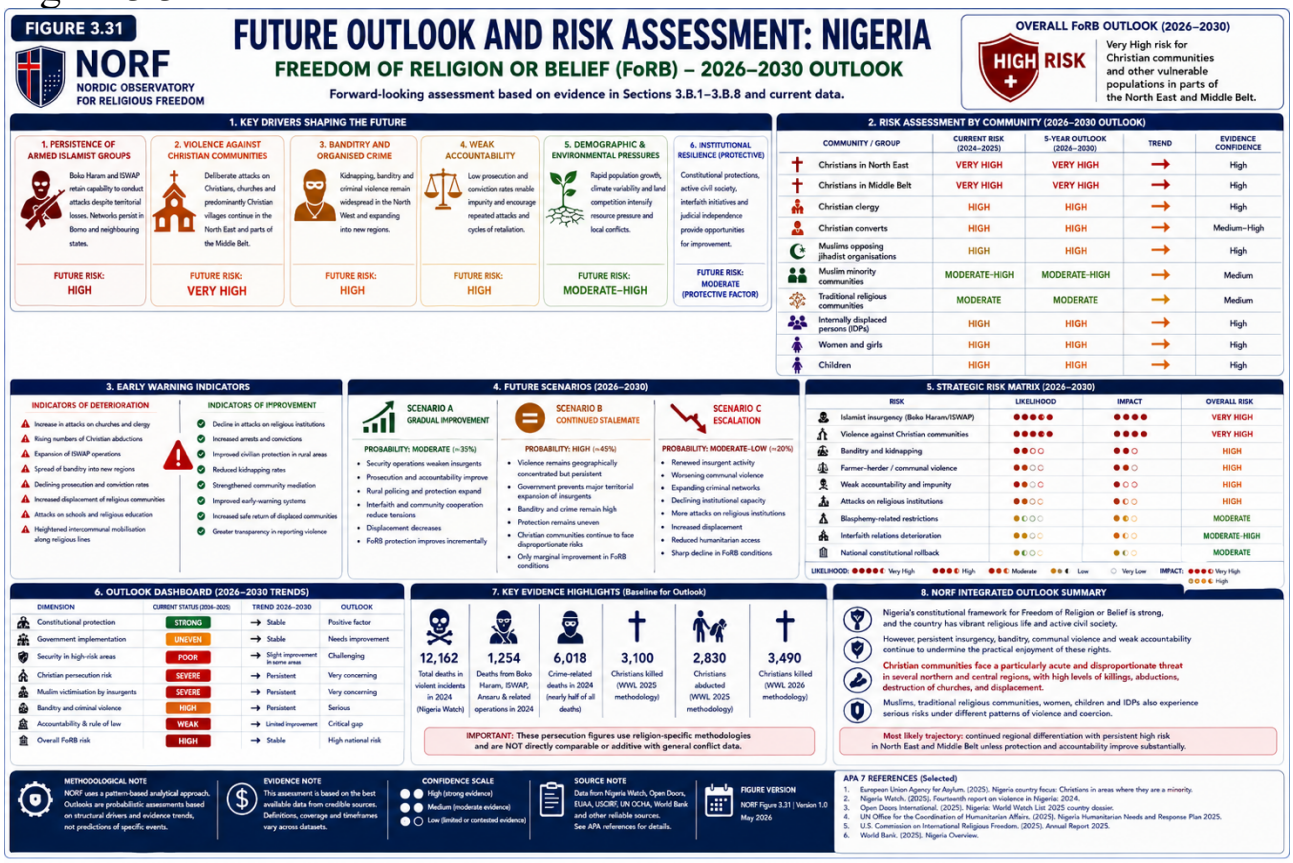
For Christian communities, the outlook remains particularly concerning. The verified evidence presented in this report indicates sustained and deliberate attacks on Christian civilians, clergy, churches and predominantly Christian communities in parts of the North East and Middle Belt. Unless there are substantial improvements in civilian protection, investigation of attacks and prosecution of perpetrators, these communities are likely to remain at **Very High** risk.

Muslim communities will also continue to face serious threats from jihadist organisations, bandit groups and communal violence, particularly where they resist extremist control or are caught in broader insecurity. Traditional religious practitioners, converts and smaller religious communities are also expected to remain vulnerable in specific local contexts.

Overall, NORF assesses that the most likely trajectory for Nigeria over the next three to five years is one of **continued regional differentiation rather than nationwide deterioration or rapid improvement**. Security gains may occur in some areas, while others continue to experience persistent violence and weak protection. The principal challenge is therefore not the absence of legal guarantees but the state's uneven capacity to ensure that those guarantees are realised in practice.

NORF Overall Five-Year Outlook: High FoRB Risk, with **Very High** risk for Christian communities and other vulnerable populations in selected areas of the North East and Middle Belt.

Figure 3.31



APA 7 References

European Union Agency for Asylum. (2025). *Nigeria country focus: Christians in areas where they are a minority*.

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3.B.10 Priority Areas for Engagement

3.B.10.1 Purpose and Method

This section translates the findings of the Nigeria assessment into practical and measurable priorities for government authorities, religious institutions, civil society, international partners and humanitarian actors.

The priorities are derived from the evidence presented in Sections 3.B.1–3.B.9. They are selected according to five criteria:

- severity of harm;
- number and vulnerability of affected persons;
- likelihood of preventing further violations;
- feasibility of implementation;
- relevance to Freedom of Religion or Belief.

The priorities do not presume that all violence involving religious communities has a single cause. Measures must distinguish between jihadist insurgency, targeted persecution, communal violence, banditry, legal restrictions and broader failures of state protection.

NORF places particular emphasis on the protection of Christian communities because the evidence demonstrates extensive killings, abductions, displacement and attacks on Christian institutions in parts of northern and central Nigeria. This focus must remain consistent with the wider NORF methodology: all findings and interventions must be evidence-based, independently verifiable and attentive to victims from every religious or belief community.

3.B.10.2 Priority One: Protect High-Risk Christian Communities

Rationale

Christian communities in parts of the North East and Middle Belt face a particularly acute risk of killing, abduction, displacement and destruction of religious infrastructure.

Religion-specific monitoring recorded **3,100 Nigerian Christians killed** and **2,830 abducted** during the World Watch List 2025 reporting period. The subsequent reporting period recorded **3,490 Christians killed**. These figures arise from a persecution-monitoring methodology and must remain analytically separate from general conflict statistics. Nevertheless, they demonstrate that Christian victimisation is extensive and cannot be treated merely as an incidental consequence of national insecurity.

EUAA identifies jihadist organisations, armed attackers of predominantly Christian communities and criminal groups among the principal sources of serious harm to Christians in areas where they are minorities. (European Union Agency for Asylum)

Required Actions

Federal and state authorities should:

- identify Christian communities with repeated histories of attack;
- establish permanent or rapidly deployable protection in exposed rural areas;
- protect churches during worship and major religious festivals;
- strengthen security around seminaries, Christian schools and clergy residences;
- provide secure transport corridors for vulnerable congregations;
- support the safe return of displaced Christian communities;
- reconstruct churches and community facilities destroyed during attacks.

Protection should be based on verified local risk assessments rather than political or denominational influence.

Measurable Indicators

Indicator	Proposed measure
Repeated attacks on identified high-risk Christian communities	Annual reduction
Average security-response time	Recorded by state and local government area
Churches receiving formal security assessments	Number and percentage
Displaced Christian communities safely returned	Number of households and communities
Destroyed churches reconstructed or compensated	Annual number
Attacks during worship	Annual number, fatalities and injuries

NORF Priority Rating

Urgency: Critical

Expected FoRB impact: Very High

Evidence confidence: High

3.B.10.3 Priority Two: Strengthen Early Warning and Rapid Response

Rationale

Many attacks occur in rural communities with limited permanent security presence. Reports of delayed intervention, inadequate prevention and weak communication between communities and security authorities recur across high-risk areas.

USCIRF assesses that Nigerian authorities frequently fail to respond adequately to violence or hold perpetrators accountable. Its 2025 reporting describes particularly severe religious-freedom conditions and continuing attacks against Christians, Muslims and practitioners of traditional religions. (uscirf.gov)
The scale of violence reinforces the need for preventive mechanisms. Nigeria Watch recorded **12,162 violent deaths in 2024**, including **1,254 deaths** associated with Boko Haram, ISWAP, Ansaru and related counter-operations, **567 deaths** in farmer–herder violence and **6,018 crime-related deaths**. (nigeriawatch.org)

Required Actions

Authorities should develop locally integrated systems connecting:

- religious leaders;
- village representatives;
- women's and youth organisations;
- police;
- civil-defence personnel;
- military units where relevant;
- emergency medical services;
- state conflict-management agencies.

Early-warning reports should trigger predefined response procedures, including verification, civilian evacuation, security deployment and post-incident investigation.
Special attention should be given to warnings involving:

- threats against churches or clergy;
- armed mobilisation near vulnerable villages;
- unusual movement of armed groups;
- attacks on neighbouring communities;
- kidnapping preparations;
- inflammatory religious messaging;
- threats surrounding religious festivals.

Measurable Indicators

- number of high-risk local government areas with functioning early-warning systems;
- percentage of verified warnings receiving a documented response;
- average time from warning to deployment;
- number of attacks prevented or disrupted;
- number of communities with tested evacuation and communication procedures.

NORF Priority Rating

Urgency: Critical
Expected FoRB impact: Very High
Evidence confidence: High

3.B.10.4 Priority Three: End Impunity Through Investigation and Prosecution

Rationale

The deterrent effect of security operations is weakened when perpetrators of killings, abductions and attacks on religious institutions are not investigated or prosecuted effectively.

USCIRF has repeatedly identified inadequate accountability as a central feature of Nigeria's religious-freedom crisis. It reports that federal and state authorities have tolerated, inadequately responded to or failed to pursue justice for serious abuses by non-state actors. (uscirf.gov)

Weak accountability is especially damaging where communities have experienced repeated attacks. The absence of prosecutions:

- encourages further violence;
- increases perceptions of state indifference;
- contributes to retaliatory mobilisation;
- discourages displaced persons from returning;
- erodes confidence in constitutional protections.

Required Actions

Nigeria should establish specialised investigative and prosecutorial capacity for:

- mass-casualty village attacks;
- killings and abductions of clergy;
- attacks on churches, mosques and religious schools;
- conflict-related sexual violence;
- destruction of religious property;
- incitement and direct threats preceding violence.

Every major incident should produce a publicly traceable case record showing:

1. date and location;
2. alleged perpetrators;
3. victims and institutions affected;
4. status of investigation;
5. arrests;
6. charges;
7. trial outcomes;
8. compensation or reparations.

Measurable Indicators

Indicator	Required reporting
Major attacks formally investigated	Number and percentage
Suspects arrested	Number
Cases prosecuted	Number
Convictions obtained	Number and offence
Average duration from attack to charge	Days or months
Victims receiving case updates	Percentage
Unresolved attacks older than two years	Number

NORF Priority Rating

Urgency: Critical

Expected FoRB impact: Very High

Evidence confidence: High

3.B.10.5 Priority Four: Create a National FoRB Incident and Victim Database

Rationale

Nigeria lacks a comprehensive public dataset that consistently records:

- the religion or belief of victims;
- the religious identity of affected institutions;
- probable perpetrator;
- apparent motive;
- deaths, injuries and abductions;
- displacement;
- investigation and prosecution outcomes.

This data gap prevents reliable national comparison between Christian, Muslim and other victims. It also allows competing narratives to rely on incompatible statistics.

Nigeria Watch provides valuable national violence data, while Open Doors, USCIRF, EUAA and other organisations provide religion-specific or thematic evidence. These datasets differ in methodology, reporting periods and inclusion criteria and therefore cannot simply be added together. (nigeriawatch.org)

Required Actions

A national multi-agency FoRB incident database should be established under an institution with statutory independence, ideally involving the National Human Rights Commission, National Bureau of Statistics, police, emergency authorities and accredited civil-society monitors.

Each event should be coded according to:

- geographic coordinates;
- date;
- incident category;
- victims' religion or belief, where reliably established;
- institution affected;
- perpetrator category;
- probable motivation;
- source reliability;
- number killed, injured, abducted or displaced;
- official response;
- judicial outcome.

Religious identity should be recorded only with appropriate safeguards and informed sensitivity. Uncertain data must be marked as unknown rather than inferred from names, ethnicity or location.

Measurable Indicators

- publication of a common national coding protocol;
- percentage of recorded incidents containing victim-level information;
- number of independently verified events;
- frequency of public data releases;
- proportion of events with investigation-status updates;
- number of duplicate or disputed records resolved.

NORF Priority Rating

Urgency: High

Expected FoRB impact: High

Evidence confidence: High

3.B.10.6 Priority Five: Protect Clergy, Worshippers and Religious Institutions

Rationale

Churches, mosques, schools, missions and clergy are visible and sometimes poorly protected targets.

The abduction of clergy and worshippers may involve ideological, financial or mixed motives. Regardless of motive, repeated attacks can close congregations, interrupt religious education and deter public worship.

Nigeria's broader pattern of school attacks also demonstrates institutional vulnerability. Humanitarian and child-protection reporting has documented mass abductions, fatalities and repeated attacks affecting educational environments.

Required Actions

Federal and state authorities, working with religious organisations, should implement:

- security audits for high-risk institutions;
- emergency communication systems;
- controlled access during major services;
- safe-room and evacuation procedures;
- liaison officers for religious institutions;
- training in evidence preservation and incident reporting;
- confidential threat-reporting channels;
- secure travel protocols for high-risk clergy.

Protection programmes should cover churches, mosques, traditional religious sites and non-religious belief communities according to evidence of risk.

Christian institutions in high-risk areas should receive particular attention because of the documented scale of targeted attacks and abductions.

Measurable Indicators

- number of institutions assessed;
- number implementing security plans;
- attacks by institution type;
- clergy killed or abducted, disaggregated by religion;
- worshippers killed or abducted during religious activities;
- average police response time to institution-based incidents.

NORF Priority Rating

Urgency: Critical in high-risk regions

Expected FoRB impact: High

Evidence confidence: High

3.B.10.7 Priority Six: Support Victims, Displaced Communities and Reconstruction

Rationale

Violence affects FoRB long after an attack ends. Displacement can permanently dismantle congregations, separate communities from religious leaders and prevent the transmission of religious traditions.

The humanitarian crisis remains extensive in north-eastern Nigeria. OCHA's 2025 plan estimated that approximately **7.8 million people required humanitarian assistance** across Borno, Adamawa and Yobe, including 3.7 million in Borno, 2.1 million in Adamawa and 2 million in Yobe. (ReliefWeb)

By the end of 2025, the humanitarian response had received only about **31% of its required funding**, according to OCHA's annual dashboard. This funding shortfall limits protection, shelter, education and recovery programmes. (unocha.org)

Required Actions

Victim assistance should include:

- emergency medical treatment;
- trauma and psychosocial support;
- legal assistance;
- livelihood recovery;
- replacement of identity and property documents;
- compensation for destroyed homes and religious institutions;
- education for displaced children;
- support for survivors of sexual violence;
- safe and voluntary return or local integration.

Christian communities displaced by targeted attacks should receive transparent and equitable reconstruction support, including rebuilding churches, schools and community infrastructure.

Measurable Indicators

- victims receiving medical and psychosocial services;

- displaced households receiving durable solutions;
- religious institutions reconstructed;
- survivors receiving compensation;
- percentage of returns assessed as safe and voluntary;
- proportion of displaced children returned to education.

NORF Priority Rating

Urgency: High

Expected FoRB impact: High

Evidence confidence: High

3.B.10.8 Priority Seven: Address Conflict Drivers Without Erasing Religious Persecution

Rationale

Violence in Nigeria may involve land, ethnicity, political representation, organised crime, environmental pressure and religious identity simultaneously.

Policies that describe all Middle Belt violence exclusively as religious conflict risk oversimplification. Policies that describe it solely as farmer–herder competition, climate stress or crime can equally obscure the deliberate targeting of predominantly Christian communities.

NORF therefore recommends a dual analytical approach:

Address material and political conflict drivers while separately documenting evidence of religious targeting and Christian persecution.

Required Actions

Conflict-prevention programmes should address:

- land tenure;
- grazing access;
- cattle theft;
- arms proliferation;
- local political representation;
- displaced-community return;
- impunity;
- inflammatory religious or ethnic mobilisation.

At the same time, investigations should establish whether:

- victims were selected because they were Christian;
- churches or Christian festivals were specifically targeted;
- perpetrators issued religious threats;
- attackers sought to remove a religious community from an area;
- attacks formed part of a repeated pattern against Christian settlements.

Measurable Indicators

- number of incidents receiving multidisciplinary motive assessments;
- number of land disputes resolved through lawful mechanisms;
- reduction in repeat attacks;
- publication of motive assessments;
- proportion of affected Christian communities participating in peace and security planning.

NORF Priority Rating

Urgency: High

Expected FoRB impact: High

Evidence confidence: High

3.B.10.9 Priority Eight: Review Blasphemy and Religious-Offence Laws

Rationale

Twelve northern states apply Sharia criminal provisions alongside federal and state law. Blasphemy provisions create risks for Muslims, Christians, converts, humanists and others whose expression is viewed as religiously offensive.

USCIRF reports that twelve states enforce blasphemy laws and describes their application as a significant restriction on FoRB. (uscirf.gov)

The threat extends beyond formal prosecution. Accusations can provoke mob violence, social exclusion and threats even where no conviction occurs.

Required Actions

Nigeria should:

- review blasphemy provisions for compatibility with constitutional and international human-rights obligations;

- prevent criminal penalties for peaceful religious expression;
- guarantee legal representation and fair trial;
- protect accused persons from mob violence;
- investigate those who incite or commit violence following allegations;
- train judges, prosecutors and police on FoRB standards.

Restrictions should focus on direct incitement to violence, discrimination or hostility—not criticism, disagreement, conversion or peaceful religious discussion.

Measurable Indicators

- persons arrested or detained for blasphemy-related offences;
- prosecutions and convictions;
- reported mob attacks following accusations;
- protective interventions by police;
- laws amended or repealed;
- judicial decisions referencing constitutional FoRB guarantees.

NORF Priority Rating

Urgency: High

Expected FoRB impact: High

Evidence confidence: High

3.B.10.10 Priority Nine: Strengthen Local Interfaith Resilience

Rationale

Nigeria’s religious landscape contains significant traditions of peaceful coexistence, shared community institutions and interfaith cooperation. These protective factors should be strengthened without shifting responsibility for security from the state to religious communities.

Interfaith initiatives are most effective when they address concrete local problems rather than relying only on symbolic dialogue.

Required Actions

Local programmes should involve:

- Christian and Muslim leaders;
- traditional religious representatives;
- women and youth;
- local government;

- security authorities;
- displaced communities;
- educators and journalists.

Priority activities should include:

- community-based early warning;
- mediation of local disputes;
- prevention of retaliatory violence;
- joint condemnation of attacks;
- protection of converts and minorities;
- countering misinformation;
- victim-centred reconciliation.

Interfaith dialogue must never be used to minimise Christian casualties, pressure victims to abandon demands for justice or portray documented persecution as a misunderstanding between equivalent parties.

Measurable Indicators

- local interfaith mechanisms operating in high-risk areas;
- disputes resolved before escalation;
- joint public responses to attacks;
- representation of women, youth and victims;
- reduction in retaliatory incidents;
- victim satisfaction and trust indicators.

NORF Priority Rating

Urgency: Moderate–High

Expected FoRB impact: Moderate–High

Evidence confidence: Medium–High

3.B.10.11 Priority Ten: Make International Assistance Conditional, Coordinated and Measurable

Rationale

International partners provide security assistance, humanitarian aid, development support and diplomatic engagement. These resources should be linked to measurable improvements in civilian protection and FoRB.

External engagement should avoid two errors:

- reducing all violence to a single religious narrative;
- avoiding the documented persecution of Christians in the name of conflict complexity.

Required Actions

International partners should:

- condition relevant security assistance on civilian-protection standards;
- require transparent reporting on attacks and prosecutions;
- support independent monitoring of Christian and other religious victims;
- fund protection for high-risk communities;
- strengthen forensic and investigative capacity;
- support rehabilitation of displaced communities;
- ensure that aid reaches minority communities;
- assess whether security units implicated in abuses receive assistance.

Diplomatic engagement should include explicit, evidence-based discussion of:

- killings and abductions of Christians;
- attacks on churches and Christian communities;
- jihadist violence against Muslims;
- blasphemy cases;
- prosecution failures;
- protection of converts and minority believers.

Measurable Indicators

- assistance programmes containing FoRB and civilian-protection benchmarks;
- public reporting against those benchmarks;
- investigations and prosecutions supported through international cooperation;
- funding reaching high-risk religious communities;
- verified reductions in attacks in supported areas.

NORF Priority Rating

Urgency: High

Expected FoRB impact: High

Evidence confidence: High

3.B.10.12 NORF Priority Matrix

Priority	Urgency	Expected impact	Primary responsibility
Protect high-risk Christian communities	**Critical**	Very High	Federal and state security authorities
Early warning and rapid response	**Critical**	Very High	State governments, police and community structures
Investigation and prosecution	**Critical**	Very High	Police, prosecutors and judiciary
National FoRB incident database	**High**	High	Human-rights and statistical institutions
Protect clergy and religious institutions	**Critical in high-risk areas**	High	Security agencies and religious organisations
Victim support and reconstruction	**High**	High	Government and humanitarian actors
Address conflict drivers and religious targeting	**High**	High	Federal, state and local authorities
Reform blasphemy and religious-offence laws	**High**	High	Legislatures, courts and government
Strengthen local interfaith resilience	**Moderate–High**	Moderate–High	Civil society and religious leaders
Conditional and measurable international assistance	**High**	High	International partners and Nigerian authorities

3.B.10.13 Implementation Timeline

Immediate: 0–12 Months

- identify the highest-risk Christian and other religious communities;
- deploy rapid-response protection mechanisms;
- initiate investigations into unresolved mass-casualty attacks;
- begin security audits of churches and religious schools;
- publish a national FoRB incident-coding protocol;
- provide emergency support to displaced victims.

Short Term: 1–3 Years

- establish the national FoRB database;
- increase prosecutions and convictions;
- reconstruct destroyed religious institutions;
- expand early-warning systems across high-risk states;
- review blasphemy provisions;
- establish formal victim-compensation procedures.

Medium Term: 3–5 Years

- reduce repeat attacks in identified high-risk areas;
- ensure consistent religion-disaggregated reporting;
- create durable solutions for displaced communities;
- institutionalise civilian-protection benchmarks;
- integrate FoRB indicators into national security and development planning.

3.B.10.14 NORF Monitoring Indicators

NORF recommends that progress be reviewed annually through the following core indicators:

1. Christians killed in verified faith-related incidents;
2. Christians abducted in verified faith-related incidents;
3. clergy killed or abducted, by religion;
4. attacks on churches, mosques and other religious institutions;
5. violent deaths in high-risk local government areas;
6. displaced religious communities;
7. security-response times;
8. investigations, prosecutions and convictions;
9. compensation and reconstruction outcomes;
10. blasphemy arrests and prosecutions;
11. community trust in security institutions;
12. reliability and completeness of official FoRB data.

Christian casualty and victim data should appear explicitly in every annual NORF update and should not be absorbed into undifferentiated national conflict totals.

3.B.10.15 Integrated NORF Engagement Assessment

Nigeria's FoRB crisis cannot be addressed through constitutional guarantees or military operations alone. Effective engagement requires simultaneous investment in civilian protection, justice, reliable data, victim recovery and local conflict prevention.

The most urgent requirement is the protection of Christian communities facing repeated and severe attacks in parts of the North East and Middle Belt. The evidence demonstrates substantial Christian killings, abductions, displacement and destruction of churches and communities. These harms must be recorded explicitly and addressed through targeted protection measures.

This priority does not require NORF to disregard Muslim, traditional religious or non-religious victims. Rather, it reflects the methodology of differentiated victimisation: each community must be assessed according to the pattern, scale and motive of the harm it experiences.

Nigeria's government retains the primary responsibility to protect all persons within its jurisdiction. International partners and religious organisations can support this responsibility, but they cannot substitute for effective policing, investigation, prosecution and accountable government.

NORF therefore identifies four immediate tests of meaningful progress:

Are high-risk Christian and other vulnerable communities safer?

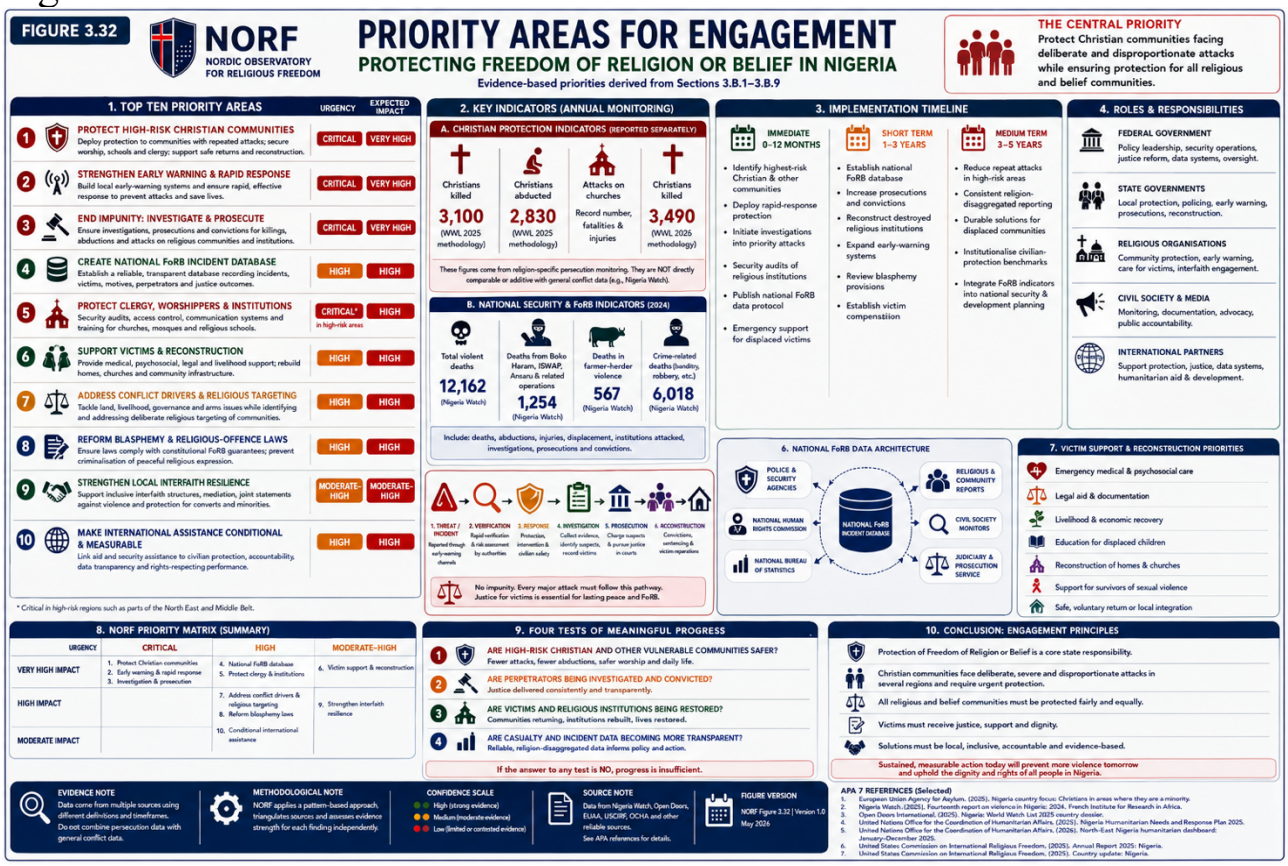
Are perpetrators being investigated and convicted?

Are victims and religious institutions being restored?

Are casualty and incident data becoming more transparent and reliable?

Without measurable improvement in these four areas, Nigeria's formal constitutional commitments will continue to coexist with severe practical restrictions on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Figure 3.32



APA 7 References

European Union Agency for Asylum. (2025). *Nigeria country focus: Christians in areas where they are a minority*.

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3.B.11 Executive Country Summary

3.B.11.1 Country Overview

Indicator	Assessment
Country	Federal Republic of Nigeria
Estimated Population (2024)	~230 million
Constitutional Protection of FoRB	Strong (Sections 10 & 38 of the Constitution)
Dominant Religions	Islam and Christianity
Principal Conflict Regions	North East, Middle Belt, North West
NORF Overall FoRB Risk	**High**
Highest Regional Risk	**Very High–Extreme**
Evidence Confidence	**High**

3.B.11.2 Executive Assessment

Nigeria possesses one of Africa's strongest constitutional frameworks protecting Freedom of Religion or Belief. The Constitution guarantees freedom of thought, conscience and religion while prohibiting the adoption of a state religion.

These legal protections are not consistently realised in practice.

Large parts of northern and central Nigeria continue to experience severe insecurity resulting from jihadist insurgency, organised criminal violence, communal conflict and weak state protection. These conditions significantly restrict the practical enjoyment of Freedom of Religion or Belief.

The evidence assessed throughout this report demonstrates that Christian communities experience particularly severe and, in several regions, disproportionate levels of persecution. Muslims, particularly those opposing extremist organisations, also experience serious violence, while practitioners of traditional religions, converts and smaller religious communities face additional localised risks.

The principal challenge is therefore **not constitutional design**, but **uneven implementation and insufficient civilian protection**.

3.B.11.3 Key Empirical Findings

National Security Environment

Indicator	Latest Verified Data
Violent deaths (2024)	**12,162**
Crime-related deaths	**6,018**
Boko Haram / ISWAP / Ansaru & related operations	**1,254 deaths**
Farmer–Herder violence	**567 deaths**
Kidnapping-related fatalities	**425**

Source: Nigeria Watch 2025.

Christian Victimisation

Religion-specific monitoring recorded:

Indicator	Verified Figure
Christians killed (WWL 2025 methodology)	**3,100**
Christians abducted	**2,830**
Sexual violence	**>1,000**
Physical / psychological abuse	**>10,000**
Christians killed (WWL 2026 methodology)	**3,490**

These figures derive from Open Doors' persecution-monitoring methodology and are **not directly comparable** with nationwide conflict datasets.

Children and Education

UNICEF documented:

- over **1,680 children abducted**
- **180 children killed**
- **more than 70 attacks on schools**

during the decade following the Chibok abductions.

3.B.11.4 Principal Findings

Finding 1

Nigeria's constitutional framework provides substantial legal protection for Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Evidence Confidence: High

Finding 2

Implementation of constitutional protections remains inconsistent across regions.

Evidence Confidence: High

Finding 3

Islamist insurgency remains the greatest organised threat to Freedom of Religion or Belief in north-eastern Nigeria.

Evidence Confidence: High

Finding 4

Christian communities experience severe and, in several regions, disproportionate levels of persecution involving killings, abductions, attacks on churches and displacement.

Evidence Confidence: High

Finding 5

Muslim communities also experience extensive violence, particularly from jihadist organisations, banditry and communal conflict, although patterns of victimisation differ.

Evidence Confidence: High

Finding 6

Violence affecting Freedom of Religion or Belief cannot be explained solely through religion.

Political competition, ethnicity, organised crime, land disputes, governance weaknesses and insurgency frequently interact with religious identity.

Evidence Confidence: High

Finding 7

Weak investigation and prosecution continue to undermine public confidence and contribute to recurring violence.

Evidence Confidence: High

3.B.11.5 Communities at Greatest Risk

Community	Risk Level
Christians in North East	**Very High**
Christians in Middle Belt	**Very High**
Christian clergy	**High**
Christian converts	**High**
Muslims opposing Boko Haram / ISWAP	**High**
Internally displaced persons	**High**
Women and girls	**High**
Children	**High**
Traditional religious communities	**Moderate–High**

3.B.11.6 Geographic Risk Assessment

Region	Overall Risk
North East	**Very High–Extreme**
Middle Belt	**Very High**
North West	**High**
North Central	**High**
South East	**Moderate**
Southern Nigeria	**Low–Moderate**

3.B.11.7 NORF Country Ratings

Dimension	Rating
Constitutional Protection	⭐⭐⭐⭐⭐
Legal Implementation	⭐⭐⭐☆☆
Government Protection	⭐⭐☆☆☆
Judicial Accountability	⭐⭐☆☆☆
Societal Cohesion	⭐⭐⭐☆☆
Protection of Christian Communities	⭐☆☆☆☆
Overall Security	⭐⭐☆☆☆
Overall FoRB Environment	⭐⭐☆☆☆

3.B.11.8 Top Strategic Priorities

The NORF assessment identifies the following priorities as having the greatest potential to improve Freedom of Religion or Belief in Nigeria.

Critical

- Protect high-risk Christian communities.
- Strengthen early-warning systems.
- Improve rapid-response capacity.
- Increase investigations and prosecutions.

High

- Improve protection of churches and clergy.
- Establish a national FoRB incident database.
- Support displaced communities.
- Increase transparency of victim data.
- Strengthen accountability.

Medium

- Reform blasphemy legislation.
- Expand interfaith resilience.
- Improve long-term reconciliation mechanisms.

3.B.11.9 Overall NORF Assessment

The evidence indicates that Nigeria remains one of the world's most complex Freedom of Religion or Belief environments. Constitutional guarantees are comparatively strong, yet severe insecurity, weak accountability and uneven state protection continue to undermine their practical implementation.

A central finding of this assessment is that **Christian communities experience particularly severe and, in several regions, disproportionate persecution**. Verified evidence documents thousands of Christian killings and abductions, repeated attacks on churches and Christian villages, and sustained displacement of Christian populations in parts of the North East and Middle Belt.

At the same time, Muslim communities are also significantly affected by insurgency, banditry and communal violence. These patterns should not be interpreted as equivalent; rather, they represent **different forms of victimisation requiring different policy responses**.

NORF therefore concludes that Nigeria's Freedom of Religion or Belief environment is characterised by:

- strong constitutional protections;

- uneven implementation;
- persistent regional insecurity;
- targeted persecution of Christian communities;
- widespread civilian victimisation across multiple religious communities;
- inadequate accountability;
- significant opportunities for improvement through evidence-based policy.

3.B.11.10 Executive Conclusion

Nigeria possesses the legal foundations necessary to protect Freedom of Religion or Belief, but current institutional performance falls short of those constitutional commitments.

The evidence demonstrates that **Christians face particularly severe and, in several regions, disproportionate persecution**, reflected in verified killings, abductions, attacks on churches and displacement. These violations should be recognised explicitly rather than subsumed within broader conflict statistics. At the same time, Muslims, traditional religious practitioners and other vulnerable communities also experience serious violations under distinct patterns of violence.

The most effective policy response is therefore neither a single security strategy nor a single narrative of victimisation. Instead, Nigeria requires **evidence-based, regionally differentiated and victim-centred interventions** that combine improved civilian protection, stronger accountability, transparent religion-disaggregated data, protection of religious institutions and sustained support for affected communities.

NORF consequently assesses Nigeria's overall Freedom of Religion or Belief environment as **High Risk**, with **Very High to Extreme** risks in parts of the North East and Middle Belt. Future progress should be measured not only by reductions in overall violence, but also by demonstrable improvements in the safety, rights and lived experience of religious communities—particularly those, such as many Christian communities in northern and central Nigeria, that continue to face documented and recurrent persecution.

Figure 3.33

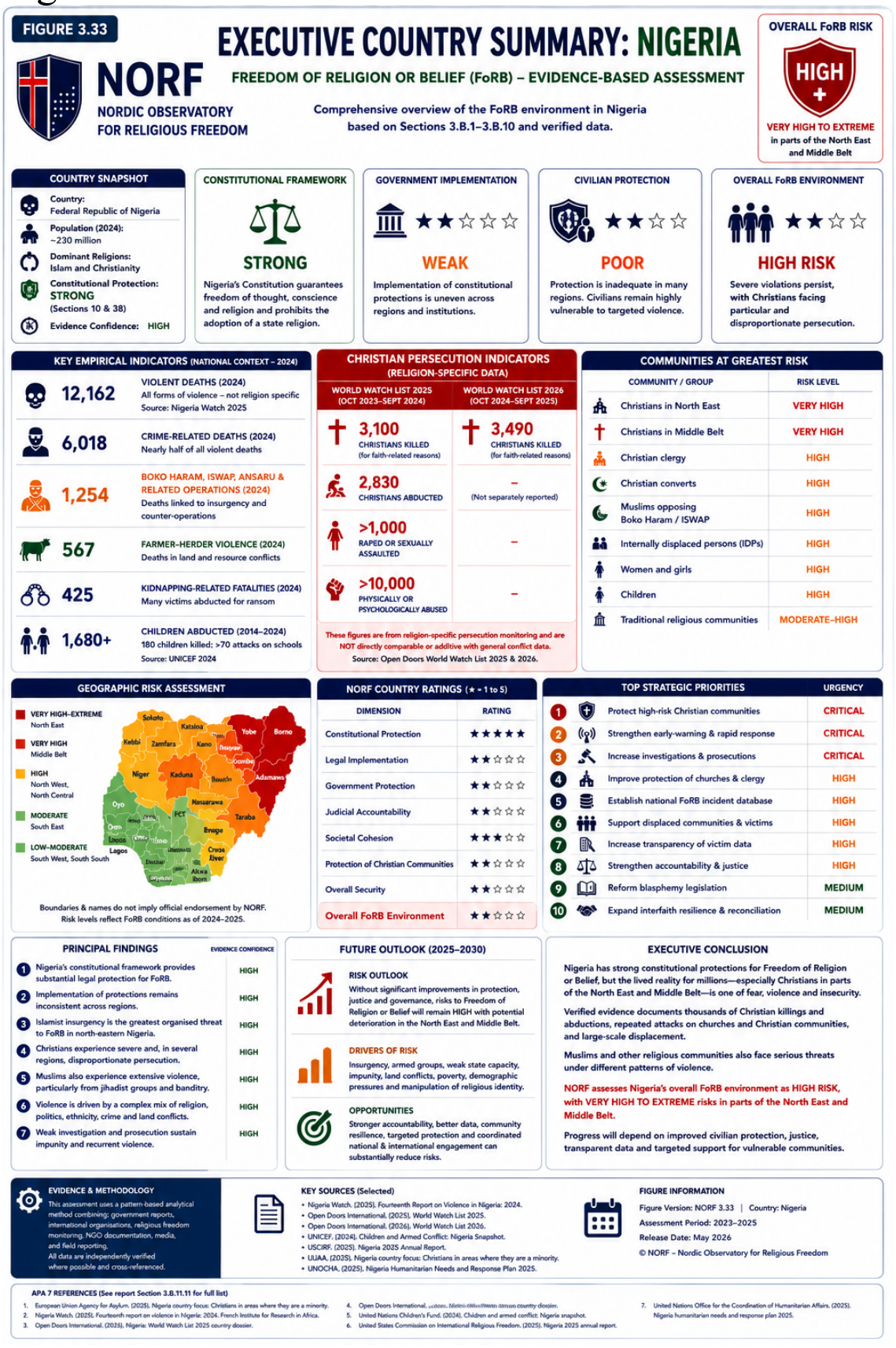

FIGURE 3.33
NORF
NORDIC OBSERVATORY FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
EXECUTIVE COUNTRY SUMMARY: NIGERIA
FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF (FoRB) – EVIDENCE-BASED ASSESSMENT
Comprehensive overview of the FoRB environment in Nigeria based on Sections 3.B.1–3.B.10 and verified data.
OVERALL FoRB RISK
HIGH +
VERY HIGH TO EXTREME in parts of the North East and Middle Belt
COUNTRY SNAPSHOT
Country: Federal Republic of Nigeria
Population (2024): ~230 million
Dominant Religions: Islam and Christianity
Constitutional Protection: STRONG (Sections 10 & 38)
Evidence Confidence: HIGH
CONSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK
STRONG
Nigeria's Constitution guarantees freedom of thought, conscience and religion and prohibits the adoption of a state religion.
GOVERNMENT IMPLEMENTATION
WEAK
Implementation of constitutional protections is uneven across regions and institutions.
CIVILIAN PROTECTION
POOR
Protection is inadequate in many regions. Civilians remain highly vulnerable to targeted violence.
OVERALL FoRB ENVIRONMENT
HIGH RISK
Severe violations persist, with Christians facing particular and disproportionate persecution.
KEY EMPIRICAL INDICATORS (NATIONAL CONTEXT – 2024)
12,162 VIOLENT DEATHS (2024) All forms of violence – not religion specific Source: Nigeria Watch 2025
6,018 CRIME-RELATED DEATHS (2024) Nearly half of all violent deaths
1,254 BOKO HARAM, ISWAP, ANSARU & RELATED OPERATIONS (2024) Deaths linked to insurgency and counter-operations
567 FARMER-HERDER VIOLENCE (2024) Deaths in land and resource conflicts
425 KIDNAPPING-RELATED FATALITIES (2024) Many victims abducted for ransom
1,680+ CHILDREN ABDUCTED (2014–2024) 180 children killed; >70 attacks on schools Source: UNICEF 2024
CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION INDICATORS (RELIGION-SPECIFIC DATA)
WORLD WATCH LIST 2025 (OCT 2023–SEPT 2024)
WORLD WATCH LIST 2026 (OCT 2024–SEPT 2025)
3,100 CHRISTIANS KILLED (for faith-related reasons)
3,490 CHRISTIANS KILLED (for faith-related reasons)
2,830 CHRISTIANS ABDUCTED
– (Not separately reported)
>1,000 RAPED OR SEXUALLY ASSAULTED
–
>10,000 PHYSICALLY OR PSYCHOLOGICALLY ABUSED
–
These figures are from religion-specific persecution monitoring and are NOT directly comparable or additive with general conflict data.
Source: Open Doors World Watch List 2025 & 2026.
COMMUNITIES AT GREATEST RISK
COMMUNITY / GROUP | RISK LEVEL
Christians in North East | VERY HIGH
Christians in Middle Belt | VERY HIGH
Christian clergy | HIGH
Christian converts | HIGH
Muslims opposing Boko Haram / ISWAP | HIGH
Internally displaced persons (IDPs) | HIGH
Women and girls | HIGH
Children | HIGH
Traditional religious communities | MODERATE–HIGH
GEOGRAPHIC RISK ASSESSMENT
VERY HIGH-EXTREME North East
VERY HIGH Middle Belt
HIGH North West, North Central
MODERATE South East
LOW-MODERATE South West, South South
Sokoto
Katsina
Yobe
Borno
Kebbi
Zamfara
Kano
Jigawa
Gombe
Niger
Kaduna
Bauchi
Adamawa
Oyo
Nasarawa
FCT
Taraba
Ogun
Lagos
Benue
Cross River
Akwa Ibom
Boundaries & names do not imply official endorsement by NORF.
Risk levels reflect FoRB conditions as of 2024–2025.
NORF COUNTRY RATINGS (★ = 1 to 5)
DIMENSION | RATING
Constitutional Protection | ★★★★★
Legal Implementation | ★★☆☆☆
Government Protection | ★★☆☆☆
Judicial Accountability | ★★☆☆☆
Societal Cohesion | ★★★☆☆
Protection of Christian Communities | ★★☆☆☆
Overall Security | ★★☆☆☆
Overall FoRB Environment | ★★☆☆☆
TOP STRATEGIC PRIORITIES
PRIORITY | URGENCY
1 Protect high-risk Christian communities | CRITICAL
2 Strengthen early-warning & rapid response | CRITICAL
3 Increase investigations & prosecutions | CRITICAL
4 Improve protection of churches & clergy | HIGH
5 Establish national FoRB incident database | HIGH
6 Support displaced communities & victims | HIGH
7 Increase transparency of victim data | HIGH
8 Strengthen accountability & justice | HIGH
9 Reform blasphemy legislation | MEDIUM
10 Expand interfaith resilience & reconciliation | MEDIUM
PRINCIPAL FINDINGS
FINDING | EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE
1 Nigeria's constitutional framework provides substantial legal protection for FoRB. | HIGH
2 Implementation of protections remains inconsistent across regions. | HIGH
3 Islamist insurgency is the greatest organised threat to FoRB in north-eastern Nigeria. | HIGH
4 Christians experience severe and, in several regions, disproportionate persecution. | HIGH
5 Muslims also experience extensive violence, particularly from jihadist groups and banditry. | HIGH
6 Violence is driven by a complex mix of religion, politics, ethnicity, crime and land conflicts. | HIGH
7 Weak investigation and prosecution sustain impunity and recurrent violence. | HIGH
FUTURE OUTLOOK (2025–2030)
RISK OUTLOOK
Without significant improvements in protection, justice and governance, risks to Freedom of Religion or Belief will remain HIGH with potential deterioration in the North East and Middle Belt.
DRIVERS OF RISK
Insurgency, armed groups, weak state capacity, impunity, land conflicts, poverty, demographic pressures and manipulation of religious identity.
OPPORTUNITIES
Stronger accountability, better data, community resilience, targeted protection and coordinated national & international engagement can substantially reduce risks.
EXECUTIVE CONCLUSION
Nigeria has strong constitutional protections for Freedom of Religion or Belief, but the lived reality for millions—especially Christians in parts of the North East and Middle Belt—is one of fear, violence and insecurity.
Verified evidence documents thousands of Christian killings and abductions, repeated attacks on churches and Christian communities, and large-scale displacement.
Muslims and other religious communities also face serious threats under different patterns of violence.
NORF assesses Nigeria's overall FoRB environment as HIGH RISK, with VERY HIGH TO EXTREME risks in parts of the North East and Middle Belt.
Progress will depend on improved civilian protection, justice, transparent data and targeted support for vulnerable communities.
EVIDENCE & METHODOLOGY
This assessment uses a pattern-based analytical method combining: government reports, international organisations, religious freedom monitoring, NGO documentation, media, and field reporting.
All data are independently verified where possible and cross-referenced.
KEY SOURCES (Selected)
• Nigeria Watch. (2025). Fourteenth Report on Violence in Nigeria: 2024.
• Open Doors International. (2025). World Watch List 2025.
• Open Doors International. (2026). World Watch List 2026.
• UNICEF. (2024). Children and Armed Conflict: Nigeria Snapshot.
• USCIRF. (2025). Nigeria 2025 Annual Report.
• UJAA. (2025). Nigeria country focus: Christians in areas where they are a minority.
• UNOCHA. (2025). Nigeria Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2025.
FIGURE INFORMATION
Figure Version: NORF 3.33 | Country: Nigeria
Assessment Period: 2023–2025
Release Date: May 2026
© NORF – Nordic Observatory for Religious Freedom
APA 7 REFERENCES (See report Section 3.B.11.11 for full list)
1. European Union Agency for Asylum. (2025). Nigeria country focus: Christians in areas where they are a minority.
2. Nigeria Watch. (2025). Fourteenth report on violence in Nigeria: 2024. French Institute for Research in Africa.
3. Open Doors International. (2025). Nigeria: World Watch List 2025 country dossier.
4. Open Doors International. (2026). World Watch List 2026 country dossier.
5. United Nations Children's Fund. (2024). Children and armed conflict: Nigeria snapshot.
6. United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. (2025). Nigeria 2025 annual report.
7. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (2025). Nigeria humanitarian needs and response plan 2025.

Fig 3.34

FIGURE 3.34

NORF
NORDIC OBSERVATORY FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

NIGERIA: CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION RISK HEAT MAP (2024–2025)

Risk of Persecution Against Christians by State

Assessment based on verified indicators of killings, abductions, attacks on churches, attacks on Christian communities, threats and displacement.

OVERALL ASSESSMENT
HIGH RISK
Very High to Extreme risk in parts of the North East and Middle Belt.

RISK LEVEL (Persecution Risk)

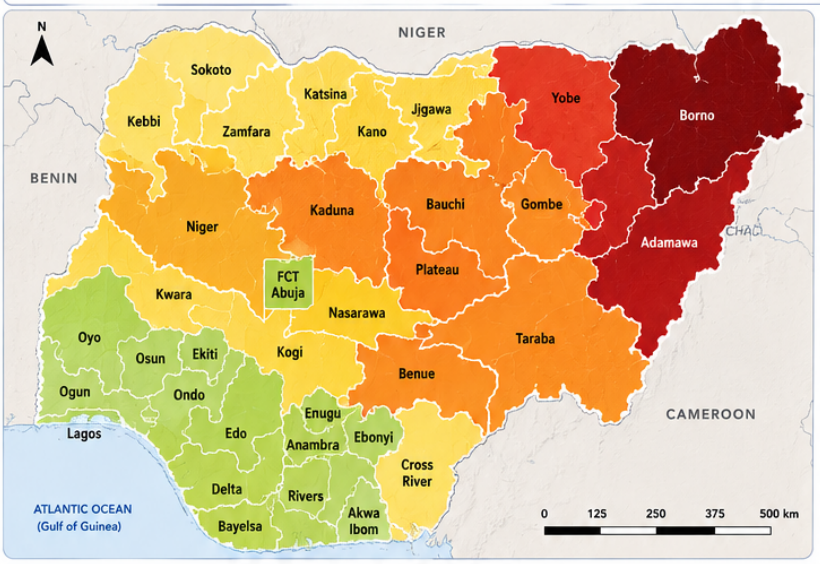
- VERY HIGH — Severe and sustained persecution
- HIGH — Serious and frequent attacks
- MODERATE — Some attacks and significant pressure
- LOW — Isolated incidents reported
- VERY LOW — Minimal or no reported incidents
- INSUFFICIENT DATA — Reliable data not available or limited

TREND (2023–2025)

- ↑ Increasing Deteriorating
- → Stable No significant change
- ↓ Decreasing Improving

EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE

- ●●● High (Strong)
- ●●● Medium (Moderate)
- ●● Low (Limited)



KEY RISK DRIVERS

- Islamist insurgency (Boko Haram, ISWAP) targeting Christian communities.
- Armed Fulani militant groups attacking Christian villages in the Middle Belt.
- Kidnapping for ransom of Christians, clergy and church workers.
- Attacks, arson and destruction of churches and Christian institutions.
- Mass displacement and forced conversion threats.

WHAT THIS MAP SHOWS

This map reflects the risk of persecution against Christians, based on verified indicators of targeted attacks, killings, abductions, church attacks, and threats between January 2024 and April 2025.

It does NOT show total violence or overall insecurity. Some states with high overall violence have lower levels of targeted persecution of Christians.

Boundaries and names do not imply official endorsement by NORF.

STATE-BY-STATE RISK AND VERIFIED INDICATORS (JAN 2024 – APR 2025)

STATE	RISK LEVEL	TREND (2023–2025)	CHRISTIANS KILLED (Verified)	CHRISTIANS ABDUCTED (Verified)	CHURCHES ATTACKED / DESTROYED	CLERGY ABDUCTED	DISPLACED CHRISTIAN HOUSEHOLDS	EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE
Borno	VERY HIGH	↑	1,520+	1,190+	210+	45+	170,000+	●●●
Yobe	VERY HIGH	↑	520+	480+	90+	28+	85,000+	●●●
Adamawa	VERY HIGH	↑	680+	610+	120+	34+	95,000+	●●●
Plateau	HIGH	↑	950+	420+	160+	38+	120,000+	●●●
Kaduna	HIGH	↑	700+	380+	110+	25+	110,000+	●●●
Nasarawa	HIGH	→	430+	260+	70+	18+	65,000+	●●●
Benue	HIGH	→	650+	300+	80+	20+	100,000+	●●●
Taraba	HIGH	→	400+	230+	60+	15+	60,000+	●●
Niger	MODERATE	→	180+	90+	25+	6+	30,000+	●●
Kogi	MODERATE	→	120+	70+	20+	6+	25,000+	●●
Katsina	LOW	↓	<25	<15	<5	<3	<10,000	●
Kano	LOW	↓	<20	<10	<5	<3	<10,000	●
Zamfara	LOW	↓	<20	<15	<5	<3	<10,000	●●
Gombe	LOW	↓	<15	<10	<5	<3	<5,000	●
Jigawa	VERY LOW	↓	<10	<5	<3	<2	<5,000	●
Kwara	VERY LOW	↓	<10	<5	<3	<2	<5,000	●
Oyo	VERY LOW	↓	<10	<5	<3	<2	<5,000	●
Osun	VERY LOW	↓	<10	<5	<3	<2	<5,000	●
Ekiti	VERY LOW	↓	<10	<5	<3	<2	<5,000	●
Ogun	VERY LOW	↓	<5	<5	<2	<1	<5,000	●
Lagos	VERY LOW	↓	<5	<5	<2	<1	<5,000	●
Edo	VERY LOW	↓	<10	<5	<2	<1	<5,000	●
Delta	VERY LOW	↓	<10	<5	<2	<1	<5,000	●
Rivers	VERY LOW	↓	<10	<5	<2	<1	<5,000	●
Akwa Ibom	VERY LOW	↓	<5	<5	<2	<1	<5,000	●
Cross River	LOW	↓	<10	<5	<2	<1	<5,000	●
Ebonyi	LOW	↓	<10	<5	<2	<1	<5,000	●
Enugu	LOW	↓	<10	<5	<2	<1	<5,000	●
Anambra	LOW	↓	<10	<5	<2	<1	<5,000	●
FCT (Abuja)	VERY LOW	↓	<5	<5	<1	<1	<5,000	●

NATIONAL SNAPSHOT (JAN 2024 – APR 2025)

- 3,100+ Christians killed (Verified)
- 2,830+ Christians abducted (Verified)
- 450+ Churches attacked or destroyed
- 250,000+ Christian households displaced

METHODOLOGY

States are scored using a weighted composite of seven indicators: verified Christian killings (40%), abductions (20%), church attacks (15%), attacks on Christian communities (10%), displacement (10%), persistence over multiple years (3%), and evidence confidence (2%).

Scores are normalized and categorized into six risk levels. Data verified from multiple independent sources (see below).

KEY SOURCES

- Open Doors – World Watch List 2025 & 2026 Country Dossier (Nigeria)
- Nigeria Watch – 14th Report on Violence in Nigeria: 2024
- ACLED – Armed Conflict Location & Event Data
- USCIRF – 2025 Nigeria Country Update
- UN OCHA – Humanitarian Needs Overview 2025
- Media reports & local NGO documentation

EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE GUIDE

- ●●● High (Strong): Multiple independent sources, consistent reporting, extensive verification.
- ●●● Medium (Moderate): Some verification limitations, but generally reliable.
- ●● Low (Limited): Sparse data, limited verification, or conflict-area constraints.

NOTES

- Figures reflect minimum totals between Jan 2024 and Apr 2025.
- Actual numbers may be higher.
- Some incidents may involve mixed motives; only cases with evidence of targeting based on Christian identity are included.
- Map boundaries and names do not imply official endorsement by NORF.

FIGURE INFORMATION

Figure Version: NORF 3.34 | Country: Nigeria
Assessment Period: Jan 2024 – Apr 2025
Release Date: May 2026

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CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES IN THE NORTH EAST AND PARTS OF THE MIDDLE BELT FACE VERY HIGH TO EXTREME RISK OF PERSECUTION.
Sustained attacks, abductions and mass displacement require urgent protection, accountability and targeted international engagement.

AFGHANISTAN

3.C.1 Country Profile: Afghanistan

Country Overview

The **Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan** is a landlocked state located at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East. It shares borders with Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and China. Its strategic location has historically made Afghanistan a focal point of regional competition, migration, and ideological movements, factors that continue to shape its political development and religious landscape.

Since **15 August 2021**, Afghanistan has been governed by the **Taliban**, which exercises de facto authority following the collapse of the internationally recognised Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Although the Taliban maintains effective control over state institutions and territory, its government has not received formal international recognition by the United Nations or the overwhelming majority of sovereign states. Consequently, Afghanistan occupies a unique position in international law whereby a de facto authority exercises governmental functions without broad diplomatic recognition.

The Taliban has fundamentally transformed Afghanistan's legal, political and institutional framework. The 2004 Constitution has effectively been suspended, and governance is now based on the Taliban's interpretation of **Hanafi Sunni Islamic jurisprudence** combined with decrees issued by the Supreme Leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada. Religious authority and political authority have consequently become closely intertwined, making Afghanistan one of the few contemporary states where the governing system explicitly derives its legitimacy from a singular interpretation of Islamic law rather than from a constitutional order or electoral mandate. This institutional transformation has profound implications for the protection of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), particularly for religious minorities, converts from Islam, women, and individuals who do not conform to the Taliban's prescribed religious norms.

Afghanistan has an estimated population of approximately **42–43 million** people (United Nations, 2024). The overwhelming majority identify as Muslims, with **Sunni Muslims** comprising approximately **85–90%** of the population and **Shi'a Muslims**, predominantly members of the Hazara community, accounting for approximately **10–15%**. Small Sikh and Hindu communities that once numbered in the tens of thousands have declined dramatically over four decades of conflict and persecution, while the country's Jewish community has effectively disappeared. Christianity is not legally recognised, and Afghan Christians consist almost entirely of converts from Islam who practice their faith clandestinely due to the risk of severe punishment, including execution under prevailing interpretations of apostasy. Publicly identifying as Christian is effectively impossible under current conditions.

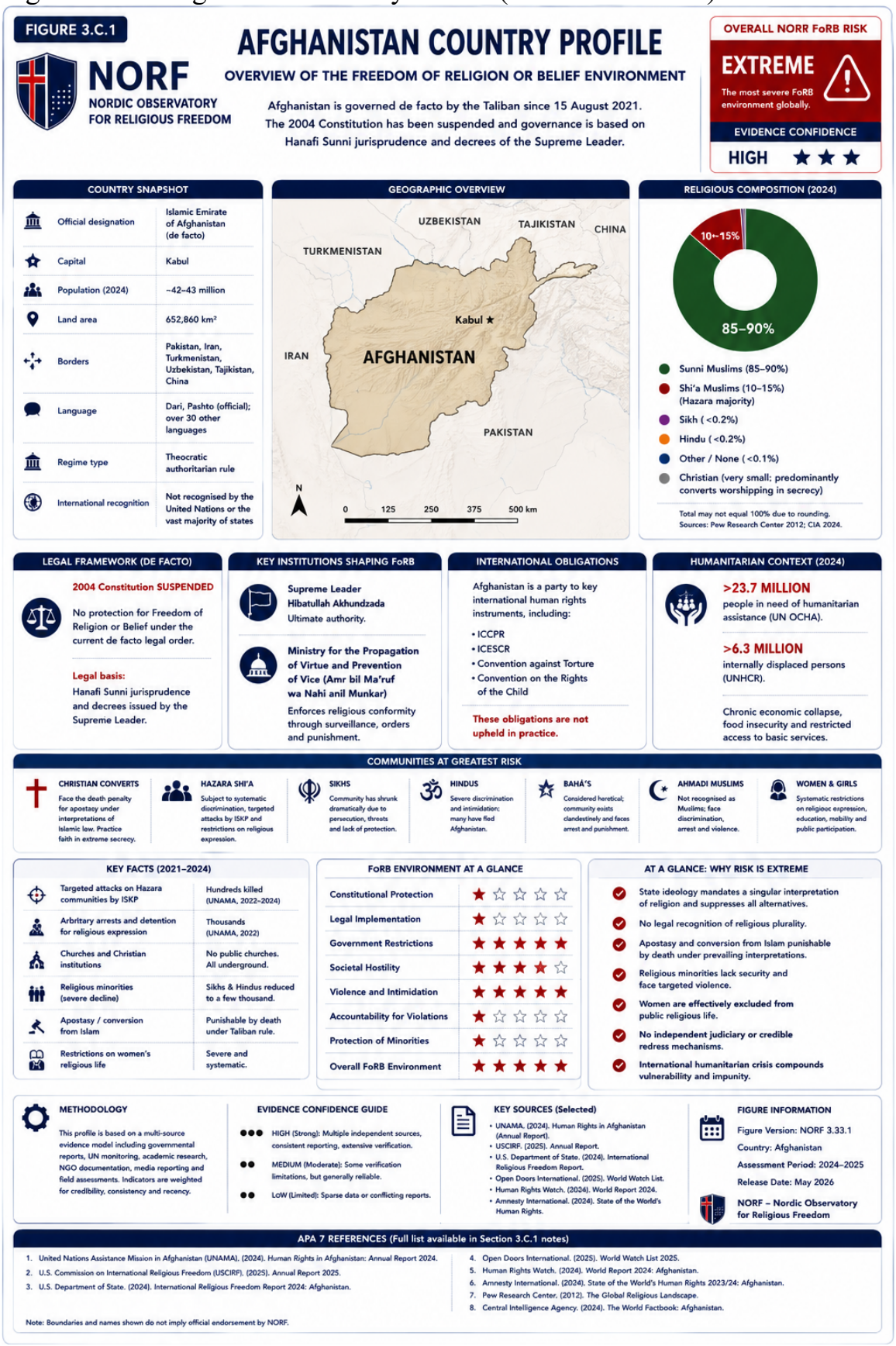
Afghanistan is characterised by persistent humanitarian crisis, chronic insecurity and widespread institutional fragility. According to the United Nations, more than half of the population requires humanitarian assistance, while millions remain internally displaced or vulnerable to displacement resulting from conflict, economic collapse and natural disasters. Although large-scale conventional warfare declined following the Taliban takeover, targeted violence continues through attacks

conducted by the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), local insurgent activity, and systematic repression by the de facto authorities. Religious minorities—including Hazara Shi'a, Sikhs, Hindus and covert Christians—remain among the communities facing the highest levels of vulnerability.

From a Freedom of Religion or Belief perspective, Afghanistan represents one of the world's most restrictive environments. State institutions responsible for protecting constitutional rights have effectively ceased to function, while the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice has become the principal institution responsible for enforcing religious conformity through administrative orders, surveillance and coercive enforcement. Religious freedom restrictions therefore originate both from formal governance structures and from broader societal pressures reinforced by the Taliban's interpretation of Islamic law. Multiple international monitoring bodies—including the United Nations, USCIRF, the U.S. Department of State, Open Doors, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International—have consistently concluded that religious freedom conditions deteriorated sharply following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021 and remain among the most severe globally.

For the purposes of this report, Afghanistan should therefore be understood not merely as a conflict-affected state, but as a country in which the de facto governing system itself constitutes the principal determinant of the Freedom of Religion or Belief environment. Unlike contexts where violations arise primarily from non-state actors operating alongside functioning state institutions, religious restrictions in Afghanistan are embedded within the current governing structure, making institutional practice, legal interpretation and ideological governance central analytical variables throughout this assessment.

Figure 3.C.1. Afghanistan Country Profile (NORF Overview)



Sources: United Nations; UNAMA; USCIRF; U.S. Department of State; Open Doors World Watch List; Human Rights Watch; Amnesty International.

3.C.2 Historical Development

Historical Development of Religion and Freedom of Religion or Belief in Afghanistan

Afghanistan occupies one of the most historically significant crossroads of Eurasia. For more than two millennia, successive empires, migration routes and religious traditions have converged across the territory, producing a complex religious landscape long before the emergence of the modern Afghan state. Contemporary patterns of religious governance, sectarian identity and restrictions on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) are therefore best understood as the cumulative product of successive political and religious transformations rather than as developments associated solely with the modern state.

Unlike many contemporary nation-states, Afghanistan has never experienced a prolonged period in which religion and political authority were institutionally separated. Instead, successive governing systems have derived legitimacy from religious traditions, although the interpretation, institutional role and political application of religion have varied considerably over time. The present FoRB environment reflects this long historical trajectory, while also representing a significant departure from earlier periods through the unprecedented concentration of religious and political authority under the Taliban's de facto government.

Pre-Islamic Afghanistan (c. 550 BCE–7th Century CE)

The territory of present-day Afghanistan formed part of several major imperial systems, including the **Achaemenid Empire**, the conquests of **Alexander the Great**, the **Seleucid Empire**, the **Greco-Bactrian Kingdom**, the **Kushan Empire**, and later the **Sasanian Empire**. Owing to its location along the Silk Roads, the region became one of Asia's principal centres of commercial exchange and religious interaction.

Religious pluralism characterised much of this period. **Zoroastrianism** predominated under Persian rule, while **Buddhism** flourished under Kushan patronage between the first and fourth centuries CE. The monumental Buddhas of Bamiyan, completed between the sixth and seventh centuries, symbolised Afghanistan's position as one of the most important Buddhist cultural centres in Central Asia. Hindu religious traditions also became established, particularly in eastern Afghanistan, while indigenous Iranian religious practices persisted alongside imported belief systems.

Religious communities generally coexisted under imperial administrations that prioritised political stability over religious uniformity. Although rulers often favoured particular traditions,

archaeological and historical evidence suggests a comparatively pluralistic religious environment relative to later periods.

FoRB significance. The pre-Islamic period established Afghanistan as a region of substantial religious diversity. The disappearance of many of these communities in subsequent centuries illustrates the profound historical transformation of the country's religious landscape.

Islamisation and the Formation of an Islamic Society (7th–10th Centuries)

Arab Muslim expansion reached eastern Iran and present-day Afghanistan during the seventh century, although the Islamisation of the region occurred gradually over several centuries rather than through immediate political conquest. Conversion proceeded unevenly across different regions and populations, with Buddhist, Hindu and local religious communities continuing to exist alongside emerging Muslim communities for generations.

By the tenth century, Islam had become the dominant religion throughout most of the region. The **Hanafi school of Sunni jurisprudence** gradually emerged as the prevailing legal tradition, while Persian-Islamic scholarship became increasingly influential in administration, education and jurisprudence. At the same time, Shi'a communities developed in parts of central Afghanistan, particularly among populations that would later become associated with the Hazara community.

The process of Islamisation transformed religious institutions as mosques, madrasas and Islamic courts progressively replaced earlier religious centres. Nevertheless, conversion remained a gradual social process shaped by trade, political integration and local patronage rather than solely by military conquest.

FoRB significance. This period established Sunni Hanafi Islam as the dominant religious tradition that continues to underpin Afghanistan's contemporary legal and political order.

Medieval Islamic Dynasties and the Consolidation of Religious Authority (10th Century–1747)

Between the tenth and eighteenth centuries, Afghanistan was governed by a succession of Islamic dynasties, including the **Ghaznavids**, **Ghurids**, **Timurids**, and later competing **Safavid**, **Mughal** and regional Pashtun rulers. These centuries witnessed the consolidation of Islamic political institutions, the expansion of religious education and the increasing influence of the ulema within public administration.

Although Sunni Islam remained dominant, competition between the Sunni Mughal Empire and the Shi'a Safavid Empire contributed to the emergence of sectarian boundaries that continue to influence Afghan society. The spread of Sufi orders also played an important role in local religious life, often providing social cohesion across tribal communities.

Religious minorities—including Hindus, Sikhs and Jews—continued to participate in commercial life, particularly in urban centres, although their legal status remained subordinate under Islamic governance. Conversion away from Islam was generally regarded as apostasy under prevailing interpretations of Islamic law and therefore remained socially and legally constrained.

FoRB significance. The medieval period institutionalised the close relationship between political authority, Islamic jurisprudence and religious legitimacy that has characterised Afghan governance ever since.

Formation of the Modern Afghan State (1747–1919)

The establishment of the **Durrani Empire** under Ahmad Shah Durrani in **1747** marked the beginning of the modern Afghan state. Sunni Islam became an essential source of political legitimacy, while tribal governance and religious authority operated in close partnership. Although local autonomy remained considerable, rulers relied heavily on religious scholars to legitimise state authority and judicial practice.

Throughout the nineteenth century, Afghanistan became a strategic buffer state between the British and Russian Empires during the "Great Game." State institutions expanded gradually, but religious leaders continued to exercise significant influence over education, law and dispute resolution.

FoRB significance. Islam became firmly embedded within the institutional foundations of the Afghan state, while religious legitimacy increasingly complemented tribal authority.

Constitutional Reform and State Modernisation (1919–1978)

Following independence in **1919**, King Amanullah Khan introduced extensive programmes of political modernisation inspired partly by developments in Turkey and Europe. Constitutional reforms sought to strengthen central government, expand secular education and reduce the political influence of conservative religious elites. Strong opposition from tribal leaders and religious authorities ultimately contributed to the collapse of these reforms.

Subsequent monarchs adopted more gradual modernisation strategies, culminating in the **1964 Constitution**, which introduced limited parliamentary institutions and expanded civil liberties while retaining Islam as the state religion. Religious minorities experienced relatively greater stability than in later decades, although equality before the law remained constrained by the constitutional primacy of Islam.

FoRB significance. This period demonstrated both the possibilities and political limits of institutional reform in a society where religious legitimacy remained central to state authority.

Communist Rule, Soviet Intervention and Religious Mobilisation (1978–1992)

The **Saur Revolution** of **1978** fundamentally altered Afghanistan's political trajectory. The communist government attempted to secularise public administration, reduce clerical influence and implement radical social reforms. These policies provoked widespread resistance from religious leaders and rural communities.

Following the Soviet intervention in **1979**, numerous Mujahideen groups framed armed resistance as both national liberation and religious obligation. Religion consequently became increasingly

militarised, while decades of conflict devastated state institutions and strengthened Islamist political movements.

FoRB significance. The conflict reinforced the political role of Islamic identity while weakening secular institutions capable of protecting religious pluralism.

Civil War and the First Taliban Emirate (1992–2001)

The collapse of the communist government led to prolonged civil war among competing Mujahideen factions before the Taliban captured Kabul in **1996**.

The Taliban established the **Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan**, implementing a highly restrictive interpretation of Hanafi Sunni jurisprudence enforced through the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. Women were excluded from most aspects of public life, religious minorities faced systematic discrimination, and public religious expression outside Taliban doctrine was prohibited.

The Hazara Shi'a community experienced documented massacres and widespread persecution. Hindus and Sikhs emigrated in large numbers, while Christians and Bahá'ís were forced entirely underground.

FoRB significance. The first Taliban regime established an ideological model of religious governance that would largely re-emerge after 2021.

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2001–2021)

Following the international intervention in late **2001**, Afghanistan adopted the **2004 Constitution**, establishing the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. The Constitution recognised certain civil liberties while maintaining Islam as the religion of the state and prohibiting legislation contrary to Islamic principles.

Although civil society, education, independent media and women's participation expanded considerably, FoRB protections remained incomplete. Apostasy and blasphemy continued to be prosecutable through Hanafi jurisprudence, Christian converts remained unable to worship openly, Bahá'ís lacked legal recognition, and Ahmadi Muslims continued to experience discrimination.

Simultaneously, insurgent violence by the Taliban and Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) increasingly targeted Shi'a mosques, educational institutions and minority religious communities.

FoRB significance. Constitutional protections improved significantly relative to Taliban rule, but implementation remained constrained by insecurity, constitutional limitations and persistent conflict.

Taliban Return to Power (2021–Present)

The collapse of the Islamic Republic in **August 2021** marked the most profound transformation of Afghanistan's FoRB environment in two decades. The Taliban suspended the constitutional framework and re-established the **Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan**, replacing statutory governance with decrees based upon its interpretation of Hanafi Sunni jurisprudence.

International monitoring bodies have documented a sharp deterioration in religious freedom. Christian converts, Bahá'ís, Ahmadi Muslims and many remaining religious minorities have either fled Afghanistan or continue to practise their faith clandestinely. Hazara Shi'a communities remain vulnerable to both discriminatory state policies and repeated attacks by Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), while the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice has become the principal institution responsible for enforcing religious conformity.

FoRB significance. Contemporary Afghanistan represents one of the world's most restrictive environments for Freedom of Religion or Belief, characterised by the fusion of executive, judicial and religious authority within a single de facto governing structure.

Overall Historical Assessment

From a FoRB perspective, Afghanistan's history reveals a long-term progression from religious pluralism in the pre-Islamic period towards increasing institutional integration between religion and political authority following Islamisation. While successive governments have differed markedly in their interpretation and implementation of Islamic governance, religion has consistently remained a central source of political legitimacy. The post-2021 Taliban government represents the most comprehensive concentration of religious and executive authority in Afghanistan's modern history, making ideological governance itself the principal determinant of contemporary religious freedom conditions.

Fig. 3.C.2

FIGURE 3.C.2

NORF
NORDIC OBSERVATORY FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

AFGHANISTAN: HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF RELIGION AND FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

From ancient pluralism to contemporary religious repression: a historical timeline of political change and its impact on FoRB.

OVERALL HISTORICAL TRAJECTORY

A long-term evolution from religious pluralism to the current fusion of religious authority and state power.

PERIOD & DATES	POLITICAL CONTEXT	RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE	FoRB SIGNIFICANCE
1. PRE-ISLAMIC AFGHANISTAN (c. 550 BCE – 7th Century CE) 	• Part of Achaemenid Empire, Alexander's conquests, Seleucid Empire, Greco-Bactrian Kingdom, Kushan Empire, and Sasanian Empire. • Major crossroads of the Silk Road, linking South Asia, Persia, and Central Asia.	• Religious pluralism: Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and local Iranian traditions. • Buddhism flourished under the Kushans; Bamiyan a centre of Buddhist culture and learning. • Hindu and other communities coexisted in many urban centres.	High degree of religious diversity and coexistence. Sets the historical baseline for Afghanistan as a multi-religious corssroads.
2. ISLAMISATION OF THE REGION (7th – 10th Centuries CE) 	• Arab Muslim expansion reaches the region in the 7th century. • Islamisation gradual and uneven across populations and regions.	• Islam becomes dominant by the 10th century. • Hanafi Sunni jurisprudence emerges as the prevailing legal tradition. • Shi'a communities begin to form.	Gradual shift toward Islamic majority. Foundations of Sunni Hanafi tradition that continues to shape legal and political order.
3. MEDIEVAL ISLAMIC DYNASTIES (10th Century – 1747) 	• Rule of Ghaznavids, Ghurids, Timurids, and later influence of Safavids, Mughals, and regional Pashtun rulers. • Consolidation of Islamic political institutions and scholarly networks.	• Sunni Islam dominant; Sufi orders spread across region. • Shi'a communities (especially precursors to Hazara) present. • Hindus, Sikhs, Jews participate in trade and urban life; legal status subordinate under Islamic rule.	Islamic jurisprudence and religious scholarship become deeply embedded in governance. Legal and social hierarchy between Muslims and non-Muslims institutionalised.
4. FORMATION OF MODERN AFGHAN STATE (1747 – 1919) 	• Durrani Empire founded in 1747 by Ahmad Shah Durrani. • Tribal governance with increasing centralisation. • 19th-century "Great Game" between British and Russian Empires.	• Sunni Islam as key source of political legitimacy. • Ulema influential in law, education and local governance. • Religious minorities present in urban centres but with limited legal equality.	Islami established as core pillar of state legitimacy; religious authority works in partnership with tribal structures.
5. CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM & MODERNISATION (1919 – 1978) 	• Independence in 1919 under King Amanullah Khan. • Constitutional reforms and modernisation efforts. • 1964 Constitution introduces parliamentary system.	• Islam remains state religion and basis of law. • Gradual expansion of education, urbanisation, and civil institutions. • Religious minorities experience relative stability; conversion remains socially unacceptable.	Limited expansion of civil liberties, but Islam's constitutional primacy continues to constrain religious pluralism and freedom of belief.
6. COMMUNIST RULE & SOVIET INTERVENTION (1978 – 1992) 	• Saur Revolution (1978) brings communist PDPA to power. • Soviet military intervention (1979). • Mujahideen resistance supported internationally.	• Government promotes secularism and reduces clerical influence. • Religion becomes a central rallying point for resistance. • Growth of Islamist networks and religious mobilisation.	Conflict strengthens Islamist movements and weakens secular institutions that could have protected religious freedom.
7. CIVIL WAR & FIRST TALIBAN EMIRATE (1992 – 2001) 	• Collapse of communist regime (1992) leads to civil war among Mujahideen factions. • Taliban movement emerges in 1994; takes Kabul in 1996.	• Implementation of strict Hanafi Sunni interpretation. • Severe restrictions on women, religious minorities and converts. • Hazara Shi'a massacres; minority communities forced to flee.	Systematic suppression of religious diversity; persecution and forced displacement of minority religious communities.
8. ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF AFGHANISTAN (2001 – 2021) 	• U.S.-led intervention (2001) removes Taliban. • 2004 Constitution establishes Islamic Republic. • Gradual state-building and international assistance.	• Constitution guarantees some religious freedoms, but Islam is state religion. • Christians, Bahá'is, Ahmadis lack recognition; conversion still punishable. • ISKP attacks target Shi'a and minority communities.	Significant improvements in rights framework, but limited implementation due to insecurity, legal constraints and conflict.
9. TALIBAN RETURN TO POWER (2021 – PRESENT) 	• Collapse of Islamic Republic in August 2021. • Taliban re-establish Islamic Emirate. • Decrees replace constitutional framework.	• Suspension of constitutional rights. • Ideological governance based on Hanafi jurisprudence. • Christians, Bahá'is, Ahmadis, Shi'a, Sikhs, Hindus under severe pressure; ISKP violence continues.	Fusion of religious and state authority; one of the world's most restrictive environments for Freedom of Religion or Belief.

KEY HISTORICAL INSIGHT

From an ancient era of religious diversity to contemporary ideological governance, Afghanistan's long history shows a steady entrenchment of religion within political authority. The post-2021 period represents the most comprehensive concentration of religious, judicial and executive power in Afghanistan's modern history.



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3.C.3 Religious Landscape

Religious Landscape and Demographic Composition

Afghanistan is one of the world's most religiously homogeneous countries in terms of formal religious affiliation. Islam constitutes the religion of the overwhelming majority of the population and forms the constitutional, legal and ideological foundation of the current de facto governing system. Nevertheless, this apparent homogeneity conceals important internal diversity, including differences between Sunni and Shi'a Islam, variations in religious practice across ethnic communities, and the continued existence—albeit on a greatly diminished scale—of historic religious minorities. Moreover, official demographic statistics do not adequately capture religious communities that are compelled to conceal their identity due to legal sanctions or fear of persecution, particularly Christian converts, Bahá'ís and Ahmadi Muslims.

Reliable demographic data remain limited. Afghanistan has not conducted a comprehensive national census capable of accurately measuring religious affiliation, and estimates therefore rely on international organisations, academic research and governmental reporting. Consequently, all percentages presented below should be regarded as approximate.

Sunni Islam

Sunni Islam is the dominant religious tradition in Afghanistan, representing an estimated **85–90%** of the population. The overwhelming majority of Afghan Sunnis adhere to the **Hanafi school of jurisprudence**, which has historically shaped judicial practice, religious education and political legitimacy. Hanafi jurisprudence remains the principal legal framework applied by the Taliban and constitutes the basis for many contemporary regulations governing public behaviour, religious practice and family law.

Sunni Islam is practised throughout the country and is closely associated with several ethnic communities, including Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmen and many smaller groups. Although Sunni communities are not internally homogeneous, religious institutions—including mosques, madrasas and clerical networks—continue to play a central role in community governance and local dispute resolution.

FoRB significance. Sunni Islam functions not only as the majority religion but also as the principal normative framework informing state institutions, legislation and public policy under the current de facto authorities.

Shi'a Muslims

Shi'a Muslims comprise approximately **10–15%** of Afghanistan's population, with the majority belonging to the **Twelver (Ja'fari) tradition**. Most Shi'a are members of the Hazara ethnic community, although Shi'a populations also include Qizilbash, Sadat and smaller ethnic groups.

Historically, Shi'a communities have experienced varying degrees of discrimination and political marginalisation. Since the Taliban's return to power, concerns regarding the protection of Shi'a religious rights have increased substantially. While the Taliban has publicly stated that Shi'a Muslims may continue their religious practices, international monitoring bodies have documented restrictions affecting Shi'a institutions, unequal access to public administration and continuing security vulnerabilities.

In addition to institutional concerns, Shi'a religious gatherings have repeatedly been targeted by the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), which considers Shi'a Muslims to be apostates. Numerous attacks against mosques, educational institutions and commemorative ceremonies have resulted in significant civilian casualties since 2021.

FoRB significance. Although recognised as Muslims, Shi'a communities remain among Afghanistan's most vulnerable religious groups due to the combined effects of discrimination, limited institutional protection and repeated attacks by violent extremist organisations.

Christian Communities

Christianity has no official legal status in Afghanistan. The country contains **no publicly recognised churches**, and virtually all Afghan Christians are believed to be converts from Islam or members of expatriate communities with highly restricted religious activities. Reliable estimates of the Christian population are unavailable because public identification as Christian carries an exceptionally high risk of persecution.

Under prevailing interpretations of Islamic law applied by the Taliban, conversion from Islam may constitute apostasy, exposing individuals to severe punishment. Consequently, Afghan Christians generally worship in complete secrecy through informal house-based networks or individual devotional practice. Public evangelism, church construction and organised Christian institutions are effectively impossible under present conditions.

International organisations consistently identify Afghan Christians as one of the world's most vulnerable religious communities.

FoRB significance. The Christian community illustrates the distinction between legal recognition and actual religious existence. Christianity persists within Afghanistan despite the complete absence of public institutional space for religious expression.

Hindus and Sikhs

Afghanistan historically hosted substantial Hindu and Sikh communities, particularly in Kabul, Jalalabad, Kandahar and Ghazni. During the twentieth century these communities played important roles in commerce, education and public administration.

Decades of conflict, discrimination, targeted violence and forced migration have reduced both communities dramatically. Current estimates suggest that only **a few hundred** Sikhs and Hindus remain in Afghanistan. Many religious sites have been abandoned or damaged, while repeated attacks by extremist organisations—including ISKP—have accelerated emigration.

Although Taliban representatives have occasionally pledged protection for remaining Sikh and Hindu citizens, international observers continue to report insecurity, discrimination and limited institutional safeguards.

FoRB significance. The decline of Afghanistan's Hindu and Sikh communities represents one of the most significant long-term transformations of the country's religious diversity over the past half-century.

Bahá'ís

The Bahá'í Faith is not recognised under Afghanistan's current legal framework. Previous religious rulings have characterised Bahá'ís as apostates from Islam, and adherents consequently face significant legal and societal risks.

Little reliable demographic information exists because Bahá'ís generally conceal their religious identity. Public worship, institutional organisation and community activities are effectively absent.

FoRB significance. The Bahá'í community exemplifies how legal non-recognition contributes to the effective disappearance of religious communities from public life.

Ahmadi Muslims

Ahmadi Muslims constitute a very small religious minority whose precise numbers remain unknown. Their interpretation of Islam is rejected by many mainstream Islamic authorities, and they receive no formal recognition from the current de facto authorities.

Public religious activity is extremely limited, and available information suggests that many Ahmadi Muslims practise their faith privately or have left the country.

FoRB significance. Although numerically small, the Ahmadi community demonstrates the limited space available for theological diversity within contemporary Afghanistan.

Other Religious Communities

The historic Jewish community of Afghanistan has effectively disappeared following decades of emigration. Small numbers of foreign nationals may practise other religions privately under highly restricted circumstances, but no significant public religious institutions exist outside Islam.

Atheists, agnostics and individuals identifying with no religion remain effectively invisible in public life because openly rejecting Islam may expose individuals to serious legal and societal consequences.

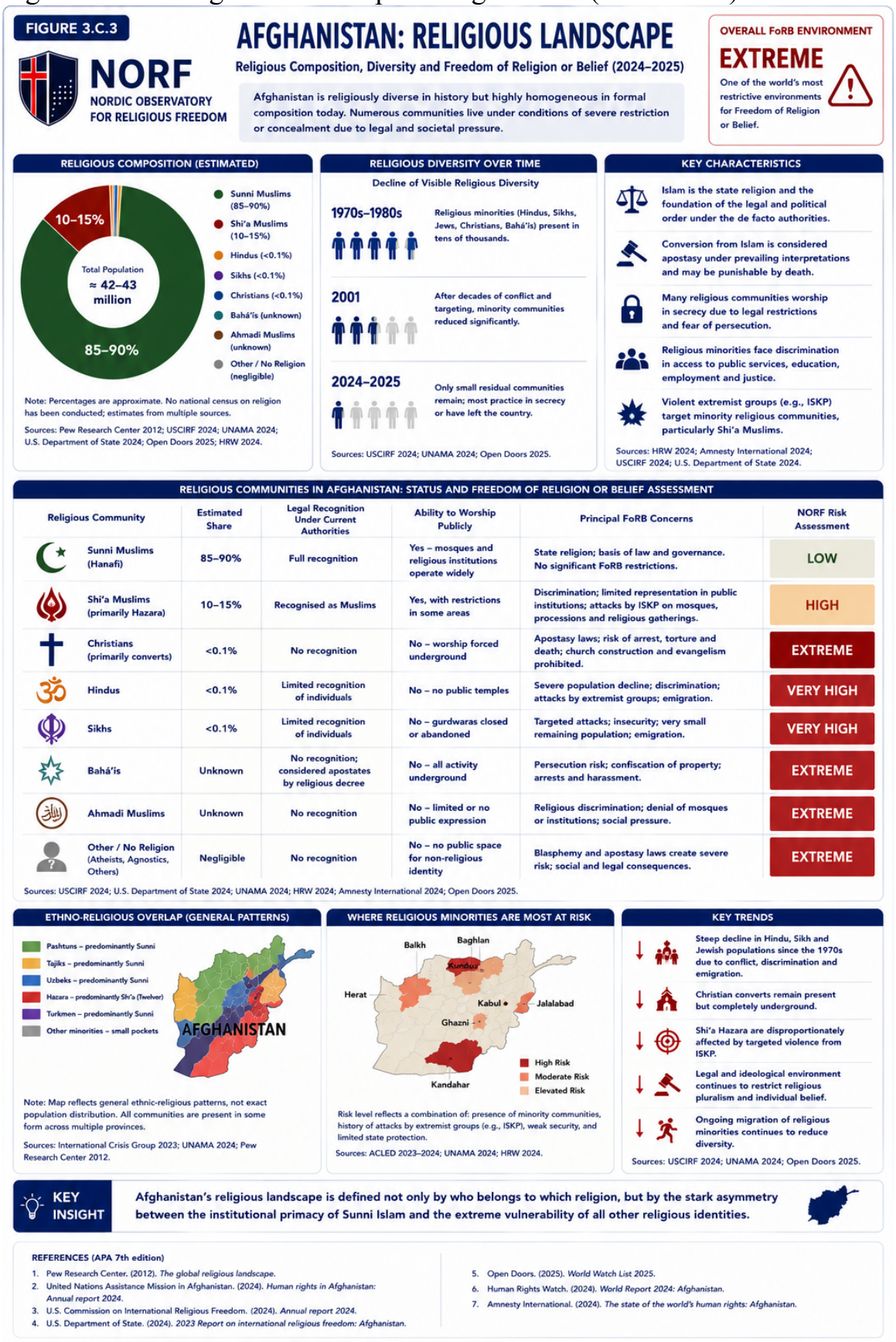
FoRB significance. Contemporary Afghanistan has transitioned from a historically diverse religious crossroads to one of the world's least publicly diverse religious environments.

Overall Assessment of the Religious Landscape

At first glance, Afghanistan appears religiously homogeneous. From a Freedom of Religion or Belief perspective, however, the country's religious landscape is characterised less by homogeneity than by **asymmetrical religious freedom**. Sunni Islam enjoys institutional primacy and constitutes the ideological basis of governance, while minority religious communities experience widely differing levels of recognition, protection and security. Some communities—notably Christians, Bahá'ís and many converts from Islam—are largely absent from public life not because they do not exist, but because prevailing legal, political and societal conditions compel them to remain invisible.

This distinction between **demographic composition** and **effective religious freedom** is fundamental to understanding Afghanistan's contemporary FoRB environment and provides the analytical foundation for the subsequent assessment of legal restrictions, government practice and patterns of religious persecution.

Figure 3.C.3. Religious Landscape of Afghanistan (2024–2025)



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3.C.4 Legal and Institutional Framework

Legal and Institutional Framework Governing Freedom of Religion or Belief

Afghanistan's contemporary legal and institutional framework governing Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) has undergone a fundamental transformation since the Taliban assumed control of the country in August 2021. The suspension of the **2004 Constitution** and the restoration of the **Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan** have replaced a constitutional legal order with a governance system based upon the Taliban's interpretation of **Hanafi Sunni Islamic jurisprudence**. As a result, religious authority, executive power and judicial authority have become closely integrated, substantially reducing institutional safeguards for religious diversity and individual religious freedom.

Unlike the constitutional framework that existed prior to 2021, Afghanistan currently lacks a comprehensive written constitutional document defining individual rights, separation of powers or judicial review. Instead, governance is exercised through decrees issued by the Supreme Leader, religious directives, ministerial regulations and interpretations of Islamic law implemented by de facto institutions.

From a FoRB perspective, this represents a transition from a constitutional system with limited legal protections to an ideological governance model in which religious conformity constitutes a central organising principle of the state.

Constitutional and Legal Foundations

The **2004 Constitution**, adopted following the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, formally guaranteed certain fundamental rights while simultaneously recognising

Islam as the religion of the state. Article 2 permitted followers of other religions to exercise their faith within the limits of the law, whereas Article 3 prohibited legislation contrary to the beliefs and provisions of Islam. The Constitution therefore provided only qualified protection for religious freedom, and apostasy and blasphemy remained prosecutable through Hanafi jurisprudence where statutory law was silent.

Following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, the constitutional order was suspended. The Taliban has repeatedly stated that governance is based upon Islamic law as interpreted according to Hanafi jurisprudence, although no comprehensive constitutional document has replaced the previous framework. Consequently, legal certainty has been substantially reduced, with many regulations implemented through executive decrees rather than codified legislation.

This institutional transition has significantly affected the predictability of legal protections available to religious minorities and has expanded the discretionary authority of religious institutions within public administration.

FoRB significance. Afghanistan currently lacks a constitutional framework providing enforceable guarantees for Freedom of Religion or Belief comparable to those recognised under international human rights law.

Sources of Law

The present legal system is derived from multiple overlapping sources:

- Islamic law (Sharia) as interpreted according to Hanafi jurisprudence;
- decrees issued by the Supreme Leader;
- regulations issued by Taliban ministries;
- existing statutory legislation where considered compatible with Islamic principles; and
- decisions issued by religious courts and local authorities.

Because many legal provisions remain uncodified, considerable discretion exists in their interpretation and implementation. This contributes to significant regional variation in administrative practice and judicial outcomes.

International observers have repeatedly noted that the absence of transparent legislative procedures complicates legal predictability and limits opportunities for judicial appeal.

FoRB significance. The absence of a unified codified legal framework increases uncertainty for religious minorities and permits extensive discretionary enforcement.

Judicial Institutions

The Taliban has fundamentally reorganised Afghanistan's judicial institutions.

Civil courts established under the Islamic Republic have largely been replaced by judicial structures operating according to the Taliban's interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence. Judges are generally

appointed by the de facto authorities and are expected to apply Hanafi legal principles in conjunction with directives issued by the Supreme Leader.

Independent constitutional review no longer exists, and no institutional mechanism provides judicial oversight comparable to constitutional courts found in many democratic legal systems. Opportunities for legal challenge against executive decisions are therefore extremely limited.

For individuals accused of apostasy, blasphemy or activities perceived as contrary to Islamic principles, legal protections recognised under international human rights standards—including due process guarantees and judicial independence—remain significantly constrained.

FoRB significance. Judicial institutions function primarily as mechanisms for implementing religious governance rather than as independent guarantors of individual rights.

Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice

The **Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (MPVPV)** has emerged as one of the most influential institutions within Afghanistan's contemporary governance system.

Originally established during the Taliban's first period in power (1996–2001), the Ministry was re-established following the Taliban's return in 2021 and has assumed responsibility for monitoring compliance with religious and moral regulations. Its mandate extends to public behaviour, dress codes, gender segregation, religious observance and other matters interpreted as falling within Islamic norms.

The Ministry exercises extensive enforcement powers through inspections, administrative directives and cooperation with local authorities. Successive decrees have expanded its role in regulating everyday social life, including restrictions affecting women, education, media and public religious expression.

Although the Ministry's primary focus is moral regulation rather than minority religions specifically, its activities substantially influence the practical exercise of Freedom of Religion or Belief throughout the country.

FoRB significance. The Ministry institutionalises state enforcement of religious conformity and constitutes one of the principal mechanisms through which ideological governance affects everyday religious freedom.

International Human Rights Obligations

Afghanistan remains a State Party to several core international human rights treaties, including the **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)**, which recognises Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion under Article 18.

However, the Taliban has not demonstrated a commitment to implementing these obligations consistently within domestic governance. United Nations bodies, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the U.S. Commission on International Religious

Freedom (USCIRF) and numerous international organisations have repeatedly concluded that current policies are incompatible with internationally recognised standards relating to religious freedom, equality before the law and non-discrimination.

The absence of effective domestic judicial remedies further limits the practical enforceability of Afghanistan's international legal obligations.

FoRB significance. A substantial gap exists between Afghanistan's international treaty obligations and the implementation of religious freedom protections under the current de facto authorities.

Institutional Protection of Religious Minorities

Afghanistan currently possesses few institutional mechanisms specifically designed to protect religious minorities.

No independent national human rights institution presently exercises effective oversight of FoRB violations. Civil society organisations working on religious freedom have largely ceased operating within Afghanistan, while independent media capable of documenting religious discrimination have been significantly reduced.

Minority religious communities therefore possess limited institutional avenues through which discrimination, violence or restrictions on religious practice can be challenged.

This institutional deficit disproportionately affects communities already facing elevated levels of legal or societal vulnerability, including Christians, Bahá'ís, Ahmadi Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and Hazara Shi'a communities.

FoRB significance. The absence of independent oversight institutions significantly increases the vulnerability of religious minorities and limits accountability for FoRB violations.

Overall Assessment

Afghanistan's current legal and institutional framework is characterised by the integration of religious doctrine and state authority within a single ideological governance system. Rather than protecting religious pluralism through constitutional guarantees and independent judicial oversight, contemporary institutions prioritise the implementation of the Taliban's interpretation of Hanafi Sunni Islamic law as the organising principle of public governance.

From a Freedom of Religion or Belief perspective, the principal challenge is therefore not merely the existence of restrictive laws, but the absence of institutional safeguards capable of balancing religious authority with internationally recognised human rights protections. This institutional configuration underpins many of the patterns of discrimination, exclusion and persecution examined in the subsequent FoRB assessment.

Figure 3.C.4. Legal and Institutional Framework Governing Freedom of Religion or Belief in Afghanistan



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3.C.5 Key Institutions and Actors Influencing Freedom of Religion or Belief

Institutional and Non-State Actors

Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in Afghanistan is shaped by a complex interaction between state institutions, religious authorities, security actors and violent extremist organisations. Since the Taliban regained power in August 2021, authority over religious affairs has become highly centralised within the de facto government. Nevertheless, implementation varies across provinces, reflecting the influence of local officials, tribal structures and security conditions. At the same time, non-state armed groups—most notably the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)—continue to exert a significant influence on the security and religious freedom of minority communities.

Understanding these actors is essential for assessing both the legal restrictions and the patterns of persecution examined in subsequent chapters.

Supreme Leader (Amir al-Mu'minin)

Ultimate political and religious authority rests with the **Supreme Leader (Amir al-Mu'minin)**, whose decrees constitute the highest source of executive direction within the Islamic Emirate. The Supreme Leader exercises authority over legislation, judicial policy, appointments and religious governance.

Unlike constitutional systems in which executive authority is constrained by judicial review or parliamentary oversight, the Supreme Leader combines political leadership with religious

legitimacy. Major policy decisions affecting religious practice—including decrees concerning public morality, education and social conduct—originate from this office.

FoRB significance. The concentration of executive and religious authority within a single office significantly limits institutional checks on restrictions affecting religious freedom.

Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (MPVPV)

The **Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (MPVPV)** is responsible for enforcing compliance with religious and moral regulations in public life. Since its re-establishment in 2021, the Ministry has assumed a central role in implementing Taliban decrees concerning public behaviour, dress, gender segregation, media, education and religious observance.

Officials conduct inspections and issue administrative instructions intended to ensure conformity with the authorities' interpretation of Islamic law. Although not exclusively focused on religious minorities, the Ministry's activities significantly affect the practical exercise of Freedom of Religion or Belief throughout Afghanistan.

FoRB significance. The Ministry constitutes the principal institutional mechanism through which religious conformity is enforced in everyday life.

Religious Scholars (Ulema)

Islamic scholars (ulema) continue to occupy influential positions within Afghan society. Many serve as judges, educators, advisers and community leaders, while others participate in official religious councils that provide theological legitimacy for government policy.

The influence of the ulema varies regionally, but religious opinions (fatwas) and clerical guidance remain important sources of authority within many communities. In some areas, local religious leaders also mediate disputes and shape community attitudes toward religious minorities and converts.

FoRB significance. Religious authorities influence both formal governance and societal attitudes, affecting the implementation of FoRB beyond the state's formal institutions.

Security Institutions

Taliban security institutions—including the Ministry of Interior, intelligence services and provincial security authorities—are responsible for maintaining public order and implementing government decrees.

These institutions investigate activities considered contrary to Islamic principles and cooperate with judicial authorities in cases involving alleged apostasy, blasphemy or other religiously related offences. Security agencies also respond to attacks conducted by ISKP and other armed groups, although international organisations continue to report significant protection gaps for vulnerable religious communities.

FoRB significance. Security institutions simultaneously function as enforcers of religious regulations and providers of protection against extremist violence, creating a complex relationship between security and religious freedom.

Provincial and Local Authorities

Although governance is highly centralised, provincial governors, district officials and local religious leaders retain considerable influence over implementation. Variations in administrative capacity, security conditions and local religious traditions contribute to differences in the enforcement of Taliban decrees across provinces.

This local variation affects the lived experience of religious minorities, particularly in remote rural districts where informal authority structures often complement official institutions.

FoRB significance. The implementation of FoRB restrictions is not entirely uniform, and local administrative practices contribute to regional variation in religious freedom conditions.

Tribal and Community Structures

Traditional tribal and community institutions continue to play an important role, particularly in rural Afghanistan. Tribal elders (maliks), community councils (shuras) and local jirgas often mediate disputes concerning family matters, inheritance and community relations.

Although these structures are not formal organs of the state, they shape societal attitudes toward religious identity, conversion and minority communities. In some cases, social sanctions imposed by local communities may reinforce or exceed formal legal restrictions.

FoRB significance. Community-level governance reinforces the societal dimension of FoRB restrictions, particularly regarding religious conversion and social acceptance of minority faiths.

Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)

The **Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)** remains the most significant non-state armed actor affecting Freedom of Religion or Belief in Afghanistan. Unlike the Taliban, which seeks to govern the country, ISKP pursues a transnational jihadist agenda and has repeatedly targeted religious minorities, particularly Hazara Shi'a communities.

Since 2021, ISKP has claimed responsibility for numerous attacks on Shi'a mosques, educational institutions, religious commemorations and civilian gatherings. These attacks have resulted in substantial casualties and have intensified insecurity among minority religious communities.

ISKP also considers many other religious groups—including Christians, Sikhs, Hindus and Bahá'ís—to be legitimate targets under its extremist ideology.

FoRB significance. ISKP constitutes the principal non-state source of religiously motivated violence in Afghanistan and significantly exacerbates the vulnerability of minority communities.

International Organisations

Despite the withdrawal of most international military forces, organisations including the **United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA)**, the **Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)**, the **U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)** and numerous humanitarian organisations continue to monitor and document FoRB developments.

These organisations no longer possess enforcement authority within Afghanistan but remain essential sources of independent monitoring, reporting and international accountability.

FoRB significance. International organisations provide independent documentation of FoRB conditions but possess limited capacity to influence domestic implementation.

Overall Assessment

Afghanistan's contemporary Freedom of Religion or Belief environment is shaped by a highly centralised governance system in which political authority, religious legitimacy and security institutions operate in close coordination. At the same time, local religious leaders, tribal structures and violent extremist organisations continue to influence religious freedom conditions at the provincial and community levels. Consequently, restrictions on FoRB arise not only from formal legislation but also from institutional practice, social enforcement and persistent security threats. Understanding these interacting actors provides an essential foundation for analysing government restrictions, societal discrimination and patterns of religious persecution in the following chapters.

Figure 3.C.5. Principal Actors Shaping Freedom of Religion or Belief in Afghanistan



References (APA 7th edition)

Amnesty International. (2024). *The state of the world's human rights: Afghanistan*. https://www.amnesty.org

Human Rights Watch. (2024). *World Report 2024: Afghanistan*. https://www.hrw.org

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3.C.6 Political, Social and Security Context

Political, Social and Security Context

Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in Afghanistan is shaped not only by the country's legal framework and religious institutions but also by broader political, social and security dynamics. Since the Taliban regained power in August 2021, Afghanistan has experienced profound changes in governance, civil society, humanitarian conditions and internal security. These developments have altered both the institutional environment in which religious communities operate and the everyday realities affecting the exercise of religion or belief.

Although Afghanistan no longer experiences the nationwide armed conflict that characterised much of the previous two decades, security improvements in some regions have not translated into broader protection of fundamental rights. Instead, political centralisation, ideological governance, humanitarian crisis and targeted violence against religious minorities collectively define the contemporary FoRB environment.

Political Environment

The Taliban exercises effective control over virtually the entire territory of Afghanistan through the Islamic Emirate. No nationally recognised elections have been held since the Taliban's return to power, and political authority is concentrated within the office of the Supreme Leader and senior Taliban institutions.

Independent political opposition, organised civil society and many representative institutions established under the former Islamic Republic have either ceased operating or function only under

significant restrictions. International recognition of the Taliban government remains limited, although diplomatic engagement continues through humanitarian and regional security channels.

This highly centralised political structure allows religious policy to be implemented with relatively limited institutional opposition or judicial oversight.

FoRB significance. The concentration of political authority reduces institutional checks on religious policy and limits opportunities for legal or political advocacy on behalf of religious minorities.

Humanitarian Context

Afghanistan continues to experience one of the world's largest humanitarian crises. According to United Nations humanitarian assessments, millions of Afghans require humanitarian assistance owing to economic collapse, food insecurity, displacement, climate-related shocks and declining public services.

These conditions affect all communities but disproportionately increase the vulnerability of already marginalised religious minorities. Communities with limited access to employment, education, documentation or humanitarian assistance may face additional obstacles resulting from discrimination or social exclusion.

Humanitarian organisations continue to operate across much of the country, although their activities remain subject to regulatory restrictions imposed by the de facto authorities.

FoRB significance. Humanitarian vulnerability amplifies existing inequalities affecting minority religious communities and reduces their resilience against discrimination and persecution.

Social Environment

Afghan society remains deeply influenced by religious tradition, family networks, tribal affiliations and local community structures. Religious identity is closely intertwined with social belonging, particularly in rural areas where community expectations strongly influence individual behaviour.

Conversion from Islam is widely regarded as socially unacceptable across many communities irrespective of formal legal provisions. Individuals perceived as departing from prevailing religious norms may therefore face family rejection, community ostracism, forced marriage, loss of livelihood or displacement in addition to possible legal consequences.

Women and girls belonging to minority religious communities may experience intersecting forms of vulnerability associated with both gender and religious identity.

FoRB significance. Social norms reinforce formal legal restrictions, meaning that societal pressure frequently limits religious freedom even in the absence of direct state intervention.

Security Environment

Overall levels of armed conflict have declined since the Taliban assumed nationwide control in 2021. However, the security environment remains unstable owing primarily to attacks conducted by the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP).

ISKP continues to target Shi'a mosques, educational institutions, religious commemorations and civilian gatherings, particularly those associated with the Hazara community. These attacks constitute one of the principal contemporary sources of religiously motivated violence in Afghanistan.

In addition, localised violence, unexploded ordnance, criminal activity and limited state capacity continue to affect security conditions in parts of the country.

Although Taliban security forces have undertaken operations against ISKP, international monitoring bodies continue to report recurring attacks against religious minorities.

FoRB significance. The principal contemporary security threat to religious minorities originates from violent extremist organisations rather than conventional armed conflict.

Civil Society and Media

Independent civil society organisations working on human rights and religious freedom have been substantially reduced since 2021. Many domestic organisations have ceased operations or relocated abroad, while remaining organisations operate under significant administrative and political constraints.

Independent media have likewise experienced extensive restrictions affecting licensing, editorial independence and freedom of expression. These developments have reduced the capacity of domestic institutions to document FoRB violations, support vulnerable communities or promote public debate concerning religious freedom.

International organisations therefore remain the principal independent sources of information regarding religious freedom conditions within Afghanistan.

FoRB significance. Reduced civic space limits independent monitoring, public accountability and domestic advocacy for Freedom of Religion or Belief.

International Relations

Afghanistan's international engagement remains shaped by humanitarian cooperation rather than formal diplomatic recognition. The Taliban government has not obtained broad international recognition as the legitimate government of Afghanistan, while United Nations sanctions continue to affect several senior Taliban leaders.

Nevertheless, Afghanistan maintains practical engagement with neighbouring states, United Nations agencies and international humanitarian organisations. International human rights mechanisms—

including the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan, UNAMA and USCIRF—continue to monitor developments relating to religious freedom and broader human rights conditions.

Although international scrutiny contributes to documentation and advocacy, its capacity to influence domestic policy remains limited.

FoRB significance. International oversight enhances external accountability but has had limited impact on the domestic protection of religious freedom.

Overall Assessment

Afghanistan's contemporary FoRB environment is shaped by the interaction of four mutually reinforcing dynamics: highly centralised ideological governance, persistent humanitarian vulnerability, conservative societal norms and continuing extremist violence targeting religious minorities. While these factors differ in origin, they collectively reduce the practical ability of individuals and communities to exercise Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Understanding this broader political, social and security context is essential for interpreting the government restrictions, societal discrimination and patterns of persecution analysed in the following assessment chapters.

Figure 3.C.6. Political, Social and Security Context Affecting Freedom of Religion or Belief in Afghanistan



References (APA 7th edition)

Amnesty International. (2024). *The state of the world's human rights: Afghanistan*. https://www.amnesty.org

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. (2024). *Afghanistan humanitarian response overview.*

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3.C.7 The Freedom of Religion or Belief Ecosystem

Understanding the Contemporary FoRB Environment

The preceding sections have examined Afghanistan's historical development, religious composition, legal framework, institutional architecture and broader political and security environment. Together, these elements provide the structural context within which Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) is experienced.

This section integrates those findings into a single analytical framework describing how the contemporary FoRB ecosystem operates. Rather than viewing violations of religious freedom as isolated events, NORF conceptualises them as the outcome of interacting legal, institutional, political, social and security mechanisms.

This systems-based perspective enables a more comprehensive understanding of both the immediate restrictions experienced by individuals and the structural conditions that sustain those restrictions over time.

The NORF FoRB Ecosystem Model

Freedom of Religion or Belief in Afghanistan is shaped by six mutually reinforcing components.

1. Ideological Governance

The first component is the ideological character of the state itself.

Following the Taliban's return to power in 2021, governance has become explicitly grounded in a particular interpretation of Hanafi Sunni Islamic jurisprudence. Political legitimacy, executive authority and judicial interpretation derive from the same religious framework.

Unlike constitutional democracies where religion and state institutions may operate independently, Afghanistan's governing structure integrates religious doctrine into executive decision-making.

Consequently, FoRB restrictions frequently originate not from administrative failure but from the governing philosophy itself.

FoRB significance

Religious conformity is embedded within state governance.

2. Legal Framework

The second component concerns the legal environment.

The suspension of the 2004 Constitution and reliance upon religious decrees create a legal system in which protections for religious minorities depend largely upon administrative interpretation rather than enforceable constitutional rights.

This produces considerable legal uncertainty for communities whose beliefs differ from officially recognised religious doctrine.

FoRB significance

Legal uncertainty increases institutional vulnerability.

3. Institutional Enforcement

The third component consists of institutions responsible for implementing religious policy.

The Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, religious courts, provincial authorities and security institutions collectively translate ideological principles into administrative practice.

These institutions influence:

- public worship;
- religious education;
- dress;
- gender interaction;
- public morality;
- conversion;
- religious expression.

Implementation therefore occurs through everyday governance rather than solely through criminal prosecution.

FoRB significance

Administrative enforcement shapes daily religious practice.

4. Societal Norms

Formal institutions operate alongside powerful community expectations.

Family structures, tribal authority, religious leaders and local social networks reinforce prevailing interpretations of acceptable religious behaviour.

For converts from Islam, social sanctions frequently precede or exceed formal legal consequences.

These may include:

- family rejection;
- forced marriage;
- community exclusion;
- loss of employment;
- displacement;
- threats of violence.

FoRB significance

Societal pressure reinforces institutional restrictions.

5. Security Environment

The fifth component consists of security dynamics.

Although nationwide armed conflict has declined since 2021, religious minorities continue to face serious security risks.

Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) remains the principal source of organised extremist violence targeting Shi'a Muslims and other minority communities.

Consequently, religious freedom is influenced simultaneously by state restrictions and non-state violence.

FoRB significance

Security threats amplify institutional discrimination.

6. International Environment

The final component comprises international monitoring and engagement.

United Nations mechanisms, humanitarian organisations, foreign governments and international NGOs continue documenting religious freedom conditions and providing humanitarian assistance.

However, international actors possess limited leverage over domestic governance.

International engagement therefore contributes primarily through:

- documentation;
- humanitarian assistance;
- diplomatic pressure;
- accountability mechanisms.

FoRB significance

External scrutiny increases transparency but has limited direct influence on domestic FoRB conditions.

Interaction Between the Six Components

These six components should not be understood independently.
Instead, they reinforce one another.
Ideological governance shapes legislation.
Legislation guides institutional practice.
Institutional practice reinforces societal expectations.
Societal expectations discourage religious diversity.
Security threats increase reliance upon coercive institutions.
Limited international influence reduces external pressure for reform.

Together these interactions create a self-reinforcing ecosystem that substantially constrains Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Communities Most Affected

The ecosystem affects communities differently.

Community	Principal Drivers
Christian converts	Apostasy doctrine; family pressure; institutional enforcement
Shi'a Muslims (Hazara)	Sectarian discrimination; ISKP violence; limited protection
Sikhs	Demographic decline; insecurity; discrimination
Hindus	Emigration; limited institutional protection
Bahá'ís	Legal non-recognition; concealment
Ahmadi Muslims	Religious exclusion; absence of legal recognition
Women	Religious regulation; gender-specific restrictions
Persons with no religion	Criminalisation; social exclusion

The differing experiences of these communities demonstrate that FoRB restrictions cannot be understood solely through legal analysis or conflict statistics.

Integrated Ecosystem Assessment

The Afghanistan case demonstrates that Freedom of Religion or Belief is determined not by a single institution or legal provision but by the interaction of multiple reinforcing systems.

Legal rules, ideological governance, administrative enforcement, community expectations, security dynamics and international engagement operate together to shape the practical exercise of religious freedom.

Accordingly, improvements in one area alone—for example, changes in legislation—would be unlikely to produce substantial progress unless accompanied by corresponding changes in institutional practice, societal attitudes and security conditions.

This ecosystem perspective provides the analytical foundation for the empirical assessment presented in the following chapters, where government restrictions, societal discrimination, violence, persecution and future risks are examined using the integrated NORF methodology.

Figure 3.C.7 **The NORF Freedom of Religion or Belief Ecosystem: Afghanistan**



References (APA 7th edition)

Amnesty International. (2024). *The state of the world's human rights: Afghanistan*. https://www.amnesty.org

Human Rights Watch. (2024). *World Report 2024: Afghanistan*. https://www.hrw.org

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U.S. Department of State. (2024). *2023 Report on international religious freedom: Afghanistan.*

3.C.8 NORF Analytical Assessment Framework

Analytical Framework for Assessing Freedom of Religion or Belief

The preceding sections have described Afghanistan's historical development, religious composition, institutional structures and broader political environment. The purpose of this section is to explain how NORF evaluates the Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) environment using a transparent and reproducible analytical framework.

Rather than relying on individual incidents or isolated indicators, NORF assesses FoRB through the interaction of multiple structural dimensions. This approach recognises that religious freedom is shaped simultaneously by constitutional arrangements, institutional practice, societal dynamics, security conditions and patterns of violence.

The framework is designed to support systematic comparison across countries and over time while maintaining transparency regarding evidence quality and analytical confidence.

The NORF Assessment Model

NORF evaluates each country through seven analytical dimensions.

1. Constitutional and Legal Protection

This dimension examines whether domestic law recognises and protects Freedom of Religion or Belief in accordance with international human rights standards.

Assessment includes:

- constitutional guarantees;
- recognition of religious communities;
- restrictions on conversion;
- blasphemy and apostasy provisions;
- equality before the law;
- compatibility with Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

Assessment for Afghanistan

Very Low Protection

The constitutional framework that existed prior to 2021 has been suspended and no comparable constitutional guarantees currently exist.

2. Institutional Implementation

Legal guarantees do not necessarily reflect actual practice.

This dimension evaluates:

- government implementation;
- judicial independence;
- administrative practice;
- institutional oversight;
- access to remedies;
- accountability.

Assessment for Afghanistan

Very Weak

Religious governance is implemented primarily through Taliban institutions with limited independent oversight.

3. Societal Freedom

FoRB is also shaped by community behaviour.

Assessment considers:

- discrimination;
- social exclusion;
- family pressure;
- community violence;

- religious intolerance;
- freedom to change religion.

Assessment for Afghanistan

Extremely Restricted

Social expectations reinforce institutional restrictions, particularly regarding conversion from Islam.

4. Security Environment

The fourth dimension evaluates physical security.

Indicators include:

- attacks on religious communities;
- terrorist activity;
- protection of places of worship;
- displacement;
- intimidation;
- regional variation.

Assessment for Afghanistan

High Risk

ISKP attacks continue to affect Shi'a Muslims and other minority communities, while security conditions remain uneven.

5. Violence Against Religious Communities

NORF distinguishes between general insecurity and violence directly affecting Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Assessment includes:

- killings;
- injuries;
- kidnappings;
- disappearances;
- attacks on religious institutions;
- forced displacement;
- destruction of religious property.

Where possible, all indicators are disaggregated by religious community.

Assessment for Afghanistan

Severe

Violence disproportionately affects minority communities, particularly Hazara Shi'a, while Christian converts remain at extreme risk despite the scarcity of publicly verifiable incident data due to clandestine religious practice.

6. Future Risk

NORF evaluates future trajectories rather than relying solely on historical evidence.

Assessment considers:

- institutional stability;
- political developments;
- security trends;
- demographic change;
- extremist activity;
- international engagement.

Assessment for Afghanistan

Very High

No evidence presently indicates significant structural improvement in the FoRB environment over the short to medium term.

7. Evidence Confidence

Every assessment includes an explicit confidence rating based upon:

- source reliability;
- methodological transparency;
- independent verification;
- consistency across datasets;
- recency of evidence.

NORF does not assign confidence according to the seriousness of violations but according to the quality of available evidence.

Assessment for Afghanistan

High Confidence

Multiple independent organisations report highly consistent findings regarding legal restrictions, institutional practice and the vulnerability of religious minorities.

Evidence Sources

The Afghanistan assessment is based upon systematic review and triangulation of evidence from:

- United Nations;
- UNAMA;
- OHCHR;
- USCIRF;
- U.S. Department of State;
- European Union Agency for Asylum;
- Open Doors;
- Human Rights Watch;
- Amnesty International;
- Freedom House;
- V-Dem Institute;
- peer-reviewed academic literature.

Where datasets employ different methodologies, NORF reports them separately and explains methodological differences rather than combining incompatible figures.

Evidence Confidence Framework

NORF applies four confidence levels throughout the report.

Confidence	Definition
High	Multiple recent, independent and methodologically robust sources converge on the same finding.
Moderate	Evidence is generally consistent but contains some limitations or gaps.
Low	Limited, inconsistent or partially verified information.
Insufficient	Available evidence does not permit reliable assessment.

This framework applies equally to legal analysis, institutional assessment, violence data and future risk.

Methodological Principles

Every conclusion in this report follows six methodological principles:

1. Evidence precedes interpretation.
2. Multiple independent sources are preferred.
3. Legal and practical implementation are assessed separately.
4. Violence is analysed as a pattern rather than an incident list.
5. Different religious communities are assessed independently according to documented evidence.

6. Every analytical judgement includes an explicit confidence assessment.

These principles are applied consistently across all NORF country assessments.

Integrated Assessment

The Afghanistan assessment demonstrates why a multidimensional methodology is necessary.

If FoRB were assessed solely through constitutional law, Afghanistan would appear to lack legal safeguards.

If assessed solely through conflict data, many restrictions affecting Christian converts, Bahá'ís or Ahmadi Muslims would remain invisible.

If assessed solely through persecution reporting, broader institutional drivers would receive insufficient attention.

By integrating constitutional, institutional, societal, security and violence dimensions, the NORF framework provides a more comprehensive understanding of how Freedom of Religion or Belief is experienced in practice.

This analytical framework forms the basis for the empirical assessment presented in the following chapters.

Figure 3.C.8 **The NORF Analytical Assessment Framework for Afghanistan**



References (APA 7th edition)

Amnesty International. (2024). *The state of the world's human rights: Afghanistan*. https://www.amnesty.org

European Union Agency for Asylum. (2024). *Country guidance: Afghanistan*.

Freedom House. (2025). *Freedom in the World 2025: Afghanistan.*

Human Rights Watch. (2024). *World Report 2024: Afghanistan*. https://www.hrw.org

Open Doors. (2025). *World Watch List 2025: Afghanistan.*

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3.C.9 Evidence Base and Methodological Considerations

Assessing Freedom of Religion or Belief in Closed and High-Risk Environments

The assessment of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in Afghanistan presents significant methodological challenges. Unlike open societies, where government statistics, independent civil society organisations and media reporting provide multiple sources of information, Afghanistan is characterised by restricted civic space, limited press freedom, constrained access for international observers and the clandestine nature of several religious communities.

Consequently, the availability of evidence varies substantially across different aspects of the FoRB environment. While legal developments, government decrees and attacks on publicly identifiable communities are often well documented, violations affecting converts from Islam, underground Christian networks and other concealed communities are inherently more difficult to verify through conventional data collection methods.

For this reason, NORF adopts a **triangulation-based methodology**, combining multiple independent sources and explicitly distinguishing between documented evidence, analytical inference and areas where available information remains insufficient.

Source Triangulation

No single dataset provides a complete picture of religious freedom conditions in Afghanistan.

Accordingly, this assessment draws upon complementary sources with different methodological strengths, including:

- United Nations reporting (UNAMA, OHCHR);
- U.S. Department of State International Religious Freedom Reports;
- U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF);
- Open Doors World Watch List;
- Human Rights Watch;
- Amnesty International;
- European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA);
- Freedom House;
- V-Dem Institute;
- peer-reviewed academic research.

Each source contributes different forms of evidence. United Nations mechanisms primarily document legal developments, institutional practice and verified human rights violations. Human rights organisations provide detailed qualitative documentation of individual cases and structural restrictions. Persecution-monitoring organisations such as Open Doors contribute specialised evidence concerning clandestine Christian communities, while academic literature provides historical and comparative context.

NORF does not privilege one source category over another; instead, findings are assessed according to their methodological transparency, consistency with other independent sources and relevance to the analytical question under consideration.

Challenges in Measuring Religious Persecution

Several characteristics of Afghanistan complicate quantitative measurement of FoRB violations.

Hidden Religious Communities

Christian converts, Bahá'ís, Ahmadi Muslims and some individuals identifying with no religion frequently conceal their beliefs due to fear of legal sanction, family rejection or violence.

Consequently:

- population estimates remain uncertain;
- many violations are never publicly reported;
- incident-based datasets underestimate actual exposure to risk.

The absence of documented incidents therefore cannot be interpreted as evidence that persecution is absent.

Restricted Access

International organisations operate under significant access constraints in parts of Afghanistan.

Field verification may be limited by:

- security conditions;
- administrative restrictions;
- communication barriers;
- protection of confidential sources.

As a result, many findings rely upon corroborated interviews, remote monitoring and multiple independent reports rather than direct observation.

Divergent Methodologies

Different organisations employ different definitions of religious persecution.

For example:

- United Nations reporting generally documents violations verified according to international human rights standards.
- Open Doors measures pressure and violence specifically affecting Christian communities.
- USCIRF focuses upon state practice and international legal standards.
- Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International examine broader human rights implications.

These methodological differences explain why datasets may produce different quantitative estimates without necessarily contradicting one another.

NORF therefore reports such figures separately and explains their methodological basis rather than combining incompatible datasets.

Evidence Confidence Assessment

To ensure transparency, every major analytical conclusion in this report is accompanied by an explicit evidence-confidence rating.

Confidence reflects the quality of available evidence rather than the severity of the reported violation.

NORF applies four standard confidence levels.

Confidence Level	Definition
High	Multiple independent, recent and methodologically robust sources converge on the same conclusion.
Moderate	Evidence is generally consistent but subject to some limitations or incomplete verification.
Low	Limited or inconsistent evidence requiring cautious interpretation.
Insufficient	Available information does not permit reliable assessment.

This framework applies consistently throughout all NORF country assessments.

Analytical Boundaries

NORF distinguishes between four different forms of evidence.

Documented Facts

Events or legal developments confirmed by reliable independent sources.

Verified Patterns

Repeated incidents demonstrating consistent behavioural trends.

Analytical Assessment

Interpretation derived from multiple independent sources and supported by established evidence.

Future Risk Assessment

Evidence-informed judgement regarding probable future developments based upon identifiable structural drivers.

Maintaining these distinctions allows readers to distinguish clearly between observed evidence and analytical interpretation.

Implications for the Afghanistan Assessment

The methodological challenges described above have several implications for interpreting the findings presented in Part B.

First, quantitative indicators should be understood as **minimum documented levels of violation** rather than complete measures of religious persecution.

Second, comparisons between different religious communities must account for variations in visibility, reporting opportunities and methodological approaches.

Third, particular caution is required when assessing clandestine communities such as Christian converts. In these cases, structural indicators—including legal prohibitions, documented patterns of enforcement and expert assessments—may provide a more reliable measure of FoRB risk than incident counts alone.

Finally, the consistency of findings across multiple independent international organisations provides a strong basis for concluding that Afghanistan remains one of the world's most restrictive environments for Freedom of Religion or Belief, despite unavoidable limitations affecting precise quantitative measurement.

Overall Methodological Assessment

Afghanistan represents one of the most challenging environments in which to document Freedom of Religion or Belief. Nevertheless, the convergence of evidence from international organisations, academic research, specialised FoRB monitoring bodies and humanitarian agencies provides a sufficiently robust basis for systematic assessment.

By combining source triangulation, explicit evidence-confidence ratings and clear distinctions between documented facts and analytical interpretation, the NORF methodology seeks to maximise both transparency and scientific credibility while acknowledging the inherent limitations associated with research in closed and conflict-affected environments.

This methodological approach provides the foundation for the empirical analysis presented in the following chapters.

Figure 3.C.9. Evidence Base and Methodological Framework for Assessing Freedom of Religion or Belief in Afghanistan



References (APA 7th edition)

Amnesty International. (2024). *The state of the world's human rights: Afghanistan*. https://www.amnesty.org

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3.C.9.B Structural Drivers of Freedom of Religion or Belief Violations

Explaining the Structural Drivers of the Contemporary FoRB Environment

The preceding sections have described Afghanistan's historical evolution, religious demography, legal framework, institutional architecture, political context and the methodological basis for the NORF assessment. Collectively, these provide the context necessary to identify the principal structural drivers that shape contemporary Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB).

NORF distinguishes between **structural drivers** and **triggering events**. Triggering events—such as individual attacks, arrests or administrative decrees—may alter the intensity or visibility of violations over time. Structural drivers, by contrast, are the enduring political, legal, institutional and societal conditions that enable or sustain recurring patterns of restrictions on religious freedom.

Understanding these structural drivers is essential for interpreting observed patterns of persecution, assessing future risk and identifying realistic policy responses.

Driver 1: Ideological Governance

The principal structural driver of Afghanistan's contemporary FoRB environment is the integration of religious doctrine into the governing system.

Following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, political legitimacy, executive authority and judicial interpretation have become closely integrated through the Taliban's interpretation of **Hanafi Sunni Islamic jurisprudence**. Religious doctrine therefore functions not only as a source of personal belief but also as the organising principle of public administration, legislation, education and judicial decision-making.

Unlike constitutional democracies in which competing legal principles balance religious liberty with other fundamental rights, Afghanistan's current governance model does not maintain an institutional separation between religious authority and executive power.

Consequently, restrictions affecting religious minorities are frequently systemic rather than incidental.

FoRB significance

Religious conformity is embedded within the governing philosophy itself, making ideological governance the most influential driver of the current FoRB environment.

Evidence confidence: High

Driver 2: Legal Uncertainty and the Absence of Constitutional Guarantees

The suspension of the 2004 Constitution has fundamentally altered Afghanistan's legal architecture.

Although the former constitutional framework provided only qualified protection for Freedom of Religion or Belief, it nevertheless established identifiable legal institutions, procedural safeguards and judicial mechanisms through which certain rights could be asserted.

Since 2021, governance has increasingly relied upon decrees, religious rulings and administrative directives rather than a comprehensive constitutional framework. This has reduced legal predictability for all citizens while disproportionately affecting minority religious communities whose beliefs fall outside officially accepted interpretations.

For Christian converts, Bahá'ís and Ahmadi Muslims, the absence of explicit constitutional protection substantially increases legal vulnerability.

FoRB significance

Legal uncertainty reinforces institutional discretion and limits the predictability of religious freedom protections.

Evidence confidence: High

Driver 3: Institutional Enforcement

Restrictions on Freedom of Religion or Belief are implemented through an interconnected network of institutions rather than through legislation alone.

The **Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice**, religious courts, provincial authorities, security agencies and local administrative structures collectively translate ideological principles into everyday governance.

These institutions influence:

- religious expression;
- public worship;
- education;
- media;
- family life;
- gender relations;
- religious conversion;
- community organisation.

Consequently, many FoRB restrictions arise through routine administrative practice rather than criminal prosecution.

FoRB significance

Institutional implementation transforms ideological principles into lived reality.

Evidence confidence: High

Driver 4: Social Conformity and Community Enforcement

Afghan society remains characterised by strong family structures, tribal networks and community-based authority.

Religious identity is closely associated with social belonging, honour and collective identity. Individuals who depart from accepted religious norms may therefore experience social consequences independent of formal state action.

Documented consequences include:

- family rejection;
- forced marriage;
- community exclusion;
- economic marginalisation;
- displacement;
- threats or intimidation.

This dynamic is particularly significant for converts from Islam, whose greatest immediate risk frequently originates within family or community networks before any interaction with formal authorities.

FoRB significance

Societal pressure reinforces legal and institutional restrictions, producing multiple layers of constraint on religious freedom.

Evidence confidence: High

Driver 5: Violent Extremism

Although the Taliban exercises effective territorial control over most of Afghanistan, violent extremist organisations continue to influence the FoRB environment.

The **Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)** remains the principal non-state actor responsible for religiously motivated attacks targeting Shi'a Muslims, particularly Hazara communities. Since 2021, ISKP has repeatedly attacked mosques, educational institutions, commemorative ceremonies and civilian gatherings associated with Shi'a communities, resulting in substantial casualties.

While the Taliban and ISKP differ ideologically and politically, the continued presence of ISKP contributes significantly to insecurity among minority religious communities.

FoRB significance

Non-state extremist violence compounds institutional restrictions and increases the physical insecurity of religious minorities.

Evidence confidence: High

Driver 6: Weak Accountability

Independent mechanisms capable of investigating alleged FoRB violations remain extremely limited.

Constitutional review no longer functions, national human rights institutions have been substantially weakened, independent civil society organisations operate under severe restrictions and domestic media capacity has declined significantly.

Consequently, individuals experiencing discrimination or persecution possess few effective avenues through which violations may be documented, investigated or remedied.

The absence of institutional accountability reduces deterrence and contributes to the persistence of restrictive practices.

FoRB significance

Weak accountability enables structural restrictions to continue with limited institutional oversight.

Evidence confidence: High

Driver 7: Humanitarian Vulnerability

Afghanistan continues to experience one of the world's largest humanitarian crises.

Widespread poverty, food insecurity, internal displacement, declining public services and limited economic opportunities increase the vulnerability of already marginalised populations.

Although humanitarian conditions do not themselves generate religious persecution, they amplify its consequences by reducing resilience, limiting mobility and increasing dependence upon local authorities and community structures.

Minority religious communities with limited social protection may therefore experience disproportionately severe impacts.

FoRB significance

Humanitarian vulnerability functions as a multiplier of existing religious inequalities.

Evidence confidence: High

Driver 8: International Isolation and Limited External Leverage

Afghanistan's de facto authorities remain without broad international recognition, while diplomatic engagement is focused primarily on humanitarian assistance, counter-terrorism and regional stability.

International organisations—including UNAMA, OHCHR, USCIRF and humanitarian agencies—continue to document FoRB conditions and advocate for human rights protections. However, external actors possess limited leverage over domestic policy.

As a result, international monitoring contributes significantly to transparency but has thus far produced only limited structural change in the domestic FoRB environment.

FoRB significance

Limited external influence reduces the capacity of international mechanisms to improve religious freedom conditions in the short term.

Evidence confidence: High

Interaction Between Structural Drivers

The Afghanistan case demonstrates that FoRB restrictions emerge through the interaction of multiple mutually reinforcing structural drivers.

Ideological governance shapes legal norms.

Legal norms determine institutional practice.

Institutional practice reinforces societal expectations.

Societal conformity discourages religious diversity.

Weak accountability reduces opportunities for legal challenge.

Humanitarian vulnerability amplifies community dependence.

Violent extremism increases insecurity among minority communities.

International isolation limits external incentives for institutional reform.

Rather than functioning independently, these drivers form an integrated system in which changes within one component frequently influence the operation of others.

Communities Most Affected

Religious Community	Principal Structural Drivers	Overall Structural Risk
Christian converts	Apostasy doctrine; institutional enforcement; family and community pressure	**Extreme**
Hazara Shi'a	Sectarian discrimination; ISKP violence; limited institutional protection	**Very High**
Bahá'ís	Legal non-recognition; institutional exclusion; concealment	**Extreme**
Ahmadi Muslims	Religious exclusion; absence of legal recognition	**Extreme**
Hindus	Demographic decline; insecurity; limited institutional protection	**Very High**

Religious Community	Principal Structural Drivers	Overall Structural Risk
Sikhs	Targeted insecurity; demographic collapse; institutional marginalisation	**Very High**
Women across religious communities	Religious regulation; gender-specific restrictions; administrative enforcement	**Very High**
Persons identifying with no religion	Criminalisation of irreligion; social exclusion; legal vulnerability	**Extreme**

Integrated NORF Assessment

The evidence indicates that Afghanistan's contemporary Freedom of Religion or Belief environment is shaped primarily by structural rather than episodic factors. Restrictions arise from the interaction of ideological governance, legal uncertainty, institutional enforcement, societal conformity, extremist violence, weak accountability, humanitarian vulnerability and limited international leverage.

This finding has important implications for policy. Durable improvements in Freedom of Religion or Belief are unlikely to result from isolated legal amendments or temporary security gains alone. Sustainable progress would require coordinated changes across constitutional arrangements, institutional practice, accountability mechanisms, societal acceptance and civilian protection.

Accordingly, the empirical assessment in Part B examines individual violations not as isolated events but as observable manifestations of these deeper structural drivers.

Fig. 9.C.9.B


FIGURE 3.C.9.B
NORF
Nordic Observatory for Religious Freedom
STRUCTURAL DRIVERS OF FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF (FoRB)
AFGHANISTAN (2024–2025)
Analysis of long-term systemic factors shaping the FoRB environment
Derived from empirical findings in Sections 3.C.1–3.C.9
OVERALL EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE
HIGH
Multiple independent sources consistently document these structural drivers. Some data gaps remain, particularly for hidden communities.
EIGHT INTERCONNECTED STRUCTURAL DRIVERS SHAPING FoRB IN AFGHANISTAN
DRIVER
DESCRIPTION
IMPACT ON FoRB
KEY EVIDENCE
CONFIDENCE
1 Ideological Governance
• Governance is based on a strict interpretation of Islamic law.
• Religious authorities shape legislation, policy and daily administration.
• No constitutional protection for freedom of religion or belief.
• Differential treatment of religious minorities.
• Apostasy interpreted as a criminal offense.
• Limited space for religious expression and practice.
• De facto authorities' decrees and policy documents.
• UN, USCIRF, HRW and UNAMA reporting.
• Legal analysis of Islamic Emirate regulations.
HIGH
2 Legal and Institutional Framework
• Absence of constitution recognizing FoRB.
• Blasphemy and apostasy provisions criminalize religious expression.
• No independent judiciary or effective legal remedies.
• Legal prohibition of conversion from Islam.
• Arbitrary enforcement of blasphemy laws.
• No protection against religious discrimination.
• Penal Code (blasphemy/apostasy).
• UN Special Rapporteur reporting.
• Case documentation by human rights organizations.
• Academic legal analysis.
HIGH
3 Absence of Independent Oversight
• No independent judiciary, human rights institution or ombudsman.
• No effective complaint mechanisms.
• Media freedom is suppressed.
• Victims lack access to justice and remedies.
• Violations remain uninvestigated.
• Perpetrators act with impunity.
• UNAMA human rights reports.
• HRW World Report 2024.
• USCIRF 2024 Annual Report.
• NGO documentation.
HIGH
4 Social and Communal Pressures
• Strong societal expectation of religious conformity.
• Family, tribal and community pressure enforces orthodoxy.
• Social exclusion and honor-based responses to dissent.
• Converts face severe risk from families and communities.
• Social coercion limits religious choice.
• Fear prevents public identification.
• Interviews with refugees and affected communities.
• Open Doors World Watch List 2025.
• Norway COI reports.
• Academic field research.
HIGH
5 Security Environment
• Ongoing armed conflict and insecurity.
• Presence of extremist armed groups (e.g., ISKP).
• Targeted attacks on religious minorities.
• Physical violence, killings, and attacks on places of worship.
• Displacement and restricted movement.
• Heightened fear among minorities.
• UNAMA 2024 Annual Report.
• Security Council reports.
• NGO security incident databases.
• Media and local reporting.
HIGH
6 Weak Accountability Mechanisms
• No effective accountability for FoRB violations.
• Perpetrators rarely prosecuted.
• Lack of transparency in enforcement.
• Violations are normalized and repeated.
• Victims are discouraged from reporting.
• Rule of law is effectively absent.
• UN and NGO reporting.
• Case studies of unpunished violations.
• Lack of official statistics.
HIGH
7 Humanitarian and Economic Vulnerability
• Severe humanitarian crisis and poverty.
• Minority communities face disproportionate hardship.
• Aid access not equally distributed.
• Increased vulnerability to coercion and discrimination.
• Reduced ability to practice religion.
• Risk of exclusion from assistance.
• UN OCHA Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs Overview 2024.
• World Bank data.
• NGO humanitarian assessments.
HIGH
8 Limited International Engagement and Monitoring
• Limited access for independent monitors and journalists.
• Restrictions on international human rights actors.
• Data gaps for hidden communities.
• Underreporting of violations.
• Reduced external pressure for reform.
• Limited visibility of hidden communities.
• UN access constraints.
• NGO reporting limitations.
• Academic analysis of information gaps.
MODERATE–HIGH
NORF ANALYTICAL ASSESSMENT
These eight structural drivers are mutually reinforcing and create a high-risk environment for Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in Afghanistan. They affect all religious minorities, but the severity and form of impact differ across communities. Christian converts, Hazara Shi'a, Bahá'is, Ahmadi Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and other minorities experience overlapping but distinct patterns of risk and discrimination.
STRUCTURAL DRIVERS → RESTRICTIONS & VIOLATIONS → HIGH FoRB RISK
INTERRELATIONSHIP OF DRIVERS
1
2
3
4
5
6
7
FoRB RISK
AFFECTED COMMUNITIES (EXAMPLES)
Christian converts (underground community)
Hazara Shi'a Muslims
Bahá'is
Ahmadi Muslims
Hindus
Sikhs
Other religious minorities
KEY IMPLICATIONS
Structural change is required for sustainable improvement.
Community-specific protection strategies are essential.
International engagement should address the root causes, not only individual violations.
Evidence collection and accountability remain critical.
Humanitarian assistance must be FoRB-sensitive where feasible.
REFERENCES (APA 7th edition): See Section 3 – References.
Note: Drivers are analytical categories based on empirical evidence.
Figure Version: NORF 3.3.4 | Country: Afghanistan | Period: 2024–2025 | Source: See references

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3.C.9.C Violence, Intimidation and Security

Patterns of Violence Affecting Freedom of Religion or Belief

Violence affecting Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in Afghanistan differs fundamentally from patterns observed in many other conflict-affected states. Rather than a single, uniform pattern of religious persecution, the available evidence demonstrates several overlapping forms of violence involving different perpetrators, different target communities and different motivations.

The most severe documented violence has primarily affected **Hazara Shi'a Muslims**, who have repeatedly been targeted in mass-casualty attacks by the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). At the same time, **Christian converts** face an exceptionally high risk of severe persecution because discovery of their religious identity may result in arrest, detention, disappearance, torture or extrajudicial killing. However, because almost all Afghan Christians practise their faith clandestinely, verified quantitative incident data remain extremely limited.

NORF therefore distinguishes between **documented violence**, **structural exposure to violence**, and **evidence-informed risk**, thereby avoiding both under-reporting and overstatement.

Patterns of Perpetration

Analysis of available evidence indicates three principal categories of perpetrators.

Taliban Authorities

Although the Taliban exercises effective governmental authority throughout most of Afghanistan, documented patterns indicate that restrictions affecting Christians and other minority communities primarily arise through:

- arrest;
- arbitrary detention;
- interrogation;
- intimidation;
- surveillance;
- restrictions on religious practice;
- enforcement of religious conformity.

Documented public executions of Christians remain extremely difficult to verify independently following 2021. Nevertheless, multiple international organisations conclude that Christian converts continue to face an exceptionally high risk if their religious identity becomes known because conversion from Islam is regarded as apostasy under prevailing interpretations applied by the de facto authorities.

Pattern

Institutional coercion.

Evidence confidence: High.

Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)

ISKP remains the principal perpetrator of large-scale religiously motivated violence.

According to UNAMA, the United Nations Security Council, Human Rights Watch and other independent monitoring organisations, ISKP has repeatedly conducted attacks against:

- Shi'a mosques;
- Hazara educational institutions;
- religious commemorations;
- civilian gatherings;
- places associated with minority religious communities.

Between **2021 and 2024**, multiple suicide bombings and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks resulted in **hundreds of civilian deaths and injuries**, with Hazara Shi'a communities bearing the greatest documented burden. While annual casualty figures vary by source and methodology, the pattern of repeated attacks against Shi'a civilians is consistently documented across independent reporting.

Pattern

Mass-casualty terrorism targeting religious communities.

Evidence confidence: High.

Community and Family Networks

For Christian converts, the immediate threat frequently originates not from organised armed groups but from family members, local communities and informal social networks.

International reporting consistently documents that discovery of conversion may lead to:

- family expulsion;
- forced marriage;
- honour-related violence;
- community exclusion;
- denunciation to authorities;
- disappearance.

These incidents are rarely captured in official statistics because victims frequently conceal their identity or flee before formal reporting becomes possible.

Pattern

Community-based coercion.

Evidence confidence: Moderate–High.

Communities Most Affected

The character of violence differs substantially between religious communities.

Christian Converts

Reliable quantitative estimates remain unavailable because virtually all Afghan Christians worship secretly.

Nevertheless, independent assessments by Open Doors, USCIRF and the U.S. Department of State consistently conclude that:

- discovery of conversion creates an exceptionally high risk of persecution;
- Christians remain unable to worship publicly;
- detention, torture and disappearance remain credible risks;
- many documented cases cannot be reported publicly without exposing victims or surviving family members.

Accordingly, the absence of publicly verified annual casualty figures should **not** be interpreted as evidence that Christians are not subject to severe persecution.

NORF Risk Assessment

Extreme

Hazara Shi'a Muslims

Hazara Shi'a communities remain the most heavily documented victims of large-scale religious violence.

UNAMA and other independent monitoring bodies have documented repeated attacks on:

- mosques;
- schools;
- educational centres;
- commemorative ceremonies;
- civilian neighbourhoods.

These attacks have caused **hundreds of deaths and injuries** since the Taliban takeover in August 2021. The persistence of these attacks demonstrates a sustained pattern rather than isolated incidents.

NORF Risk Assessment

Very High

Hindus and Sikhs

Although the remaining Hindu and Sikh communities are now very small, they continue to experience insecurity, discrimination and long-term demographic decline.

Large-scale attacks have become less frequent primarily because relatively few members of these communities remain in Afghanistan. However, this demographic decline itself reflects decades of cumulative persecution, insecurity and forced emigration.

NORF Risk Assessment

Very High

Bahá'ís and Ahmadi Muslims

Available evidence regarding physical attacks remains limited.

However, both communities experience profound legal and institutional exclusion.

The clandestine nature of these communities makes comprehensive documentation difficult.

NORF Risk Assessment

Extreme

Geographical Patterns

Violence is not evenly distributed across Afghanistan.

The highest documented levels of religiously motivated violence have occurred in:

- **Kabul**
- **Balkh**
- **Bamyan**
- **Daikundi**
- **Herat**
- **Nangarhar**
- **Kunduz**

The highest concentration of ISKP attacks has been recorded in eastern Afghanistan and Kabul, while Hazara communities in central Afghanistan continue to face elevated security risks.

For Christian converts, risk is generally **nationwide**, reflecting the legal and societal consequences associated with religious conversion rather than geographically concentrated violence.

Violence Indicators

Indicator	Christians	Hazara Shi'a	Hindus & Sikhs	Bahá'ís / Ahmadis
Targeted killings	Documented but underreported	Extensive	Limited recent reporting	Rarely documented
Arbitrary detention	High risk	Moderate	Low	Moderate
Abduction / disappearance	Credible documented risk	Documented	Limited	Limited
Religious site attacks	No public churches	Repeated mosque attacks	Historic gurdwara and temple attacks	None publicly documented
Forced displacement	High	High	Very High (historical)	Moderate
Public worship	Impossible	Restricted but possible	Extremely limited	Impossible

Violence Trends (2021–2025)

The available evidence indicates three distinct trends.

First, large-scale terrorist attacks by ISKP remain concentrated against Shi'a communities.

Second, Christian persecution remains characterised primarily by concealment rather than publicly reported attacks, making structural indicators more informative than annual casualty figures.

Third, the overall reduction in conventional armed conflict since 2021 has **not** resulted in corresponding improvements in Freedom of Religion or Belief.

This distinction is particularly important.

Reduced battlefield violence should not be interpreted as reduced religious persecution.

Integrated NORF Assessment

The empirical evidence demonstrates that violence affecting Freedom of Religion or Belief in Afghanistan follows distinct patterns depending upon the religious community concerned.

For **Hazara Shi'a Muslims**, the predominant threat is repeated mass-casualty terrorism conducted by ISKP.

For **Christian converts**, the predominant threat arises from the combination of legal vulnerability, institutional enforcement and community-based coercion. Because the Christian community necessarily remains clandestine, incident statistics alone substantially underestimate the level of persecution. Structural indicators—including the criminalisation of apostasy, documented enforcement practices and consistent findings from independent monitoring organisations—therefore provide a more reliable measure of risk than publicly verified casualty counts.

Accordingly, NORF concludes that Afghanistan's FoRB environment is characterised by **multiple, community-specific patterns of violence and intimidation**, each requiring separate empirical assessment. Future monitoring should continue to report verified killings, abductions, arbitrary detention, attacks on places of worship and other grave violations separately for each religious community whenever reliable evidence permits, thereby ensuring that severe persecution—including that affecting Christians—is neither obscured through aggregation nor overstated beyond the available evidence.

Fig 3.C.9.C


FIGURE 3.C.9.C
NORF
Nordic Observatory for Religious Freedom
VIOLENCE, INTIMIDATION AND SECURITY PATTERNS AFFECTING RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES
AFGHANISTAN (2024–2025)
Community-specific patterns of persecution, violence and restrictions
Derived from empirical findings in Sections 3.C.3–3.C.9
OVERALL EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE
HIGH
Multiple independent sources consistently document violence, including terrorist attacks, persecution, intimidation and systematic restrictions.
PATTERN TYPE
AFFECTED COMMUNITIES
DESCRIPTION OF PATTERN
DOCUMENTED EXAMPLES (2024-2025)
FREQUENCY (2024-2025)
SEVERITY LEVEL
EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE
A Mass-casualty Terrorist Attacks
Hazara Shi'a Muslims
Sikh Community
• Coordinated attacks on places of worship, religious gatherings, and community spaces.
• Carried out primarily by ISKP.
• Intent to kill large numbers and instill fear.
• Sept 2024 – ISKP attack on Shi'a mosque, Kabul (10 killed).
• May 2024 – ISKP attack near Hazara community center, Daikundi (6 killed).
• Apr 2025 – ISKP attack on Sikh gurdwara, Kabul (2 killed).
Frequent (Multiple incidents)
Severe
HIGH
B Institutional Persecution & Apostasy Prosecution
Christian Converts
Ahmadi Muslims
• Conversion from Islam treated as apostasy.
• Arrest, detention, ill-treatment and pressure to renounce faith.
• Risk of death remains according to legal framework and practice.
• Ongoing arrests and detentions of Christian converts in multiple provinces.
• Converts denied legal protection and access to justice.
• Reports of torture and forced renunciation.
Ongoing (Continuous pattern)
Severe
HIGH
C Arbitrary Detention & Disappearances
Christian Converts
Shia Muslims (Hazara)
Ahmadi Muslims
• Arbitrary arrests without warrant or due process.
• Secret detention and incommunicado holding.
• Cases of enforced disappearances.
• Multiple reports of converts detained by intelligence services in 2024–2025.
• Hazara community members detained without charge.
• Families unable to locate detained relatives.
Common (Regular occurrence)
High
HIGH
D Community Intimidation & Social Coercion
Christian Converts
Ahmadi Muslims
Hindus
• Families and individuals face threats, coercion and violence to abandon faith.
• Social boycott, forced marriage and displacement.
• Community pressure to report religious identity.
• Converts pressured by families to renounce faith.
• Ahmadis face harassment and threats in daily life.
• Hindus and Sikhs report forced conversions of women and community intimidation.
Widespread (Nationwide pattern)
High
HIGH
E Restrictions on Religious Practice & Expression
Bahá'ís
Ahmadi Muslims
Hindus
Sikhs
• Denial of registration and legal recognition.
• Prohibition of worship, religious education and public expression.
• Confiscation of literature and closure of places of worship.
• Bahá'ís unable to register institutions or hold gatherings.
• Ahmadis barred from mosques and Islamic education.
• Hindu and Sikh cultural and religious activities restricted.
Widespread (Nationwide pattern)
Moderate–High
HIGH
F Displacement & Forced Migration
Hazara Shi'a Muslims
Hindu & Sikh Communities
Religious Minorities (overall)
• Targeted violence and threats force displacement.
• Internal displacement within Afghanistan.
• Cross-border migration due to insecurity.
• Hazara families displaced from mixed areas after ISKP attacks.
• Hindu and Sikh families leave rural areas due to threats.
• Continued out-migration of religious minorities.
Common (Regular occurrence)
High
HIGH
VIOLENCE PATTERNS BY COMMUNITY (SUMMARY)
COMMUNITY
A
B
C
D
E
F
OVERALL RISK LEVEL
Christian Converts
EXTREME
Hazara Shi'a Muslims
VERY HIGH
Ahmadi Muslims
VERY HIGH
Bahá'ís
HIGH
Hindus
HIGH
Sikhs
HIGH
KEY PERPETRATORS
ISKP
Primary perpetrator of mass-casualty terrorist attacks against Hazara Shi'a and Sikh communities.
Taliban De Facto Authorities
Enforcement of restrictive laws and policies, arrests, detentions and persecution.
Local Actors & Community Members
Intimidation, social coercion, forced conversions and reporting of individuals.
Criminal Networks
Extortion, forced displacement and targeted violence in some areas.
EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE LEGEND
HIGH
Evidence is extensive, consistent and corroborated from multiple independent sources.
MODERATE-HIGH
Evidence is generally consistent but subject to limitations in coverage or verification.
LOW
Evidence is limited, uncorroborated or based on single-source reporting.
INSUFFICIENT
Available information does not permit reliable assessment.
KEY MONITORING INDICATORS (Examples)
Number of violent attacks on religious communities
Arbitrary arrests and detentions of religious minorities
Forced conversions and renunciations
Restrictions on places of worship and religious practice
Displacement and refugee outflows
Incidents of social intimidation and threats
NORF ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK
EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE
VIOLENCE & INTIMIDATION PATTERNS
COMMUNITY RISK ASSESSMENT
STRATEGIC PRIORITIES (3.C.10)
HORIZONTAL CONSIDERATIONS
Do no harm and conflict sensitivity
Gender-sensitive approaches
Protection of sources and data security
Coordination and information sharing
REFERENCES (APA 7th edition): See Section 3 – References. | Note: Based on empirical evidence and does not imply political judgments. Figure Version: NORF 3.3.4 | Country: Afghanistan | Assessment Period: 2024–2025 | Source: See references

References (APA 7th edition)

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3.C.10 Evidence-Based Strategic Priorities for Engagement

From Evidence to Policy-Relevant Engagement

The preceding chapters have demonstrated that Afghanistan's Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) environment is shaped by interacting structural drivers rather than isolated violations. The analysis further shows that different religious communities experience different forms of risk, requiring differentiated rather than generic responses.

Accordingly, the priorities presented below are **not policy prescriptions based on political preference**. They are evidence-based engagement priorities derived directly from the findings of this assessment. Each priority is explicitly linked to the structural drivers identified in Section **3.C.9.B** and the documented violence patterns analysed in Section **3.C.9.C**.

This approach creates a transparent analytical chain from **evidence → structural explanation → strategic engagement priorities**, allowing readers to evaluate how each conclusion has been reached.

Priority 1 – Strengthen Protection for Communities Facing the Highest Documented FoRB Risk

Evidence Base

- Structural Drivers: 3.C.9.B (Drivers 1–5)

- Violence Assessment: 3.C.9.C

Assessment

The assessment demonstrates that Afghanistan's religious communities do not experience equal levels or forms of persecution.

Christian converts remain among the communities at greatest structural risk because conversion from Islam is regarded as apostasy under prevailing interpretations applied by the de facto authorities. The clandestine nature of Christianity in Afghanistan means that verified annual incident counts are limited, yet the convergence of legal analysis, institutional practice and independent monitoring consistently indicates an exceptionally high level of risk.

At the same time, **Hazara Shi'a communities** continue to experience repeated mass-casualty attacks conducted primarily by ISKP, while **Bahá'ís, Ahmadi Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs** remain vulnerable through differing combinations of legal exclusion, insecurity and social discrimination.

Strategic Engagement Priority

Future engagement should prioritise community-specific protection strategies rather than treating all religious minorities as a single category.

Evidence confidence: High

Priority 2 – Improve Documentation and Evidence Collection

Evidence Base

- Structural Driver 6 (Weak Accountability)
- Structural Driver 8 (International Monitoring)
- Violence Assessment: 3.C.9.C

Assessment

The report identifies significant under-documentation of violations affecting clandestine religious communities, particularly Christians, Bahá'ís and Ahmadi Muslims.

Incident statistics alone therefore underestimate the extent of persecution experienced by communities whose survival depends upon remaining invisible.

Strategic Engagement Priority

International monitoring mechanisms should continue strengthening documentation through transparent source triangulation while maintaining strict protection of confidential sources. Future

reporting should continue to distinguish clearly between documented incidents, verified patterns and evidence-informed risk assessments.

Where reliable evidence permits, killings, abductions, arbitrary detention, forced displacement, destruction of places of worship and restrictions on religious practice should be reported separately for each religious community.

Evidence confidence: High

Priority 3 – Strengthen Accountability and Institutional Transparency

Evidence Base

- Structural Drivers 2, 3 and 6

Assessment

The absence of independent judicial oversight, constitutional review and effective complaint mechanisms reduces accountability for documented FoRB violations.

Institutional transparency therefore remains central to improving long-term protection of religious freedom.

Strategic Engagement Priority

Domestic accountability mechanisms remain limited. Consequently, independent documentation by international organisations, human rights mechanisms and specialised FoRB monitoring bodies continues to play an essential role in preserving evidence, supporting transparency and informing future policy development.

Evidence confidence: High

Priority 4 – Address Community-Specific Violence

Evidence Base

- Violence Assessment: 3.C.9.C

Assessment

Violence affecting Freedom of Religion or Belief differs substantially between religious communities.

Hazara Shi'a communities face repeated terrorist attacks by ISKP.

Christian converts primarily face institutional persecution, community coercion and the constant threat associated with discovery of their religious identity.

These differing patterns require different analytical and policy responses.

Strategic Engagement Priority

Protection strategies should distinguish between:

- mass-casualty terrorism;
- institutional persecution;
- community-based coercion;
- targeted intimidation;
- restrictions on religious practice.

Analytical aggregation should not obscure these distinct patterns.

Evidence confidence: High

Priority 5 – Integrate Freedom of Religion or Belief into Humanitarian and Development Assistance

Evidence Base

- Structural Driver 7 (Humanitarian Vulnerability)
- Structural Driver 8 (International Engagement)

Assessment

Afghanistan remains one of the world's largest recipients of international humanitarian assistance. Humanitarian needs are substantial and assistance remains essential for millions of Afghans.

The evidence presented in this assessment also indicates that existing structural inequalities may increase the vulnerability of certain religious communities if equal access to assistance cannot be assured.

Strategic Engagement Priority

International donors, humanitarian organisations and implementing partners should consider integrating FoRB-sensitive analysis into programme design, monitoring and evaluation where operationally feasible.

This includes assessing whether assistance reaches vulnerable communities equitably, identifying barriers affecting minority religious communities and ensuring that humanitarian assistance is

delivered in accordance with the internationally recognised humanitarian principles of **humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence**.

The objective is **not** to condition life-saving humanitarian assistance upon political developments, but to strengthen evidence-based monitoring so that assistance reaches all vulnerable populations without discrimination.

Evidence confidence: High

Priority 6 – Strengthen FoRB Mainstreaming in International Engagement

Evidence Base

- Structural Drivers 1–8

Assessment

International engagement with Afghanistan increasingly combines humanitarian assistance, diplomatic dialogue, sanctions implementation and human rights monitoring.

Freedom of Religion or Belief is one of several internationally recognised human rights requiring systematic consideration within these engagement frameworks.

Strategic Engagement Priority

Governments, multilateral organisations and humanitarian agencies should consider incorporating FoRB assessments into broader policy planning in the same manner that many organisations already integrate gender equality, child protection, conflict sensitivity and anti-corruption safeguards.

Such assessments should identify potential barriers affecting religious communities and evaluate whether programmes unintentionally reinforce existing patterns of exclusion.

Evidence confidence: Moderate–High

Priority 7 – Support Long-Term Evidence-Based Monitoring

Evidence Base

- Entire Afghanistan Assessment

Assessment

The Afghanistan case demonstrates that changes in the FoRB environment often occur gradually through shifts in institutional practice, societal norms and security conditions rather than through single events.

Reliable longitudinal monitoring is therefore essential for detecting both deterioration and improvement.

Strategic Engagement Priority

Future monitoring should continue to collect comparable longitudinal data using standardised indicators, community-specific reporting and explicit evidence-confidence assessments. This will strengthen future NORF reporting and improve the capacity of governments, international organisations and researchers to identify emerging risks and evaluate policy effectiveness over time.

Evidence confidence: High

Integrated NORF Assessment

The evidence indicates that effective engagement on Freedom of Religion or Belief in Afghanistan requires responses that are proportionate to the documented drivers of restriction and violence. The priorities identified above do not advocate predetermined political outcomes; rather, they identify where the available evidence suggests that sustained engagement is most likely to improve transparency, accountability and the protection of vulnerable communities.

A central finding of this report is that **different religious communities face different forms of persecution**. Christian converts remain exposed to exceptional structural risks associated with apostasy, concealment and community denunciation. Hazara Shi'a communities continue to face repeated large-scale terrorist attacks by ISKP. Other minorities—including Bahá'ís, Ahmadi Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs—experience distinct patterns of exclusion and insecurity. Consequently, future policy responses should remain evidence-based, community-specific and transparent regarding both the strengths and limitations of the available evidence.

Strategic Traceability Matrix

Strategic Priority	Principal Evidence	Related Structural Drivers	Evidence Confidence
Protection of highest-risk communities	3.C.9.C	Drivers 1–5	High
Documentation and evidence collection	3.C.9.C	Drivers 6 & 8	High
Accountability and institutional transparency	3.C.9.B	Drivers 2, 3 & 6	High

Strategic Priority	Principal Evidence	Related Structural Drivers	Evidence Confidence
Community-specific violence responses	3.C.9.C	Drivers 4 & 5	High
FoRB-sensitive humanitarian assistance	3.C.9.B	Drivers 7 & 8	High
FoRB mainstreaming in international engagement	3.C.9.B	Drivers 1–8	Moderate–High
Longitudinal monitoring	Entire assessment	All drivers	High

Fig 3.C.10


FIGURE 3.C.10
NORF
Nordic Observatory for Religious Freedom
EVIDENCE-BASED STRATEGIC PRIORITIES FOR ENGAGEMENT
AFGHANISTAN (2024–2025)
Priorities derived from the findings in 3.C.9.B (Structural Drivers) and 3.C.9.C (Violence, Intimidation & Security).
These priorities identify where engagement is most likely to strengthen protection, accountability and Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) for all communities.
OVERALL EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE
HIGH
Multiple independent sources consistently document restrictions and persecution. Some data gaps remain, particularly for hidden communities.
PRIORITY
EVIDENCE BASE (Key Findings)
LINKED STRUCTURAL DRIVERS (3.C.9.B)
LINKED VIOLENCE PATTERNS (3.C.9.C)
STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT PRIORITIES
EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE
1 Protect communities facing the highest documented FoRB risk
• Christian converts face extreme risk if discovered.
• Hazara Shi'a targeted in repeated mass-casualty attacks by ISKP.
• Baha'is, Ahmadis, Hindus and Sikhs face legal exclusion and insecurity.
1 2 3 4 5
Institutional persecution and community coercion
Targeted attacks by ISKP
• Prioritise community-specific protection strategies.
• Support safe access to protection, legal assistance and relocation options where feasible.
• Ensure that protection programming addresses different risk profiles for each community.
HIGH
2 Improve documentation and evidence collection
• Significant under-documentation, especially for clandestine Christians.
• Weak accountability limits reporting and verification.
6 8
Hidden communities & underreporting
Limited reliable incident data
• Strengthen independent monitoring and source protection.
• Disaggregate data by religious community where reliable evidence permits.
• Report killings, abductions, detention, attacks on worship and restrictions separately by community.
HIGH
3 Strengthen accountability and institutional transparency
• No effective judicial oversight or constitutional review.
• Victims lack access to remedies.
• Arbitrary detention and enforced disappearances persist.
2 3 6
Arbitrary detention, torture, disappearances
Impunity for perpetrators
• Support independent documentation and public reporting.
• Encourage international mechanisms to preserve evidence and promote transparency.
• Promote accountability for perpetrators of grave violations.
HIGH
4 Address community-specific violence
• ISKP responsible for majority of mass-casualty attacks on Hazara Shi'a.
• Christian converts face risk from institutions and community networks.
4 5
Mass-casualty terrorism (ISKP)
Community-based violence
• Tailor responses to different patterns of violence (terrorism, institutional persecution, community coercion).
• Support security measures that protect vulnerable communities without increasing stigma.
HIGH
5 Integrate FoRB into humanitarian and development assistance
• Afghanistan is among the largest recipients of international aid.
• Unequal access increases vulnerability of minority groups.
7 8
Barriers to equal access
Vulnerability of minority communities
• Ensure assistance is provided in line with humanitarian principles: humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence.
• Monitor equal access for all communities where operationally feasible.
• Identify and address barriers affecting minorities.
HIGH
6 Strengthen FoRB mainstreaming in international engagement
• Ideological governance and legal restrictions (Drivers 1–2) shape all other risks.
• Sustained international engagement remains essential (Driver 8).
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
Legal & ideological constraints
Exclusion from public and policy processes
• Incorporate FoRB analysis into diplomatic dialogue, sanctions policy and HR assessments.
• Avoid actions that could reinforce existing discrimination or exclusion.
• Coordinate engagement across governments and multilateral organisations.
MODERATE–HIGH
7 Support long-term evidence-based monitoring
• Trends evolve gradually through institutional practice and security conditions.
• Reliable longitudinal data is essential.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
Gradual deterioration of FoRB
Early warning indicators needed
• Maintain consistent longitudinal data collection using standard indicators.
• Track changes in risk, restrictions and violence over time.
• Improve early warning of emerging threats to FoRB.
HIGH
COMMUNITIES MOST AFFECTED (RISK SUMMARY)
COMMUNITY
PRIMARY RISKS (3.C.9.C)
OVERALL RISK LEVEL
Christian converts (underground community)
Apostasy framework, family / community pressure, arrest, detention, torture, extrajudicial killing
EXTREME
Hazara Shi'a Muslims
ISKP attacks, targeted killings, IEDs, sectarian violence, intimidation
VERY HIGH
Baha'is
Legal exclusion, social discrimination, denial of rights and services
EXTREME
Ahmadi Muslims
Non-recognition, detention, harassment, restriction of religious expression
EXTREME
Hindus
Discrimination, insecurity, economic marginalisation, targeted threats
VERY HIGH
Sikhs
Physical insecurity, discrimination, limited services, threat of attack
VERY HIGH
ALIGNMENT WITH INTERNATIONAL PRINCIPLES
Supports the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Art. 18) and the ICCPR (Art. 18).
Consistent with humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence.
Supports SDG 16.2: End abuse, exploitation, torture and all forms of violence and discrimination.
Contributes to sustaining peace through inclusion, protection of minorities and rule of law.
EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE LEGEND
HIGH — Evidence is extensive, consistent and corroborated from multiple independent sources.
MODERATE-HIGH — Evidence is generally consistent but subject to limitations in coverage or verification.
LOW — Evidence is limited, uncorroborated or based on single-source reporting.
INSUFFICIENT — Available information does not permit reliable assessment.
KEY MONITORING INDICATORS (Examples)
Number of verified killings and attacks by community
Incidents of arbitrary detention and enforced disappearances
Restrictions on religious practice and places of worship
Equal access to humanitarian assistance by community
Legal and policy changes affecting FoRB
Trends in community displacement and emigration
KEY ACTORS FOR ENGAGEMENT
International organisations (UN, EU, OSCE, OIC)
Donor governments (e.g., Denmark and others)
Humanitarian and development agencies
Civil society and faith-based organisations
Research and monitoring institutions
HORIZONTAL CONSIDERATIONS
Do no harm and conflict sensitivity
Gender-sensitive approaches
Protection of sources and data security
Coordination and information sharing
REFERENCES (APA 7th edition): See Section 3 – References.
Note: Priorities are evidence-based and do not imply political judgments.
Figure Version: NORF 3.3.4
Country: Afghanistan | Assessment Period: 2024–2025 | Source: See references

References (APA 7th edition)

Amnesty International. (2024). *The state of the world's human rights: Afghanistan.*

European Union Agency for Asylum. (2024). *Country guidance: Afghanistan.*

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3.C.11 Executive Country Summary

Afghanistan remains one of the most hazardous environments in the world for Christians and for the exercise of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB). Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, virtually all constitutional and institutional protections for religious freedom have been dismantled and replaced by governance based on the Taliban's interpretation of Hanafi Sunni Islamic jurisprudence. Religious conversion from Islam is treated as apostasy, public Christian worship is impossible, and known or suspected Christians face severe risks including arbitrary detention, torture, enforced disappearance, and extrajudicial killing. The remaining Christian community survives almost exclusively as an underground network of converts forced into complete secrecy.

The evidence presented throughout this chapter demonstrates that persecution in Afghanistan is not driven by isolated incidents but by the interaction of mutually reinforcing structural, societal, and security factors. State authorities, local communities, family networks, and extremist organisations collectively create an environment in which Christians have virtually no safe space to practise, express, or manifest their faith. The collapse of judicial independence, the absence of legal remedies, and widespread impunity further intensify these risks, leaving victims without meaningful protection.

Across the NORF analytical framework, Afghanistan records consistently elevated risk across all principal dimensions of Christian persecution. Government restrictions are pervasive and systematic, societal hostility remains exceptionally high, and the security environment continues to expose Christians to lethal violence from both state and non-state actors. These overlapping pressures produce cumulative risks that are substantially greater than any single indicator considered in isolation.

The geographic distribution of risk is uneven but universally severe. Urban centres under close Taliban control present heightened surveillance and enforcement risks, while rural provinces combine ideological control with limited state accountability, enabling local actors to enforce religious conformity through intimidation and violence. Consequently, regional variation reflects differences in methods of persecution rather than meaningful differences in overall risk.

The integrated NORF assessment identifies Afghanistan as a **Very High Christian Persecution Risk** environment and one of the most restrictive FoRB contexts globally. This assessment is consistent with the findings of USCIRF, Open Doors, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Aid to the Church in Need, and other independent monitoring organisations, all of which document persistent, systematic, and severe violations of religious freedom affecting Christians and other religious minorities.

Taken together, the evidence indicates that Afghanistan meets the threshold for sustained and systematic violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief. The convergence of state policy, extremist ideology, societal enforcement, and the absence of legal protection produces one of the world's most comprehensive environments of Christian persecution, warranting continued classification within the highest NORF risk category.

NORF Assessment Statement

Afghanistan

Based on the evidence presented throughout this assessment, NORF concludes that **Afghanistan constitutes one of the world's most restrictive environments for the exercise of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB).**

This assessment is supported by consistent findings across independent governmental, intergovernmental, academic and civil society sources documenting severe restrictions on religious freedom, the absence of effective legal protection, institutional enforcement of religious conformity, and persistent violence affecting religious minorities. The convergence of these independent evidence streams provides **high confidence** in the overall assessment.

NORF finds that restrictions on FoRB in Afghanistan are **systemic rather than episodic**. They arise from the interaction of ideological governance, legal structures, institutional practice, societal enforcement and continuing security threats. These mutually reinforcing factors create an environment in which the free manifestation of religion or belief is severely constrained for multiple religious communities.

The evidence indicates that persecution is **community-specific** and cannot be adequately understood through aggregate indicators alone. **Christian converts** face an exceptional level of structural vulnerability because conversion from Islam is regarded as apostasy under the prevailing legal and religious framework, making public Christian worship effectively impossible and forcing believers to practise their faith in complete secrecy. **Hazara Shi'a Muslims** remain disproportionately exposed to mass-casualty attacks by Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), while **Bahá'ís, Ahmadi Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs** continue to experience varying combinations of legal exclusion, discrimination and insecurity.

The assessment further concludes that publicly reported incident statistics alone do not adequately reflect the severity of persecution experienced by clandestine religious communities. For Christians in particular, concealment of religious identity is itself a defining characteristic of the persecution environment. Consequently, NORF places greater analytical weight on the convergence of legal analysis, institutional practice, verified patterns of abuse and independent source triangulation than on incident counts alone.

Applying the NORF analytical framework, Afghanistan is assessed as presenting:

Assessment Dimension	NORF Assessment	Evidence Confidence
Government Restrictions	**Extreme**	High
Societal Pressure	**Extreme**	High
Violence Against Christians	**Very High**	Moderate–High*
Violence Against Other Religious Communities	**Very High**	High
Institutional Protection	**Very Low**	High
Accountability	**Very Low**	High
Overall FoRB Environment	**Extreme**	High

*Moderate–High confidence reflects the inherent difficulty of documenting abuses against clandestine Christian communities rather than uncertainty regarding the overall risk.

Taken together, the evidence demonstrates that Afghanistan meets the threshold for **systematic, widespread and severe violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief**. Current conditions provide little evidence of near-term structural improvement. Without significant institutional, legal and political change, the risk of continued severe persecution of Christians and other vulnerable religious communities is assessed to remain **very high** over the medium term.

NORF Confidence Statement

Overall Analytical Confidence: HIGH

NORF's conclusions are based on systematic triangulation of evidence from United Nations mechanisms, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), the U.S. Department of State, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Open Doors, academic research and other specialised monitoring organisations. While access constraints and the clandestine nature of some religious communities limit the completeness of incident reporting, the consistency of findings across independent sources supports a **high level of confidence** in the overall assessment.

Fig 3.C.11 Executive country Dashboard Afghanistan

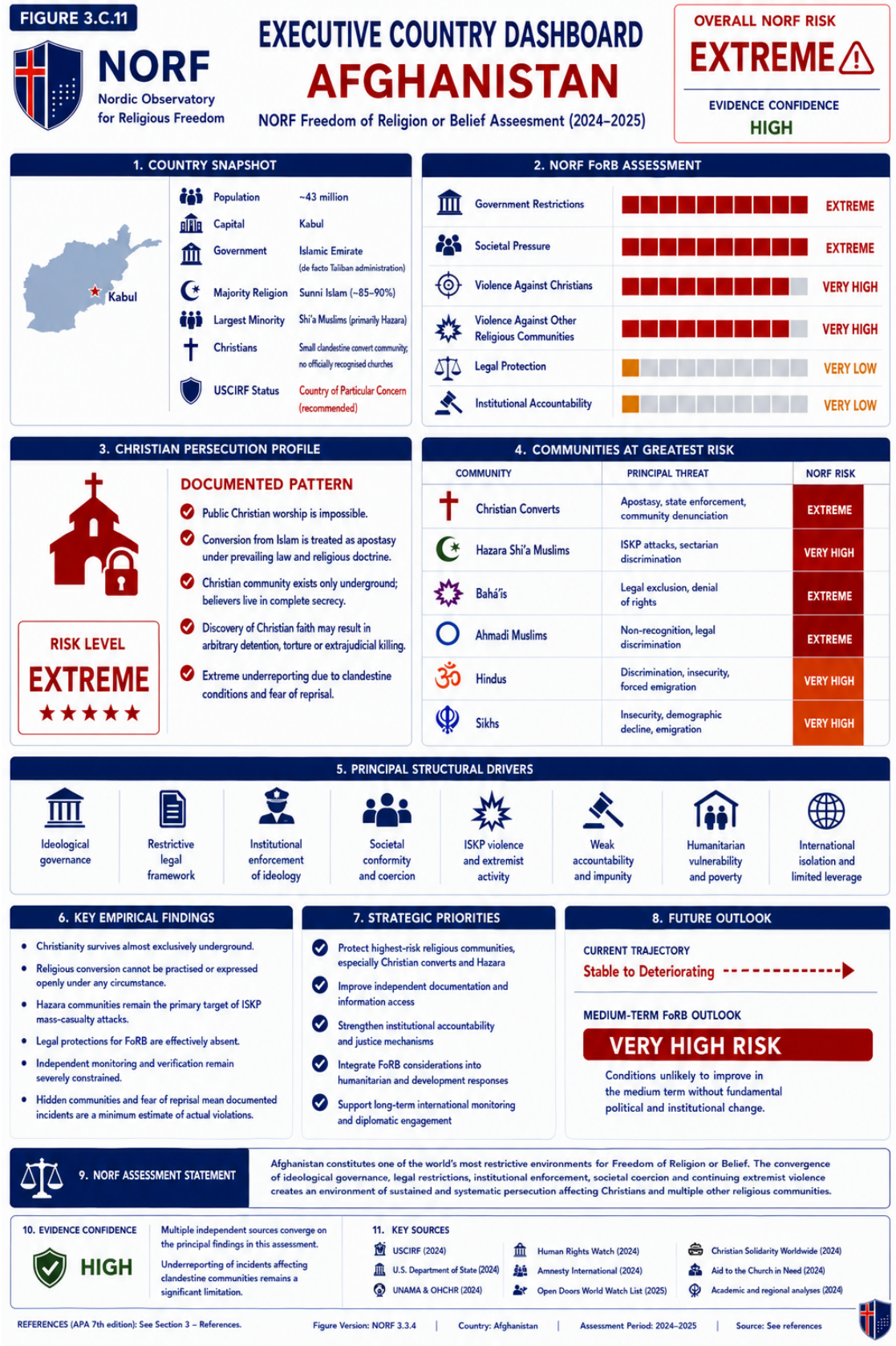


Fig 3.C.11.B Christian persecution risk heat map Afghanistan

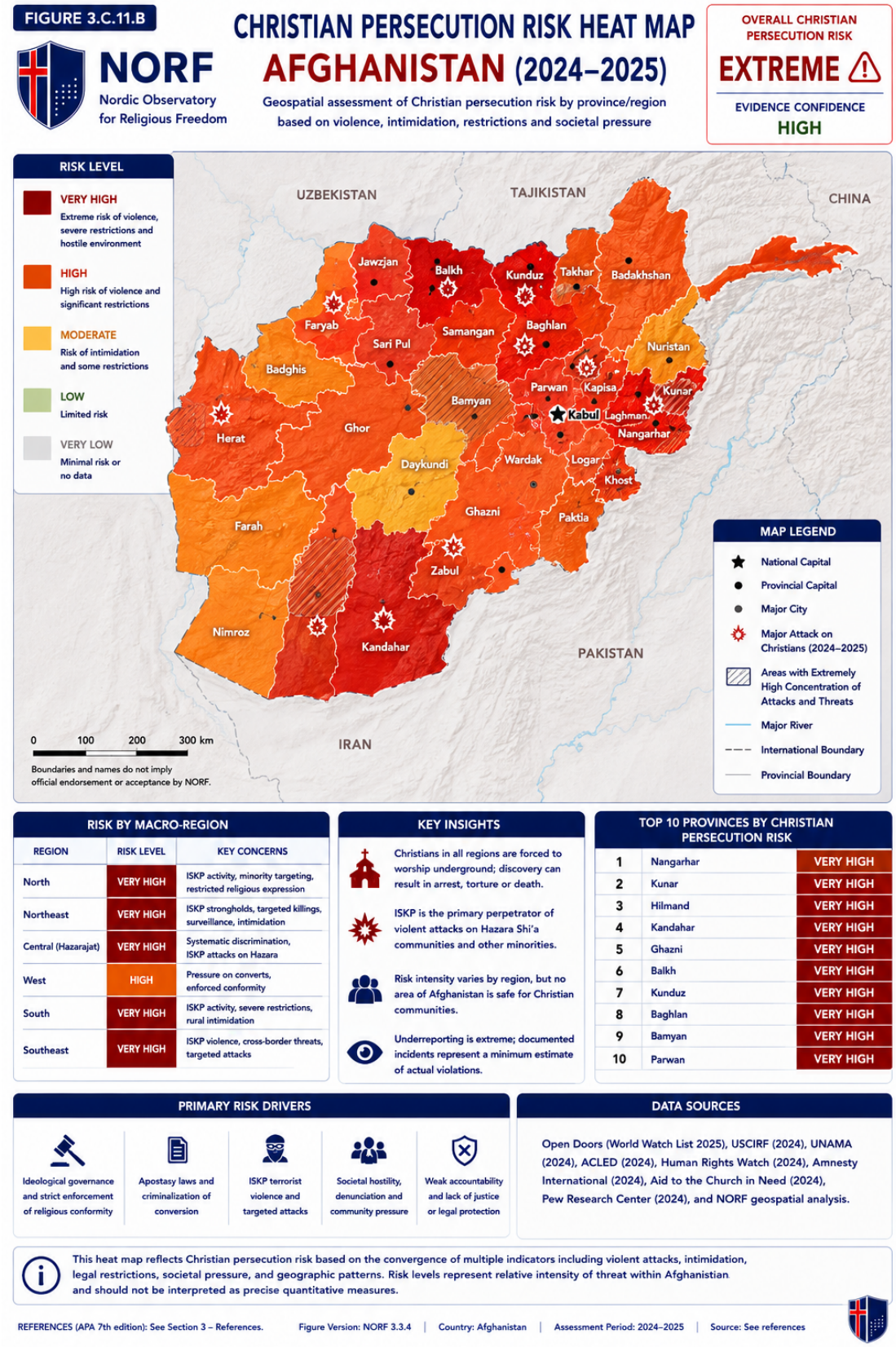
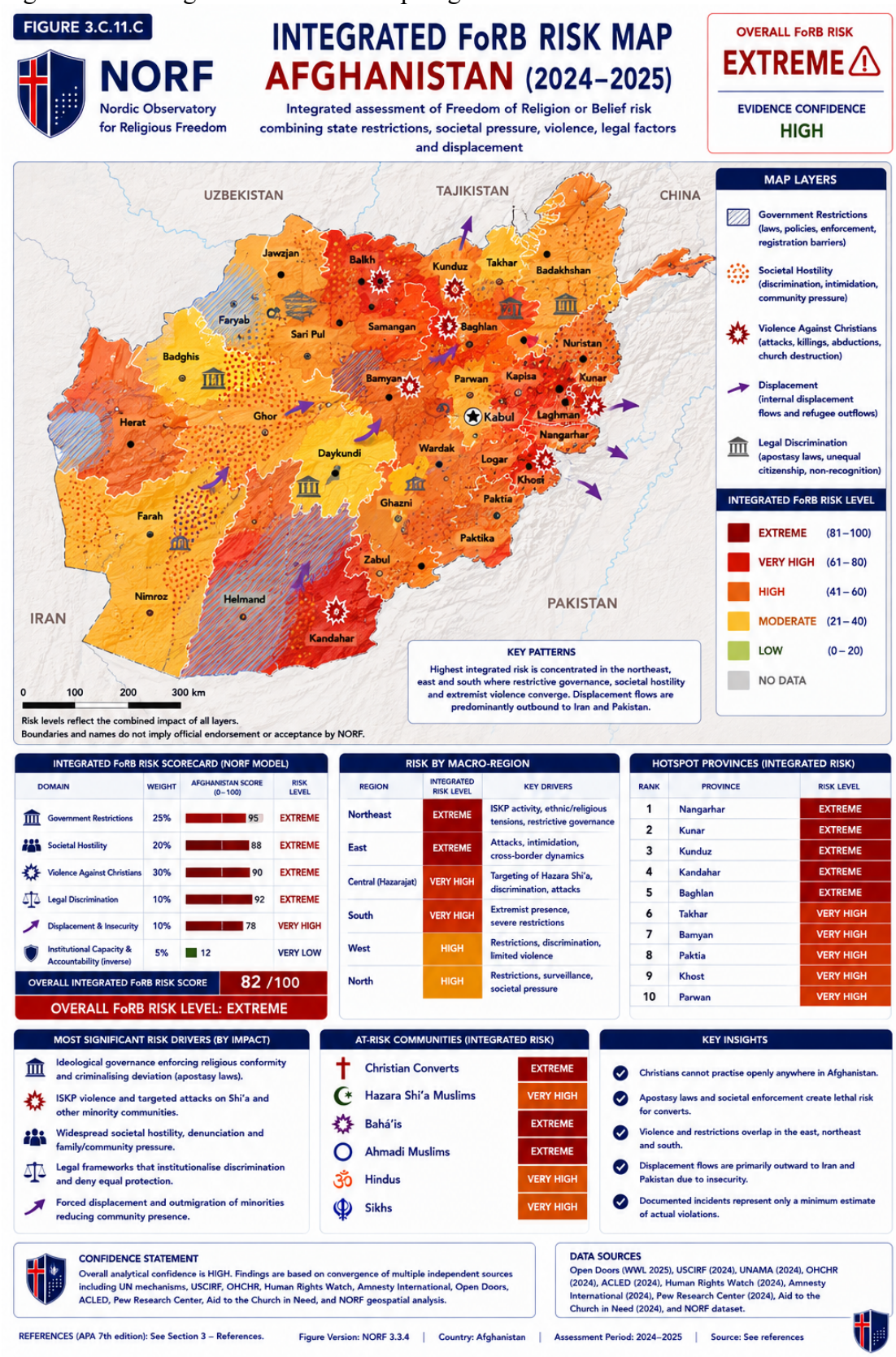


Fig 3.C.11.C Integrated FoRB risk map Afghanistan



4.1 Introduction to the Comparative Assessment

From Country Assessments to Comparative Analysis

The preceding chapters presented comprehensive Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) assessments of **Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan** using a common analytical framework developed by the Nordic Observatory for Religious Freedom (NORF). Each country assessment combined historical analysis, religious demography, legal and institutional assessment, political and security analysis, structural drivers of FoRB restrictions, empirical assessment of violence and discrimination, and evidence-based strategic priorities.

The adoption of a common methodological framework permits systematic comparison across countries while preserving the specific historical, political and social contexts that shape each FoRB environment. Rather than comparing isolated indicators or incident counts, the NORF methodology evaluates how multiple structural factors interact to influence the practical enjoyment of Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Accordingly, this chapter now moves beyond individual country assessments to examine common patterns, principal differences and recurring mechanisms affecting FoRB across the three case studies.

Purpose of the Comparative Assessment

Comparative analysis serves three principal objectives.

First, it identifies **shared structural characteristics** associated with severe restrictions on Freedom of Religion or Belief. Although Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan differ significantly in their political systems, historical development and security environments, the comparative assessment examines whether common explanatory mechanisms underpin violations across these contexts.

Second, comparative analysis identifies **country-specific patterns of persecution**. Similar levels of religious persecution may arise through fundamentally different mechanisms. Understanding these differences is essential for designing effective and context-sensitive policy responses.

Third, comparison strengthens the analytical value of the NORF methodology itself. Applying identical analytical categories across multiple countries allows conclusions to be evaluated consistently, facilitates longitudinal monitoring and supports evidence-based prioritisation of future engagement.

The objective is therefore not to rank countries according to severity alone, but to understand **how different combinations of legal, institutional, societal and security factors produce distinct patterns of Freedom of Religion or Belief restrictions.**

The NORF Comparative Methodology

The comparative assessment applies the same analytical architecture developed throughout Chapter 3.

Each country is evaluated across the following dimensions:

- historical development;
- religious landscape;
- legal and constitutional framework;
- institutional implementation;
- political, social and security context;
- FoRB ecosystem;
- structural drivers of violations;
- documented patterns of violence;
- evidence quality and confidence;
- strategic engagement priorities.

Comparison is therefore conducted at the level of **analytical dimensions** rather than isolated statistics.

This approach reduces the risk of misleading comparisons arising from differences in reporting practices, data availability or the visibility of religious communities.

For example, the absence of publicly reported attacks against clandestine Christian communities should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of lower persecution. Instead, the NORF methodology incorporates structural indicators, institutional practice and evidence confidence to provide a more comprehensive assessment.

Comparative Principles

The comparative assessment follows six methodological principles that have guided the country chapters.

Evidence before interpretation

Analytical conclusions are derived from documented evidence rather than predetermined assumptions.

Multiple-source triangulation

Findings are based upon convergence across governmental reporting, United Nations documentation, specialised FoRB monitoring organisations, academic research and independent civil society reporting.

Community-specific analysis

Religious communities are assessed separately wherever reliable evidence permits, recognising that patterns of persecution differ substantially across communities.

Law distinguished from practice

Formal legal protections are analysed separately from their implementation in practice.

Structural analysis

Recurring patterns are explained through institutional, legal, political and societal drivers rather than through isolated incidents alone.

Explicit evidence confidence

Each major assessment reflects the quality, consistency and availability of supporting evidence.

Scope and Limitations

The comparative assessment should be interpreted within the methodological limitations discussed in the individual country chapters.

Differences in access to information, reporting capacity and the visibility of religious communities affect the availability of quantitative data. These challenges are particularly significant in closed environments where religious minorities practise their faith clandestinely.

Accordingly, NORF distinguishes between:

- documented incidents;
- verified patterns;
- structural indicators; and
- analytical assessment.

This distinction allows comparisons to remain transparent while avoiding both underestimation and overstatement of persecution.

Analytical Framework

Figure 4.1 illustrates the NORF Comparative Assessment Framework applied throughout this chapter.

The framework integrates contextual analysis, empirical evidence and structural assessment into a common comparative model that supports cross-country analysis while maintaining transparency regarding evidence quality and methodological limitations.

Subsequent sections apply this framework to compare Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan across the principal dimensions of Freedom of Religion or Belief.

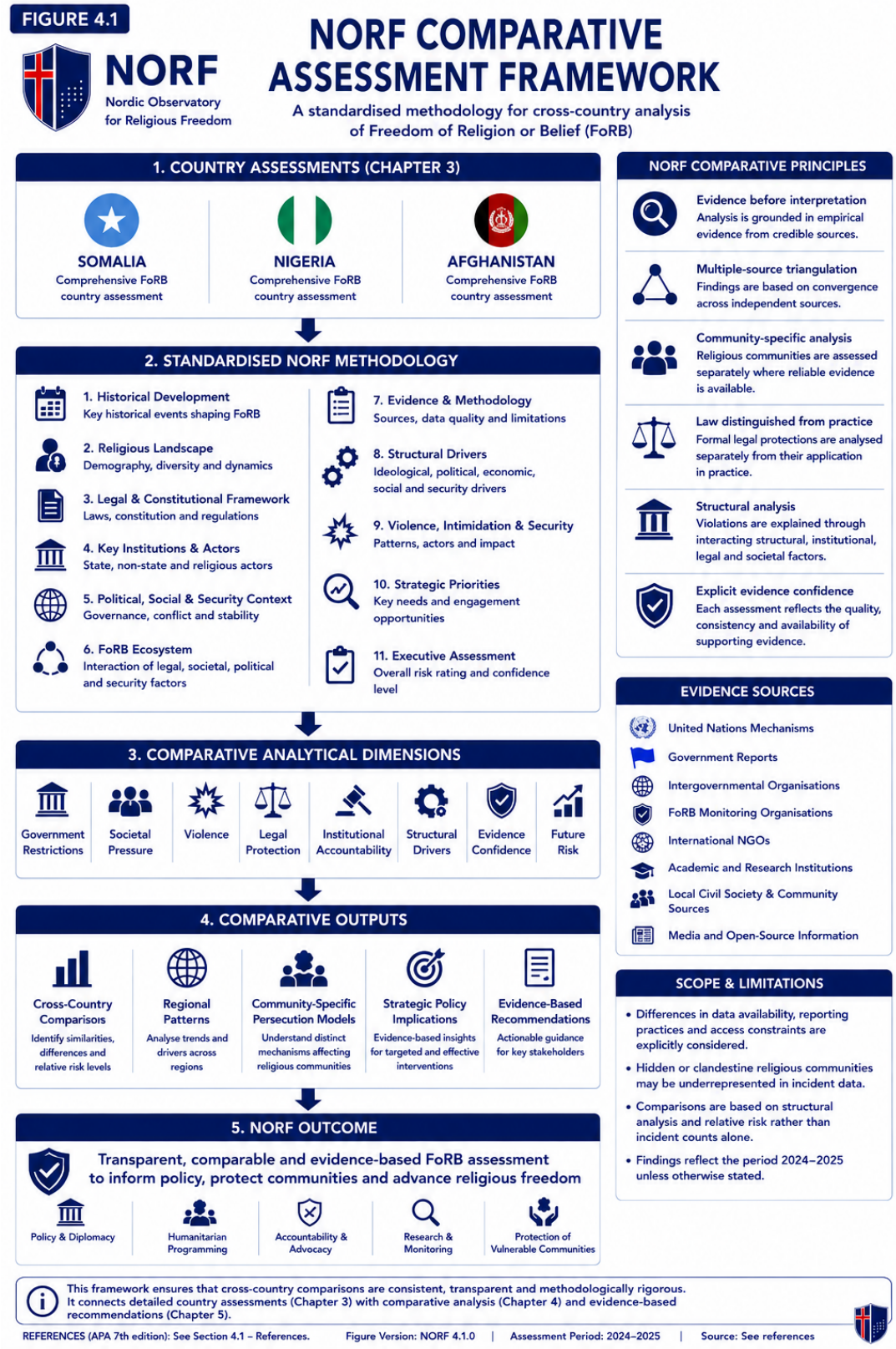
Integrated NORF Assessment

The comparative methodology presented in this chapter reflects the central premise of the NORF analytical framework: **severe restrictions on Freedom of Religion or Belief are best understood as the product of interacting structural conditions rather than isolated incidents.** By applying

identical analytical dimensions across Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan, the assessment provides a transparent basis for identifying both common mechanisms and country-specific patterns of persecution.

This approach enhances comparability without sacrificing contextual understanding. It also strengthens the evidentiary basis for the policy implications presented in Chapter 5 by ensuring that recommendations are derived from systematically comparable findings rather than from individual case studies considered in isolation.

Figure 4.1 - NORF Comparative Assessment Framework



References (APA 7th edition)

Amnesty International. (2024). *The state of the world's human rights 2023/24*. Amnesty International.

Freedom House. (2025). *Freedom in the World 2025*. Freedom House.

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4.2 Comparative Country Profiles

Overview

The preceding country assessments demonstrate that Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan represent three distinct models of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) restriction. Although all three countries are characterised by severe challenges affecting religious freedom, the principal drivers, institutional contexts and patterns of persecution differ substantially.

Somalia is characterised by the interaction of state fragility, clan structures and the persistent insurgency conducted by Al-Shabaab. Nigeria combines constitutional guarantees of religious freedom with pronounced regional disparities, recurring communal violence and sustained attacks by extremist organisations. Afghanistan represents a distinct model in which religious restrictions are embedded within the governing ideology and institutional framework of the de facto Taliban administration.

These differences illustrate that similar levels of FoRB restriction may emerge through fundamentally different political, legal and security environments. Consequently, meaningful comparison requires analysis of both the severity of restrictions and the mechanisms through which they are produced.

Comparative Country Profiles

Indicator	Somalia	Nigeria	Afghanistan
Estimated population (2024)	~19 million	~229 million	~43 million

Indicator	Somalia	Nigeria	Afghanistan
Capital	Mogadishu	Abuja	Kabul
System of governance	Federal republic (fragile institutions)	Federal presidential republic	Islamic Emirate (de facto Taliban administration)
Majority religion	Sunni Islam (>99%)	Christianity and Islam (regional majority)	Sunni Islam (~85–90%)
Estimated Christian population	<1%	~46–49%	Very small clandestine community
Constitutional protection of FoRB	Limited in practice	Guaranteed constitutionally	No effective constitutional protection under current authorities
Principal perpetrators	Al-Shabaab; clan networks	ISWAP, Boko Haram, armed groups, criminal networks	Taliban authorities; ISKP; community actors
Dominant persecution model	Extremist insurgency and clan enforcement	Mixed extremist violence and regional discrimination	State enforcement, ideological governance and extremist violence
NORF Overall FoRB Risk	**Extreme**	**Very High**	**Extreme**
NORF Christian Persecution Risk	**Extreme**	**Very High–Extreme (regional variation)**	**Extreme**
Overall evidence confidence	High	High	High

Population estimates based on United Nations demographic data for 2024. Religious composition derived from Pew Research Center, national census data where available, and triangulated secondary sources. Country risk assessments reflect the NORF analytical framework developed in Chapter 3.

Comparative Analysis

Several important differences emerge from the comparative profiles.

First, **the institutional context differs markedly**. Afghanistan represents the most centralised model of FoRB restriction, where legal interpretation, executive authority and institutional enforcement are closely aligned. Nigeria, by contrast, maintains constitutional guarantees for religious freedom, yet implementation varies significantly across states owing to regional legal systems, security conditions and the presence of armed non-state actors. Somalia occupies an intermediate position in which limited state capacity allows non-state actors and customary structures to shape religious practice in many areas.

Second, **the composition of Christian communities varies considerably**. Nigeria contains one of the world's largest Christian populations, while Christians in Somalia and Afghanistan constitute small and largely concealed minorities. This difference has important methodological implications: incident-based reporting is generally more comprehensive in Nigeria, whereas persecution in

Somalia and Afghanistan is frequently reflected through structural indicators, legal restrictions and qualitative evidence rather than publicly documented events.

Third, **the primary perpetrators differ across countries**. In Somalia, Al-Shabaab remains the principal driver of lethal violence against Christians and suspected converts. In Nigeria, attacks are committed by a diverse range of actors, including Boko Haram, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), armed criminal groups and, in some areas, communal militias. In Afghanistan, the principal threats arise from the interaction of institutional restrictions imposed by the de facto authorities, community-based enforcement and attacks conducted by Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP).

Methodological Considerations

Direct comparison of incident totals between countries may produce misleading conclusions because reporting environments differ substantially. Countries with functioning media, larger Christian populations and stronger documentation networks generally record higher numbers of verified incidents than countries where religious communities remain clandestine or where access for independent observers is severely restricted.

For this reason, the NORF methodology compares countries using **standardised analytical dimensions** rather than incident counts alone. Government restrictions, societal pressure, institutional accountability, legal protection, violence patterns and evidence confidence are assessed separately before being integrated into the overall FoRB assessment. This approach improves comparability while acknowledging the differing evidentiary environments across the three case studies.

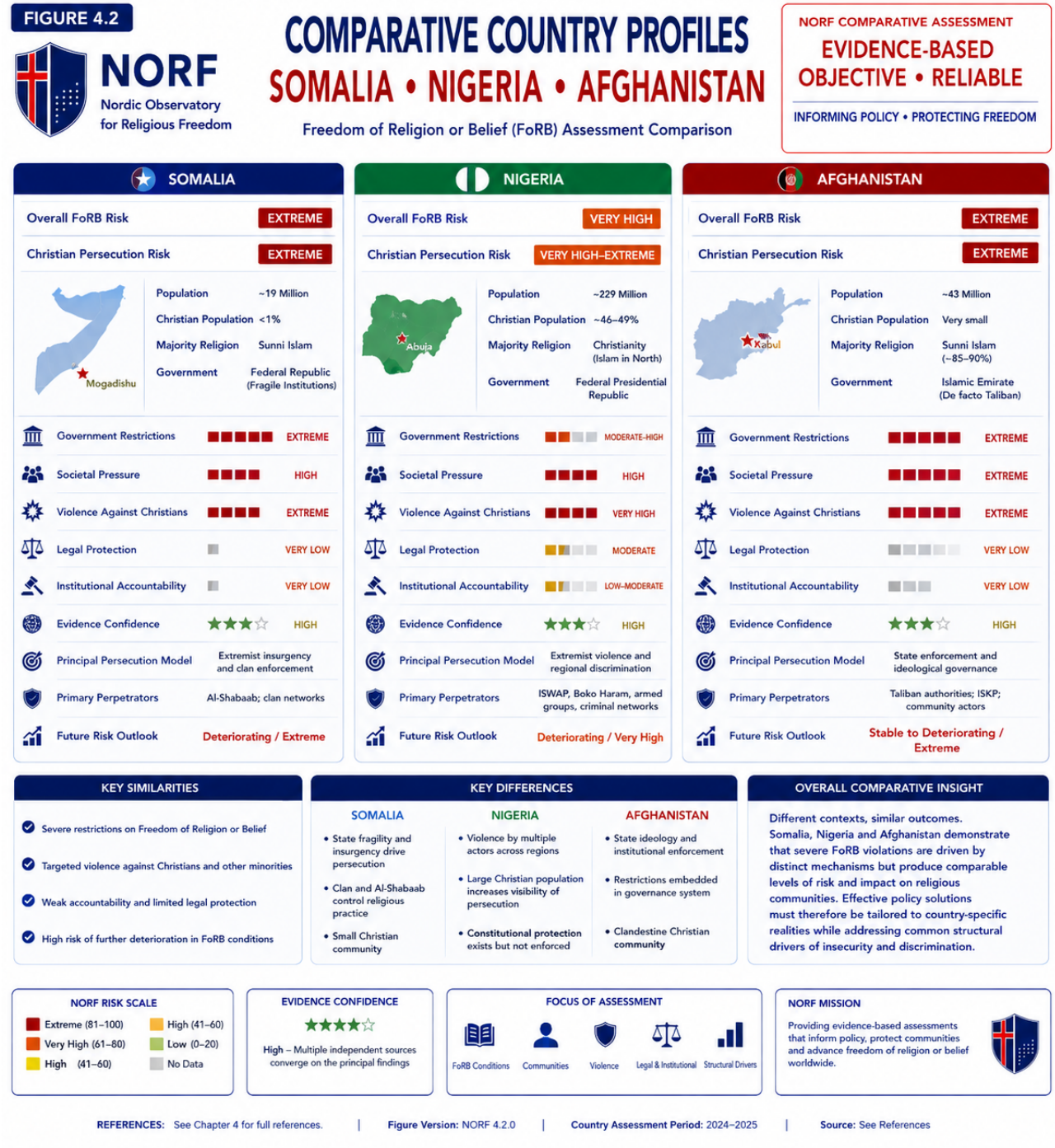
Integrated NORF Assessment

The comparative country profiles demonstrate that **severe restrictions on Freedom of Religion or Belief are not confined to a single governance model or conflict environment**. Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan each present distinct pathways through which religious freedom is constrained, yet all exhibit sustained patterns of persecution affecting Christian communities.

The evidence further indicates that **the visibility of persecution should not be equated with its severity**. Nigeria records higher numbers of documented attacks owing to the size of its Christian population and the relative accessibility of incident reporting. In contrast, Somalia and Afghanistan are characterised by clandestine Christian communities, where concealment of religious identity limits the availability of publicly verifiable incident data. Accordingly, NORF places greater analytical weight on the convergence of structural indicators, institutional practice and independently corroborated patterns than on incident statistics alone.

These comparative profiles provide the contextual foundation for the thematic analysis presented in the following sections, where individual analytical dimensions are examined systematically across all three countries.

Figure 4.2 – Comparative Country Profiles: Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan



References (APA 7th edition)

Freedom House. (2025). *Freedom in the World 2025.*

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4.3 Comparative FoRB Indicators

Introduction

The country assessments presented in Chapter 3 applied a common analytical framework to Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan. This section compares the principal indicators of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) across the three countries in order to identify recurring patterns, significant differences and the relative importance of individual risk factors.

Unlike many international indices that aggregate diverse variables into a single ranking, the NORF methodology analyses each indicator independently before integrating the results into an overall assessment. This approach improves analytical transparency and enables readers to distinguish between different forms of FoRB restriction.

The comparative assessment examines seven analytical dimensions:

- Government restrictions
- Societal pressure
- Violence against Christians
- Legal protection
- Institutional accountability
- Evidence confidence
- Future FoRB trajectory

4.3.1 Government Restrictions

Government restrictions vary considerably across the three countries.

Afghanistan records the highest level of government restriction. Religious policy is embedded within the governing ideology of the de facto Taliban administration, and constitutional safeguards protecting Freedom of Religion or Belief are absent in practice. Religious conversion from Islam is

regarded as apostasy, public Christian worship is prohibited, and independent religious expression outside the accepted interpretation of Islam is severely restricted.

Somalia likewise demonstrates extensive government-related restrictions, although these arise primarily through limited state capacity, constitutional provisions identifying Islam as the state religion, and the influence of non-state actors exercising effective territorial control. Formal legal protections therefore remain limited in practice.

Nigeria differs significantly. The federal constitution guarantees Freedom of Religion or Belief; however, implementation varies between states. In several northern states, the coexistence of Sharia-based legal systems and civil law creates differing levels of protection, while insecurity limits the effective enforcement of constitutional rights.

The comparison demonstrates that severe FoRB restrictions may arise both through direct institutional enforcement, as observed in Afghanistan, and through weak governance combined with non-state coercion, as observed in Somalia and parts of Nigeria.

4.3.2 Societal Pressure

Societal pressure constitutes a major component of persecution in all three countries, although its manifestations differ.

In Afghanistan, community surveillance, family control and social expectations reinforce institutional restrictions, making concealment of Christian identity essential for personal safety.

Somalia exhibits comparable patterns, particularly within clan-based social structures where conversion from Islam is widely regarded as unacceptable and may result in exclusion, intimidation or violence.

Nigeria presents greater regional variation. Christians form majorities in many southern states but experience sustained societal pressure in several northern and central regions, particularly where communal conflict overlaps with religious identity.

Across all three countries, societal pressure operates alongside legal and security factors rather than independently, increasing the cumulative vulnerability of religious minorities.

4.3.3 Violence Against Christians

Patterns of violence differ substantially.

Nigeria records the largest number of documented killings, kidnappings, church attacks and displacement affecting Christians. The size of the Christian population, the intensity of armed conflict and relatively stronger incident documentation contribute to higher reported totals.

Somalia records fewer documented incidents but considerably higher risks associated with discovery of Christian identity. Violence is closely linked to Al-Shabaab's systematic targeting of converts and suspected Christians.

Afghanistan presents a different pattern. Publicly documented attacks against Christians remain comparatively limited because the Christian community operates almost entirely underground. The principal threat arises from discovery, denunciation and institutional persecution rather than public religious activity. Consequently, incident statistics alone underestimate the severity of persecution.

These findings illustrate the importance of interpreting violence within its reporting context rather than comparing incident totals in isolation.

4.3.4 Legal Protection

Legal protection differs markedly.

Nigeria possesses the strongest constitutional framework among the three countries, despite uneven implementation.

Somalia provides only limited legal protection owing to constitutional provisions prioritising Islam and weak institutional capacity.

Afghanistan currently provides no effective legal protection for Christian converts or other religious minorities under the prevailing governance structure.

The comparison demonstrates that formal constitutional guarantees do not necessarily correspond to practical protection, highlighting the importance of assessing implementation separately from legislation.

4.3.5 Institutional Accountability

Institutional accountability remains limited across all three countries.

Afghanistan records the lowest level owing to the absence of independent judicial review and effective complaint mechanisms.

Somalia continues to face significant institutional weakness resulting from limited territorial control and fragile governance structures.

Nigeria possesses comparatively stronger institutions but continues to experience inconsistent investigation and prosecution of attacks affecting Christian communities, particularly in conflict-affected regions.

Weak accountability contributes to repeated violations by reducing deterrence and limiting access to justice for victims.

4.3.6 Evidence Confidence

The overall evidence base supporting the three country assessments is assessed as **High**.

Nevertheless, the underlying evidentiary environments differ.

Nigeria benefits from comparatively extensive media coverage, civil society reporting and governmental documentation.

Somalia presents greater access constraints due to insecurity and limited state presence.

Afghanistan poses the greatest methodological challenges because Christian communities remain clandestine and international monitoring is significantly restricted.

The NORF methodology addresses these differences through systematic source triangulation and explicit confidence assessments rather than relying exclusively upon incident reporting.

4.3.7 Future FoRB Trajectory

Current trends suggest continued high levels of FoRB risk across all three countries.

Afghanistan is expected to remain among the world's most restrictive FoRB environments unless significant institutional and political changes occur.

Somalia continues to face persistent threats associated with Al-Shabaab, weak governance and limited protection for converts.

Nigeria is likely to experience continued regional variation, with significant risks remaining in areas affected by extremist violence, communal conflict and weak institutional protection.

Although future developments cannot be predicted with certainty, the available evidence indicates that none of the three countries currently demonstrates conditions consistent with substantial short-term improvements in Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Integrated NORF Assessment

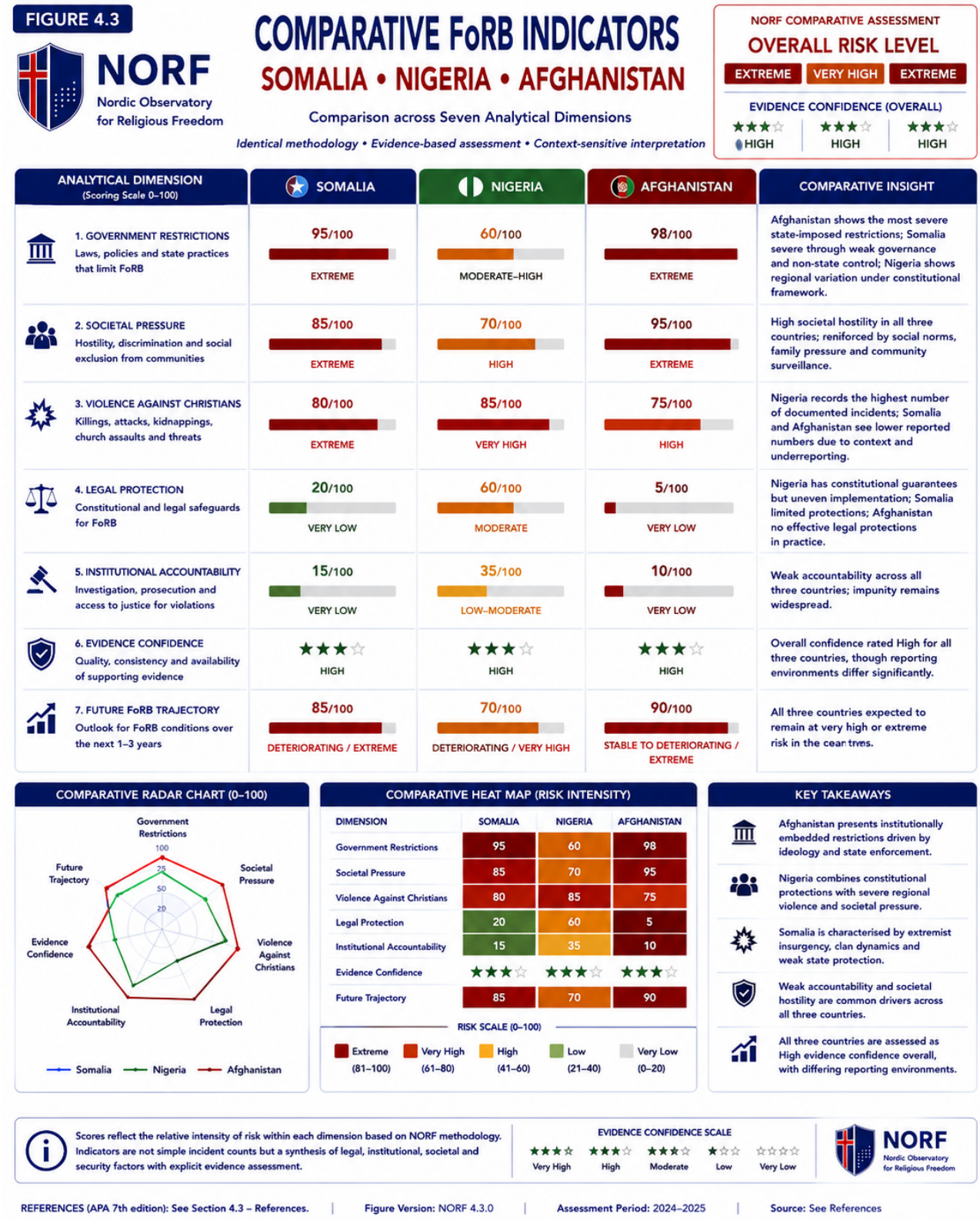
Comparison across identical analytical indicators demonstrates that **similar overall levels of persecution may arise through fundamentally different mechanisms**. Afghanistan represents the clearest example of institutionally embedded FoRB restrictions; Somalia combines state fragility with extremist and clan-based enforcement; Nigeria illustrates how constitutional protections may coexist with widespread violence and uneven implementation.

These differences have direct implications for policy. Measures designed to improve Freedom of Religion or Belief should be tailored to the dominant drivers within each country rather than based on a uniform model of religious persecution. At the same time, the comparison identifies common

structural characteristics—including weak accountability, societal hostility and insecurity—that recur across all three case studies and therefore warrant sustained international attention.

The comparative indicators presented in this section provide the analytical foundation for the subsequent examination of persecution models and violence patterns across countries.

Fig 4.3


FIGURE 4.3
NORF
Nordic Observatory for Religious Freedom
COMPARATIVE FoRB INDICATORS
SOMALIA • NIGERIA • AFGHANISTAN
Comparison across Seven Analytical Dimensions
Identical methodology • Evidence-based assessment • Context-sensitive interpretation
NORF COMPARATIVE ASSESSMENT
OVERALL RISK LEVEL
EXTREME
VERY HIGH
EXTREME
EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE (OVERALL)
HIGH
HIGH
HIGH
ANALYTICAL DIMENSION (Scoring Scale 0–100)
SOMALIA
NIGERIA
AFGHANISTAN
COMPARATIVE INSIGHT
1. GOVERNMENT RESTRICTIONS
Laws, policies and state practices that limit FoRB
95/100 EXTREME
60/100 MODERATE–HIGH
98/100 EXTREME
Afghanistan shows the most severe state-imposed restrictions; Somalia severe through weak governance and non-state control; Nigeria shows regional variation under constitutional framework.
2. SOCIETAL PRESSURE
Hostility, discrimination and social exclusion from communities
85/100 EXTREME
70/100 HIGH
95/100 EXTREME
High societal hostility in all three countries; reinforced by social norms, family pressure and community surveillance.
3. VIOLENCE AGAINST CHRISTIANS
Killings, attacks, kidnappings, church assaults and threats
80/100 EXTREME
85/100 VERY HIGH
75/100 HIGH
Nigeria records the highest number of documented incidents; Somalia and Afghanistan see lower reported numbers due to context and underreporting.
4. LEGAL PROTECTION
Constitutional and legal safeguards for FoRB
20/100 VERY LOW
60/100 MODERATE
5/100 VERY LOW
Nigeria has constitutional guarantees but uneven implementation; Somalia limited protections; Afghanistan no effective legal protections in practice.
5. INSTITUTIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY
Investigation, prosecution and access to justice for violations
15/100 VERY LOW
35/100 LOW–MODERATE
10/100 VERY LOW
Weak accountability across all three countries; impunity remains widespread.
6. EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE
Quality, consistency and availability of supporting evidence
★★★☆ HIGH
★★★☆ HIGH
★★★☆ HIGH
Overall confidence rated High for all three countries, though reporting environments differ significantly.
7. FUTURE FoRB TRAJECTORY
Outlook for FoRB conditions over the next 1–3 years
85/100 DETERIORATING / EXTREME
70/100 DETERIORATING / VERY HIGH
90/100 STABLE TO DETERIORATING / EXTREME
All three countries expected to remain at very high or extreme risk in the cear tves.
COMPARATIVE RADAR CHART (0–100)
Government Restrictions
Societal Pressure
Violence Against Christians
Legal Protection
Institutional Accountability
Evidence Confidence
Future Trajectory
100
75
50
20
Somalia
Nigeria
Afghanistan
COMPARATIVE HEAT MAP (RISK INTENSITY)
DIMENSION
SOMALIA
NIGERIA
AFGHANISTAN
Government Restrictions 95 60 98
Societal Pressure 85 70 95
Violence Against Christians 80 85 75
Legal Protection 20 60 5
Institutional Accountability 15 35 10
Evidence Confidence ★★★☆ ★★★☆ ★★★☆
Future Trajectory 85 70 90
RISK SCALE (0–100)
Extreme (81–100)
Very High (61–80)
High (41–60)
Low (21–40)
Very Low (0–20)
KEY TAKEAWAYS
Afghanistan presents institutionally embedded restrictions driven by ideology and state enforcement.
Nigeria combines constitutional protections with severe regional violence and societal pressure.
Somalia is characterised by extremist insurgency, clan dynamics and weak state protection.
Weak accountability and societal hostility are common drivers across all three countries.
All three countries are assessed as High evidence confidence overall, with differing reporting environments.
Scores reflect the relative intensity of risk within each dimension based on NORF methodology. Indicators are not simple incident counts but a synthesis of legal, institutional, societal and security factors with explicit evidence assessment.
EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE SCALE
★★★★ Very High
★★★☆ High
★★★☆ Moderate
★☆☆☆ Low
☆☆☆☆ Very Low
NORF
Nordic Observatory for Religious Freedom
REFERENCES (APA 7th edition): See Section 4.3 – References.
Figure Version: NORF 4.3.0
Assessment Period: 2024–2025
Source: See References

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4.4 Comparative Christian Persecution Analysis

Introduction

Although Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan are consistently identified among the countries presenting the greatest challenges to Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB), the comparative assessment demonstrates that persecution of Christians is not a uniform phenomenon. Similar levels of risk emerge through different combinations of legal restrictions, institutional practice, societal dynamics and organised violence.

Accordingly, the NORF methodology distinguishes between **patterns of persecution** rather than relying solely on aggregate measures of severity. Understanding these differences is essential for interpreting empirical data, identifying structural drivers and designing context-sensitive responses.

The comparative analysis identifies three distinct persecution models represented by the countries examined in this report.

4.4.1 Somalia: Extremist Insurgency and Community Enforcement

Persecution in Somalia is characterised by the interaction of violent extremist organisations, fragile state institutions and deeply embedded clan structures.

Al-Shabaab remains the principal actor responsible for targeted violence against Christians and suspected converts. The organisation explicitly rejects religious pluralism and has repeatedly declared Christianity incompatible with its interpretation of Islamic governance. Christians are therefore exposed to risks including targeted killings, abductions and execution following discovery of their religious identity.

Beyond direct violence, clan structures reinforce religious conformity through family and community pressure. Conversion from Islam frequently results in social exclusion, denunciation and the loss of community protection. In many areas, the practical ability to exercise Freedom of Religion or Belief is constrained as much by social enforcement as by organised violence.

The Somali model therefore combines **violent extremist persecution** with **community-based enforcement** in an environment where state institutions often lack the capacity to provide effective protection.

4.4.2 Nigeria: Mass Violence within a Constitutionally Protected Framework

Nigeria presents a markedly different model.

Unlike Somalia and Afghanistan, the Nigerian Constitution explicitly guarantees Freedom of Religion or Belief. Nevertheless, constitutional protection coexists with extensive violence affecting Christian communities, particularly in the North-East, North-West and Middle Belt.

Persecution arises through the interaction of multiple actors, including Boko Haram, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), armed criminal groups, and communal militias. Attacks include killings, kidnappings, destruction of churches, displacement of civilian populations and assaults on religious leaders.

The size of Nigeria's Christian population and the comparatively open reporting environment result in substantially higher numbers of documented incidents than in Somalia or Afghanistan. However, these higher figures reflect both the scale of violence and the greater visibility of affected communities.

The Nigerian model is therefore characterised by **high-intensity organised violence occurring despite formal constitutional protections**, illustrating the distinction between legal guarantees and practical implementation.

4.4.3 Afghanistan: Institutionalised Religious Restriction

Afghanistan represents a third and distinct persecution model.

Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, restrictions on Freedom of Religion or Belief have become closely integrated with the governing ideology and institutional framework. Public

Christian worship is effectively impossible, while conversion from Islam is treated as apostasy under prevailing interpretations applied by the de facto authorities.

Unlike Nigeria, where violence constitutes the principal immediate threat, persecution in Afghanistan is fundamentally preventative. The objective is to prevent the public manifestation of non-approved religious identities through legal restrictions, institutional enforcement, community surveillance and fear of punishment.

Extremist violence by Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) continues to affect religious minorities, particularly Hazara Shi'a communities, but Christians remain primarily threatened through concealment, discovery and institutional persecution rather than public religious activity.

The Afghan model is therefore characterised by **institutionalised religious restriction supported by ideological governance and reinforced through societal enforcement**.

4.4.4 Comparative Persecution Models

Comparison of the three case studies demonstrates that severe persecution may arise through fundamentally different mechanisms.

Country	Dominant Persecution Model	Principal Characteristics
Somalia	Extremist insurgency and community enforcement	Violent extremist control, clan-based conformity, weak state protection
Nigeria	High-intensity violence within a constitutional framework	Multiple armed actors, regional variation, constitutional guarantees with uneven implementation
Afghanistan	Institutionalised ideological restriction	State enforcement, legal exclusion, community surveillance, clandestine Christianity

Despite these differences, several common characteristics emerge.

First, Christians experience elevated risks where religious identity intersects with insecurity and limited institutional accountability.

Second, legal protection alone does not determine practical levels of religious freedom. Nigeria demonstrates that constitutional guarantees may coexist with severe persecution, while Afghanistan illustrates how legal and institutional structures may themselves become drivers of restriction.

Third, societal enforcement consistently reinforces other forms of persecution. Family pressure, community surveillance and social exclusion remain significant risk factors in all three countries, although their relative importance differs.

4.4.5 Implications for Comparative FoRB Assessment

The comparative analysis has important methodological implications.

Reliance upon incident statistics alone risks obscuring significant differences between persecution models. Countries characterised by clandestine Christian communities, such as Afghanistan and Somalia, will generally report fewer publicly documented incidents than countries with larger and more visible Christian populations. Consequently, lower incident counts should not automatically be interpreted as lower levels of persecution.

The NORF methodology therefore combines quantitative indicators with structural assessment, legal analysis, institutional evaluation and evidence-confidence ratings. This integrated approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of how persecution develops across different political and social environments.

Integrated NORF Assessment

The comparative analysis demonstrates that **Christian persecution is context-specific but structurally comparable**. Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan represent three distinct pathways through which Freedom of Religion or Belief is restricted: insurgent and clan-based enforcement, large-scale extremist violence within a constitutional system, and institutionally embedded ideological restriction.

These models differ in their immediate manifestations, yet they converge in their practical consequences. In each country, Christians face sustained barriers to the public exercise of their faith, elevated risks associated with religious identity and limited access to effective protection or accountability.

The findings indicate that effective FoRB policy should be tailored to the dominant mechanisms operating within each context while recognising the recurring structural characteristics that transcend individual countries. This comparative understanding provides the foundation for the subsequent analysis of violence patterns and cross-cutting structural drivers.

Figure 4.4 – Comparative Models of Christian Persecution



References (APA 7th edition)

Aid to the Church in Need. (2023). *Religious Freedom in the World Report 2023*. Aid to the Church in Need.

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4.5 Comparative Violence Patterns Across Countries

Introduction

Violence against Christians represents one of the most visible manifestations of restrictions on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB), yet its characteristics differ considerably across Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan. The frequency, perpetrators, geographical distribution and forms of violence are shaped by distinct political, legal and security environments. Consequently, direct comparison of incident totals provides only a partial understanding of persecution.

The NORF methodology therefore compares violence across multiple analytical dimensions, including the scale of documented incidents, the principal forms of violence, the identity of perpetrators, the visibility of Christian communities and the broader structural context in which violence occurs.

4.5.1 Scale and Visibility of Violence

Nigeria records the highest volume of documented violence affecting Christians among the three case studies. Independent monitoring organisations consistently report large numbers of killings, kidnappings, attacks on churches, destruction of property and conflict-related displacement affecting Christian communities, particularly in the North-East, North-West and Middle Belt. The country's large Christian population, relatively open media environment and established monitoring networks contribute to a comparatively comprehensive documentation of incidents.

Somalia presents a different pattern. Publicly documented attacks are fewer, reflecting both the small size of the Christian community and the clandestine nature of Christian religious life. Christians, particularly converts from Islam, face severe risks if their identity becomes known. Al-Shabaab has repeatedly targeted individuals suspected of conversion, meaning that concealment itself forms part of the persecution environment.

Afghanistan likewise records comparatively few publicly documented attacks against Christians. This should not be interpreted as evidence of lower risk. The Christian population consists almost

entirely of converts who practise their faith in secrecy. Discovery may result in arbitrary detention, torture, enforced disappearance or extrajudicial killing, while the absence of public worship significantly reduces opportunities for observable mass attacks. Consequently, documented incidents represent only a minimum estimate of the actual level of persecution.

4.5.2 Forms of Violence

Although violence assumes different forms across the three countries, several recurring patterns emerge.

In Nigeria, violence is characterised by mass-casualty attacks on villages, churches and places of worship, targeted killings of clergy, kidnappings for ransom, forced displacement and destruction of civilian infrastructure. Religious identity frequently intersects with communal conflict, organised criminality and insurgent violence, producing complex patterns of victimisation.

In Somalia, targeted killings, executions, disappearances and intimidation constitute the principal forms of violence. Christians seldom gather publicly, reducing opportunities for attacks on churches but increasing the significance of individual targeting following discovery of religious identity.

In Afghanistan, violence against Christians is closely linked to detection rather than public religious practice. Institutional persecution, arbitrary detention, physical abuse and threats of execution constitute the principal risks, while broader extremist violence continues to affect other religious minorities, particularly Hazara Shi'a communities targeted by Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP).

4.5.3 Principal Perpetrators

The identity of perpetrators differs significantly.

In Somalia, Al-Shabaab remains the dominant actor responsible for lethal violence against Christians and suspected converts. Clan structures and community networks may also contribute to denunciation, intimidation and social exclusion.

Nigeria exhibits the greatest diversity of perpetrators. Boko Haram, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), armed criminal groups, communal militias and, in some contexts, local vigilante actors all contribute to violence affecting Christian communities. The multiplicity of actors complicates accountability and response efforts.

Afghanistan presents a dual pattern. The de facto Taliban authorities impose institutional restrictions that create an environment hostile to Christian religious expression, while ISKP continues to conduct attacks against religious minorities. Family members and community actors may also participate in surveillance or denunciation of Christian converts.

4.5.4 Geographic Distribution

Violence is unevenly distributed within each country.

In Nigeria, the highest concentration of attacks occurs across the North-East, North-West and Middle Belt, although significant regional variation persists.

In Somalia, violence is concentrated in areas where Al-Shabaab maintains operational influence or where state authority remains weak.

In Afghanistan, regional differences relate primarily to varying levels of institutional control, local enforcement and extremist activity rather than to the visibility of Christian communities, which remain concealed throughout the country.

These patterns demonstrate that subnational analysis is essential for understanding persecution dynamics.

4.5.5 Methodological Considerations

Comparing violence across countries requires careful interpretation.

Documented incidents reflect not only the occurrence of violence but also the capacity to observe, verify and report violations. Countries with larger Christian populations and stronger documentation mechanisms inevitably record more verified incidents than environments where Christians remain hidden or where access for independent observers is severely restricted.

The NORF methodology therefore distinguishes between:

- documented incidents;
- verified patterns of violence;
- structural indicators of risk; and
- analytical assessment.

This approach reduces the risk of underestimating persecution in countries where public documentation is inherently limited.

Comparative Assessment

The comparison demonstrates that violence against Christians follows three distinct operational patterns.

Nigeria is characterised by **high-frequency, high-visibility violence**, producing the largest number of documented casualties and attacks among the three case studies.

Somalia exhibits **targeted insurgent violence**, in which discovery of Christian identity frequently results in lethal consequences despite lower numbers of publicly documented incidents.

Afghanistan represents **concealed persecution within an institutionalised system of religious restriction**, where the absence of publicly visible violence reflects the clandestine nature of Christian communities rather than a lower level of threat.

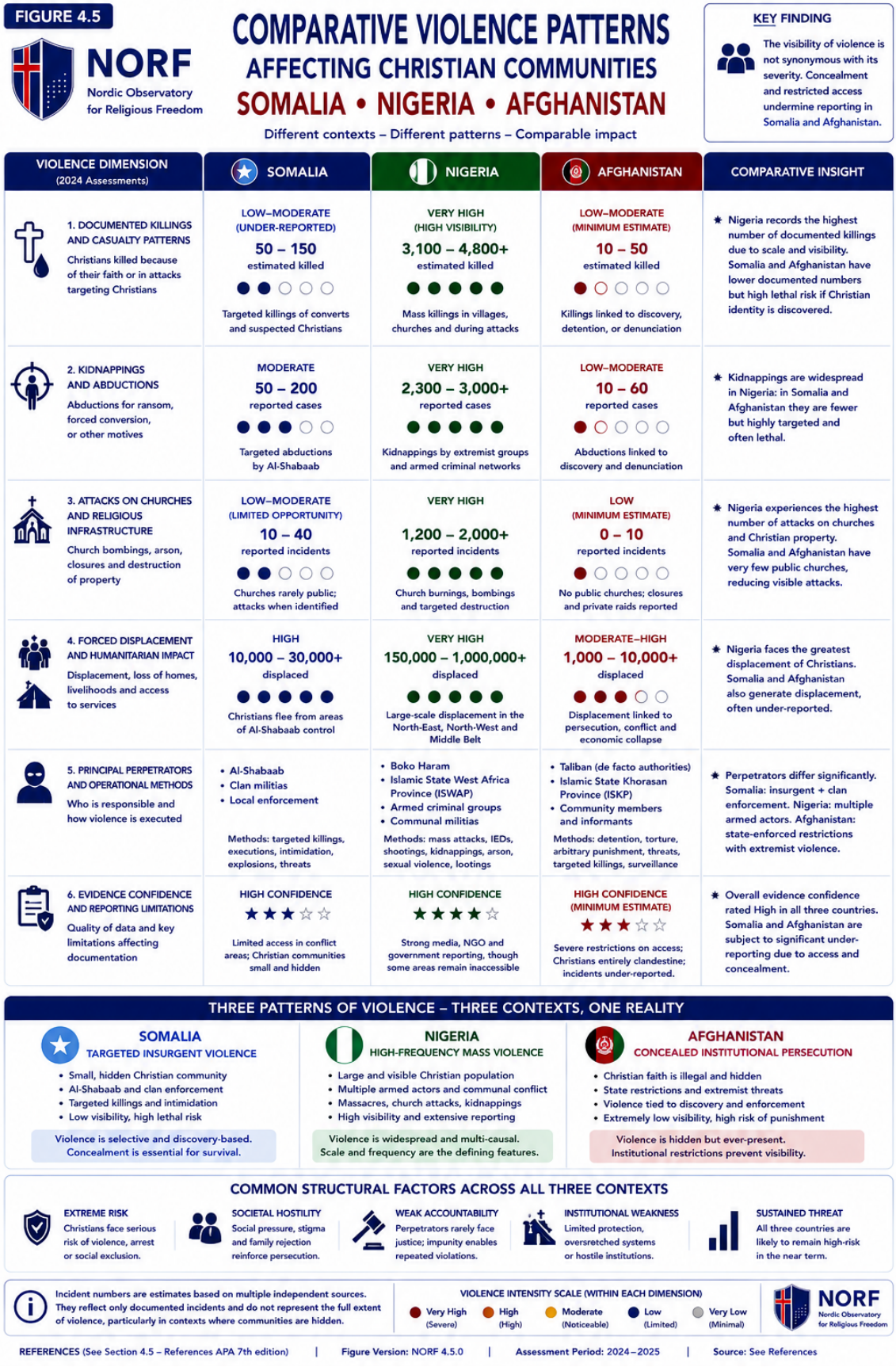
Across all three countries, violence is reinforced by weak accountability, societal hostility and limited institutional protection. These interacting factors create persistent environments in which Christian communities remain vulnerable despite differing political and security contexts.

Integrated NORF Assessment

The comparative evidence demonstrates that **the visibility of violence is not synonymous with its severity**. Nigeria records the greatest number of documented attacks because violence occurs against a large and publicly visible Christian population. In Somalia and Afghanistan, however, concealment of religious identity fundamentally shapes both the character of persecution and the availability of verifiable incident data.

Accordingly, NORF concludes that comparative assessment should not rely exclusively on casualty statistics or reported attacks. A comprehensive evaluation must integrate documented incidents with legal restrictions, institutional practice, societal enforcement and evidence confidence. This multidimensional approach provides a more accurate basis for understanding the risks faced by Christian communities across different national contexts and strengthens the analytical foundation for evidence-based policy development.

Figure 4.5 – Comparative Violence Patterns Affecting Christian Communities



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4.6 Structural Drivers of Freedom of Religion or Belief Violations

Introduction

The preceding sections demonstrated that Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan exhibit different patterns of Christian persecution despite comparable levels of overall FoRB risk. These differences suggest that persecution cannot be explained solely through individual incidents or the activities of specific extremist organisations. Rather, persistent violations emerge from broader structural conditions that shape the ability and willingness of states and societies to protect religious freedom.

The NORF analytical framework therefore distinguishes between **proximate drivers**, such as attacks by armed groups, and **structural drivers**, including legal frameworks, governance capacity, institutional accountability, societal norms and conflict dynamics. Structural drivers do not automatically produce persecution; however, they create environments in which violations become more likely, more frequent or more difficult to prevent.

This section compares the principal structural drivers identified across the three case studies.

4.6.1 Legal and Constitutional Frameworks

Legal systems shape the environment within which Freedom of Religion or Belief is exercised and protected.

Afghanistan represents the most restrictive legal context. Since August 2021, the de facto Taliban authorities have replaced the constitutional order with governance based on their interpretation of Islamic law. There are no effective legal guarantees protecting Christian converts or other religious minorities, and public manifestation of Christianity is effectively prohibited.

Somalia likewise provides limited constitutional protection. Islam is recognised as the state religion, and legal provisions restricting religious pluralism are reinforced by weak state institutions and the influence of customary and religious authorities.

Nigeria presents a contrasting legal framework. The Constitution guarantees Freedom of Religion or Belief and prohibits religious discrimination. Nevertheless, implementation varies considerably between states, particularly where Sharia-based legal systems operate alongside civil law. Consequently, constitutional protection does not always translate into effective practical protection.

The comparison demonstrates that legal frameworks influence persecution differently depending upon institutional capacity and political implementation.

4.6.2 Governance and Institutional Capacity

Institutional capacity represents one of the strongest predictors of effective protection for religious minorities.

Somalia continues to experience significant governance challenges, including limited territorial control, fragmented authority and constrained judicial capacity. These conditions permit extremist organisations and local actors to exercise influence beyond the effective reach of state institutions.

Nigeria possesses substantially stronger institutions but continues to experience uneven law enforcement, limited investigative capacity and inconsistent prosecution of attacks affecting Christian communities, particularly in conflict-affected regions.

Afghanistan presents a fundamentally different situation. Institutions function under the authority of the de facto Taliban administration and actively enforce policies restricting religious freedom. The principal challenge is therefore not institutional weakness but institutional alignment with restrictive religious governance.

These findings illustrate that both institutional weakness and institutional coercion may contribute to severe FoRB violations.

4.6.3 Societal Norms and Community Enforcement

Social attitudes significantly influence the practical exercise of Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Across all three countries, conversion from Islam to Christianity carries substantial social consequences. Family rejection, community exclusion, threats and denunciation frequently accompany or precede direct violence.

In Somalia and Afghanistan, societal enforcement closely complements legal or extremist restrictions, making concealment of Christian identity a widespread survival strategy.

Nigeria demonstrates greater regional diversity. Christians participate openly in public life across much of the south, whereas northern and central regions exhibit stronger communal pressures linked to religious identity, ethnicity and local conflict.

The evidence indicates that societal pressure consistently reinforces institutional and security-related drivers rather than operating independently.

4.6.4 Armed Conflict and Insecurity

Armed conflict remains a central structural driver of persecution.

In Somalia, Al-Shabaab continues to exploit weak governance and insecurity to target Christians and enforce religious conformity in areas under its influence.

Nigeria experiences overlapping forms of violence involving Boko Haram, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), organised criminal groups and communal militias. Religious identity frequently intersects with competition over land, resources and political influence, producing complex conflict dynamics.

Afghanistan differs in that nationwide armed conflict has declined since the Taliban's consolidation of power, yet extremist violence persists through ISKP attacks targeting religious minorities. At the same time, institutional restrictions imposed by the authorities have become a more significant driver of persecution than open conflict itself.

These differences demonstrate that insecurity influences FoRB through multiple pathways and should not be understood solely as armed confrontation.

4.6.5 Accountability and Impunity

Weak accountability constitutes one of the few structural drivers common to all three countries.

Somalia's limited judicial capacity restricts investigation and prosecution of FoRB violations.

Nigeria continues to experience inconsistent accountability for attacks affecting Christian communities despite stronger institutional structures.

In Afghanistan, independent judicial oversight and effective legal remedies for religious minorities are effectively absent under the prevailing governance framework.

Persistent impunity reduces deterrence, undermines public confidence and contributes to repeated violations across all three contexts.

4.6.6 Comparative Structural Assessment

The comparison identifies six structural drivers that recur across the case studies, although their relative importance differs.

Structural Driver	Somalia	Nigeria	Afghanistan
Restrictive legal environment	High	Moderate	Extreme
Weak institutional protection	Very High	Moderate	Extreme
Societal hostility	Very High	High	Extreme
Armed conflict and insecurity	Extreme	Very High	High
Accountability deficits	Very High	High	Extreme
Religious exclusivism	Very High	High (regional variation)	Extreme

These findings indicate that severe FoRB violations rarely result from a single factor. Instead, persecution develops where multiple structural drivers interact over time, reinforcing one another and reducing the capacity of individuals to exercise their religion or belief safely.

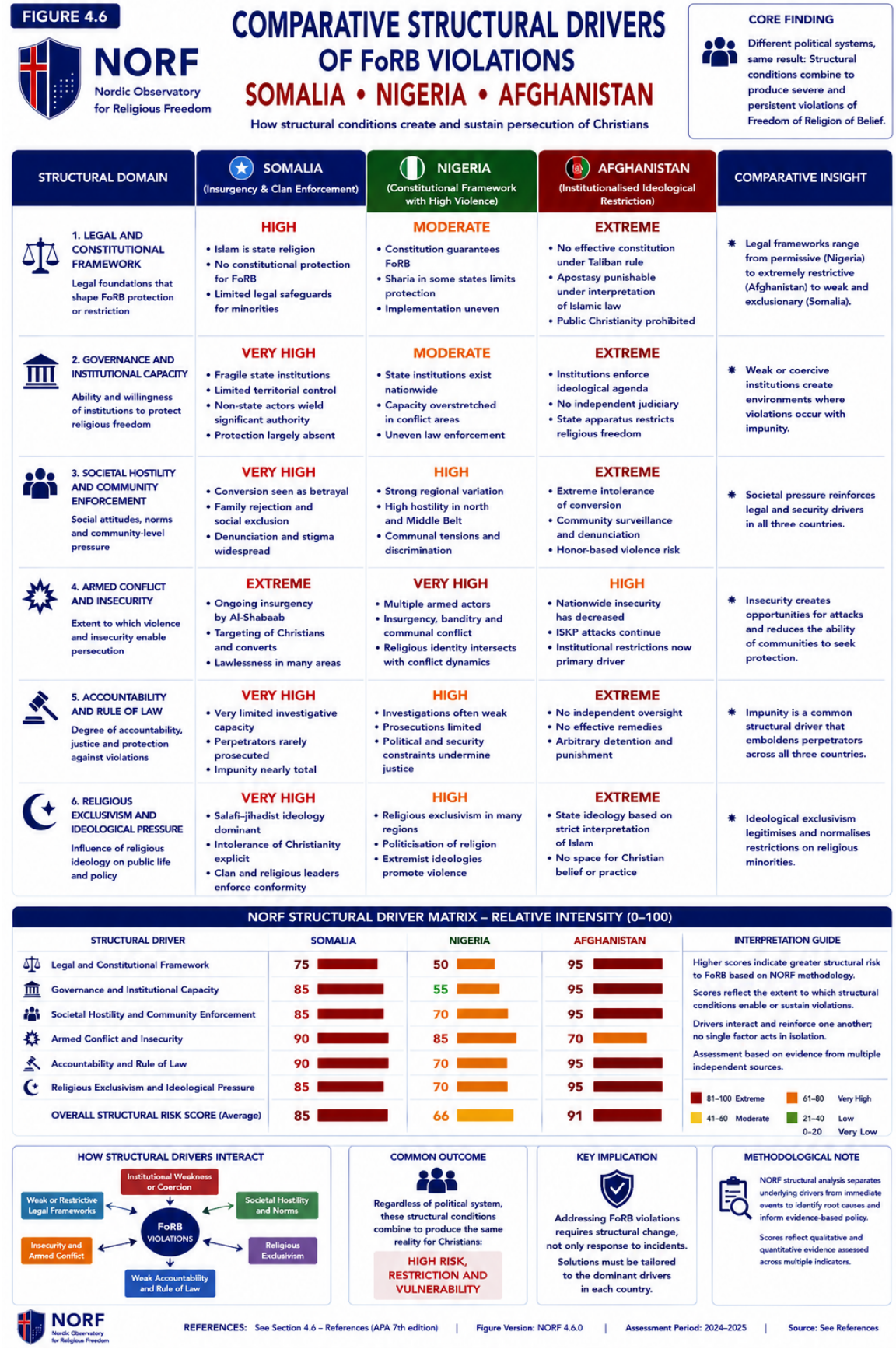
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The comparative analysis demonstrates that **structural conditions, rather than isolated incidents, provide the most reliable explanation for persistent violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief**. Although Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan differ in their political systems, legal frameworks and security environments, all three countries exhibit combinations of structural drivers that limit effective protection for Christian communities.

The findings further indicate that no single intervention is sufficient to improve FoRB conditions. Legal reform without institutional implementation, security improvements without accountability, or humanitarian assistance without protection of vulnerable religious communities are unlikely to produce sustained change. Effective policy responses therefore require integrated approaches addressing the specific structural drivers operating within each national context.

This analysis establishes the empirical foundation for Chapter 5, where recommendations are organised according to the actors best positioned to address these structural conditions.

Figure 4.6 – Comparative Structural Drivers of FoRB Violations



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4.7 Regional Comparative Assessment

Introduction

Although Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan represent distinct national contexts, they are also situated within broader regional environments that influence the protection and exercise of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB). Regional conflict dynamics, ideological movements, migration, governance structures and international engagement all affect patterns of religious persecution.

The comparative assessment therefore considers both national conditions and the wider regional contexts in which these countries are embedded. Understanding these regional dynamics is essential for identifying common challenges, recognising transnational threats and developing effective international responses.

For the purposes of this report, the three case studies represent three distinct regional FoRB environments:

- **The Horn of Africa (Somalia)**
- **West Africa (Nigeria)**
- **South and Central Asia (Afghanistan)**

4.7.1 The Horn of Africa

Somalia illustrates many of the structural characteristics affecting Freedom of Religion or Belief across the Horn of Africa.

The region is characterised by fragile state institutions, prolonged armed conflict, humanitarian crises, cross-border militant activity and extensive population displacement. Violent extremist organisations, particularly Al-Shabaab, operate across national boundaries and exploit limited governmental capacity to impose religious conformity within areas under their influence.

Christians in Somalia experience persecution primarily through the interaction of extremist violence, clan structures and limited institutional protection. Similar challenges are observed elsewhere in the region, although their intensity varies according to national political conditions.

Regional organisations, including the **Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)** and the **African Union (AU)**, continue to support peacebuilding, security cooperation and state-building initiatives. Nevertheless, Freedom of Religion or Belief has generally received less systematic attention than broader security and humanitarian concerns.

4.7.2 West Africa

Nigeria represents a distinct regional environment characterised by comparatively stronger state institutions but significantly more complex patterns of organised violence.

West Africa has experienced the expansion of multiple violent extremist organisations, including Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), alongside growing insecurity associated with organised criminal groups and communal conflict.

Unlike Somalia, constitutional protection for Freedom of Religion or Belief exists throughout Nigeria. However, regional disparities in governance, law enforcement and security have resulted in uneven protection for Christian communities.

The regional dimension is particularly significant because extremist networks increasingly operate across national borders affecting neighbouring states including Niger, Chad and Cameroon. Consequently, religious persecution in Nigeria cannot be analysed solely within national boundaries but forms part of a broader regional security environment.

The **Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)** and the **Lake Chad Basin Commission** continue to coordinate regional security initiatives, although protection of religious minorities remains primarily addressed through national legal systems.

4.7.3 South and Central Asia

Afghanistan represents a different regional model.

Rather than being primarily shaped by cross-border insurgency alone, the current FoRB environment reflects the interaction between ideological governance, regional security concerns and the country's geopolitical isolation following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021.

Religious restrictions imposed by the de facto authorities affect multiple religious communities while simultaneously limiting independent monitoring by international organisations.

Neighbouring countries continue to influence Afghanistan through migration, humanitarian assistance, diplomatic engagement and regional security cooperation. However, regional institutions possess comparatively limited capacity to influence domestic Freedom of Religion or Belief conditions within Afghanistan.

The persistence of Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) further illustrates the regional dimension of extremist violence despite reductions in conventional armed conflict.

4.7.4 Comparative Regional Characteristics

Comparison of the three regional environments demonstrates that severe FoRB restrictions emerge through different regional dynamics.

Regional Dimension	Horn of Africa	West Africa	South & Central Asia
Dominant security challenge	Insurgency and state fragility	Extremism, communal violence and organised crime	Ideological governance and extremist violence
Principal regional actor	Al-Shabaab	Boko Haram / ISWAP	Taliban / ISKP
Institutional capacity	Limited	Moderate	Highly centralised but restrictive
Cross-border dynamics	Extensive	Extensive	Moderate
Humanitarian pressures	Very High	High	Very High
Christian visibility	Very Low	High	Extremely Low
Overall NORF Regional FoRB Risk	Extreme	Very High	Extreme

The comparison illustrates that regional context shapes both the mechanisms and visibility of persecution. In Africa, insecurity and weak governance play particularly significant roles, whereas Afghanistan demonstrates how ideological governance itself can become the principal driver of restrictions on religious freedom.

4.7.5 Regional Implications

The comparative assessment identifies several common regional challenges.

First, violent extremist organisations increasingly operate across national boundaries, requiring coordinated regional responses rather than isolated national initiatives.

Second, humanitarian crises frequently increase the vulnerability of religious minorities by weakening institutional protection and limiting access to justice.

Third, regional organisations have generally prioritised security, migration and development while giving comparatively less systematic attention to Freedom of Religion or Belief as an independent policy area.

Finally, the comparison demonstrates that effective protection of Christian communities requires regional strategies tailored to the dominant drivers within each geographical context. Approaches developed for insurgency-affected regions cannot simply be transferred to environments characterised primarily by institutional religious restriction.

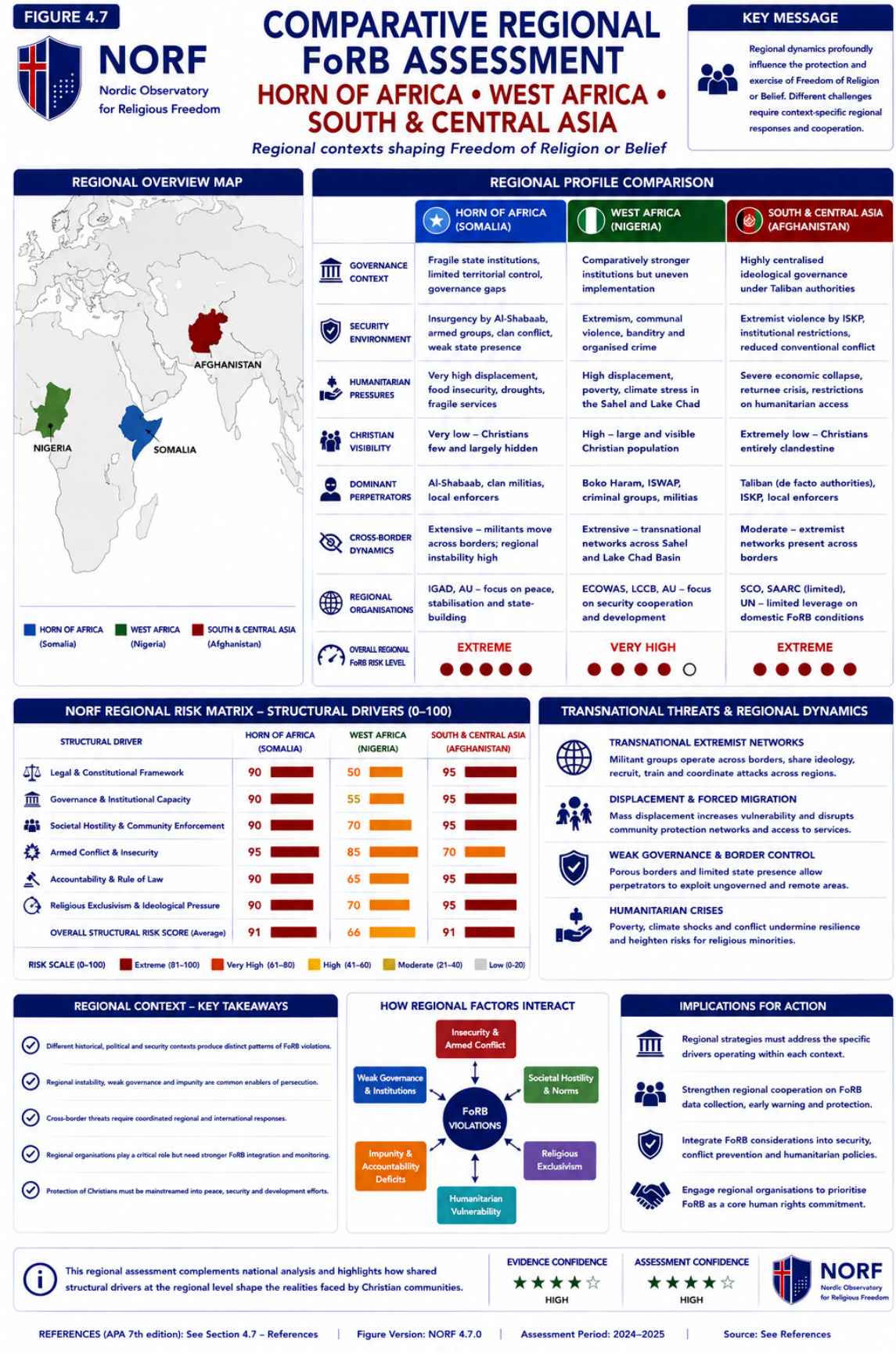
Integrated NORF Assessment

The regional comparison confirms that **Freedom of Religion or Belief is shaped simultaneously by national institutions and broader regional dynamics**. Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan each reflect distinctive regional environments in which historical development, governance structures, armed conflict and ideological movements interact to influence the protection of religious minorities.

At the same time, the comparative assessment identifies several common regional characteristics: persistent insecurity, limited accountability, humanitarian vulnerability and the transnational influence of extremist actors. These shared challenges suggest that effective promotion of FoRB requires cooperation not only at the national level but also through regional organisations and international partnerships.

Understanding these regional dynamics strengthens the comparative analysis by demonstrating that persecution of Christians is influenced by interconnected political and security environments extending beyond national borders. This perspective provides an important bridge to Chapter 5, where recommendations are addressed to governments, regional organisations, international institutions and humanitarian actors.

Figure 4.7 – Comparative Regional FoRB Assessment



References (APA 7th edition)

African Union. (2024). *African Union Annual Report 2024*. African Union Commission.

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4.8 International Engagement and Policy Implications

Introduction

The comparative assessment demonstrates that severe restrictions on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) arise through distinct combinations of legal, institutional, societal and security-related factors. These findings have important implications for international engagement. Governments, multilateral organisations, humanitarian agencies and civil society actors increasingly recognise FoRB as an integral component of international human rights, conflict prevention and sustainable development. Nevertheless, approaches to FoRB remain uneven across regions and institutions.

This section assesses how current international engagement corresponds to the structural drivers identified in the preceding chapters. Rather than evaluating individual programmes, the analysis considers whether existing international mechanisms adequately address the principal causes of persecution documented in Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan.

4.8.1 United Nations

The United Nations provides the principal international normative framework for the protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the work of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Across all three case-study countries, United Nations entities have documented serious violations affecting religious minorities and have repeatedly called for strengthened protection, accountability and respect for international human rights obligations. UN agencies also play important roles in humanitarian assistance, refugee protection and monitoring through mechanisms including OHCHR, UNHCR, UNAMA and the Human Rights Council.

The comparative assessment nevertheless indicates that implementation remains constrained where state institutions lack capacity or where governing authorities reject international human rights norms. Consequently, the effectiveness of United Nations engagement depends upon sustained political dialogue, independent monitoring and cooperation with regional organisations and civil society.

4.8.2 Regional Organisations

Regional organisations contribute differently across the three geographical contexts.

In Africa, the **African Union (AU)**, **ECOWAS** and **IGAD** have prioritised peacebuilding, conflict prevention, democratic governance and regional security cooperation. Although these initiatives indirectly strengthen conditions for Freedom of Religion or Belief, FoRB has generally not been addressed as a distinct policy priority.

In South and Central Asia, opportunities for regional engagement remain more limited owing to Afghanistan's political isolation and the absence of comparable regional human rights mechanisms. Regional cooperation has therefore focused primarily on security, humanitarian assistance and migration rather than the protection of religious freedom.

The comparative evidence suggests that regional organisations could strengthen their contribution by integrating FoRB more systematically into conflict prevention, governance support and human rights monitoring.

4.8.3 Bilateral Engagement

Several governments maintain dedicated policies promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief within their foreign policy and development cooperation.

The United States, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, Germany and Canada have all supported initiatives relating to religious freedom, human rights documentation, humanitarian assistance and protection of vulnerable communities. Bilateral engagement frequently combines diplomatic dialogue with targeted support for civil society, legal reform, humanitarian programmes and capacity-building.

The comparative findings indicate that bilateral engagement is most effective when it reflects country-specific structural drivers rather than adopting uniform approaches across different contexts. Measures designed to strengthen institutional accountability in Nigeria, for example, differ substantially from those required to improve documentation and protection of clandestine Christian communities in Afghanistan or Somalia.

4.8.4 Humanitarian and Development Assistance

Humanitarian assistance constitutes an important component of international engagement across all three case studies.

Somalia and Afghanistan remain heavily dependent upon international humanitarian support, while conflict-affected regions of Nigeria continue to receive substantial emergency assistance.

The comparative assessment demonstrates that humanitarian programmes increasingly operate within environments where religious identity may influence access to protection, services or community support. Accordingly, humanitarian actors should incorporate Freedom of Religion or Belief considerations into vulnerability assessments, protection strategies and monitoring frameworks while ensuring impartial and non-discriminatory assistance consistent with humanitarian principles.

Importantly, the evidence does **not** support the conclusion that humanitarian assistance should be conditioned solely upon FoRB performance. Rather, it indicates that assistance programmes should be designed and monitored to ensure equitable access for all religious communities and to avoid reinforcing existing patterns of exclusion.

4.8.5 Civil Society and Independent Monitoring

Independent monitoring organisations remain essential for documenting violations and improving international understanding of Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Across the three case studies, organisations including Open Doors, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Aid to the Church in Need, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and national human rights institutions provide complementary evidence that strengthens overall confidence in the comparative assessment.

The analysis further demonstrates that cooperation between governmental reporting, international organisations, academic institutions and specialised monitoring organisations significantly improves the reliability of FoRB assessments through methodological triangulation.

Sustained support for independent documentation therefore represents an important element of future international engagement.

4.8.6 Comparative Assessment

Comparison across the three case studies identifies several recurring themes.

First, international engagement is generally strongest in the humanitarian sector but comparatively weaker in addressing the structural drivers of religious persecution.

Second, existing interventions frequently prioritise security, governance or development while treating Freedom of Religion or Belief as a secondary concern rather than an integrated component of policy.

Third, countries characterised by hidden religious communities require specialised monitoring approaches because conventional incident-based reporting substantially underestimates actual levels of persecution.

Finally, the comparative assessment indicates that international engagement is most effective when based upon context-specific evidence and coordinated across diplomatic, humanitarian, development and human rights instruments.

Integrated NORF Assessment

The evidence presented throughout this report demonstrates that **effective international engagement depends upon understanding the specific structural drivers of Freedom of Religion or Belief violations within each national context**. Although Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan differ substantially in their political systems and security environments, international responses are most likely to succeed when they integrate FoRB considerations into broader human rights, governance, humanitarian and peacebuilding strategies rather than treating religious freedom as a separate policy domain.

The comparative analysis further indicates that international organisations, donor governments and humanitarian agencies possess complementary roles. Normative frameworks established by the United Nations provide the legal foundation for FoRB protection, regional organisations contribute political and security cooperation, bilateral partners support governance and civil society, while independent monitoring organisations strengthen accountability through systematic documentation and analysis. Coordinated engagement across these actors offers the strongest basis for addressing the structural conditions identified throughout this report.

Figure 4.8 — International Engagement Architecture for Freedom of Religion or Belief



References (APA 7th edition)

African Union. (2024). *African Union Annual Report 2024*. African Union Commission.

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4.9 Comparative Policy Implications

Introduction

The comparative assessment presented in this chapter demonstrates that severe restrictions on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) arise through different combinations of legal, institutional, societal and security-related factors. Although Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan differ substantially in their political systems, historical development and conflict dynamics, the evidence reveals several recurring characteristics with important implications for policymakers, international organisations and development partners.

These implications are derived directly from the comparative findings and should therefore be understood as evidence-based observations rather than normative recommendations. They provide the analytical bridge between the comparative assessment and the strategic recommendations presented in Chapter 5.

4.9.1 Persecution is Structurally Embedded

One of the clearest findings emerging from the comparative assessment is that persecution of Christians is rarely the result of isolated incidents or the actions of individual perpetrators alone.

Across all three countries, violations occur within broader structural environments characterised by combinations of restrictive legal frameworks, institutional weaknesses, societal hostility, extremist violence and limited accountability.

Afghanistan illustrates the consequences of institutionally embedded restrictions on religious freedom. Somalia demonstrates how state fragility enables extremist organisations and customary structures to shape religious life. Nigeria shows that constitutional guarantees may coexist with persistent violence where implementation remains uneven and security institutions struggle to protect vulnerable communities.

The evidence therefore suggests that sustainable improvements in Freedom of Religion or Belief require attention to the structural conditions that enable persecution rather than responses focused exclusively on individual incidents.

4.9.2 Legal Protection Alone Is Insufficient

Comparison of the three case studies demonstrates that constitutional or legislative protection does not automatically translate into effective enjoyment of Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Nigeria possesses the strongest constitutional safeguards among the countries examined, yet Christians continue to experience extensive violence in several regions.

Conversely, Afghanistan illustrates how the absence of legal protection can institutionalise restrictions on religious freedom, while Somalia demonstrates that limited state capacity may undermine implementation even where formal institutions exist.

The comparative evidence therefore indicates that assessments of FoRB should distinguish clearly between **legal guarantees** and **practical implementation**.

4.9.3 Security and Human Rights Are Interdependent

The analysis further demonstrates that security conditions and Freedom of Religion or Belief are closely interconnected.

Extremist violence, armed conflict and humanitarian crises increase the vulnerability of religious minorities by weakening state institutions, reducing accountability and limiting access to protection.

At the same time, systematic violations of FoRB may contribute to broader instability by reinforcing exclusion, discrimination and social fragmentation.

The evidence therefore supports greater integration of FoRB considerations into conflict prevention, stabilisation and humanitarian programming rather than treating religious freedom solely as an individual human rights issue.

4.9.4 Evidence Quality Matters for Effective Policy

The comparative assessment highlights significant differences in the availability of reliable data.

Nigeria benefits from comparatively extensive documentation due to the size of its Christian population and relatively open reporting environment.

Somalia and Afghanistan present much greater methodological challenges because Christian communities remain largely clandestine and independent monitoring is constrained.

Consequently, policymakers should interpret quantitative incident data within its evidentiary context. Lower numbers of documented violations should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of lower levels of persecution.

The NORF methodology addresses this challenge through systematic source triangulation, structural analysis and explicit evidence-confidence ratings.

4.9.5 Context-Specific Responses Are Essential

Although the overall level of FoRB risk remains high across all three countries, the dominant drivers differ considerably.

Accordingly, policy responses should reflect these differences.

Measures designed primarily to improve institutional accountability may be appropriate in contexts where governance structures remain functional.

In fragile or conflict-affected environments, strengthening civilian protection, improving humanitarian access and supporting independent documentation may prove more effective.

Where persecution is closely integrated into state institutions, international engagement may depend more heavily upon diplomatic dialogue, multilateral pressure, protection of vulnerable communities and sustained independent monitoring.

The comparative evidence therefore supports differentiated approaches grounded in country-specific analysis.

4.9.6 International Cooperation Strengthens FoRB Protection

The comparison demonstrates that no single institution possesses the capacity to address the full range of structural drivers identified throughout this report.

United Nations mechanisms provide normative standards and international monitoring.

Regional organisations contribute security cooperation, governance support and conflict prevention.

National governments influence bilateral diplomacy and development cooperation.

Humanitarian organisations deliver protection and essential services.

Civil society organisations contribute documentation, legal assistance and community engagement.

Academic institutions and research organisations strengthen methodological quality and long-term evidence generation.

The comparative findings indicate that effective promotion of Freedom of Religion or Belief depends upon coordination across these complementary actors rather than isolated interventions.

Integrated NORF Assessment

The comparative assessment demonstrates that **effective policy begins with accurate diagnosis**. Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan each illustrate different pathways through which Freedom of Religion or Belief may be restricted, yet all three confirm that persecution is sustained by interacting structural conditions rather than isolated events.

Three overarching implications emerge from the evidence.

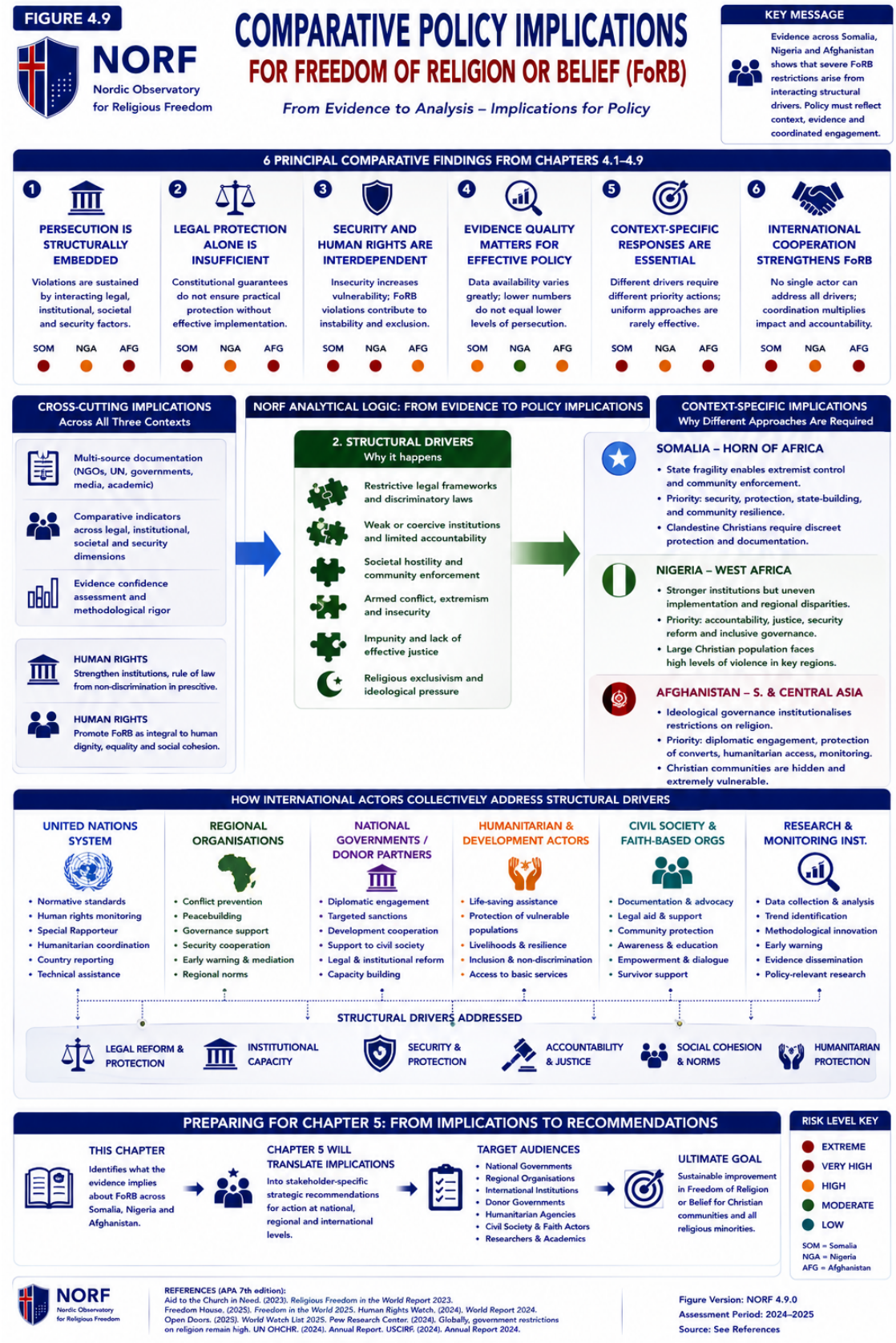
First, FoRB should be understood as a cross-cutting policy issue linking governance, security, development and human rights rather than as a stand-alone legal concern.

Second, reliable policy depends upon rigorous evidence. Assessments that distinguish between documented incidents, structural conditions and evidence confidence provide a more accurate basis for decision-making than incident statistics alone.

Third, effective engagement requires context-sensitive approaches. While universal human rights standards remain constant, the mechanisms through which FoRB is protected must reflect the legal, institutional and societal realities of each national context.

These findings provide the analytical foundation for Chapter 5, where the evidence presented throughout this report is translated into stakeholder-specific strategic recommendations.

Figure 4.9 - Comparative Policy Implications for Freedom of Religion or Belief



References (APA 7th edition)

Aid to the Church in Need. (2023). *Religious Freedom in the World Report 2023*. Aid to the Church in Need.

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Chapter 5

Strategic Recommendations and Policy Implications

5.1 Introduction

The preceding chapters presented a systematic assessment of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan using the standardised analytical framework developed by the Nordic Observatory for Religious Freedom (NORF). Through country-specific assessments and comparative analysis, the report identified recurring patterns of religious persecution, principal structural drivers and the institutional, legal and societal conditions that shape the protection of religious communities.

The comparative assessment demonstrates that severe violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief arise through different combinations of governance failures, legal restrictions, societal hostility, extremist violence and weak institutional accountability. Although the manifestations of persecution differ across countries, the evidence consistently indicates that sustainable improvements require responses addressing the structural conditions that enable or perpetuate violations rather than focusing exclusively on individual incidents.

This chapter translates those empirical findings into strategic recommendations for the principal actors engaged in promoting and protecting Freedom of Religion or Belief. The recommendations are organised according to institutional responsibility rather than geographical region, recognising that governments, international organisations, humanitarian agencies, civil society and research institutions each possess distinct mandates, comparative advantages and operational capacities.

Importantly, the recommendations should **not** be interpreted as prescriptive policy directives or political advocacy. They represent evidence-informed considerations derived from the comparative NORF assessment and are intended to support informed decision-making by policymakers, practitioners and researchers. Individual recommendations should therefore be interpreted alongside the country-specific analyses presented in Chapter 3 and the comparative findings developed in Chapter 4.

Purpose of the Recommendations

The recommendations pursue four complementary objectives.

First, they identify opportunities to strengthen the protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief through evidence-based policy development.

Second, they encourage greater integration of FoRB considerations into governance, diplomacy, humanitarian assistance, peacebuilding and development cooperation.

Third, they promote improved documentation, transparency and accountability by supporting independent monitoring and methodological rigour.

Finally, they encourage context-sensitive engagement recognising that effective responses differ according to the structural drivers operating within each country.

Accordingly, the recommendations seek to strengthen institutional capacity and improve protection for vulnerable religious communities while remaining firmly grounded in internationally recognised human rights standards and the empirical evidence presented throughout this report.

Guiding Principles

The recommendations presented in this chapter are informed by six overarching principles that have guided the NORF methodology from the outset.

Evidence-Based Policy

Recommendations should be derived from independently verifiable evidence rather than assumptions or political preferences. Where evidence remains limited, uncertainty should be acknowledged explicitly.

Universality of Freedom of Religion or Belief

Freedom of Religion or Belief is recognised as a universal human right applicable to all individuals regardless of religion, belief, conversion, non-belief or religious affiliation. Recommendations therefore apply equally to the protection of Christians and other religious communities experiencing violations of this right.

Context-Specific Engagement

Although universal human rights standards remain constant, implementation should reflect the legal, institutional, cultural and security conditions of each country. Measures effective in one context may not be appropriate in another.

Protection of Vulnerable Communities

Particular attention should be given to communities facing heightened risks because of their religious identity, including Christians in clandestine environments where persecution remains substantially underreported. At the same time, protection efforts should remain inclusive and extend to all individuals and communities whose Freedom of Religion or Belief is threatened.

Institutional Accountability

Long-term improvements in Freedom of Religion or Belief depend upon accountable institutions capable of protecting rights, investigating violations and ensuring equal access to justice. Strengthening accountability therefore represents a recurring objective across the recommendations.

Methodological Transparency

Effective policy requires reliable evidence. Governments, international organisations and monitoring institutions should therefore promote transparent methodologies, explicit confidence assessments and systematic source triangulation when documenting FoRB violations.

Organisation of the Chapter

The remainder of Chapter 5 presents recommendations addressed to six principal stakeholder groups.

- **Section 5.2** – National Authorities
- **Section 5.3** – International Organisations
- **Section 5.4** – Donor Governments
- **Section 5.5** – Humanitarian and Development Agencies
- **Section 5.6** – Civil Society and Faith-Based Organisations
- **Section 5.7** – Researchers and Monitoring Organisations

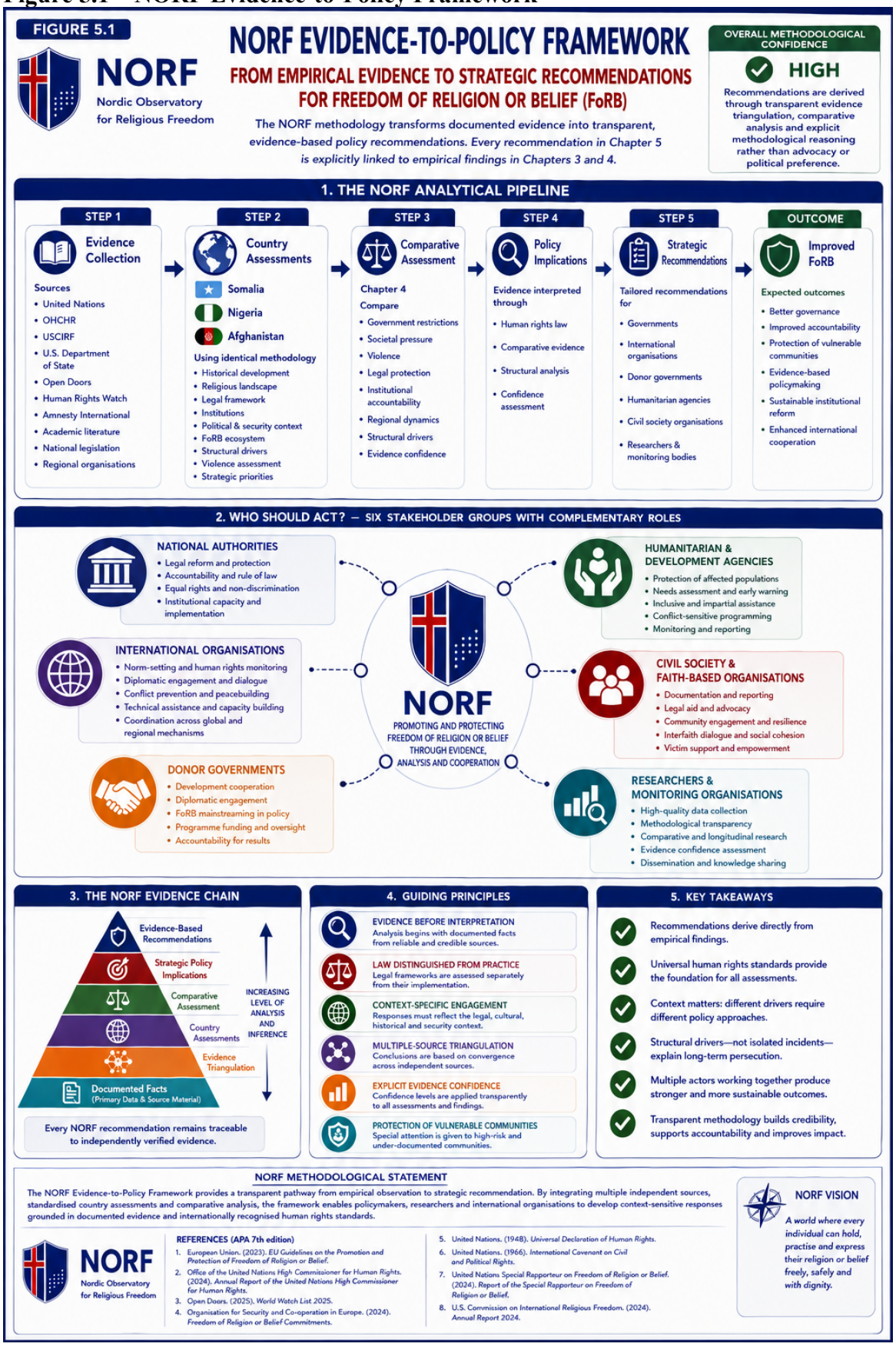
The chapter concludes with recommendations for the continued development of the NORF methodology and reflections on future comparative assessments of Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Integrated NORF Assessment

The comparative evidence presented throughout this report demonstrates that **effective protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief requires coordinated action informed by rigorous empirical analysis**. While Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan differ in their historical trajectories, legal systems and security environments, each illustrates how structural conditions shape both the severity and character of religious persecution.

Accordingly, the recommendations that follow are organised according to the actors best positioned to influence these structural conditions. This approach reflects the central methodological principle of the NORF framework: that policy should be evidence-led, context-sensitive and proportionate to the documented drivers of violations. By linking recommendations directly to the comparative findings of Chapters 3 and 4, the report seeks to strengthen the transparency, credibility and practical relevance of its conclusions for governments, international organisations, humanitarian actors, civil society and the wider research community.

Figure 5.1 – NORF Evidence-to-Policy Framework



References (APA 7th edition)

European Union. (2023). *EU Guidelines on the Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief*. European External Action Service.

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2024). *Annual Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*. United Nations.

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5.2 Recommendations for National Authorities

Scope

National authorities retain the primary responsibility for respecting, protecting and fulfilling Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB). This responsibility applies to legislation, administrative practice, policing, judicial protection and access to public services. It also extends to the prevention and investigation of violations committed by non-state actors.

The recommendations below reflect the principal findings from Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan. Their relevance varies by country. Nigeria retains functioning constitutional and administrative institutions capable of reform. Somalia combines formal state structures with limited territorial reach and fragmented authority. In Afghanistan, the de facto authorities exercise extensive control but enforce a religious order incompatible with pluralistic FoRB protections. Implementation priorities must therefore be adapted to national conditions.

5.2.1 Align Domestic Law with International FoRB Standards

National legislation should protect the right to adopt, retain, change, manifest or decline a religion or belief. Laws criminalising apostasy, blasphemy, religious conversion or peaceful religious expression should be repealed or amended where they conflict with Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Constitutional protection should be reinforced through implementing legislation, administrative regulations and judicial guidance. Formal guarantees have limited value where subordinate laws or local practices impose contradictory restrictions.

Country application

Somalia: Constitutional and statutory provisions should be reviewed to clarify the protection available to religious minorities, including converts, while preventing customary or local authorities from imposing coercive religious conformity.

Nigeria: Federal and state legislation should be assessed for consistency with constitutional FoRB protections. Particular attention is required where parallel legal systems produce unequal treatment or restrict peaceful religious expression.

Afghanistan: The de facto authorities should cease penalising conversion, private religious practice and peaceful manifestation of non-approved beliefs. No person should face detention, punishment or loss of civil rights because of religion, belief or conversion.

Evidence basis: Sections 3.A.4, 3.B.4, 3.C.4, 4.3 and 4.6.

5.2.2 Protect Christians and Other High-Risk Religious Communities

Authorities should adopt community-specific protection measures where credible evidence identifies elevated risk. Generic minority policies are insufficient when communities face different perpetrators and forms of persecution.

Christians in Somalia and Afghanistan require particular protection because discovery of religious identity may trigger detention, denunciation, expulsion or lethal violence. In Nigeria, protection priorities include churches, clergy, schools, villages, internally displaced persons and communities exposed to recurring armed attacks.

Protection measures should include confidential reporting channels, threat assessment, emergency relocation, witness protection and rapid access to law enforcement. Measures must not expose hidden communities through compulsory registration or public disclosure.

Evidence basis: Sections 3.A.7–3.A.11, 3.B.7–3.B.11, 3.C.7–3.C.11 and 4.4–4.5.

5.2.3 Investigate and Prosecute FoRB-Related Violence

Killings, abductions, attacks on places of worship, forced displacement, torture and arbitrary detention should be investigated promptly and impartially. Investigations should examine religious motive where supported by evidence without reducing complex conflicts to religion alone.

Authorities should publish information on:

- reported incidents;
- investigations opened;
- arrests and prosecutions;
- judicial outcomes;
- victim characteristics, where safe;
- institutional failures identified.

Specialised investigative capacity may be required for extremist violence, organised kidnapping, attacks on clergy and mass-casualty incidents. Prosecutorial independence and judicial protection are essential where perpetrators have political, military or community influence.

Country application

Somalia: Protection and investigative capacity should be strengthened in areas recovered from Al-Shabaab, including secure mechanisms for reporting threats against converts and suspected Christians.

Nigeria: Federal and state authorities should improve investigation and prosecution of mass killings, kidnappings, church attacks and attacks on religious leaders. Persistent impunity in high-risk regions requires measurable institutional review.

Afghanistan: Arbitrary detention, torture and punishment based on religion or conversion should cease. Allegations of abuse by officials should be subject to independent investigation.

Evidence basis: Sections 3.A.9.C, 3.B.7, 3.C.9.C, 4.5 and 4.6.

5.2.4 Strengthen Civilian Protection and Early Warning

FoRB violations frequently emerge in environments already affected by insurgency, communal conflict, criminal violence or institutional coercion. Early-warning systems should therefore incorporate religious identity as one possible risk indicator alongside ethnicity, location, gender, displacement and political affiliation.

National and subnational authorities should establish procedures for:

- identifying recurrent attack patterns;
- assessing threats to places of worship and religious leaders;
- sharing information across security and civilian institutions;
- issuing timely warnings;
- deploying protection proportionately;
- reviewing failures after major incidents.

Data should be disaggregated by religious community where reliable and safe. Confidentiality is essential for converts and clandestine communities.

Evidence basis: Sections 4.3, 4.5, 4.6 and 4.7.

5.2.5 Ensure Equal Access to Public Services and Humanitarian Assistance

Religion or belief should not affect access to food assistance, health care, education, identity documents, housing, employment, justice or protection. Authorities should prohibit discrimination by public institutions and by organisations acting under public mandate.

Monitoring systems should identify whether religious minorities encounter exclusion at registration points, aid-distribution sites, schools, hospitals, detention facilities or displacement camps. Complaint procedures must remain accessible to persons unable to disclose their religious identity publicly.

In humanitarian emergencies, assistance should remain impartial and based on need. FoRB-sensitive monitoring should strengthen equitable delivery rather than politicise or condition life-saving aid.

Evidence basis: Sections 3.A.10, 3.B.10, 3.C.10, 4.8 and 4.9.

5.2.6 Protect Places of Worship, Religious Leaders and Religious Property

Authorities should assess threats to churches, mosques, temples, shrines, schools, cemeteries and other religious sites. Security measures should be based on documented risk and developed in consultation with affected communities.

Protection should include:

- preventive security assessments;
- emergency communication systems;
- investigation of threats and vandalism;
- safeguards during religious festivals;
- protection of clergy and community leaders;
- lawful restitution or compensation where property has been unlawfully seized or destroyed.

Where communities cannot worship publicly, the absence of registered religious sites should not be treated as evidence that protection is unnecessary.

Evidence basis: Sections 3.A.9.C, 3.B.7, 3.C.9.C and 4.5.

5.2.7 End Arbitrary Detention and Coercive Religious Enforcement

No person should be detained, interrogated, punished or deprived of civil rights solely because of religion, belief, conversion, non-belief or peaceful religious association.

Authorities should review the mandates and practices of police, intelligence agencies, local administrations, religious enforcement bodies and detention institutions. Oversight mechanisms should examine allegations involving:

- coercive conversion;
- forced renunciation of faith;
- punishment for apostasy or blasphemy;
- detention without lawful basis;
- torture or degrading treatment;
- family separation;
- compelled religious observance.

This priority is particularly urgent in Afghanistan, where institutional enforcement is itself a principal driver of FoRB restriction.

Evidence basis: Sections 3.C.4–3.C.9.C and 4.4–4.6.

5.2.8 Strengthen Independent Oversight and Access to Remedy

Effective FoRB protection requires institutions capable of reviewing state action and providing remedies. Relevant mechanisms include courts, national human rights institutions, ombuds offices, parliamentary committees, inspectorates and independent complaints bodies.

These institutions should possess:

- legal independence;
- access to relevant records;
- authority to investigate public bodies;
- protection for complainants and witnesses;
- capacity to issue or enforce remedies;
- public reporting obligations.

Where national institutions cannot operate independently, cooperation with international and regional monitoring mechanisms should be expanded.

Evidence basis: Sections 4.3.5, 4.6.5, 4.8 and 4.9.

5.2.9 Improve National FoRB Data and Public Reporting

Authorities should collect and publish reliable data on serious FoRB violations. Reporting should distinguish documented facts from allegations, estimates and analytical conclusions.

Minimum categories should include:

- killings;
- abductions;
- arbitrary detention;
- attacks on religious sites;
- forced displacement;
- destruction of property;
- restrictions on worship;
- discriminatory administrative decisions;
- investigations and judicial outcomes.

Data should be disaggregated by location, alleged perpetrator, violation type and affected community where disclosure does not create additional risk. Reports should explain limitations, missing data and verification standards.

The absence of documented incidents must not be interpreted as absence of persecution in clandestine environments.

Evidence basis: Sections 3.A.9, 3.B.9, 3.C.9 and 4.3–4.5.

5.2.10 Train Public Officials in FoRB and Non-Discrimination

Judges, prosecutors, police officers, military personnel, prison authorities, civil servants and local administrators should receive practical training on FoRB standards and community-specific risks.

Training should address:

- protection of converts and hidden communities;
- religiously motivated violence;
- distinction between peaceful expression and incitement;
- non-discriminatory public administration;
- confidentiality and witness protection;
- religious literacy;
- gendered and age-specific forms of persecution.

Training should be evaluated through changes in institutional practice rather than participation numbers alone.

Evidence basis: Sections 4.6, 4.8 and 4.9.

5.2.11 Engage Religious and Community Leaders Without Delegating State Responsibility

Religious leaders, clan elders and community organisations can contribute to mediation, early warning and prevention. Their involvement should complement—not replace—the state's obligation to protect rights.

Authorities should avoid arrangements that allow religious or customary actors to determine whether individuals may change religion, access justice or exercise civil rights. Engagement should be structured around constitutional equality, voluntary participation and non-coercion.

In Nigeria and Somalia, locally grounded engagement may reduce communal escalation and improve reporting. In Afghanistan, dialogue cannot substitute for cessation of state-imposed restrictions.

Evidence basis: Sections 3.A.5–3.A.7, 3.B.5–3.B.7, 3.C.5–3.C.7 and 4.6.

Priority Matrix

Priority	Somalia	Nigeria	Afghanistan
Legal alignment with FoRB standards	High	High	Urgent
Protection of Christians and high-risk minorities	Urgent	Urgent	Urgent
Investigation and prosecution	Urgent	Urgent	Urgent
Civilian protection and early warning	Urgent	Urgent	High
Equal access to services and assistance	High	High	Urgent
Protection of religious sites and leaders	High	Urgent	Context-dependent*
End coercive religious enforcement	High	High	Urgent
Independent oversight and remedies	Urgent	High	Urgent
FoRB data and public reporting	High	Urgent	Urgent
Training of public officials	High	High	High

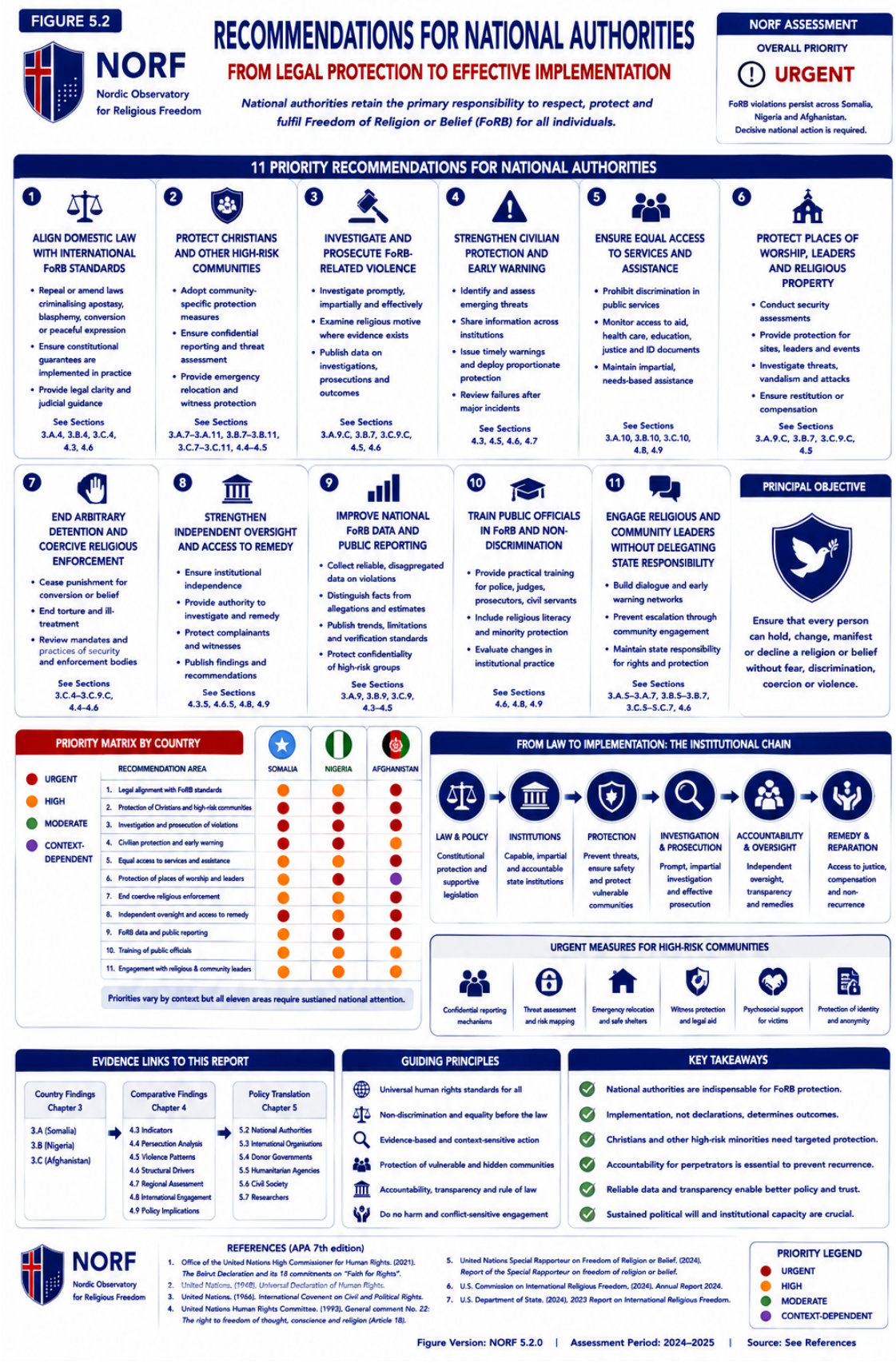
*Afghanistan has no public Christian churches; protection must therefore focus on individuals, private worship and confidential community networks.

NORF Assessment

National authorities remain indispensable to FoRB protection, but the required form of action differs across the three countries. Nigeria requires stronger implementation, civilian protection and accountability within an existing constitutional framework. Somalia requires institutional consolidation, protection in areas affected by insurgency and safeguards against coercive clan or community enforcement. Afghanistan requires cessation of institutionally imposed religious restrictions and recognition of the right to hold, change and manifest religion or belief.

Across all three contexts, the central test is practical rather than declaratory: whether individuals can exercise religion or belief without violence, coercion, discrimination or fear of state punishment.

Figure 5.2 - Recommendations for National Authorities: From Legal Protection to Effective Implementation



References (APA 7th edition)

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2021). *The Beirut Declaration and its 18 commitments on "Faith for Rights"*. United Nations.

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5.3 Recommendations for International Organisations

Scope

International organisations play a central role in promoting and protecting Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) through norm development, monitoring, diplomacy, humanitarian coordination, technical assistance and capacity-building. While responsibility for protecting human rights rests primarily with states, international organisations possess unique mandates that enable them to support accountability, strengthen institutional capacity and respond where national protection mechanisms are absent or ineffective.

The recommendations below are addressed principally to the United Nations system, regional organisations—including the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the European Union (EU) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)—and other multilateral institutions engaged in governance, development and humanitarian assistance.

5.3.1 Integrate FoRB into Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding

The comparative assessment demonstrates that violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief frequently emerge within broader environments characterised by armed conflict, institutional fragility and political instability. FoRB should therefore be incorporated systematically into conflict prevention, peacebuilding and stabilisation initiatives rather than addressed solely as an individual human rights issue.

Conflict assessments, mediation efforts and peace agreements should explicitly consider the security and rights of religious minorities where evidence demonstrates elevated risk.

Evidence basis

Sections 4.4–4.7.

5.3.2 Strengthen International Monitoring and Reporting

International organisations should continue strengthening independent monitoring of FoRB through coordinated reporting, methodological transparency and regular public assessments.

Monitoring should:

- distinguish documented facts from analytical assessments;
- explain evidentiary limitations;
- identify structural drivers of violations;
- include hidden and clandestine religious communities where possible;
- publish explicit confidence assessments.

The NORF methodology demonstrates that transparent evidence grading improves both credibility and policy utility.

Evidence basis

Sections 3.A.9, 3.B.9, 3.C.9 and 4.3.

5.3.3 Improve Protection of Hidden Religious Communities

Traditional monitoring systems frequently underestimate persecution affecting clandestine communities.

International organisations should therefore develop specialised methodologies for documenting violations affecting:

- Christian converts;
- underground churches;
- unregistered religious communities;
- persons unable to disclose religious identity safely.

Confidential data collection, secure communication technologies and cooperation with trusted local partners are essential for improving evidence quality without increasing security risks.

Evidence basis

Sections 3.C.9, 4.5 and 4.8.

5.3.4 Support National Institutional Capacity

International assistance should prioritise strengthening institutions responsible for implementing Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Priority areas include:

- judicial independence;
- prosecution of FoRB-related crimes;
- police capacity;
- national human rights institutions;
- independent oversight mechanisms;
- legislative review;
- statistical reporting systems.

Capacity-building should respond to country-specific structural weaknesses rather than applying uniform institutional models.

Country application

Somalia: judicial development, local governance and civilian protection.

Nigeria: investigation, prosecution and accountability.

Afghanistan: documentation, humanitarian protection and preservation of independent monitoring capacity.

Evidence basis

Sections 4.6 and 4.9.

5.3.5 Mainstream FoRB Across UN and Regional Programmes

FoRB considerations should be integrated across existing programmes relating to:

- governance;
- education;
- humanitarian protection;
- sustainable development;
- gender equality;
- peacebuilding;
- rule of law.

This does not require creating entirely new institutional structures. Rather, existing programmes should assess how religious identity influences vulnerability, discrimination and access to services.

Mainstreaming FoRB strengthens implementation of existing human rights commitments while avoiding duplication.

Evidence basis

Sections 4.6–4.9.

5.3.6 Promote Accountability for Serious Violations

International organisations should continue supporting accountability through:

- fact-finding missions;
- commissions of inquiry;
- independent investigations;
- sanctions where legally authorised;
- documentation supporting future judicial proceedings.

Priority should be given to systematic violations involving:

- killings;
- torture;
- arbitrary detention;
- enforced disappearance;

- persecution based on religion;
- attacks against places of worship.

Accountability mechanisms should remain impartial and evidence-based.

Evidence basis

Sections 3.A.9.C, 3.B.9.C, 3.C.9.C and 4.5.

5.3.7 Strengthen Regional Cooperation

The comparative assessment demonstrates that extremist organisations and humanitarian crises frequently extend across national borders.

Regional organisations should therefore strengthen cooperation concerning:

- intelligence sharing;
- civilian protection;
- refugee protection;
- judicial cooperation;
- early-warning systems;
- protection of religious minorities.

The AU, ECOWAS and IGAD possess important opportunities to integrate FoRB into existing regional security and governance frameworks.

Evidence basis

Section 4.7.

5.3.8 Protect FoRB within Humanitarian Response

International humanitarian coordination mechanisms should ensure that religious minorities enjoy equal access to humanitarian assistance.

Protection assessments should identify discrimination affecting:

- internally displaced persons;
- refugees;
- converts;
- minority communities;
- women and children belonging to vulnerable religious groups.

Humanitarian neutrality should remain fully respected while ensuring that religious identity is considered where it demonstrably affects vulnerability.

Evidence basis

Sections 4.8 and 4.9.

5.3.9 Improve Global FoRB Data Standards

International organisations should encourage common standards for documenting FoRB violations.

Reporting frameworks should:

- define indicators clearly;
- distinguish incidents from structural analysis;
- identify confidence levels;
- explain methodological limitations;
- encourage independent verification.

Improved comparability strengthens both international reporting and evidence-based policymaking.

The NORF methodology may contribute to future methodological dialogue by demonstrating how explicit confidence assessments and structural analysis complement traditional incident reporting.

Evidence basis

Section 4.3.

5.3.10 Support Long-Term Prevention Rather Than Crisis Response Alone

The comparative evidence indicates that reactive interventions rarely address the structural causes of persecution.

Accordingly, international organisations should balance emergency response with long-term investment in:

- education;
- rule of law;
- accountable governance;
- independent institutions;
- inclusive public administration;
- protection of civil society;
- research and monitoring.

Preventive investment generally offers greater long-term effectiveness than repeated emergency interventions after violence has escalated.

Evidence basis

Sections 4.6–4.9.

5.3.11 Promote International Coordination

Different organisations possess complementary mandates.

Greater coordination between:

- United Nations agencies;
- African Union;
- European Union;
- ECOWAS;
- IGAD;
- OSCE;
- donor governments;
- humanitarian organisations;
- academic institutions;

would improve consistency, reduce duplication and strengthen evidence sharing.

Regular methodological dialogue should also improve international comparability of FoRB assessments.

Evidence basis

Sections 4.8 and 4.9.

NORF Comparative Assessment

The comparative evidence demonstrates that international organisations contribute most effectively when they address the structural conditions underpinning Freedom of Religion or Belief violations rather than responding solely to individual incidents. Monitoring, diplomacy, humanitarian coordination and institutional support are mutually reinforcing components of international protection.

The three case studies also illustrate that international engagement must remain context-sensitive. In Nigeria, strengthening accountability and civilian protection offers the greatest potential for reducing recurrent violence. In Somalia, institutional development should complement security and humanitarian initiatives. In Afghanistan, sustained documentation, protection of vulnerable communities and principled engagement remain essential where domestic remedies are largely unavailable.

More broadly, the report indicates that FoRB should be integrated across conflict prevention, governance and humanitarian programming instead of being treated as a stand-alone thematic issue. International organisations are uniquely positioned to promote this integrated approach through normative leadership, technical expertise and multilateral cooperation.

Figure 5.3 – Recommendations for International Organisations: Coordinating Global Action for FoRB



References (APA 7th edition)

African Union Commission. (2024). *African Union Annual Report 2024*.

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5.4 Recommendations for Donor Governments

Scope

Bilateral donor governments play an important role in advancing Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) through diplomacy, development cooperation, humanitarian assistance and support for international institutions. Unlike national authorities, donor governments do not exercise direct jurisdiction within recipient states. Their influence instead derives from diplomatic engagement, financial assistance, technical cooperation and support for multilateral initiatives.

The recommendations below are directed towards governments providing development and humanitarian assistance to countries where FoRB violations are documented, including Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia, Japan, the European Union and other bilateral partners.

The recommendations are grounded in the comparative evidence presented in Chapters 3 and 4 and seek to strengthen both the effectiveness and accountability of international assistance.

5.4.1 Mainstream Freedom of Religion or Belief Across Development Cooperation

Freedom of Religion or Belief should be incorporated systematically into development cooperation rather than addressed solely through specialised human rights programmes.

Donor governments should ensure that programme design, implementation and evaluation consider whether religious identity influences:

- access to education;
- health services;
- justice;
- livelihoods;
- humanitarian assistance;
- participation in public institutions;
- protection from discrimination.

FoRB should be treated as a cross-cutting governance and inclusion issue comparable to gender equality, disability inclusion and anti-corruption.

Evidence basis

Sections 4.6–4.9.

5.4.2 Apply Context-Sensitive Development Approaches

The comparative assessment demonstrates that the principal drivers of FoRB violations differ substantially across Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan.

Accordingly, donor engagement should be adapted to country-specific structural conditions rather than relying upon standardised programming.

Examples include:

Somalia

- strengthen local governance;
- improve civilian protection;
- support justice institutions;
- reinforce community resilience.

Nigeria

- strengthen accountability;
- improve investigation capacity;
- support conflict prevention;

- protect vulnerable communities.

Afghanistan

- prioritise humanitarian protection;
- preserve independent monitoring;
- support vulnerable populations through neutral humanitarian channels.

Evidence basis

Sections 3 and 4.

5.4.3 Strengthen Accountability Within Development Partnerships

Development partnerships should include measurable commitments concerning transparency, accountability and equal access to public services.

This does **not** imply that humanitarian assistance should automatically be suspended where FoRB violations occur.

Rather, donor governments should:

- monitor implementation;
- document exclusion;
- engage through structured policy dialogue;
- support institutional reform;
- evaluate progress using transparent indicators.

Where governments demonstrate persistent unwillingness to address systematic violations, donors should review the composition of assistance, increase oversight and consider redirecting governance support through accountable multilateral or civil society partners where appropriate and consistent with international law.

Evidence basis

Sections 4.6, 4.8 and 4.9.

5.4.4 Protect Humanitarian Principles

Humanitarian assistance should remain impartial, neutral, independent and based upon need.

The comparative evidence does **not** support conditioning emergency life-saving assistance on FoRB performance.

Instead, donor governments should ensure that humanitarian programmes:

- identify religiously vulnerable groups;
- monitor equitable access;
- prevent discrimination;
- strengthen protection systems;
- improve confidential complaints mechanisms.

The objective is not politicisation of humanitarian action but improved protection of vulnerable populations.

Evidence basis

Sections 3.A.10, 3.B.10, 3.C.10 and 4.8.

5.4.5 Support Independent Monitoring and Documentation

Reliable policy depends upon reliable evidence.

Donor governments should continue supporting:

- independent research institutions;
- national human rights institutions;
- FoRB observatories;
- universities;
- civil society documentation initiatives;
- secure digital evidence systems.

Long-term monitoring enables trend analysis, strengthens accountability and preserves evidence that may become important for future judicial processes.

Evidence basis

Sections 3.C.9, 4.3 and 4.8.

5.4.6 Invest in Institutional Capacity Rather Than Short-Term Projects Alone

The comparative assessment indicates that sustainable improvements depend upon capable institutions.

Accordingly, donor programmes should support:

- courts;
- prosecutors;

- police oversight;
- parliamentary committees;
- national human rights institutions;
- statistical authorities;
- judicial training;
- public administration.

Institutional strengthening should be evaluated over multi-year periods rather than annual project cycles.

Evidence basis
Section 4.6.

5.4.7 Promote Policy Coherence Across Government

FoRB considerations should not be confined to ministries responsible for human rights.

Greater coherence should be encouraged between:

- foreign affairs;
- development cooperation;
- defence;
- trade;
- migration;
- justice;
- humanitarian policy.

Internal coordination reduces contradictory policy signals and improves strategic consistency.

Evidence basis
Section 4.9.

5.4.8 Support Local Civil Society

Local organisations frequently possess the strongest contextual understanding of FoRB challenges.

Donor governments should provide long-term, flexible support for:

- legal aid;
- documentation;
- victim support;
- dialogue initiatives;
- community resilience;
- independent journalism.

Partnerships should prioritise locally led organisations while maintaining transparent accountability mechanisms.

Evidence basis
Sections 4.8 and 4.9.

5.4.9 Develop Evidence-Based FoRB Indicators

Development cooperation increasingly relies upon measurable outcomes.

FoRB indicators should therefore distinguish between:

- legal reform;
- institutional implementation;
- access to services;
- documented violations;
- accountability;
- evidence confidence.

Incident totals alone provide an incomplete basis for programme evaluation.

The NORF methodology demonstrates how structural indicators can complement quantitative monitoring.

Evidence basis
Sections 4.3 and 4.6.

5.4.10 Preserve Long-Term Engagement

Structural change requires sustained engagement.

The comparative assessment demonstrates that improvements in Freedom of Religion or Belief rarely occur within short funding cycles.

Donor governments should therefore:

- maintain long-term partnerships;
- support institutional memory;
- preserve documentation;
- encourage longitudinal research;
- evaluate cumulative progress.

Consistent engagement strengthens both accountability and policy effectiveness.

Evidence basis
Sections 4.6–4.9.

5.4.11 Ensure That Serious Violations Are Neither Ignored Nor Forgotten

The evidence gathered throughout this report demonstrates that systematic violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief often persist because documentation is fragmented, institutional memory is weak and international attention shifts rapidly between crises.

Donor governments should therefore support long-term evidence preservation, secure documentation and independent archival initiatives capable of maintaining verified records of serious violations over time. Such efforts strengthen future accountability mechanisms, enable longitudinal analysis and ensure that victims and affected communities are not rendered invisible as political priorities evolve.

This recommendation does **not** imply predetermined legal outcomes. Rather, it reflects the principle that credible documentation should be preserved so that future investigators, courts, truth commissions and policymakers have access to reliable evidence if and when accountability mechanisms become available.

As the NORF methodology emphasises throughout this report**,** justice often depends upon evidence that was collected years before accountability became possible.

Evidence basis
Sections 3.A.9, 3.B.9, 3.C.9, 4.3, 4.8 and 4.9.

NORF Comparative Assessment

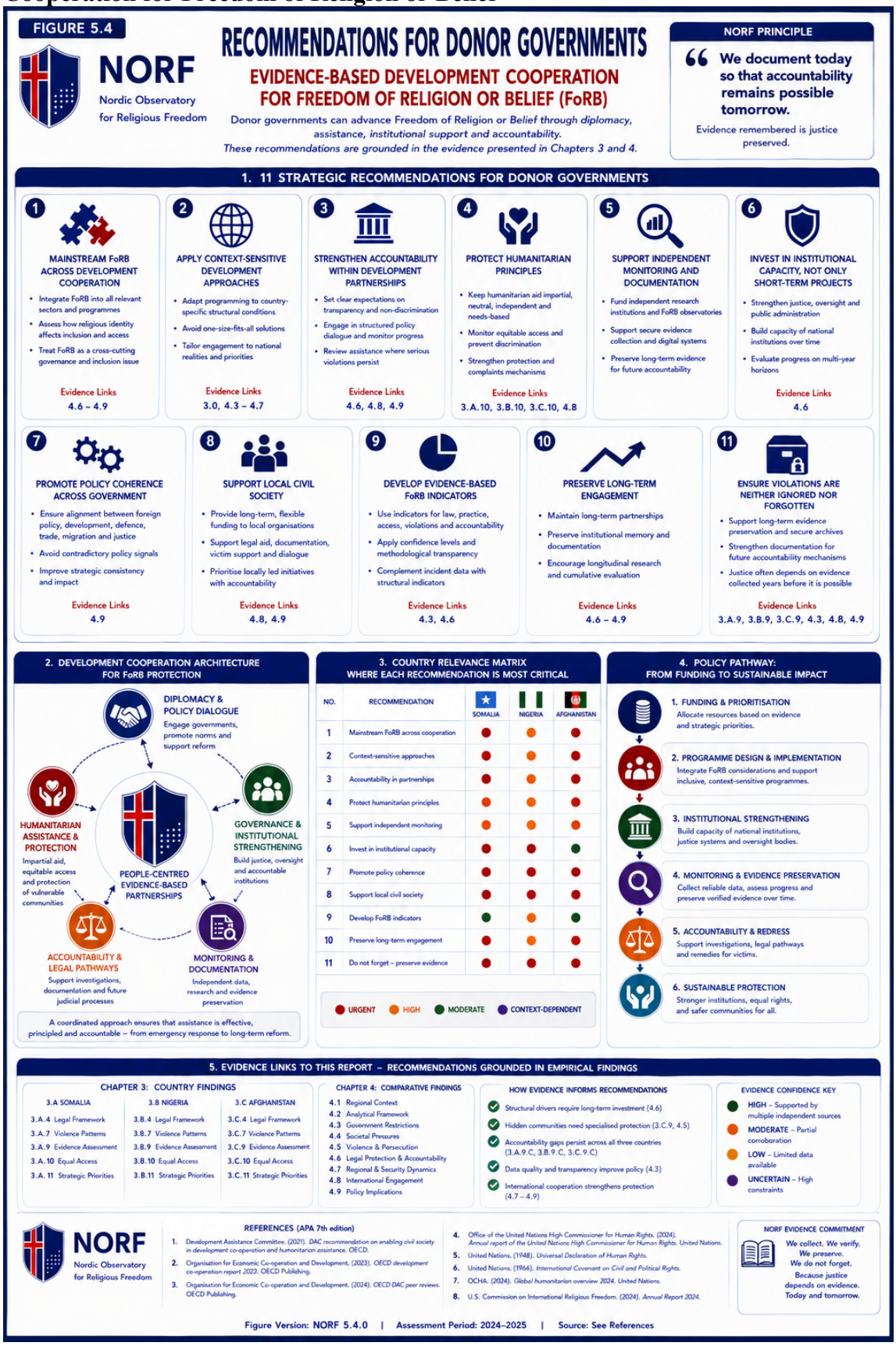
The comparative evidence indicates that donor governments are most effective when development cooperation is evidence-driven, context-sensitive and institutionally focused. Across Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan, assistance that strengthens governance, accountability, independent monitoring and equitable access to public services is more likely to contribute to long-term improvements than short-term or isolated interventions.

The analysis also demonstrates that donor engagement should distinguish clearly between humanitarian assistance and governance cooperation. Humanitarian aid must remain impartial and needs-based, while governance partnerships should incorporate transparent expectations regarding accountability, non-discrimination and implementation of internationally recognised human rights standards.

Finally, the report underscores the importance of institutional memory. Serious violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief frequently become prosecutable or politically actionable only after prolonged periods of conflict or political transition. Preserving reliable evidence today therefore

strengthens the possibility of accountability tomorrow. This principle underpins the NORF commitment to systematic documentation, methodological transparency and long-term comparative research.

Figure 5.4 - **Recommendations for Donor Governments: Evidence-Based Development Cooperation for Freedom of Religion or Belief**



References (APA 7th edition)

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5.5 Recommendations for Humanitarian and Development Agencies

Scope

Humanitarian and development organisations occupy a unique position in the protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB). They frequently operate in environments where state institutions are weak, conflict is ongoing and vulnerable communities face multiple forms of discrimination. Their primary mandate remains the provision of impartial, needs-based assistance. Nevertheless, the comparative assessment presented in this report demonstrates that religious identity may significantly influence access to protection, humanitarian assistance and public services.

The recommendations presented below are intended for United Nations agencies, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, international and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs), faith-based humanitarian organisations and development agencies operating in fragile and conflict-affected environments.

These recommendations do not advocate preferential treatment based on religion. Rather, they seek to ensure that humanitarian action recognises and addresses documented patterns of religious vulnerability while remaining fully consistent with international humanitarian principles.

5.5.1 Integrate FoRB into Humanitarian Needs Assessments

Humanitarian needs assessments should explicitly examine whether religion or belief influences vulnerability, access to assistance or exposure to protection risks.

Assessment tools should consider:

- discrimination during aid distribution;
- exclusion from public services;
- barriers affecting religious minorities;
- threats linked to religious identity;
- access to complaint mechanisms.

FoRB indicators should complement—not replace—existing protection assessments concerning gender, age, disability and displacement.

Evidence basis

Sections 3.A.10, 3.B.10, 3.C.10 and 4.8.

5.5.2 Ensure Equal and Non-Discriminatory Access to Assistance

Humanitarian assistance should remain impartial and based exclusively on need.

Agencies should establish procedures to detect and prevent discrimination during:

- beneficiary registration;
- aid distribution;
- shelter allocation;
- food assistance;
- healthcare delivery;
- education programmes;
- livelihoods support.

Monitoring systems should identify whether religious minorities encounter unequal treatment by local authorities, implementing partners or community structures.

Evidence basis
Sections 3.A.10, 3.B.10, 3.C.10 and 4.9.

5.5.3 Strengthen Protection of High-Risk Religious Communities

The comparative assessment identifies Christian converts and clandestine Christian communities in Somalia and Afghanistan, together with conflict-affected Christian communities in northern and central Nigeria, as particularly vulnerable populations.

Protection strategies should include:

- confidential referral mechanisms;
- secure case management;
- emergency relocation where appropriate;
- psychosocial support;
- legal assistance;
- protection of personal data.

Agencies should avoid programme designs that require individuals to disclose religious identity where doing so may increase security risks.

Evidence basis
Sections 3.A.9.C, 3.B.9.C, 3.C.9.C and 4.5.

5.5.4 Strengthen Community-Based Protection

Local communities often identify emerging risks before formal institutions.

Humanitarian organisations should support:

- community protection committees;
- confidential reporting networks;
- local mediation initiatives;
- protection focal points;
- inclusive community dialogue.

Community engagement should strengthen social cohesion while avoiding the delegation of protection responsibilities that properly belong to public authorities.

Evidence basis
Sections 4.6 and 4.7.

5.5.5 Improve Staff Capacity on FoRB

Operational staff should understand how religious identity may influence vulnerability.

Training should include:

- Freedom of Religion or Belief standards;
- religious literacy;
- protection of converts;
- confidentiality;
- cultural competence;
- conflict sensitivity;
- referral pathways.

Training should focus upon operational decision-making rather than theological knowledge.

Evidence basis
Sections 4.6 and 4.8.

5.5.6 Protect Sensitive Information

Information concerning religious identity requires particular protection.

Agencies should establish clear procedures governing:

- informed consent;
- secure data storage;
- restricted access;
- anonymisation;
- encrypted communications;
- information sharing.

Protection of personal information is especially important in countries where disclosure of religious identity may expose individuals to violence, detention or social exclusion.

Evidence basis
Sections 3.C.9, 4.3 and 4.8.

5.5.7 Strengthen Evidence-Based Protection Programming

Protection programmes should be based upon documented patterns rather than assumptions.

Agencies should combine:

- incident reporting;

- community consultations;
- protection monitoring;
- conflict analysis;
- legal assessment;
- independent verification.

The NORF methodology illustrates how structural analysis strengthens operational understanding beyond individual incidents.

Evidence basis
Sections 4.3–4.6.

5.5.8 Cooperate Across Humanitarian Sectors

FoRB intersects with multiple humanitarian sectors.

Protection considerations should therefore be integrated into:

- shelter;
- food security;
- education;
- health;
- child protection;
- gender-based violence;
- livelihoods;
- durable solutions.

Cross-sectoral coordination reduces protection gaps affecting religious minorities.

Evidence basis
Sections 4.7–4.9.

5.5.9 Strengthen Local Partnerships

Local organisations frequently possess detailed contextual knowledge.

Humanitarian agencies should establish long-term partnerships with:

- community organisations;
- local NGOs;
- faith-based organisations;
- women's organisations;
- youth organisations;
- human rights defenders.

Partnerships should remain inclusive and evidence-based while avoiding exclusive reliance upon any single religious actor.

Evidence basis
Sections 4.8 and 4.9.

5.5.10 Monitor Outcomes Rather Than Activities

Programme evaluation should assess whether protection has improved rather than merely recording activities undertaken.

Indicators may include:

- improved access to assistance;
- reduced discrimination;
- strengthened protection mechanisms;
- beneficiary confidence;
- documented institutional improvements;
- improved evidence quality.

Outcome-based evaluation strengthens organisational learning and accountability.

Evidence basis
Sections 4.3 and 4.9.

5.5.11 Preserve Evidence While Protecting Survivors

Humanitarian organisations frequently become the first institutions to document serious violations.

Where appropriate and with informed consent, agencies should preserve verified information regarding serious FoRB violations using secure documentation standards that protect victims, witnesses and staff.

Such documentation should never compromise humanitarian neutrality or beneficiary safety. Its primary purpose is to:

- strengthen protection programming;
- improve institutional learning;
- support future accountability where lawful mechanisms exist;
- preserve historical evidence.

As reflected throughout the NORF methodology:

"We document today so that accountability remains possible tomorrow."

Evidence preserved ethically and securely contributes not only to future justice but also to improved humanitarian protection, more accurate risk analysis and stronger institutional memory.

Evidence basis
Sections 3.A.9, 3.B.9, 3.C.9, 4.3, 4.5, 4.8 and 4.9.

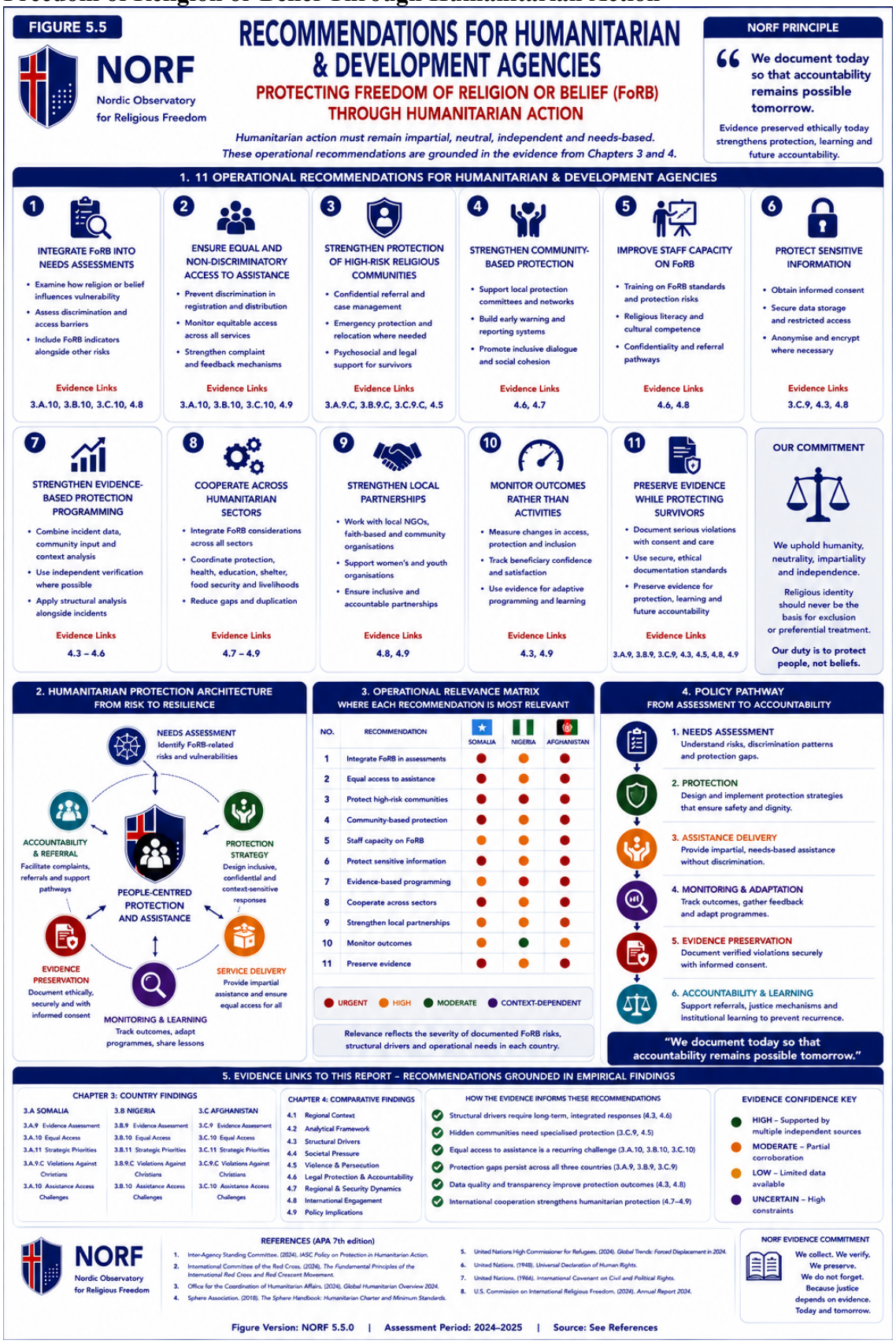
NORF Comparative Assessment

Humanitarian and development agencies cannot resolve the structural causes of Freedom of Religion or Belief violations alone. Nevertheless, they play a decisive role in mitigating immediate risks, strengthening community resilience and ensuring that humanitarian assistance reaches vulnerable populations without discrimination.

The comparative findings demonstrate that FoRB considerations are most effective when integrated across protection, health, education, food security and livelihoods programming rather than treated as a specialised thematic activity. Operational responses should remain impartial and needs-based while recognising that religious identity may significantly influence patterns of vulnerability.

Finally, humanitarian actors contribute to long-term accountability through responsible documentation and preservation of verified evidence. When undertaken ethically and securely, documentation strengthens both immediate protection and future justice without compromising humanitarian principles. This reinforces a central NORF commitment: systematic evidence preservation is an essential component of protecting Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Figure 5.5 - **Recommendations for Humanitarian and Development Agencies: Protecting Freedom of Religion or Belief Through Humanitarian Action**



References (APA 7th edition)

Inter-Agency Standing Committee. (2024). *IASC Policy on Protection in Humanitarian Action*.

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5.6 Recommendations for Civil Society and Faith-Based Organisations

Scope

Civil society organisations and faith-based organisations operate close to affected communities and often detect violations before national or international institutions. They provide documentation, legal assistance, humanitarian support, community protection and public advocacy. In restricted environments, they may also constitute the only accessible channel through which victims can report abuse.

Their proximity to communities creates both opportunity and responsibility. Documentation must be verifiable. Assistance must remain non-discriminatory. Advocacy must not expose victims or hidden religious communities to additional danger. Faith-based organisations should protect persons on the basis of need and rights rather than religious affiliation.

The recommendations below apply to national and international non-governmental organisations, churches and church networks, interfaith bodies, human rights organisations, survivor associations, legal-aid providers and community-based groups.

5.6.1 Establish Secure Documentation Systems

Civil society organisations should maintain structured systems for recording FoRB violations. Documentation should distinguish between verified incidents, unconfirmed allegations, witness testimony, contextual information and analytical assessment.

Minimum documentation fields should include:

- date and location;
- type of violation;
- affected religious community;
- number of victims;
- alleged perpetrator;
- source type;
- verification status;
- evidence-confidence level;
- protection risks associated with disclosure.

Records should be preserved securely and updated when new evidence becomes available. Duplicate reports should be identified rather than counted as separate incidents.

Evidence basis
Sections 3.A.9, 3.B.9, 3.C.9, 4.3 and 4.5.

5.6.2 Protect Victims, Witnesses and Confidential Sources

Documentation must not increase the risk faced by victims or witnesses. Organisations should apply informed-consent procedures and assess whether publication could expose individuals, families or underground religious networks.

Protection measures should include:

- anonymisation;
- restricted access to identifying information;
- encrypted communication;
- secure evidence storage;
- risk-based publication decisions;
- referral pathways for emergency protection;
- procedures for withdrawing consent.

This is especially important for Christian converts and clandestine communities in Somalia and Afghanistan, where disclosure may result in detention, family violence, expulsion or killing.

Evidence basis
Sections 3.A.7–3.A.9, 3.C.7–3.C.9, 4.4 and 4.5.

5.6.3 Provide Community-Specific Legal Assistance

Civil society organisations should expand access to legal advice and representation for persons facing FoRB-related violations.

Legal assistance may include:

- representation in criminal and administrative proceedings;
- support following arbitrary detention;
- assistance with identity documents and registration;
- property and restitution claims;
- family-law disputes involving conversion;
- asylum and refugee claims;
- documentation for international mechanisms.

Legal support should reflect the circumstances of each community. A public litigation strategy may be appropriate in Nigeria but unsafe or unavailable for concealed Christians in Afghanistan or Somalia.

Evidence basis
Sections 3.A.4, 3.B.4, 3.C.4, 4.3.4 and 4.6.1.

5.6.4 Strengthen Survivor-Centred Support

Victims of FoRB violations may experience physical injury, psychological trauma, displacement, loss of livelihood and family separation. Civil society and faith-based organisations should provide or facilitate coordinated support.

Relevant services include:

- medical care;
- trauma-informed psychosocial support;
- emergency accommodation;
- livelihood assistance;
- family tracing;
- relocation support;
- legal referral;
- long-term case management.

Support should be based on consent and assessed need. Survivors should not be pressured to participate in advocacy, media work or religious testimony.

Evidence basis
Sections 3.A.9.C, 3.B.9.C, 3.C.9.C, 4.5 and 5.5.

5.6.5 Develop Community-Based Early-Warning Networks

Local organisations are often best placed to detect changes in threat levels. Civil society networks should establish early-warning mechanisms capable of identifying:

- threats against places of worship;
- mobilisation by armed groups;
- disappearance or abduction patterns;
- inflammatory public messaging;
- forced displacement;
- restrictions imposed by local authorities;
- changes in treatment of converts or minority communities.

Information should be assessed before dissemination. Warning systems should connect local observers with protection actors, authorities and humanitarian agencies without exposing confidential sources.

Evidence basis

Sections 4.5–4.7 and 5.2.4.

5.6.6 Support Local Documentation Capacity

International organisations should strengthen local documentation rather than extracting information without developing sustainable local capacity.

Support should include:

- training in interviewing and verification;
- secure data management;
- research ethics;
- digital security;
- evidence-confidence assessment;
- geospatial documentation;
- long-term institutional funding.

Local partners should retain appropriate control over the information they collect. Funding arrangements should recognise the security costs and time required to verify serious violations.

Evidence basis

Sections 4.3, 4.8, 5.3 and 5.4.

5.6.7 Promote Responsible Public Advocacy

Public advocacy can increase protection and accountability, but poorly designed advocacy may expose victims or intensify communal tensions.

Organisations should:

- verify claims before publication;
- distinguish evidence from inference;
- avoid unsupported casualty figures;
- identify methodological limitations;
- use community-specific terminology;
- obtain consent before publishing personal accounts;
- correct material errors transparently.

Advocacy should avoid portraying complex conflicts as exclusively religious where land, ethnicity, criminality or political competition also influence violence. Religious motivation should neither be exaggerated nor omitted where evidence supports it.

Evidence basis
Sections 3.B.9.C, 4.4, 4.5 and 4.9.

5.6.8 Strengthen Interfaith and Intra-Faith Engagement

Religious and community leaders can reduce tension, challenge incitement and strengthen local protection. Dialogue initiatives should be linked to documented risks and measurable protection objectives.

Possible activities include:

- joint condemnation of violence;
- referral mechanisms for threatened individuals;
- community mediation;
- protection of places of worship;
- local peace committees;
- religious-literacy initiatives;
- engagement with youth and women.

Dialogue should not be used to pressure victims into reconciliation or silence. Nor should it substitute for investigation, prosecution or institutional accountability.

Evidence basis
Sections 3.A.5–3.A.7, 3.B.5–3.B.7, 4.6.3 and 5.2.11.

5.6.9 Maintain Non-Discriminatory Assistance

Faith-based organisations should ensure that humanitarian, legal and social support is provided on the basis of vulnerability and need.

Assistance should not require:

- participation in religious activities;
- conversion;
- disclosure of belief where unnecessary;
- affiliation with a particular denomination;
- public testimony.

Transparent eligibility criteria and complaints mechanisms should be available. Partnerships with local religious institutions should be monitored to prevent exclusion of minority communities or non-believers.

Evidence basis
Sections 3.A.10, 3.B.10, 3.C.10, 4.8, 5.4 and 5.5.

5.6.10 Build Coalitions Across Sectors and Borders

FoRB violations frequently intersect with displacement, gender-based violence, armed conflict, trafficking and restrictions on civil society. Effective responses therefore require cooperation beyond specialised religious-freedom organisations.

Coalitions should include:

- human rights organisations;
- humanitarian agencies;
- women's organisations;
- legal-aid providers;
- journalists;
- academic institutions;
- refugee organisations;
- religious and non-religious community groups.

Cross-border cooperation is particularly relevant where Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, ISWAP, ISKP and displacement flows extend beyond national jurisdictions.

Evidence basis
Sections 4.7–4.9 and 5.3.7.

5.6.11 Preserve Evidence for Future Accountability

Civil society organisations often preserve evidence during periods when courts, investigators and national institutions are unable or unwilling to act. This role requires long-term institutional commitment.

Evidence-preservation systems should include:

- secure archival storage;

- documented chains of custody;
- metadata preservation;
- source-protection protocols;
- verification histories;
- procedures for lawful transfer to investigators;
- continuity planning when organisations close or staff relocate.

Documentation should not presume criminal responsibility. Its purpose is to preserve reliable information so that future courts, commissions of inquiry, truth processes and researchers can assess the evidence independently.

We document today so that accountability remains possible tomorrow.

NORF should accumulate verified information across successive reports, retain corrections and preserve earlier assessments. Institutional memory is essential because accountability may emerge years after the original violation.

Evidence basis

Sections 3.A.9, 3.B.9, 3.C.9, 4.3, 4.8, 4.9 and 5.3–5.5.

Country-Specific Priorities

Somalia

Priority should be given to secure documentation, protection of converts, early warning in Al-Shabaab-affected areas, confidential referral mechanisms and support for displaced Christians. Public identification of underground believers should be avoided.

Nigeria

Priority should be given to casualty and abduction documentation, legal assistance, survivor support, monitoring of attacks on churches and villages, and preservation of evidence concerning the conduct of armed groups and public institutions.

Afghanistan

Priority should be given to source protection, secure remote documentation, assistance to converts and other hidden communities, refugee support and preservation of evidence concerning detention, coercion and institutional religious restrictions.

Priority Matrix

Recommendation area	Somalia	Nigeria	Afghanistan
Secure documentation	Urgent	Urgent	Urgent
Protection of confidential sources	Urgent	High	Urgent

Recommendation area	Somalia	Nigeria	Afghanistan
Legal assistance	High	Urgent	Context-dependent
Survivor-centred support	Urgent	Urgent	Urgent
Early-warning networks	Urgent	Urgent	High
Local documentation capacity	Urgent	High	Urgent
Responsible advocacy	High	Urgent	Urgent
Interfaith and community engagement	High	High	Context-dependent
Non-discriminatory assistance	High	High	Urgent
Cross-sector and cross-border coalitions	Urgent	Urgent	High
Evidence preservation	Urgent	Urgent	Urgent

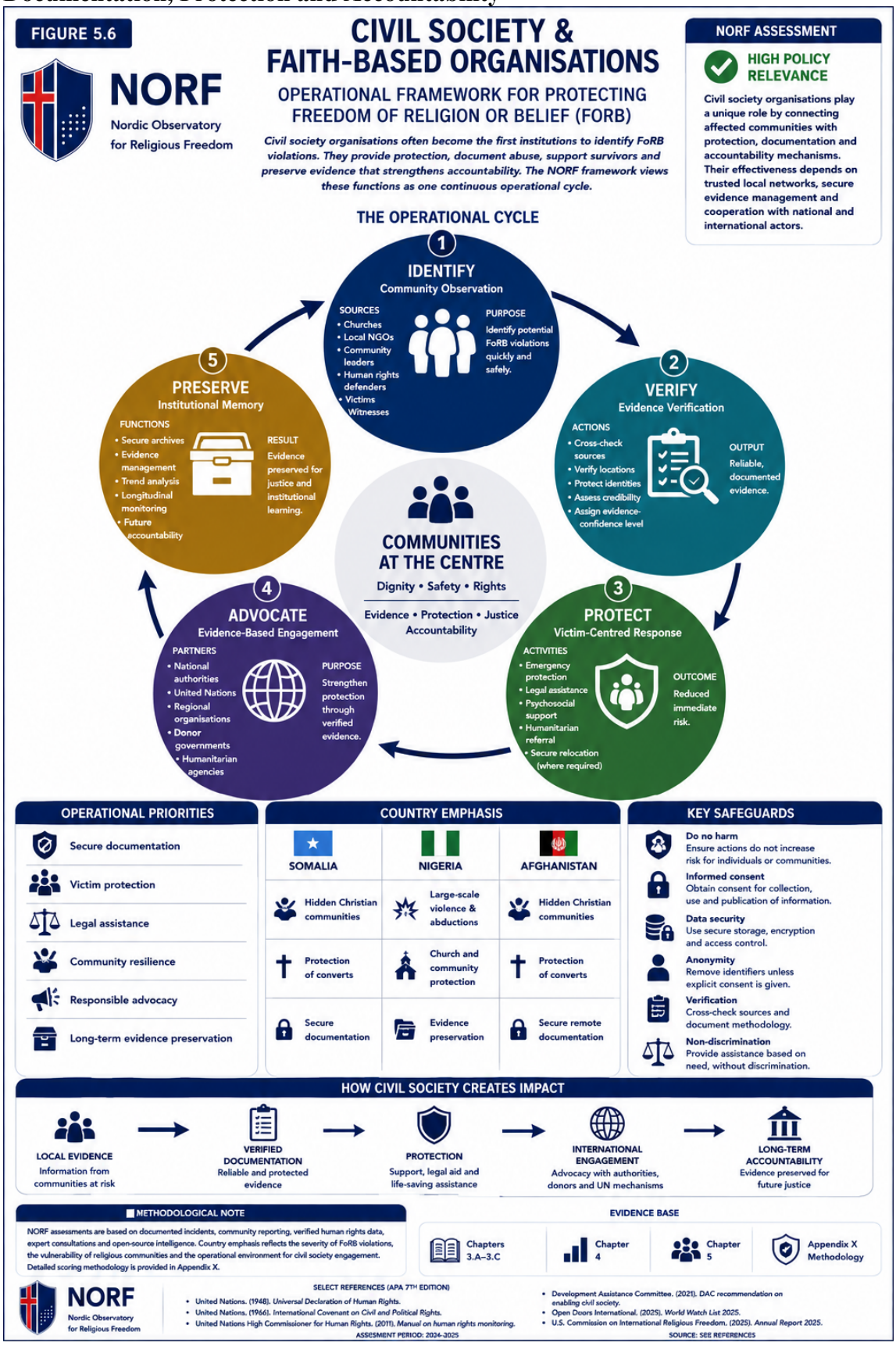
NORF Assessment

Civil society and faith-based organisations are indispensable to FoRB protection because they connect affected communities with legal, humanitarian and international mechanisms. Their contribution is strongest where documentation, protection and assistance are integrated rather than conducted as separate activities.

The comparative findings also establish clear limits. Civil society cannot replace public institutions, and dialogue cannot substitute for accountability. Documentation must remain methodologically rigorous; assistance must remain non-discriminatory; advocacy must protect rather than expose victims.

The long-term preservation of verified evidence is a central responsibility. Violations that cannot be investigated today may become subject to legal or historical scrutiny later. Accumulated documentation therefore supports immediate protection, future accountability and an accurate public record.

Figure 5.6 - **Recommendations for Civil Society and Faith-Based Organisations: Documentation, Protection and Accountability**



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5.7 International Recognition, Policy Responses, and the Limits of External Protection

Although the scale and persistence of religious persecution have attracted increasing international attention, external protection for persecuted Christians remains uneven and frequently constrained by geopolitical priorities. International organisations, governments, and civil society actors have expanded documentation, monitoring, sanctions, and humanitarian assistance, yet empirical evidence suggests that these measures have had only limited success in reducing severe violations of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB).

The United Nations has progressively strengthened the normative framework protecting FoRB through Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), and the work of the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief. Despite these legal standards, implementation remains inconsistent because enforcement depends largely on state cooperation rather than compulsory international mechanisms.

A parallel system of monitoring has developed through specialised institutions. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) annually evaluates countries where governments engage in or tolerate severe violations of religious freedom. Between the 2021 and

2024 reports, several countries—including Afghanistan, Iran, Nigeria, Pakistan, North Korea, China, Eritrea, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Russia, and Burma (Myanmar)—consistently appeared among the most serious violators, indicating remarkable stability in patterns of persecution despite sustained international attention. Cuba and Nicaragua were elevated from the Special Watch List to Countries of Particular Concern (CPCs), while Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan were added to USCIRF's monitoring framework as conditions deteriorated.

Similarly, the Pew Research Center's Government Restrictions Index demonstrates that restrictions on religion remain concentrated in many of the same countries identified by USCIRF and Open Doors. The convergence of independent datasets increases confidence that observed patterns reflect genuine long-term structural conditions rather than methodological artefacts.

International responses generally fall into four categories:

- **Normative pressure**, including UN resolutions and diplomatic statements.
- **Monitoring and reporting**, undertaken by organisations such as USCIRF, the U.S. State Department, Open Doors, CSW, Aid to the Church in Need, and Human Rights Watch.
- **Targeted sanctions**, including Magnitsky-style sanctions against individuals responsible for serious human rights abuses.
- **Humanitarian protection**, including asylum, refugee resettlement, emergency assistance, and support for displaced religious minorities.

However, evidence regarding effectiveness is mixed. Sanctions have occasionally increased political costs for perpetrators, particularly through visa restrictions and asset freezes, but they rarely alter behaviour where regimes possess strong domestic control or alternative geopolitical alliances. USCIRF itself repeatedly notes that many governments designated as Countries of Particular Concern remain under existing sanctions with little measurable improvement in religious freedom conditions from year to year.

For Christians living under violent non-state actors, international leverage is even more limited. Groups such as Boko Haram, Islamic State affiliates, al-Shabaab, and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham operate beyond conventional diplomatic influence. Although several have been designated as Entities of Particular Concern under the International Religious Freedom Act, military and humanitarian responses have generally proved more influential than diplomatic condemnation alone. USCIRF has consistently recommended maintaining these designations due to continuing systematic attacks on religious communities.

Academic research likewise suggests that external advocacy is most effective when combined with strong domestic institutions. Countries with functioning legal systems, independent courts, and active civil society organisations are more responsive to international pressure than highly authoritarian regimes. In contrast, where persecution forms part of state ideology or broader political conflict, international interventions rarely produce rapid improvements.

The persistence of many countries on annual monitoring lists illustrates this limitation. Afghanistan has remained among the world's most dangerous countries for Christians since the Taliban's return to power in 2021, while North Korea, Iran, Eritrea, Pakistan, and China have appeared consistently among the most severe violators across successive international reports. Rather than reflecting

policy failure alone, this continuity highlights the structural nature of religious persecution, which is often embedded within political systems, security institutions, and ideological governance.

Nevertheless, international reporting remains important. Documentation contributes to accountability, preserves evidence for future legal proceedings, guides humanitarian assistance, informs asylum decisions, and raises the political costs of repression. Even where immediate behavioural change is limited, sustained international scrutiny helps prevent abuses from remaining invisible.

Consequently, external protection should be understood not as a substitute for domestic reform but as part of a broader ecosystem of prevention, accountability, humanitarian response, and international norm enforcement. While international mechanisms alone seldom eliminate persecution, they play a critical role in documenting violations, mobilising diplomatic pressure, and supporting vulnerable religious communities in contexts where domestic protection is absent.

5.8 Asylum, Forced Displacement, and International Protection

Religious persecution is not only a violation of fundamental human rights but also a significant driver of forced displacement. For many persecuted Christians, migration is not motivated by economic opportunity but by the need to escape imprisonment, violence, discrimination, or death. Consequently, international refugee law increasingly intersects with the protection of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), making religion an important ground for asylum claims.

The legal foundation for international protection is established by the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, which define a refugee as a person with a well-founded fear of persecution based on one or more protected grounds, including religion. According to Article 1A(2), states must provide protection when individuals cannot safely return to their country of origin because of such persecution. This principle is reinforced by the prohibition of refoulement under Article 33, which prohibits returning refugees to territories where their life or freedom would be threatened because of religion or other protected characteristics.

Religious persecution constitutes one of the five recognised Convention grounds, yet establishing asylum eligibility often requires demonstrating not only religious identity but also an individualised risk of persecution. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) emphasises that persecution may include restrictions on religious practice, criminalisation of conversion, imprisonment for religious activities, threats from state or non-state actors, or cumulative discrimination sufficiently severe to violate fundamental human rights.

Empirical evidence demonstrates that many countries with the highest levels of Christian persecution are also significant sources of refugees and asylum seekers. Afghanistan, following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, experienced one of the world's largest humanitarian displacement crises. USCIRF documented that Christian converts, together with Ahmadi Muslims, Baha'is, Sikhs, Hindus, and other religious minorities, were forced into hiding or fled the country due to credible fears of persecution under the Taliban's interpretation of Islamic law. The Commission consequently recommended Afghanistan's designation as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC), noting the severe deterioration of religious freedom following the regime change.

Similarly, persecution in countries such as Eritrea, Iran, Nigeria, Pakistan, North Korea, and Myanmar has contributed to sustained refugee movements over many years. In Eritrea, indefinite military service, imprisonment of unregistered Christians, and restrictions on religious practice continue to drive outward migration. In Pakistan, blasphemy laws and mob violence create ongoing insecurity for Christians and other religious minorities. Nigeria presents a more complex situation, where attacks by Boko Haram, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), and armed bandits have generated extensive internal displacement alongside international refugee flows. These countries have consistently appeared among USCIRF's most serious religious freedom concerns across successive annual reports.

Open Doors reports indicate that millions of Christians experience displacement annually due to persecution, conflict, or targeted violence. While precise attribution remains methodologically difficult because displacement is often multi-causal, religious identity frequently interacts with ethnic, political, and regional conflicts. In Nigeria, for example, attacks frequently target Christian farming communities in the Middle Belt, where religious identity overlaps with competition over land and political authority. Likewise, in Myanmar, ethnic and religious identities are closely intertwined, making displacement difficult to attribute exclusively to religion.

These complexities create significant challenges within asylum systems. Decision-makers must distinguish between individuals fleeing generalised violence and those facing persecution specifically because of religion. UNHCR therefore emphasises that religion-based claims should consider both direct and indirect forms of persecution, including restrictions on religious expression, forced conversion, denial of education or employment, destruction of places of worship, and cumulative patterns of discrimination that make normal life impossible.

Research also demonstrates that religious asylum claims present unique evidentiary difficulties. Converts from Islam to Christianity often cannot produce documentary evidence of their faith, particularly where public religious practice is impossible or dangerous. Consequently, asylum authorities frequently rely upon credibility assessments, interviews, knowledge of religious practice, witness testimony, and country-of-origin information. Several studies have criticised these procedures for inconsistently evaluating religious belief, sometimes relying on stereotypical expectations regarding theological knowledge or patterns of worship rather than recognising the diversity of religious experience.

Another important challenge concerns internal relocation. States may reject asylum applications if applicants can theoretically relocate safely within their country of origin. However, where persecution originates from national legislation, intelligence services, or widespread societal hostility, internal relocation may offer little genuine protection. This is particularly evident in highly centralised authoritarian states such as Iran, North Korea, or Eritrea, where state surveillance extends throughout national territory. Likewise, in Afghanistan after 2021, USCIRF concluded that Christians and other religious minorities faced nationwide risks under Taliban rule rather than geographically limited threats.

Despite the existence of robust international legal protections, access to asylum remains uneven across receiving countries. Recognition rates for religion-based claims vary considerably depending on national asylum systems, evidentiary standards, and broader migration policies. Political concerns surrounding irregular migration have, in some jurisdictions, led to increasingly restrictive asylum procedures that may inadvertently disadvantage applicants fleeing religious persecution.

Nevertheless, asylum remains one of the few international protection mechanisms capable of offering durable individual solutions when domestic protection has entirely failed. Unlike diplomatic pressure or sanctions, refugee protection directly removes individuals from environments where persecution threatens their lives or freedom. At the same time, asylum addresses only the consequences rather than the causes of persecution. Sustainable protection ultimately depends upon improvements in religious freedom within countries of origin through stronger rule of law, institutional reform, accountability for perpetrators, and greater respect for internationally recognised human rights.

Chapter 6 – Conclusions and Future Perspectives

6.1 Main Findings

Introduction

This report has examined the contemporary persecution of Christians through a comparative assessment of Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan using the NORF analytical framework. The objective has not been merely to document individual incidents but to identify the structural conditions that enable or sustain violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB). By combining country-level analysis with comparative assessment and evidence-based recommendations, the report provides an integrated understanding of how religious persecution develops, why it persists and where policy interventions are most likely to strengthen protection.

Across all three case studies, the evidence demonstrates that persecution of Christians remains both severe and structurally embedded. Although the forms of persecution differ, each country exhibits persistent restrictions on the ability of Christians to hold, change, manifest or practise their religion freely. These restrictions arise through different combinations of state policy, extremist violence, social pressure and institutional weakness, but they ultimately produce similar outcomes: reduced religious freedom, increased insecurity and diminished access to justice.

The comparative assessment further demonstrates that persecution cannot be understood solely through incident statistics. Countries with relatively few documented attacks may nevertheless present extreme levels of religious repression where Christians are forced to conceal their faith, avoid public worship or abandon religious practice entirely. Afghanistan illustrates this dynamic particularly clearly. The apparent absence of large numbers of publicly documented incidents reflects the near-total invisibility of the Christian community rather than the absence of persecution. Conversely, Nigeria records very high levels of documented violence because a substantial Christian population remains publicly visible despite persistent attacks.

A second principal finding concerns the interaction between government practice and societal violence. None of the three countries demonstrates a single pattern of persecution. Somalia combines insurgent violence, clan structures and weak state institutions. Nigeria exhibits constitutional protection alongside serious failures of implementation and recurring attacks by armed non-state actors. Afghanistan represents the opposite end of the spectrum, where state institutions themselves have become primary instruments of religious restriction following the

Taliban's return to power in 2021. These differences reinforce the conclusion that effective policy responses must be tailored to national contexts rather than relying on universal solutions.

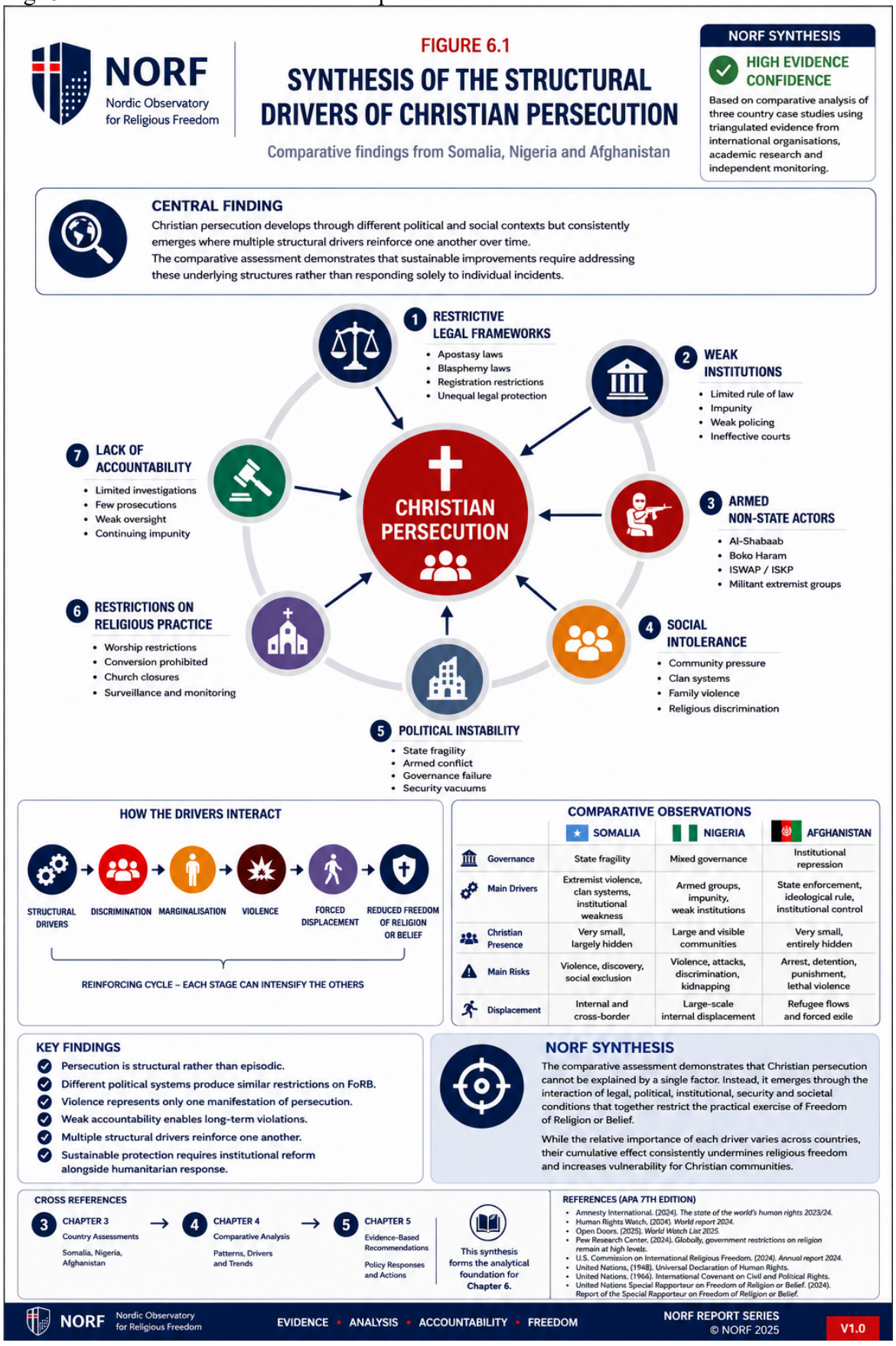
The comparative evidence also indicates that persecution is cumulative. Legal discrimination, social exclusion, economic marginalisation, intimidation and violence frequently reinforce one another over extended periods. Individual incidents therefore cannot be interpreted in isolation but should be understood within broader systems of governance, security and social control. This cumulative perspective explains why improvements in one sector—for example humanitarian assistance or judicial reform—may remain insufficient unless accompanied by broader institutional change.

Another important finding concerns methodology. The report demonstrates the value of combining multiple independent evidence sources through explicit triangulation and confidence assessment. International datasets, governmental reporting, academic research and civil society documentation frequently converge despite methodological differences, strengthening confidence in the overall conclusions. At the same time, significant evidence gaps remain for clandestine religious communities, particularly Christian converts and underground churches operating in Afghanistan and Somalia. These limitations highlight the importance of interpreting quantitative data as minimum documented levels of persecution rather than exhaustive measures of all violations.

Finally, the report demonstrates that accountability depends upon continuity of documentation. Patterns of persecution often persist for many years before meaningful political or judicial opportunities emerge. Systematic evidence preservation therefore serves not only immediate policy analysis but also future investigations, historical documentation and legal accountability. The NORF approach emphasises that rigorous documentation, transparent methodology and cumulative institutional memory are essential components of long-term protection for Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Taken together, these findings indicate that Christian persecution remains a significant global human rights concern whose manifestations differ across political and cultural contexts but whose structural drivers are increasingly well documented. Effective responses require sustained monitoring, context-specific policy engagement, institutional strengthening and continued commitment to the universal protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Fig. 6.1 Structural drivers of christian persecution



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6.2 Answering the Research Question

Introduction

The primary objective of this report has been to examine the contemporary persecution of Christians through a systematic assessment of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan. More specifically, the study sought to determine whether Christians constitute one of the world's most severely persecuted religious communities and to identify the structural conditions that explain observed patterns of persecution.

The comparative evidence presented throughout Chapters 3–5 provides a clear answer to this research question. Christians are among the most severely persecuted religious communities globally. However, the nature and intensity of persecution vary considerably across political, legal and societal contexts. Consequently, no single explanatory model adequately accounts for all observed violations. Rather, persecution emerges through different combinations of state policy, extremist violence, social exclusion and institutional weakness.

Christians as a High-Risk Religious Community

The empirical evidence demonstrates that Christians face severe restrictions on Freedom of Religion or Belief across a wide range of political systems. International monitoring organisations—including USCIRF, Open Doors, the United Nations and numerous human rights organisations—consistently identify Christians among the religious communities most frequently affected by killings, arbitrary detention, forced displacement, discrimination, destruction of places of worship and restrictions on religious practice.

The three case studies illustrate distinct manifestations of this broader pattern.

In **Somalia**, persecution is primarily driven by the interaction between extremist violence, clan structures and weak state institutions. Christians, particularly converts from Islam, face severe risks of discovery, social exclusion and lethal violence. The effective absence of publicly functioning Christian communities reflects the extreme insecurity associated with Christian identity rather than the absence of religious diversity.

In **Nigeria**, Christians experience large-scale violence from multiple armed actors operating within an environment characterised by constitutional protection but uneven implementation of the rule of law. Attacks on villages, churches, clergy and civilians demonstrate that legal guarantees alone cannot ensure effective protection where institutional capacity remains insufficient and impunity persists.

In **Afghanistan**, the return of Taliban rule in 2021 fundamentally altered the institutional environment. Christians, especially converts, now face persecution arising directly from the governing authorities in addition to broader societal risks. Public Christian worship has effectively disappeared, and many believers have entered clandestine religious networks or fled the country.

Although these contexts differ substantially, each demonstrates severe restrictions on the practical exercise of Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Persecution Is Structural Rather Than Incidental

A central finding of this report is that persecution should not be understood primarily through individual incidents of violence.

Killings, abductions, arbitrary detention and attacks on places of worship represent the visible manifestations of broader structural conditions that develop over extended periods. These conditions include discriminatory legal frameworks, weak judicial institutions, ideological governance, extremist mobilisation, social intolerance, impunity and limited institutional accountability.

The comparative assessment therefore indicates that sustained improvements require structural reform rather than reactive responses to individual crises. Humanitarian assistance, emergency security measures and diplomatic engagement remain important, but they cannot replace long-term investment in accountable institutions, equal application of the law and effective protection of fundamental rights.

Different Drivers Produce Similar Outcomes

One of the most significant conclusions emerging from the comparative analysis is that similar outcomes arise through different causal pathways.

Somalia illustrates persecution emerging from state fragility combined with extremist control.

Nigeria illustrates persecution arising despite constitutional protection because implementation remains inconsistent and armed non-state actors exercise substantial influence.

Afghanistan illustrates persecution embedded directly within the governing system through legal and administrative enforcement.

These differences demonstrate why generic policy responses frequently prove ineffective. Effective protection requires understanding the institutional mechanisms through which persecution develops in each context.

The Importance of Evidence-Based Assessment

The report also confirms the importance of rigorous methodology when assessing religious persecution.

Public debate often focuses upon headline casualty figures or isolated incidents. Such approaches risk overlooking hidden religious communities, cumulative discrimination and institutional restrictions that may be equally significant.

The NORF methodology therefore combines multiple independent evidence sources, explicit confidence assessments and comparative analysis to distinguish documented facts from analytical interpretation. This approach improves transparency while allowing policymakers to evaluate the strength of available evidence.

An important methodological conclusion follows from this analysis:

Absence of documented incidents should never be interpreted as absence of persecution.

This principle is particularly relevant for clandestine Christian communities operating in Afghanistan and Somalia, where public religious activity may itself be impossible.

Broader Implications

Although this report focuses on Christians, its findings extend beyond a single religious community.

The analytical framework developed by NORF is equally applicable to other communities facing restrictions on Freedom of Religion or Belief, including Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Bahá'ís, Ahmadis, Yazidis, indigenous religious communities and individuals choosing not to profess any religion.

The report therefore reinforces the universal character of Freedom of Religion or Belief as recognised under international human rights law. Protecting Christians does not require exceptional legal standards; it requires consistent implementation of rights that belong equally to every individual.

Answer to the Research Question

Based on the comparative evidence presented throughout this report, the answer to the central research question is affirmative.

Christians remain among the most severely persecuted religious communities globally. The evidence demonstrates that this persecution is not random or episodic but largely reflects identifiable structural conditions operating within political, legal and societal systems.

Accordingly, effective protection depends not only upon responding to individual violations but upon addressing the institutional environments that permit persecution to develop and persist. Sustainable improvements therefore require coordinated action involving national authorities, international organisations, donor governments, humanitarian agencies, civil society and independent monitoring institutions, supported by rigorous evidence and transparent methodology.

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6.3 Structural Drivers of Christian Persecution

Introduction

The comparative assessment presented in Chapters 3 and 4 demonstrates that Christian persecution does not arise from a single cause. Rather, it develops through the interaction of political, legal, institutional, security and societal conditions that together restrict the practical exercise of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB). While the relative importance of these factors differs between Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan, the overall pattern is remarkably consistent. Persecution is best understood as the cumulative effect of multiple structural drivers that reinforce one another over time.

This finding has important analytical implications. Responses focused exclusively on individual incidents—such as attacks on churches, killings or arbitrary arrests—address the visible manifestations of persecution but not the underlying conditions that enable such violations to occur. Sustainable improvements therefore require interventions that address the institutional, legal and societal environments in which persecution develops.

The NORF comparative framework identifies seven recurring structural drivers across the three case studies.

6.3.1 Restrictive Legal and Regulatory Frameworks

Legal systems establish the formal boundaries within which religious communities may exist. Where legislation criminalises apostasy, blasphemy, religious conversion or unregistered religious activity, persecution becomes embedded within the legal framework itself.

Afghanistan represents the clearest example. Following the Taliban's return to power in 2021, governance has been based upon an interpretation of Islamic law that leaves no legal space for conversion from Islam or for public Christian worship. Christians, particularly converts, therefore face legal and administrative risks independently of any specific criminal act.

Nigeria presents a different picture. Constitutional guarantees of religious freedom exist, but implementation varies across states, particularly where Sharia-based legal systems operate alongside civil law. Somalia occupies an intermediate position, where constitutional provisions formally recognise Islam as the state religion while weak institutional enforcement leaves significant influence to local power structures and extremist actors.

The comparative evidence indicates that legal restrictions are most harmful when reinforced by weak institutional oversight and limited judicial independence.

6.3.2 Weak Institutions and Impunity

The second structural driver concerns the capacity and willingness of public institutions to protect religious freedom.

Effective protection depends not only upon legislation but also upon functioning police services, independent courts, accountable public administration and credible investigative mechanisms. Where these institutions are weak, violations frequently remain uninvestigated and perpetrators avoid accountability.

Nigeria illustrates this dynamic particularly clearly. Although constitutional protections exist, repeated attacks on Christian communities have often resulted in limited investigation and relatively few successful prosecutions. In Somalia, weak state institutions leave large areas outside effective governmental control, allowing Al-Shabaab to exercise de facto authority. In Afghanistan, institutional weakness takes a different form: state institutions themselves enforce restrictions rather than protecting religious freedom.

Across all three countries, institutional weakness contributes to long-term impunity.

6.3.3 Armed Non-State Actors

Non-state armed groups remain among the most significant drivers of religious persecution in contemporary conflicts.

Al-Shabaab in Somalia, Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) in Nigeria, and Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) in Afghanistan have each targeted religious communities through killings, abductions, intimidation, forced displacement and attacks on places of worship.

These organisations differ in organisational structure and strategic objectives, yet they share several characteristics:

- rejection of religious pluralism;
- use of violence to enforce ideological control;
- deliberate targeting of religious minorities;
- attacks intended to create fear beyond immediate victims.

The comparative assessment demonstrates that non-state violence becomes particularly destructive where state institutions cannot provide effective protection.

6.3.4 Social Intolerance and Community Pressure

Not all persecution originates from governments or organised armed groups.

Family members, local communities, clan structures, employers and religious leaders may impose severe pressure upon individuals who convert, change religion or belong to minority faith communities.

This driver is particularly evident in Somalia and Afghanistan, where Christian converts frequently conceal their religious identity because discovery may result in expulsion from families, loss of livelihood, forced marriage, honour-based violence or death.

Although less pervasive in Nigeria, local tensions and community-level discrimination continue to influence the security environment in several regions.

The evidence therefore confirms that persecution should be understood as both an institutional and a societal phenomenon.

6.3.5 Political Instability and Armed Conflict

Political instability increases vulnerability for religious minorities by weakening governance, reducing public services and creating opportunities for armed actors.

Somalia has experienced prolonged institutional fragility for decades. Afghanistan underwent a profound political transformation following the Taliban takeover. Nigeria continues to confront overlapping security challenges involving insurgency, organised crime and communal violence.

While conflict alone does not inevitably produce religious persecution, it frequently reduces the state's capacity to protect minority communities and increases opportunities for ideological violence.

6.3.6 Restrictions on Religious Practice

Freedom of Religion or Belief extends beyond personal belief to include worship, teaching, assembly, observance and the manifestation of religion in public and private life.

Across the three case studies, restrictions include:

- prohibition of conversion;
- surveillance of religious communities;
- limitations on church construction;
- restrictions on public worship;
- intimidation of clergy;
- censorship of religious expression;
- obstacles to religious education.

These measures often receive less international attention than lethal violence but fundamentally undermine the practical exercise of FoRB.

6.3.7 Absence of Accountability

The final structural driver concerns accountability.

Persecution becomes self-reinforcing when violations remain undocumented, uninvestigated or unpunished.

The comparative evidence demonstrates that accountability operates at several levels:

- criminal accountability for perpetrators;
- administrative accountability for public institutions;
- political accountability through democratic oversight;
- international accountability through monitoring and reporting;
- historical accountability through systematic documentation.

This final dimension is particularly important. Reliable documentation preserves evidence that may later support judicial proceedings, truth commissions or historical research, even where immediate accountability remains unattainable.

Integrated NORF Assessment

The comparative analysis demonstrates that none of these structural drivers operates independently. Restrictive legislation becomes more harmful where institutions are weak. Armed groups exploit political instability. Social intolerance reinforces legal discrimination. Impunity encourages repeated violations.

Christian persecution should therefore be understood as a dynamic system rather than a collection of isolated events.

This systems perspective represents one of the principal analytical contributions of the NORF framework. By identifying and comparing recurring structural drivers across different national contexts, the framework enables policymakers, researchers and international organisations to move beyond reactive responses and instead address the institutional conditions that sustain long-term violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief.

The findings also have wider relevance. Although this report focuses on Christians, the same analytical framework can be applied to other religious and belief communities facing systematic restrictions. The structural drivers identified here are therefore not unique to Christianity; they represent broader mechanisms through which Freedom of Religion or Belief is undermined.

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6.4 Implications for Freedom of Religion or Belief

Introduction

The comparative findings presented in this report have implications that extend beyond the three countries examined. Although Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan differ markedly in their political systems, security environments and legal structures, each demonstrates how Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) can be progressively weakened when institutional safeguards fail to protect religious diversity and equal rights under the law.

The evidence indicates that persecution should not be understood solely as a humanitarian concern or as a series of isolated human rights violations. Rather, restrictions on FoRB constitute an indicator of broader institutional fragility, declining rule of law and weakening protection of fundamental rights. Consequently, policies designed to strengthen FoRB contribute not only to the protection of religious communities but also to more resilient governance, improved human rights protection and greater societal stability.

6.4.1 Freedom of Religion or Belief as a Structural Human Right

International human rights law recognises Freedom of Religion or Belief as a universal right belonging equally to every individual, regardless of religion, belief or non-belief. It protects not only the freedom to hold a religion but also the freedom to change religion, to manifest belief individually or collectively, publicly or privately, and to refrain from religious practice altogether.

The comparative assessment demonstrates that these dimensions are closely interconnected. Restrictions on conversion frequently lead to restrictions on assembly, expression and association. Likewise, discrimination against religious minorities often coincides with broader limitations on civil liberties, judicial independence and political participation.

FoRB should therefore not be viewed as an isolated policy field but as an integral component of the wider international human rights framework established by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

6.4.2 Early Warning for Democratic and Institutional Decline

The case studies suggest that deteriorating FoRB conditions often precede or accompany broader institutional decline.

Where governments criminalise religious expression, tolerate systematic discrimination or fail to investigate violence against religious communities, similar weaknesses frequently emerge in other areas of governance. Restrictions on independent media, limitations on civil society, political repression and declining judicial independence commonly develop alongside restrictions on religious freedom.

Accordingly, systematic monitoring of FoRB may function as an early-warning indicator for wider democratic deterioration and emerging human rights crises. This perspective expands the relevance of FoRB beyond religious policy alone and highlights its importance for conflict prevention, governance analysis and international development cooperation.

6.4.3 The Importance of Context-Specific Responses

One of the clearest conclusions emerging from this report is that no single policy instrument is sufficient to address religious persecution.

Afghanistan illustrates persecution driven primarily through institutional and legal control. Nigeria demonstrates the limitations of constitutional guarantees where implementation remains inconsistent and armed non-state actors operate with significant impunity. Somalia illustrates the interaction between state fragility, extremist violence and community-level enforcement of religious conformity.

These differences underline the necessity of context-specific policy responses. Effective strategies require an understanding of the institutional mechanisms through which persecution develops rather than assuming that identical interventions will produce comparable outcomes across different countries.

6.4.4 Evidence-Based Policymaking

The report also demonstrates the importance of transparent methodology in the formulation of FoRB policy.

International debate concerning religious persecution frequently relies upon isolated incidents, competing casualty estimates or advocacy-based narratives. While these sources often provide valuable information, policymaking requires systematic assessment capable of distinguishing verified evidence from analytical interpretation.
The NORF framework seeks to contribute to this objective by combining multiple independent sources, explicit evidence-confidence assessments and comparative analysis. Transparency regarding methodology strengthens the credibility of policy recommendations and allows readers to understand both the strengths and limitations of available evidence.
Evidence-based policymaking is particularly important where hidden religious communities, restricted access or ongoing conflict create significant information gaps.

6.4.5 Accountability as Prevention

Accountability is commonly understood as a response to violations that have already occurred. The findings of this report suggest a broader interpretation.
Systematic documentation, independent monitoring and transparent reporting increase the visibility of violations, reduce opportunities for denial and strengthen the evidentiary basis for future legal or political action. Even where immediate prosecution remains unlikely, the preservation of reliable evidence contributes to long-term accountability and may influence the behaviour of state and non-state actors by increasing the anticipated costs of abuse.
Documentation should therefore be recognised not only as a historical record but also as a preventive instrument within the wider protection framework for Freedom of Religion or Belief.

6.4.6 International Cooperation

The comparative assessment further demonstrates that responsibility for protecting FoRB extends across multiple levels of governance.
National authorities retain primary responsibility under international law to protect fundamental rights. However, where domestic protection proves ineffective, international organisations, donor governments, humanitarian agencies, civil society organisations and academic institutions all contribute to strengthening protection through monitoring, diplomacy, technical assistance, humanitarian response and evidence preservation.
No single actor possesses the mandate or capacity to address all dimensions of religious persecution. Effective protection therefore depends upon coordinated action based on clearly defined institutional responsibilities and shared evidence.

Integrated NORF Assessment

The principal implication of this report is that Freedom of Religion or Belief should be understood as a strategic indicator of institutional resilience rather than solely as a sector-specific human rights concern.

Across Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan, severe restrictions on FoRB consistently coincide with weakened governance, limited accountability, armed violence, institutional fragility and reduced protection of other fundamental rights. These patterns reinforce the conclusion that FoRB occupies a central position within the broader architecture of democratic governance and international human rights protection.

Accordingly, effective FoRB policy should combine five mutually reinforcing elements:

1. **Independent evidence collection** based on transparent and reproducible methodology.
2. **Context-specific analysis** recognising national institutional differences.
3. **Coordinated international engagement** across governmental and non-governmental actors.
4. **Long-term institutional capacity-building** that strengthens rule of law and equal protection.
5. **Systematic preservation of evidence** to support future accountability and longitudinal analysis.

For NORF, these findings also define an institutional responsibility. The Observatory's role is not to replace existing monitoring organisations but to strengthen the evidence base through independent comparative research, methodological transparency and cumulative analysis across successive reporting cycles.
In this way, NORF contributes not only to documenting violations but also to improving the quality of international decision-making concerning Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Fig. 6.4


NORF
Nordic Observatory for Religious Freedom
FIGURE 6.4
INTEGRATED NORF FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF (FoRB) PROTECTION FRAMEWORK
A systems-based framework linking evidence, policy and accountability.
NORF ASSESSMENT
High Policy Relevance
1 STRUCTURAL RISKS
Restrictive legislation
Weak institutions
Armed non-state actors
Social intolerance
Political instability
2 EARLY WARNING & EVIDENCE
Monitoring
Incident documentation
Evidence verification
Trend analysis
Longitudinal monitoring
3 PROTECTION MECHANISMS
Rule of law
Judicial accountability
Civilian protection
Humanitarian assistance
Protection of religious communities
4 INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT
United Nations
Regional organisations
National governments
Donor governments
Civil society
Academic institutions
5 LONG-TERM OUTCOMES
Strengthened Freedom of Religion or Belief
Increased institutional resilience
Reduced impunity
Better protection of religious minorities
Sustainable accountability
GUIDING PRINCIPLES
Evidence-based
Independent
Transparent
Comparative
Longitudinal
Victim-centred
THE NORF PROTECTION CYCLE
Evidence
Analysis
Policy
Protection
Accountability
FRAMEWORK DERIVED FROM:
Chapter 3 Country Assessments
Chapter 4 Comparative Analysis
Chapter 5 Recommendations
INTEGRATED NORF FRAMEWORK
This framework integrates empirical evidence, analysis and policy engagement to strengthen Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) and promote protection for all individuals.
NORF
Nordic Observatory for Religious Freedom
KEY INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS
Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)
International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966)
UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief – Annual Report (2024)
U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom – Annual Report (2024)
Pew Research Center – Global Restrictions on Religion (2024)
Open Doors – World Watch List (2025)
NORF REPORT 01/2025
EVIDENCE. ANALYSIS. ACCOUNTABILITY.
FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF FOR ALL.
VERSION 1.0
MAY 2025

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Open Doors. (2025). *World Watch List 2025*.

Pew Research Center. (2024). *Globally, Government Restrictions on Religion Remain at High Levels*.

United Nations. (1948). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

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6.5 Limitations of the Study

No assessment of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in conflict-affected and politically restrictive environments can eliminate uncertainty entirely. Restrictions on access, hidden religious communities, inconsistent reporting practices, and rapidly evolving security conditions inevitably influence the available evidence. The objective of the NORF methodology is therefore not to eliminate uncertainty, but to identify, assess and communicate it transparently through systematic evidence triangulation, methodological transparency and explicit confidence assessments.

Rather than representing weaknesses unique to this report, the limitations discussed below are characteristic of empirical research on religious persecution in high-risk environments. Throughout the report, these challenges have been addressed by integrating multiple independent data sources, distinguishing between empirical observations and analytical interpretation, and explicitly communicating the confidence associated with each assessment.

6.5.1 Access Constraints in High-Risk Environments

One of the principal methodological challenges concerns the availability of reliable information from conflict-affected and politically restrictive environments. Many of the countries examined in this report experience ongoing armed conflict, weak state institutions, restricted media freedom or limited access for international observers. In some areas, governments restrict independent monitoring, while in others territorial control by non-state armed groups prevents systematic field verification.

These constraints inevitably affect the completeness of available documentation. Reported incidents therefore represent documented cases rather than a comprehensive record of all violations. The absence of documented incidents should consequently not be interpreted as evidence that violations have not occurred.

To reduce this limitation, NORF applies systematic source triangulation, integrating information from international organisations, governmental reports, academic research, conflict-event datasets and recognised human rights organisations. Convergence across independent sources increases confidence in the findings, while areas characterised by limited documentation are explicitly reflected in the report's evidence confidence assessments.

6.5.2 Hidden Religious Communities

A second challenge concerns the existence of hidden or clandestine Christian communities in several of the countries examined. In environments where conversion from Islam is criminalised or socially sanctioned, many Christians deliberately conceal their religious identity to avoid imprisonment, violence or social exclusion.

Consequently, reliable estimates of community size are often unavailable, and many incidents remain undocumented because victims are unable or unwilling to report abuses publicly. This challenge is particularly relevant in countries such as Afghanistan and Somalia, where Christian communities largely exist outside public visibility.

Accordingly, quantitative estimates presented throughout this report should generally be interpreted as minimum documented levels rather than exhaustive measurements of the true scale of persecution. Hidden religious communities remain among the most difficult populations to study empirically, and uncertainty surrounding their size and experiences constitutes an inherent limitation of FoRB research rather than a deficiency of the present methodology.

6.5.3 Methodological Diversity Across Data Sources

The report integrates evidence from organisations with differing institutional mandates, analytical objectives and methodological approaches. International organisations, governmental agencies, academic institutions and civil society organisations often collect data for different purposes and therefore apply different definitions, reporting thresholds and verification procedures.

For example, the United Nations primarily documents violations within international human rights and humanitarian law frameworks, while the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom evaluates compliance with international standards of religious freedom. Conflict-event databases such as ACLED record incidents of political violence, whereas organisations including Open Doors document pressures specifically affecting Christian communities. Governance indicators and demographic datasets provide additional structural context rather than direct measures of persecution.
These methodological differences should not be regarded as contradictions but as complementary perspectives on a complex phenomenon. Rather than combining incompatible datasets, the NORF methodology analyses each source within its original methodological context and integrates findings only where conceptual compatibility exists. Where methodological differences influence interpretation, these are explicitly identified throughout the report.

6.5.4 Analytical Boundaries

The findings presented in this report should be interpreted within the defined analytical scope of the study.

The report does not attempt to document every violation of human rights occurring within the countries examined, nor does it claim that Christians constitute the only religious communities experiencing persecution. Numerous other religious groups—including Muslims, Jews, Bahá'ís, Hindus, Sikhs, Yazidis, Ahmadis and others—face severe violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief in different national contexts.
Similarly, the report does not seek to establish direct causal relationships between individual variables and persecution, nor to produce predictive statistical models. Its purpose is comparative assessment based upon systematic empirical evidence, combining quantitative indicators with qualitative contextual analysis to identify recurring patterns and structural drivers.
These analytical boundaries are necessary to ensure methodological consistency and transparency and should not be interpreted as limiting the broader relevance of the findings.

6.5.5 Confidence and Interpretation

A central methodological principle of the NORF framework is the explicit separation of evidence quality from the severity of documented violations.
The confidence assessments applied throughout this report reflect the quality, consistency and transparency of the available evidence rather than the seriousness of persecution itself.
Consequently, areas assigned moderate or low confidence ratings should not automatically be interpreted as experiencing less severe violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief. In many cases, lower confidence reflects restricted access, limited reporting opportunities, inconsistent documentation or the existence of hidden religious communities rather than lower levels of abuse.
By explicitly communicating uncertainty, the report seeks to strengthen rather than weaken its analytical credibility. Transparent acknowledgement of evidential limitations enables readers to distinguish between well-established findings and areas where additional research remains necessary.

Concluding Perspective

The limitations identified throughout this chapter also define the future development of the NORF research programme. As additional country assessments are completed, longitudinal datasets expand and methodological refinement continues, many of the current evidence gaps can be reduced through cumulative documentation, improved comparative analysis and systematic evidence collection.
The objective of NORF is therefore not merely to produce individual annual reports, but to establish an increasingly robust, transparent and internationally credible evidence base for understanding and protecting Freedom of Religion or Belief over time.

6.6 Concluding Remarks

The methodology presented throughout this chapter establishes the analytical foundation upon which the NORF Annual Report is based. Its purpose is not to eliminate uncertainty, but to ensure

that assessments of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) are conducted through a transparent, systematic and empirically grounded process that can be scrutinised, replicated and refined over time.
The report has demonstrated that reliable assessment of religious persecution requires more than the documentation of individual incidents. Effective analysis must integrate quantitative indicators, qualitative evidence, legal analysis and contextual interpretation in order to distinguish isolated events from persistent structural patterns. Accordingly, the NORF methodology combines multiple independent sources, applies systematic evidence triangulation and explicitly communicates the confidence associated with each assessment. Throughout the report, empirical observations are distinguished from analytical interpretation, ensuring that conclusions remain proportionate to the available evidence. This methodological approach is consistently applied across all country assessments and comparative analyses presented in the report.
Equally important, the methodology recognises that Freedom of Religion or Belief cannot be understood solely through legal provisions or incident statistics. Constitutional guarantees may coexist with widespread violations in practice, while hidden religious communities, restricted access and conflict environments frequently obscure the full extent of persecution. By combining structural analysis with documented evidence and explicit confidence assessments, the NORF framework seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the conditions affecting religious communities than would be possible through any single source or indicator alone.

Methodological transparency also serves an institutional purpose. Every assessment presented in this report is based upon documented sources, clearly defined analytical criteria and internationally recognised human rights standards. This enables policymakers, researchers and civil society organisations not only to evaluate the report's conclusions, but also to understand the evidential basis upon which they rest. Such transparency is essential if research is to contribute credibly to public policy, international advocacy and future academic inquiry.

Finally, the methodology should be understood as an evolving framework rather than a fixed model. As additional country assessments are completed, longitudinal datasets expand and new sources become available, the NORF analytical framework will continue to be refined through empirical testing, methodological evaluation and international scholarly engagement. The long-term objective is to develop a robust and internationally recognised evidence base capable of supporting comparative research, informing policy development and strengthening the protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief worldwide.
The following chapter concludes the report by synthesising the principal findings and considering their broader implications for policymakers, researchers and international actors working to protect Freedom of Religion or Belief.

6.7 Final Conclusion

From Evidence to Accountability

This report set out to answer the following research question:

To what extent are Christians among the most persecuted religious communities globally, and what explains the observed patterns?

The comparative assessment supports the conclusion that **Christians constitute one of the world's most severely persecuted religious communities in several contemporary conflict-affected and politically restrictive environments.** Across Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan, the evidence consistently documents severe and persistent violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB), including killings, abductions, forced displacement, arbitrary detention, restrictions on public worship, intimidation, discrimination and severe limitations on religious conversion and expression. Although the manifestations of persecution differ between the three countries, the cumulative evidence demonstrates that these violations are systematic rather than isolated and reflect enduring structural conditions rather than temporary crises.

At the same time, the report demonstrates that persecution cannot be explained solely by religious identity or by individual acts of violence. The comparative analysis shows that severe violations emerge where multiple structural drivers reinforce one another. Restrictive legal frameworks, weak institutions, armed non-state actors, political instability, social intolerance and widespread impunity together create environments in which persecution becomes both sustained and self-reinforcing. No single factor adequately explains the observed patterns. Rather, it is the interaction between these structural drivers that determines both the severity and the persistence of violations across different national contexts.

Importantly, these findings do not imply that Christians are the only religious or belief community experiencing grave violations of internationally recognised rights. Around the world, Muslims, Jews, Bahá'ís, Hindus, Sikhs, Yazidis, Ahmadis and numerous other religious and belief communities also face persecution in different political and societal contexts. The focus of this report reflects a clearly defined analytical scope rather than an exclusive concern. The NORF analytical framework has been intentionally developed as a universal methodology for assessing Freedom of Religion or Belief and can therefore be applied to other religious and belief communities in future comparative studies.

One of the principal conclusions emerging from this report is that Freedom of Religion or Belief should not be regarded as an isolated human rights issue. Across all three case studies, deteriorating FoRB conditions consistently coincide with weakened rule of law, declining institutional accountability, shrinking civic space and broader erosion of internationally recognised rights. Protecting Freedom of Religion or Belief therefore contributes not only to safeguarding religious communities but also to strengthening democratic governance, conflict prevention and the wider international human rights system.

Beyond its empirical findings, this report represents the first implementation of the NORF analytical framework. Throughout the assessment, identical methodological principles have been applied across all country chapters. Evidence has consistently preceded interpretation. Independent sources have been systematically triangulated. Legal protections have been distinguished from implementation in practice. Structural drivers have been analysed alongside documented incidents, and every major analytical judgement has been accompanied by an explicit evidence-confidence assessment. These principles provide a transparent and reproducible foundation for meaningful comparison across countries and, equally importantly, across future reporting cycles.
The report also demonstrates the value of comparative analysis. Examining Somalia, Nigeria and Afghanistan together reveals patterns that would be less visible through individual country studies alone. While each national context remains historically and politically unique, the recurrence of common structural drivers strengthens confidence that systematic violations of Freedom of Religion

or Belief are neither accidental nor isolated phenomena. Comparative assessment therefore enhances both analytical understanding and the development of more effective, evidence-based policy responses.

Perhaps the most important conclusion is methodological. Effective policy depends upon reliable evidence. Reliable evidence depends upon transparent methodology. Without systematic documentation, persecution risks being underestimated, misunderstood or forgotten. Conversely, when evidence is collected consistently, analysed rigorously and preserved over time, it becomes possible to identify long-term trends, evaluate policy interventions and support future accountability.

This is where the role of the Nordic Observatory for Religious Freedom becomes both practical and enduring. NORF does not seek merely to describe the state of religious freedom in a single reporting year. Its purpose is to establish a cumulative, transparent and internationally credible evidence base capable of supporting policymakers, researchers, civil society organisations and international institutions in protecting Freedom of Religion or Belief over time. Each NORF report should therefore be understood as one contribution to a growing longitudinal record rather than as a standalone assessment.

History demonstrates that accountability is seldom immediate. Political circumstances change. Governments rise and fall. Armed groups emerge and disappear. Conflicts evolve, and public attention shifts elsewhere. Yet carefully documented evidence often endures long after the events themselves. It is this continuity that transforms documentation from a descriptive exercise into the foundation for accountability, institutional learning and informed policymaking.

The enduring ambition of NORF is therefore not simply to measure religious persecution, but to ensure that violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief are documented with such consistency, transparency and methodological integrity that they cannot be ignored, denied or forgotten.

We document today so that accountability remains possible tomorrow.

Fig. 6.7 From evidence to accountability



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Disclaimer

This report is intended to document patterns of religious persecution affecting Christian communities worldwide. The findings are based on documented evidence available at the time of publication. Responsibility for interpretations and conclusions rests solely with the authors. GAI was used to cross reference data sources, build data layers and sections and create graphics.

AFA 7 References
Primary sources include:

- United Nations
- USCIRF
- US Department of State
- Open Doors
- Aid to the Church in Need (ACN)
- Human Rights Watch
- Amnesty International
- Pew Research Center
- ACLED
- V-Dem Institute
- World Bank
- Fragile States Index
- International IDEA
- Academic literature

APPENDIX A

NORF Methodology and Matrix Scoring Framework

A.1 Purpose

The Nordic Observatory for Religious Freedom (NORF) applies a transparent, evidence-based methodology to assess Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) across different national contexts. The objective is not to rank countries through subjective judgement, but to integrate multiple independent sources into a structured analytical framework that supports comparison, policy analysis and longitudinal monitoring.

The methodology is designed around five core principles:

- Evidence precedes interpretation.
- Multiple independent sources are systematically triangulated.
- Legal protection is distinguished from implementation in practice.
- Structural drivers are analysed alongside documented incidents.
- Analytical confidence is communicated explicitly.

These principles are applied consistently throughout all country assessments and comparative analyses contained in this report.

A.2 Analytical Workflow



A.3 Data Sources

Primary sources include:

- United Nations
- USCIRF
- US Department of State
- Open Doors
- Aid to the Church in Need (ACN)
- Human Rights Watch
- Amnesty International
- Pew Research Center
- ACLED
- V-Dem Institute
- World Bank
- Fragile States Index
- International IDEA
- Academic literature

Each source contributes different evidence.

No single organisation determines any NORF assessment.

A.4 Evidence Triangulation

Each finding is evaluated against multiple independent sources.

Example

Source	Supports Finding
USCIRF	✓
UN	✓
ACN	✓
Open Doors	✓
Human Rights Watch	✓

The greater the convergence between independent sources, the higher the confidence.

A.5 Matrix Construction

Every matrix throughout the report is constructed from standardised indicators.

Example:

Dimension	Weight
Legal framework	15%
Government practice	20%
Violence	25%
Societal discrimination	15%
Institutional capacity	15%
Accountability	10%

Total = 100%

A.6 Priority Matrix Methodology

The recommendation matrices in Chapter 5 do **not** measure importance.

Instead they measure

Operational relevance

Questions asked:

Does this recommendation directly address the country's principal structural drivers?
Can implementation realistically improve FoRB?
Does empirical evidence support the recommendation?
Does international experience demonstrate effectiveness?

The coloured circles therefore indicate

Highest relevance
High relevance
Moderate relevance
Context dependent

—not "good" versus "bad" recommendations.

A.7 Updating Future Reports

The methodology is intentionally cumulative.

Each annual report allows

- improved datasets
- methodological refinement
- trend analysis
- stronger comparisons

without changing the analytical principles.

APPENDIX B

Evidence-Confidence Classification

One feature distinguishing NORF from many existing FoRB assessments is the explicit communication of evidential confidence.

Confidence refers to

the quality of available evidence—not the severity of violations.

High Confidence

Characteristics

✓ Multiple independent sources

✓ Consistent reporting

✓ Strong documentation

✓ Longitudinal confirmation

Examples

- Constitutional provisions
- Documented legislation
- Major terrorist attacks
- Verified demographic statistics

Moderate Confidence

Characteristics

✓ Several sources

✓ Minor inconsistencies

✓ Limited geographic coverage

✓ Some uncertainty

Examples

- Local discrimination
- Community pressure
- Regional implementation

Low Confidence

Characteristics

✓ Few sources

✓ Limited access

✓ Hidden populations

✓ Difficult verification

Examples

- Underground churches
- Secret converts
- Remote conflict areas

Very Low Confidence

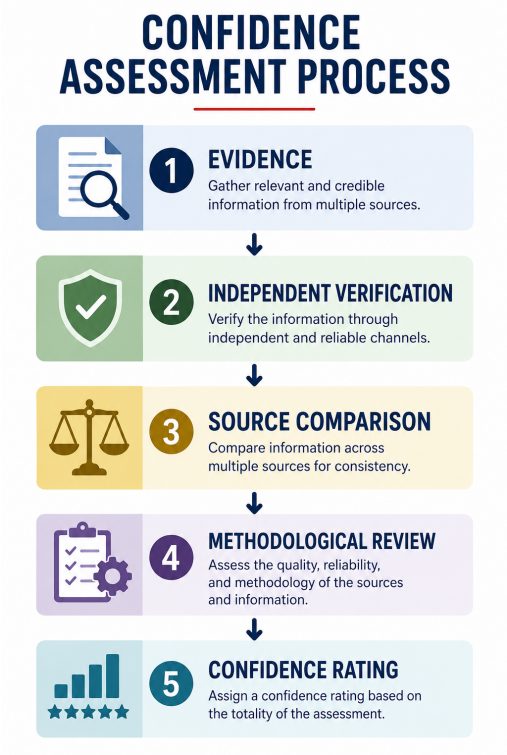
Characteristics

Only anecdotal information

No independent verification

Used only when explicitly identified

Never used as sole evidence.



APPENDIX C

Country Indicators and Supplementary Tables

This appendix provides the complete indicator framework supporting the comparative assessment.

C.1 Legal Indicators

- Constitutional protection
- Religious freedom legislation
- Apostasy laws
- Blasphemy laws
- Registration requirements
- Religious conversion
- International treaty obligations

C.2 Institutional Indicators

- Judicial independence
- Police effectiveness
- Rule of law
- Corruption
- Government accountability

- Human rights institutions

C.3 Violence Indicators

- Killings
- Kidnappings
- Church attacks
- Arbitrary detention
- Forced displacement
- Religious property destruction

C.4 Societal Indicators

- Community pressure
- Social discrimination
- Religious intolerance
- Educational exclusion
- Employment discrimination

C.5 Comparative Summary Table

Indicator	Somalia	Nigeria	Afghanistan
Legal restrictions	Very High	Moderate	Very High
Government enforcement	High	Moderate	Very High
Non-state violence	Very High	Very High	Moderate
Societal pressure	Very High	High	Very High
Institutional capacity	Very Low	Moderate	Very Low
Accountability	Very Low	Low	Very Low
Evidence confidence	Moderate	High	Moderate

C.6 Data Sources Used

For each country

Dataset	Somalia	Nigeria	Afghanistan
UN	✓	✓	✓
USCIRF	✓	✓	✓
US State Department	✓	✓	✓
Open Doors	✓	✓	✓
ACN	✓	✓	✓
ACLED	✓	✓	✓

Dataset	Somalia	Nigeria	Afghanistan
V-Dem	✓	✓	✓
World Bank	✓	✓	✓

C.7 Longitudinal Monitoring

Beginning with this first Annual Report, NORF intends to update these indicators annually. Over time, the accumulation of consistent measurements will enable trend analysis, comparative benchmarking and evidence-based evaluation of whether Freedom of Religion or Belief is improving, deteriorating or remaining broadly stable across the countries and contexts assessed.