

CHRISTIANS ON THE RUN

The Global Persecution of Christians

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PART 1

Somalia

The first part of a global series



NORF

Nordic Observatory
for Religious Freedom

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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.

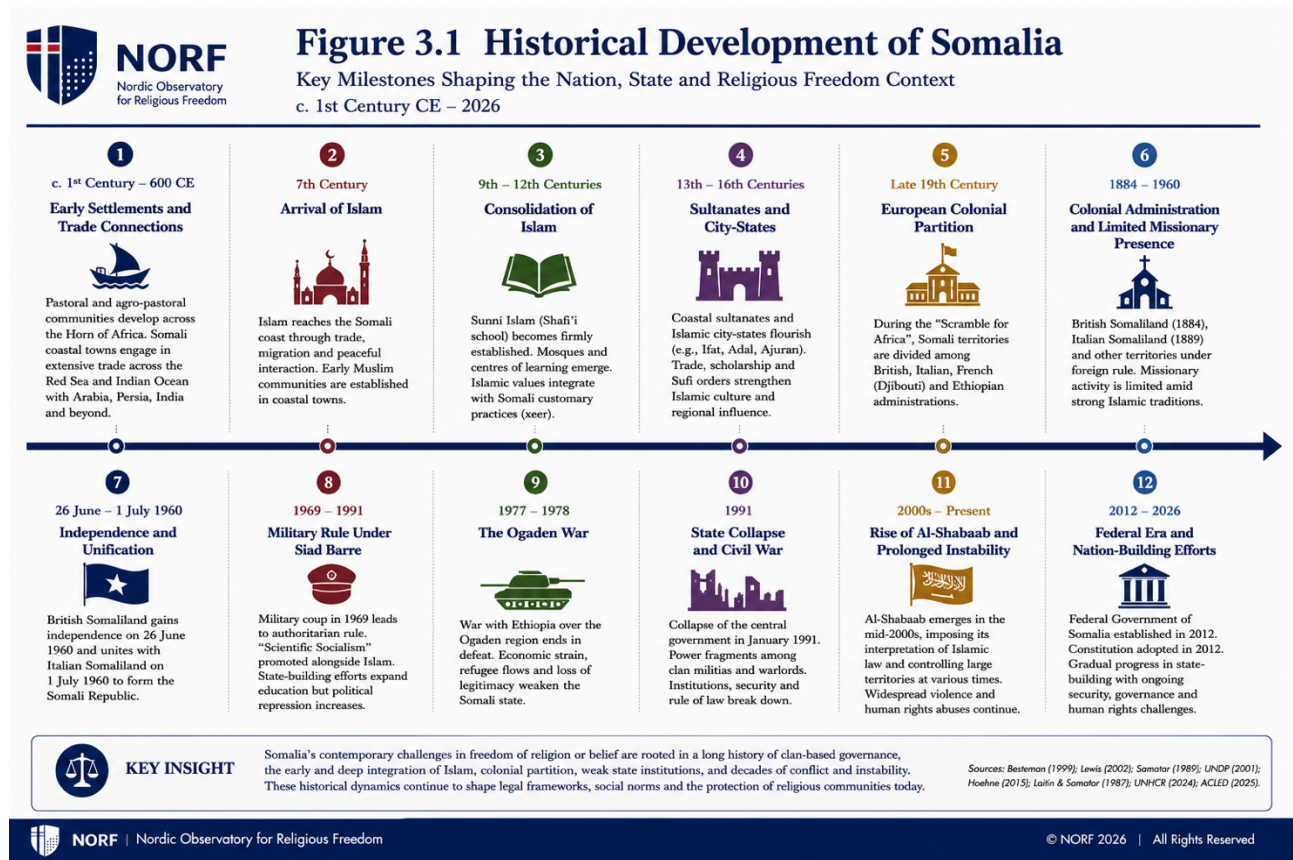
Importantly, Islam in Somalia developed predominantly within the Shafi'i school of Sunni jurisprudence, complemented by influential Sufi traditions that played significant social, educational and spiritual roles for many centuries. These traditions shaped patterns of religious authority that continue 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.

Figure 3.1



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.

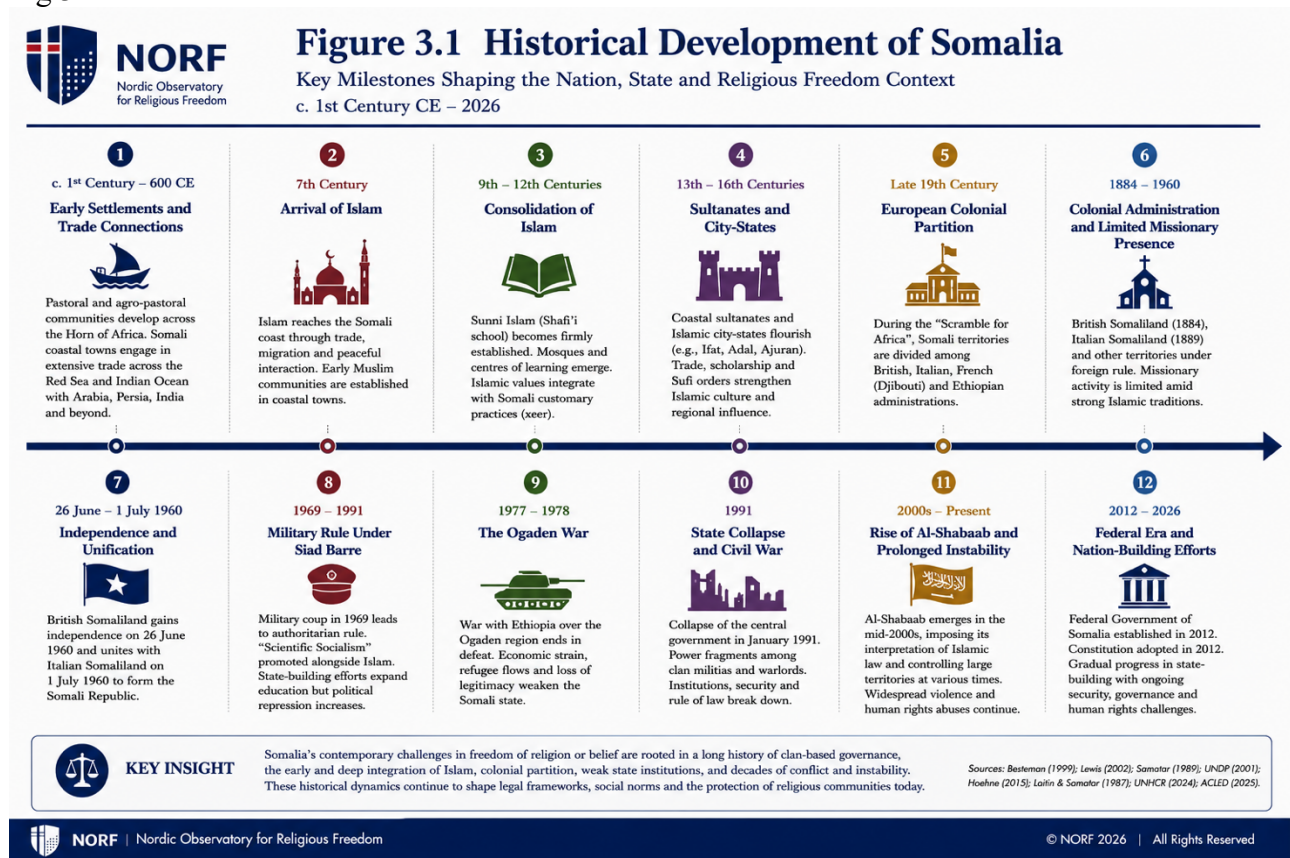
Today, Somalia represents one of the world's most fragile states. Formal constitutional institutions coexist with customary governance, religious authority, federal structures and non-state armed actors. Understanding this complex institutional landscape is essential for interpreting the country's contemporary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

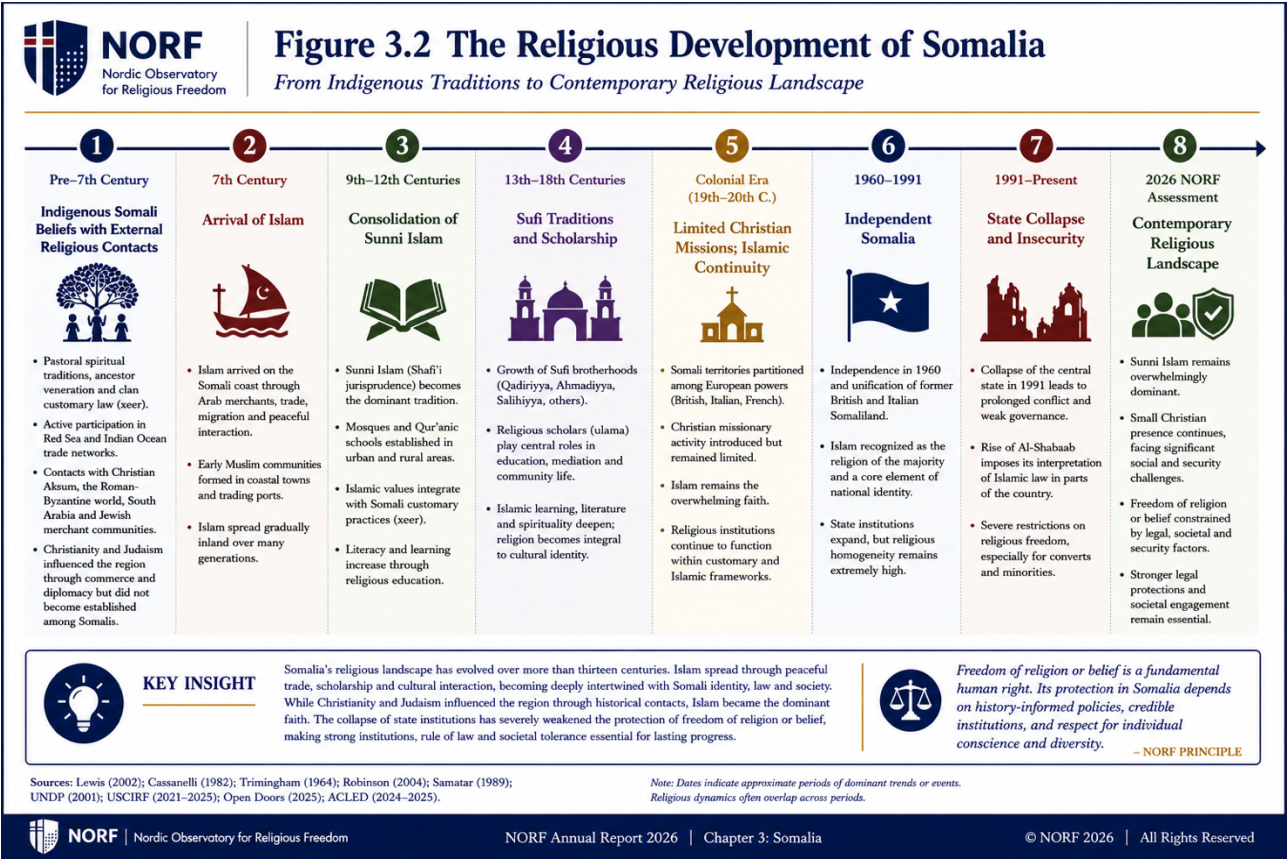
Religion has functioned simultaneously as a source of moral authority, communal cohesion, education, legal tradition and national identity. These historical roles continue to shape public attitudes towards religious diversity, conversion and minority communities.

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)



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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



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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Venice Commission. (2020). *Rule of Law Checklist*. Council of Europe.

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.

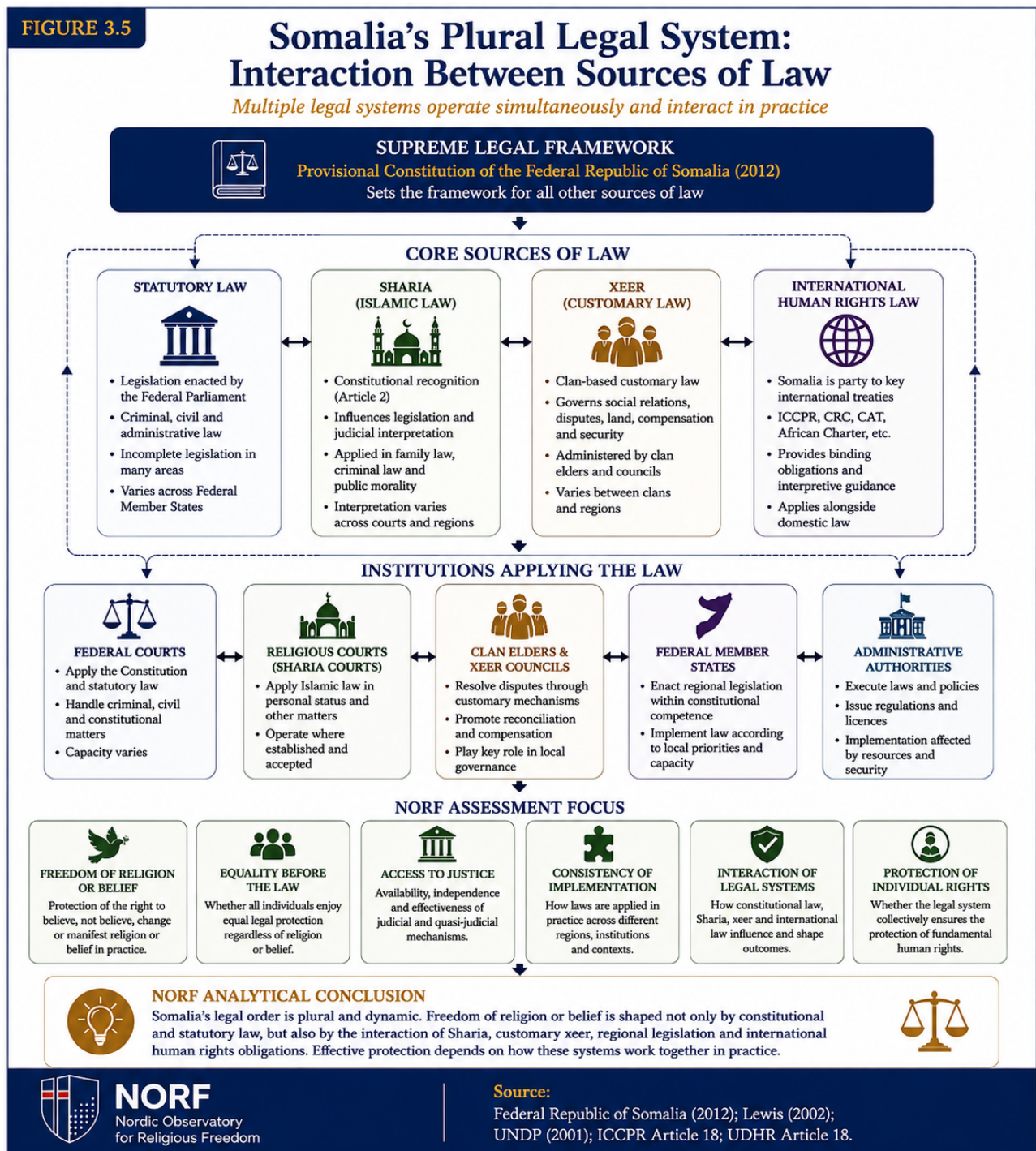
This interaction creates a legally complex environment in which the practical exercise of freedom of religion or belief depends not only upon formal legislation but also upon local governance, judicial interpretation, customary authority and prevailing security conditions.

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

- Federal Republic of Somalia. (2012). *Provisional Constitution of the Federal Republic of Somalia*.
- Lewis, I. M. (2002). *A Modern History of the Somali* (4th ed.). James Currey.

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

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*.
- United Nations. (1948). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.
- United Nations. (1966a). *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*.
- United Nations. (1966b). *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*.
- United Nations. (1979). *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*.
- United Nations. (1984). *Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment*.

United Nations. (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

United Nations Human Rights Committee. (1993). *General Comment No. 22: The right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 18)*, CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.4.

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):

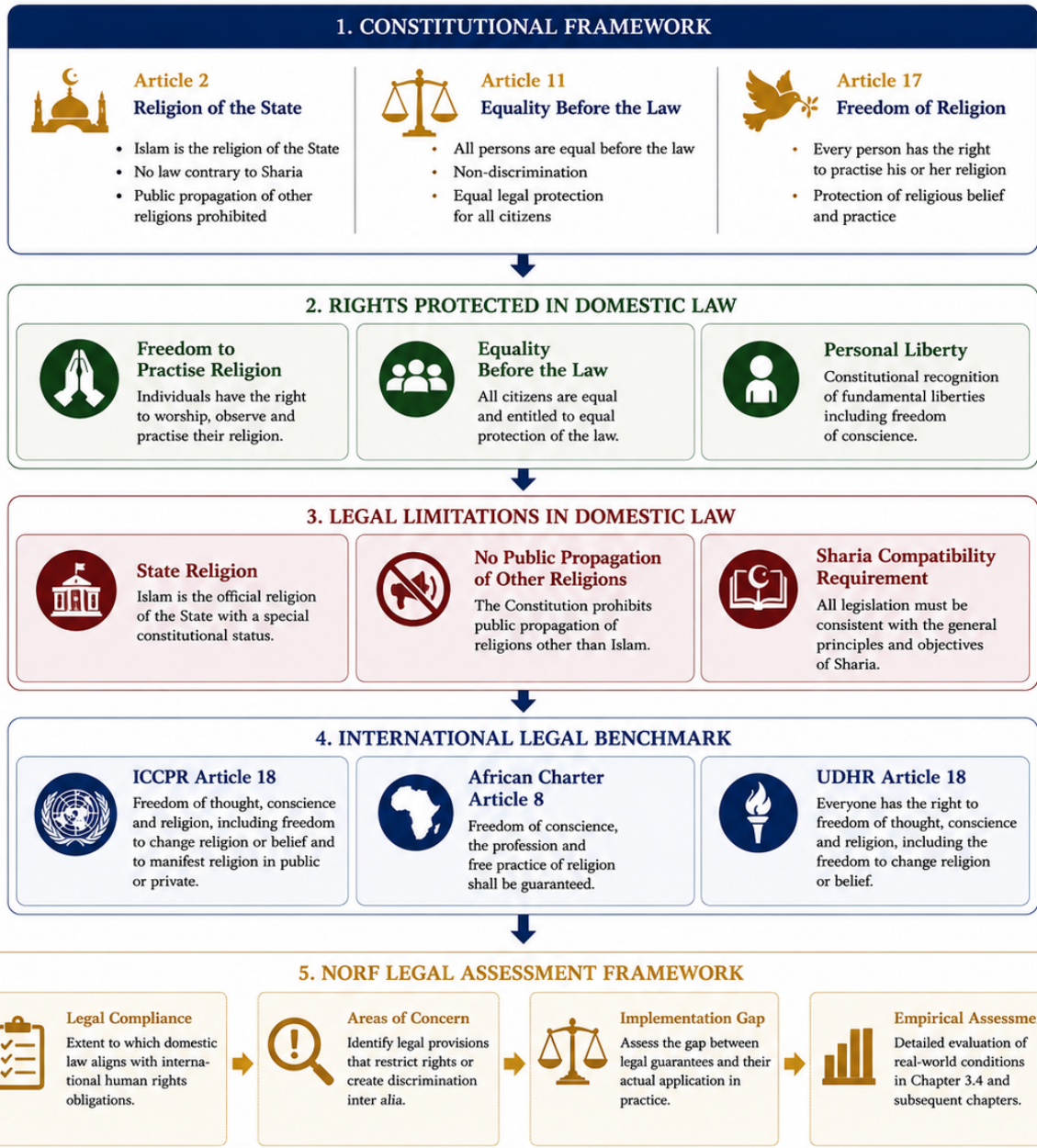
1. **Are religious rights recognised in law?**
2. **Are legal limitations compatible with international human rights obligations?**
3. **Are rights applied equally to all individuals regardless of religion or belief?**
4. **Can individuals safely exercise these rights in practice?**

Figure 3.7

FIGURE 3.7

Freedom of Religion or Belief in Somali Domestic Law

Constitutional guarantees, legal limitations and alignment with international standards



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

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

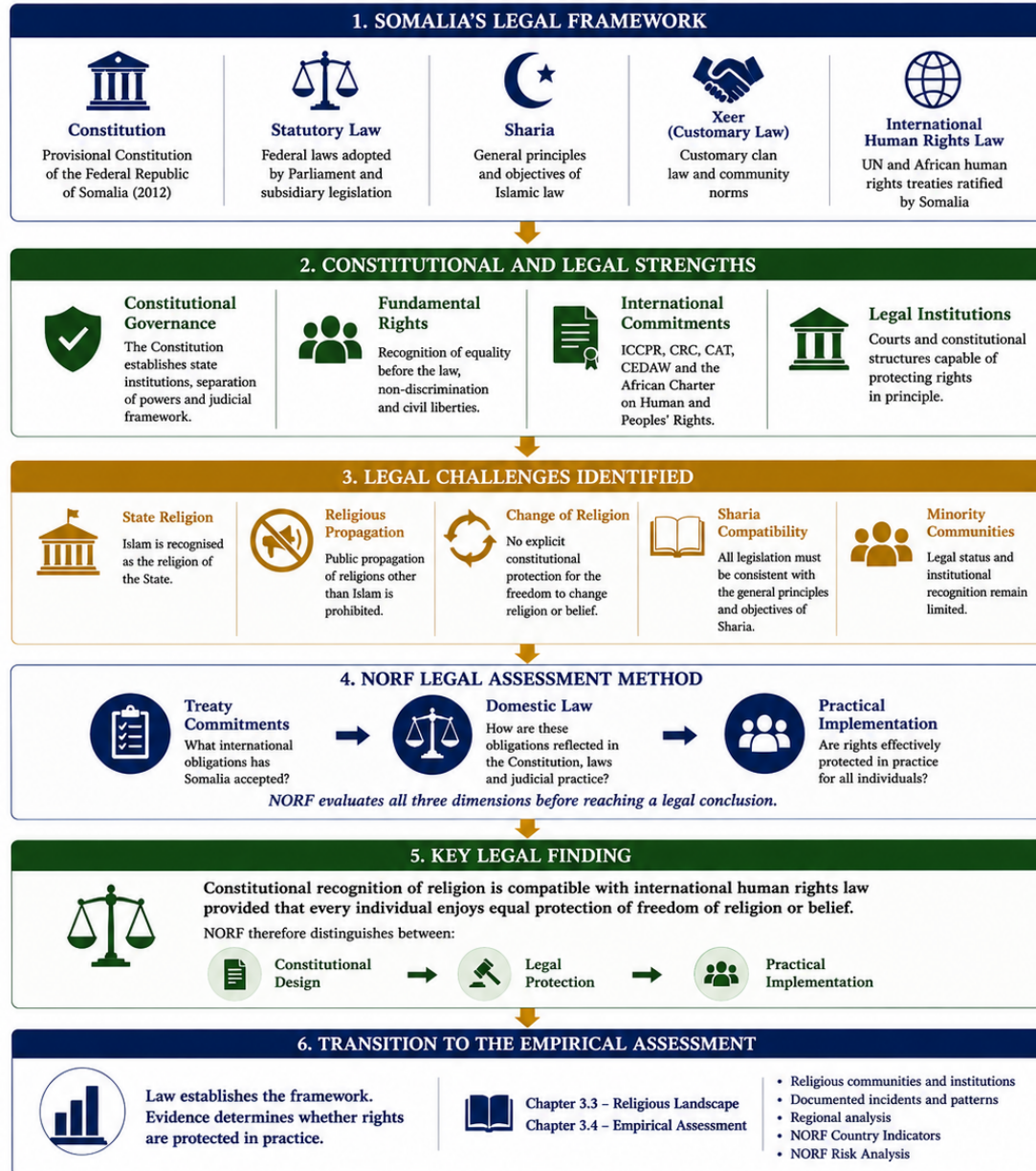
- The legal framework provides a basis for rights protection but contains provisions that may restrict the full enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief under international human rights law. The extent to which these legal provisions affect individuals in practice requires empirical evaluation and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

Figure 3.8

FIGURE 3.8

NORF Legal Assessment Framework – Somalia

From constitutional provisions to evidence-based legal assessment



NORF
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for Religious Freedom

NORF LEGAL ASSESSMENT MODEL
Evidence • Law • Implementation • Accountability

Nordic Observatory
for Religious Freedom

APA 7 References

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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 **Salihhiyya** 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

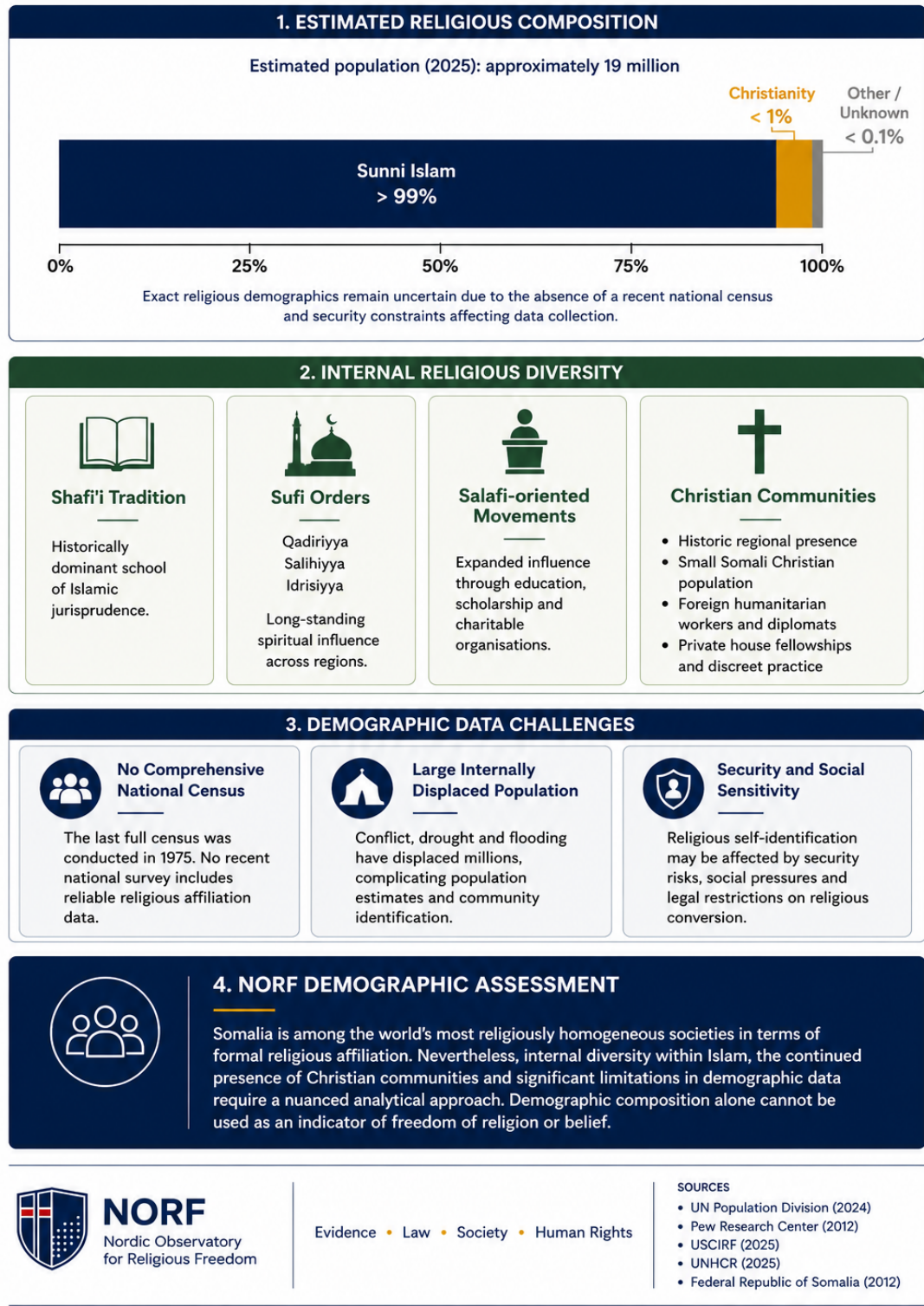
Religious demography should not be confused with religious freedom. A country may exhibit high levels of religious homogeneity while still protecting individual freedom of religion or belief, just as a highly diverse society may experience significant religious discrimination. NORF therefore treats demographic 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)



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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**, **Salahiyya** 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.

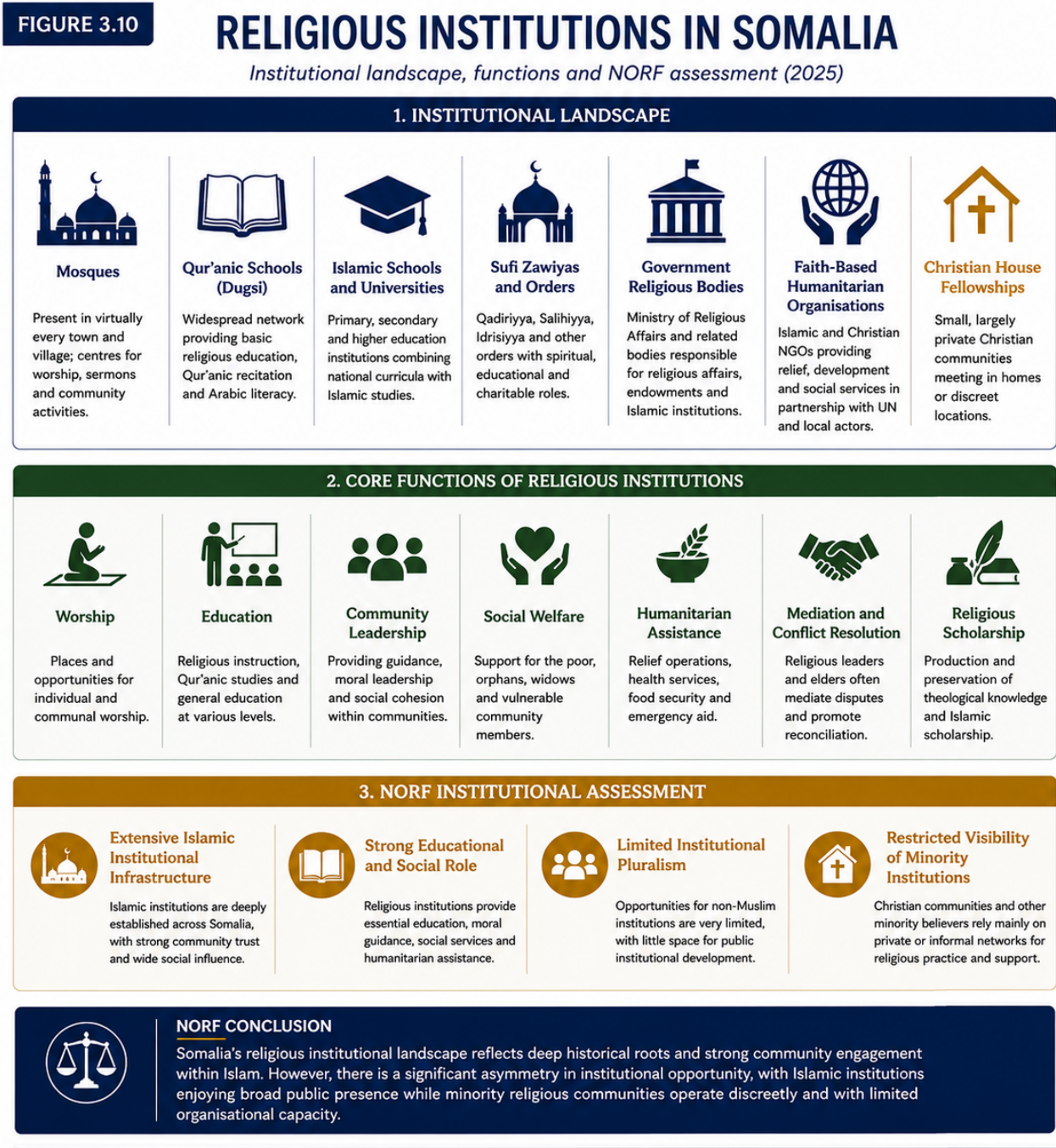
NORF therefore concludes that Somalia's institutional religious landscape is characterised by **high institutional development for the majority religion alongside very limited institutional pluralism for minority faith communities**. This finding provides an important context for the empirical assessment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



APA 7 References

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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**, **Salihyya** 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



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.



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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



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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.

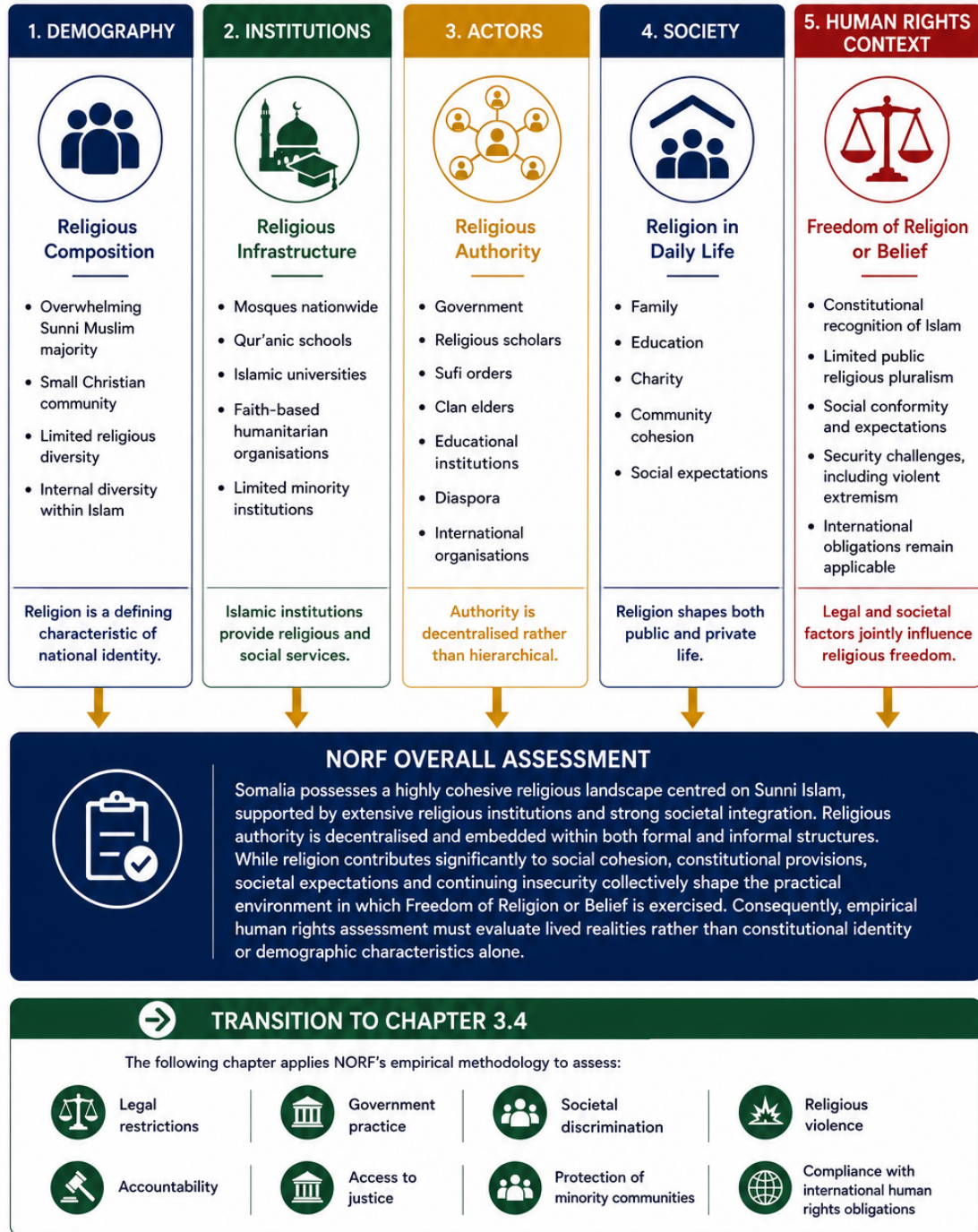
The following chapter applies the NORF analytical framework developed in Chapter 2 to evaluate how international human rights standards are implemented in practice. Rather than analysing constitutional design or religious demography alone, the assessment examines measurable indicators including legal 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



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SOURCES

- Federal Republic of Somalia (2012)
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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.

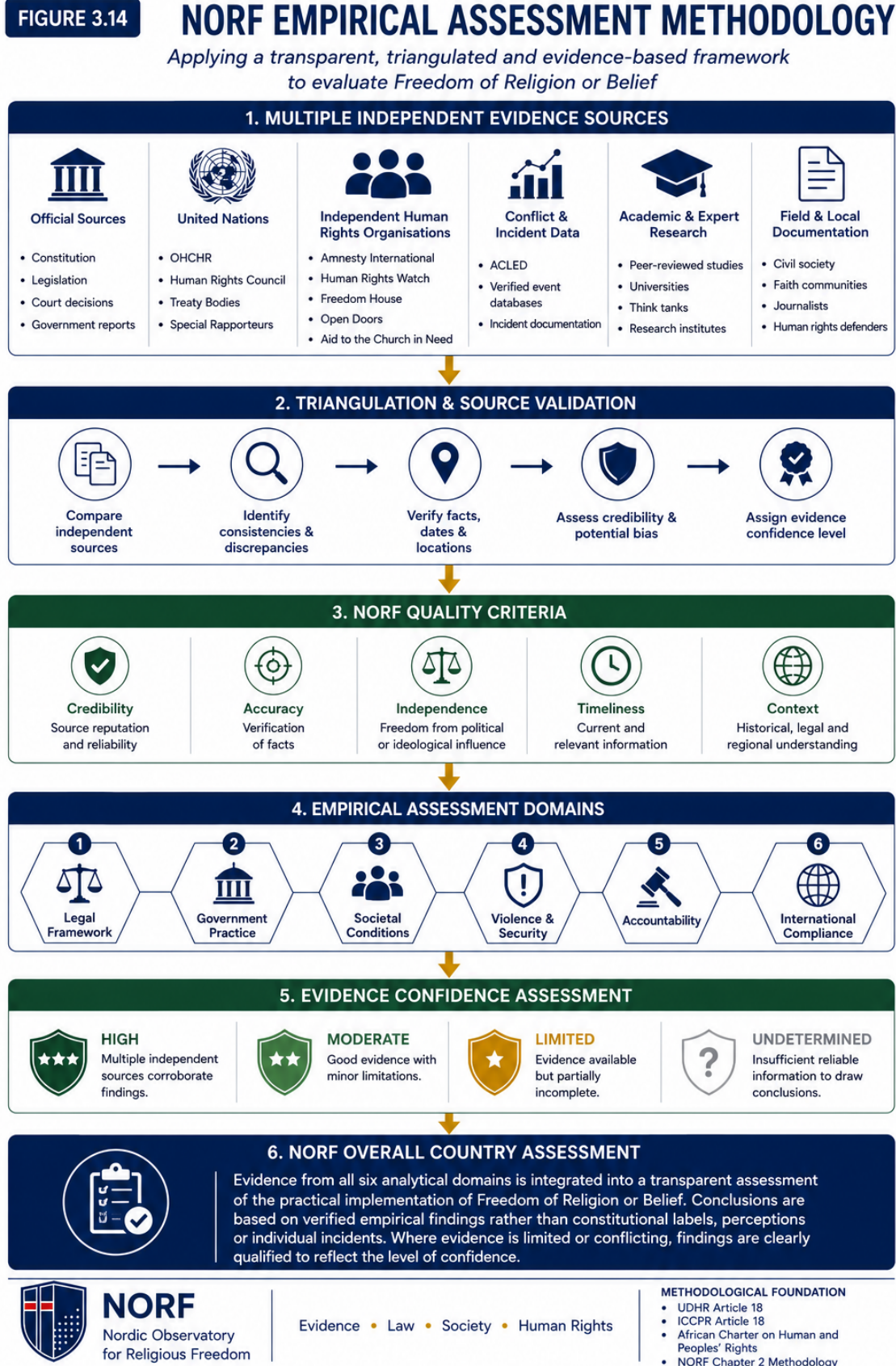
By integrating legal analysis, institutional assessment, documented incidents, societal conditions and international human rights standards, NORF evaluates freedom of religion or belief as an empirical human rights outcome rather than a theoretical constitutional principle.

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



APA 7 References

- Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project. (2025). *ACLED methodology and coding decisions*.
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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.



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SOURCES

- Federal Republic of Somalia (2012), Provisional Constitution
- UDHR (1948), Article 18
- ICCPR (1966), Article 18
- African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981)
- UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 22 (1993)
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United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. (2025). *2025 Annual Report*.

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

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

FIGURE 3.16 GOVERNMENT PRACTICE ASSESSMENT <i>Institutional Implementation of Freedom of Religion or Belief in Somalia</i>				
INSTITUTIONAL AREA	ASSESSMENT FOCUS	OBSERVED GOVERNMENT PRACTICE	EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE	NORF ASSESSMENT (Against International Standards)
 1. EXECUTIVE AUTHORITIES	Policy implementation, religious affairs administration, and public cooperation with religious actors.	- Government institutions operate within a constitutional framework that recognises Islam as the state religion. - Active support for Islamic institutions, mosques and religious leaders. - Limited visible initiatives to facilitate the public practice of non-Islamic religions.	MODERATE  Some data available but with limitations	 PARTIALLY ALIGNED Policies reflect constitutional preference for Islam. Institutional support for minority religions remains limited.
 2. LAW ENFORCEMENT	Protection of religious communities, prevention of attacks, response to incidents and investigation of violations.	- Security forces focus primarily on counter-terrorism against Al-Shabaab. - Limited targeted protection for religious minority communities. - Many areas remain outside effective state control, restricting protection capacity.	MODERATE  Some data available but with limitations	 PARTIALLY ALIGNED Protection capacity constrained by insecurity, limited resources and uneven territorial control.
 3. JUDICIARY	Independence, access to justice, judicial interpretation and legal remedies in religion-related cases.	- Judicial system operates under a mix of constitutional, statutory, customary (xeer) and Islamic law. - Judicial capacity varies significantly across regions. - Few publicly reported cases specifically related to freedom of religion or belief.	MODERATE  Some data available but with limitations	 PARTIALLY ALIGNED Access to justice exists in principle but is limited in practice and uneven across the country.
 4. PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION	Registration of religious organisations, public services, permits and equal treatment in administrative processes.	- Formal mechanisms for non-Muslim religious organisations are limited. - Permits and recognition for minority institutions are rarely granted. - Administrative practice varies significantly between federal member states.	LIMITED  Limited data or indirect information	 RAISES CONCERNS Limited legal recognition and administrative support for minority religious organisations.
 5. EDUCATION	Religious education policy, curriculum content and respect for parental rights.	- Islamic education widely integrated in public and private schools. - Limited provision for religious education associated with minority faiths. - Opportunities for parents to secure education in line with their beliefs are constrained.	MODERATE  Some data available but with limitations	 PARTIALLY ALIGNED Policy reflects national identity; limited practical options for minority religious education.
 6. INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT	Cooperation with UN mechanisms, implementation of recommendations and reporting obligations.	- Somalia engages with UN Human Rights Council and UPR processes. - Accepted recommendations related to governance and human rights. - Implementation progress is uneven due to capacity and security constraints.	MODERATE  Some data available but with limitations	 PARTIALLY ALIGNED International engagement continues, but implementation of recommendations remains limited.
 NORF CONCLUSION Government practice in Somalia reflects both constitutional preferences for Islam and the practical constraints of a fragile state. While public institutions support the country's majority religion, institutional protection for minority communities remains limited and is further affected by uneven state capacity and continuing insecurity.  BROADLY CONSISTENT Consistent with international standards  PARTIALLY ALIGNED Partial alignment or important gaps  RAISES CONCERNS Significant gaps or negative impact				



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SOURCES

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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.

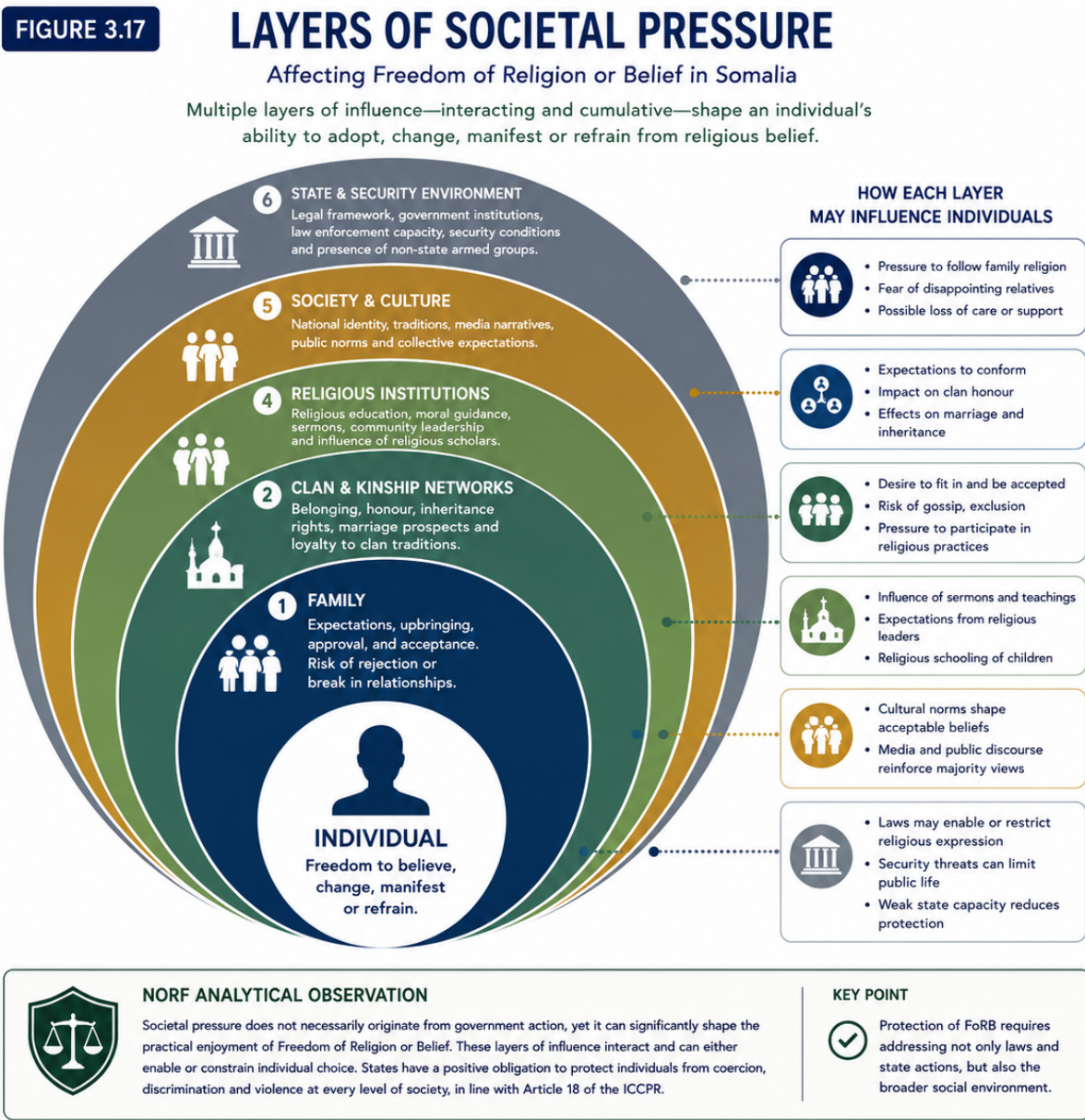
Documented societal pressures appear most pronounced in relation to religious conversion, public manifestation of minority religions and participation in community life outside established religious norms.

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



APA 7 References

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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

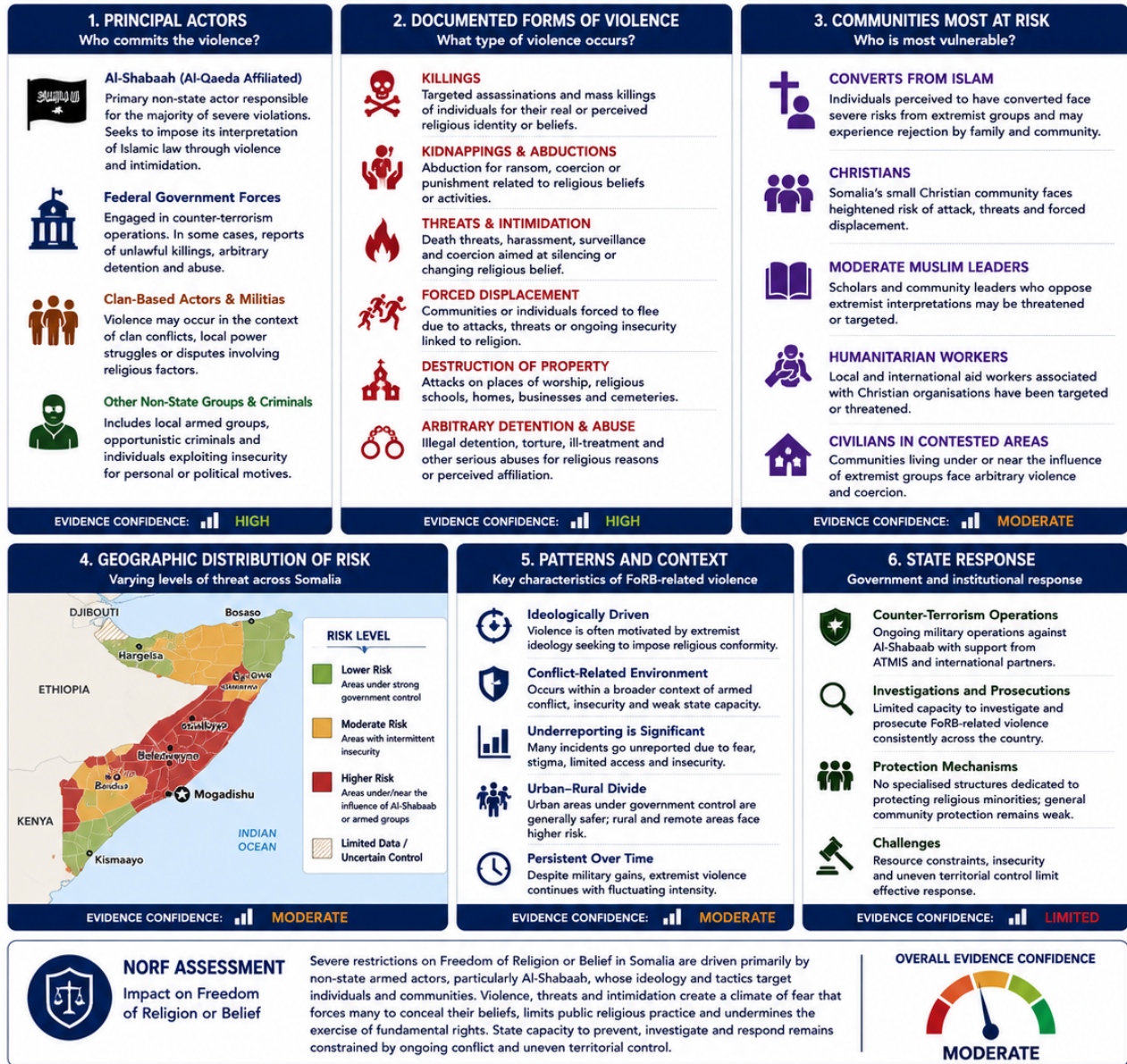
Violence should not be assessed solely by counting documented incidents. Understanding freedom of religion or belief requires analysing the actors responsible, the motivations underlying attacks, the populations most affected and the broader security context in which violations occur. In fragile states, 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



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SOURCES

- African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) (2024), Annual Report
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- Human Rights Watch (2025), World Report 2025
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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

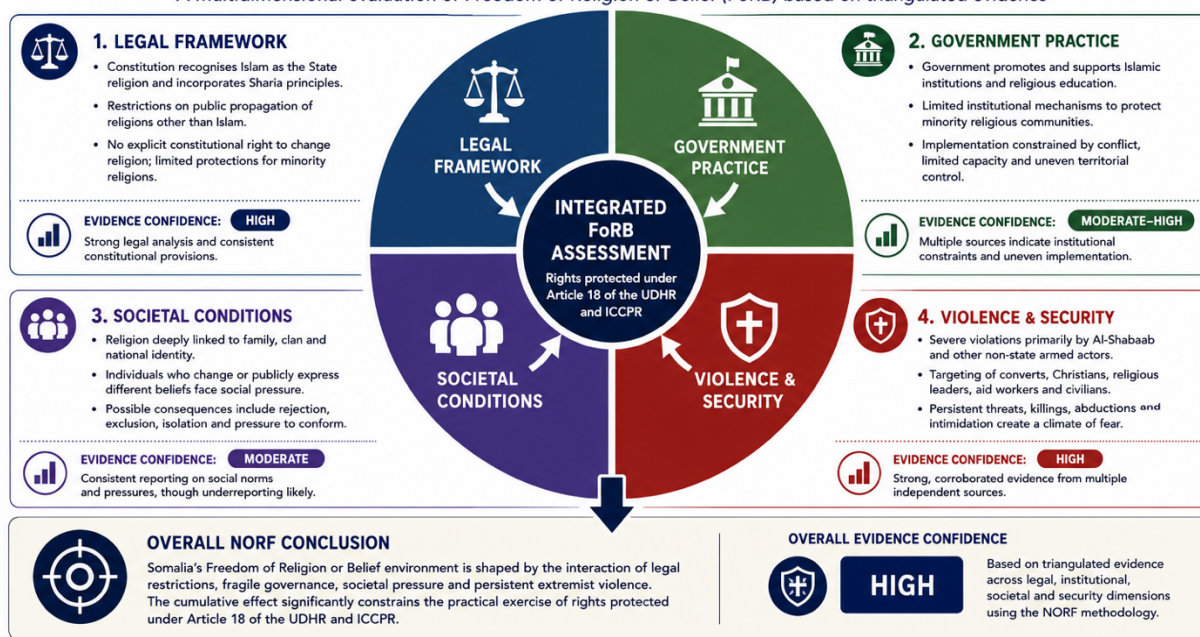
Freedom of Religion or Belief should be assessed as an interconnected human rights ecosystem rather than a collection of isolated indicators. Constitutional law, government performance, societal dynamics and security conditions each contribute to the practical enjoyment of religious freedom. Reliable assessment therefore requires integration of these dimensions through transparent evidence triangulation, explicit confidence assessment and internationally recognised human rights standards.

Figure 3.19

FIGURE 3.19

INTEGRATED NORF ASSESSMENT MODEL – SOMALIA

A multidimensional evaluation of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) based on triangulated evidence



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Assessment based on triangulated evidence and the NORF methodology (Chapter 2).

SOURCES

- African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981), African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights
- Federal Republic of Somalia (2012), Provisional Constitution of the Federal Republic of Somalia
- Freedom House (2025), Freedom in the World 2025: Somalia
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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.



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Assessment based on triangulated evidence
and the NORF methodology (Chapter 2).

SOURCES

- African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (2024), Annual Report
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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



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).

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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

Assessment Dimension	NORF Assessment	Evidence Confidence
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.

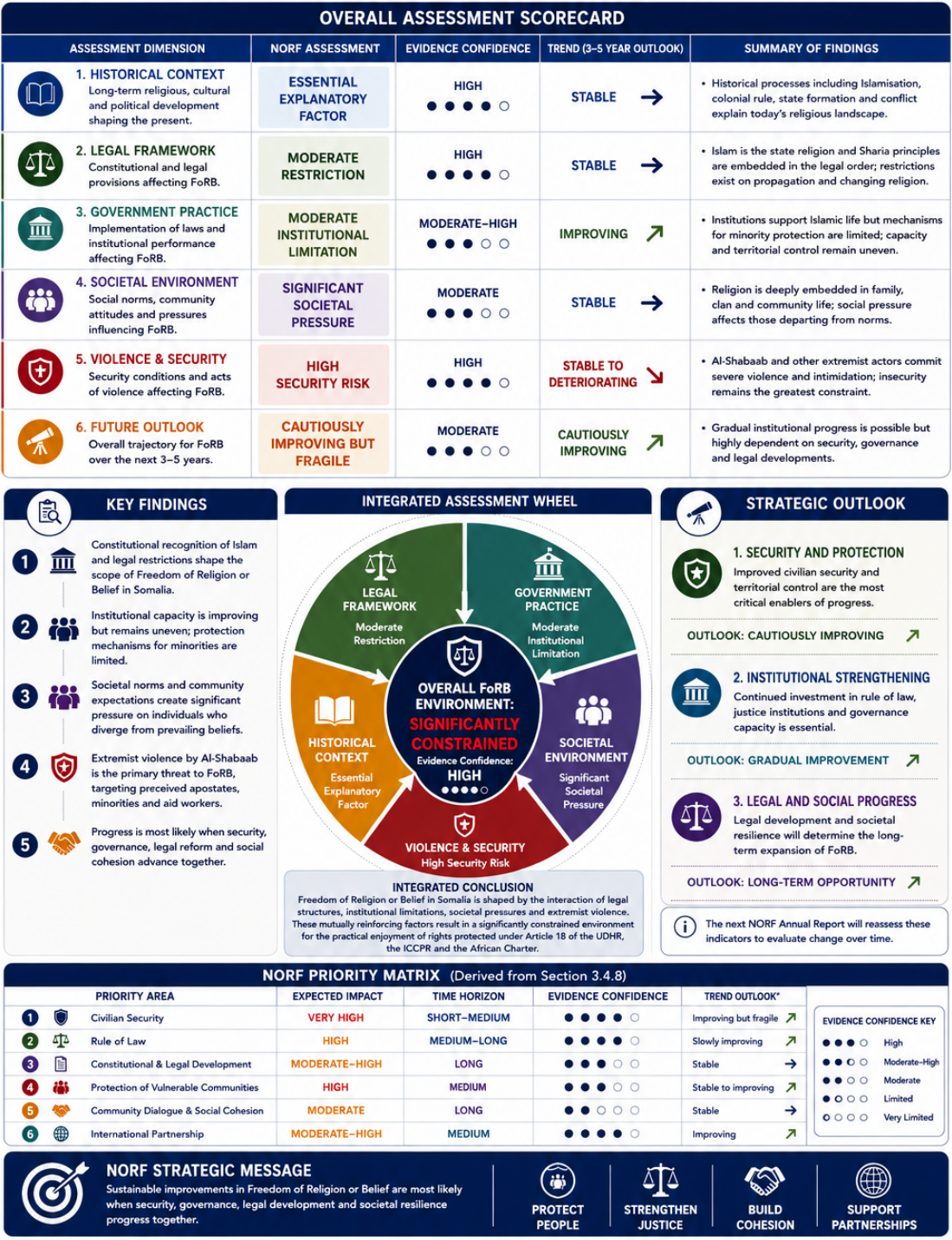
At the same time, the evidence demonstrates that Somalia is not a static environment. Ongoing state-building, institutional development and international engagement create opportunities for gradual improvement. Future assessments should therefore focus on whether these developments translate into measurable 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.



APA 7 References

This concluding section synthesises the evidence presented throughout Chapter 3. Accordingly, no new primary sources are introduced. The references for Sections **3.1–3.4.8** collectively constitute the evidentiary basis for the integrated assessment and will be cited together in the chapter bibliography.

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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 and create graphics

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Primary sources include:

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- World Bank
- Fragile States Index
- International IDEA
- Academic literature