**SOUTH AFRICA**

Quick Facts

Population: 54,841,552
Area: 1,219,090 sq km
Ethnic Groups: Black African 80.2%, white 8.4%, colored 8.8%, Indian/Asian 2.5%
Government Type: Parliamentary republic
GDP (official exchange rate): $344.1 billion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated April 2018)

**INTRODUCTION**

*South Africa is home to approximately 1 million Muslims, constituting 1.9% of the population*.

The country’s diverse Muslim community consists of the descendants of Malay slaves brought by the Dutch East India Company in the 17th and 18th centuries, the descendants of Indian indentured servants that arrived in the 19th and early 20th centuries, recent arrivals since the end of Apartheid, and a growing number of converts.

Although Islamism first gained traction in the country in the 1960s, South Africa only became a haven for terrorists after the end of Apartheid. Despite their small numbers, Muslims are well represented in the leadership of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) and some have created a welcoming climate for Muslim extremism. While Islamist terrorist groups rarely perceive South Africa as an enemy, they have directed violence against heterodox Muslims in the country as well as against drug dealers and businesses associated with the United States.

**ISLAMIST ACTIVITY**

Islamist ideology first filtered into South Africa in the 1960s, while groups devoted to the radicalization of the country’s Muslims emerged in the 1970s. Imam Abdullah Haron, president of the Muslim Judicial Council, introduced Islamist ideology to South Africa through a newsletter called *Islamic Mirror*, which published extracts from the work of Abul A’la Maududi and Sayyid Qutb. Haron also edited the *Muslim News*, a fortnightly newspaper that promoted the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and peddled extreme anti-Zionism. In 1969, he was arrested and killed in custody for organizing the transportation of Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) militants abroad under the guise of recruiting students for Cairo’s Al-Azhar University. The Muslim Youth Movement (MYM) was founded the following year, and subsequently disseminated Islamist ideology through leadership training programs that hosted foreign extremist clerics, orientation camps, study circles, and a press. After the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the writings of
Ali Shari’ati and the Ayatollah Khomeini were added to the MYM reading list.6

Qibla and People Against Gangsterism and Drugs (PAGAD)

Achmad Cassiem, a schoolteacher who had been imprisoned on Robben Island for ten years for PAC activities, founded Qibla with other PAC activists “to promote the aims and ideals of the Iranian Revolution in South Africa and in due course transform South Africa into an Islamic state.”7 Qibla members received military training in Libya and fought alongside Hezbollah in southern Lebanon.8 It also formed the Islamic Unity Convention (IUC) in 1994, which still serves as an umbrella organization for over 250 Muslim organizations in South Africa.9 Achmad Cassiem is leader of both Qibla and the IUC.10 The group has boycotted government elections in South Africa “under the pretext that leaders produced by democratic means, such as elections, are illegitimate.”11 It likewise owns a radio station, Radio 786, through which it preaches and promotes its ideology.12

While Qibla’s theocratic program attracted few adherents, its leaders were able to exploit the skyrocketing crime rates following the end of Apartheid and coopt the vigilante PAGAD, which coalesced in the Western Cape in 1995.13 Initially, PAGAD limited its violence to attacks on gang leaders and cooperated with police.14 However, the Qibla-controlled faction of PAGAD quickly reverted to its roots and began targeting moderate Muslims, synagogues, gay nightclubs, tourist attractions, and Western-associated restaurants.15 Its spiritual advisor, Hafiz Abdulrazaq, was given the title emir (commander).16 PAGAD’s national coordinator, Abdus-Salaam Ebrahim, legitimized violence in his speeches. He called on Muslims to “prepare themselves with steeds of war against the enemies of Allah (SWT), the enemy of the Muslims and the oppressed people.”17

In 1998, there were a reported 80 pipe bomb explosions in the Western Cape, with the most notorious occurring at a Planet Hollywood restaurant.18 PAGAD was designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the United States in 2001.19 The group has not launched any violent attacks in recent years. South Africa outlawed PAGAD in 1996 and prosecuted most of its leadership in 2000, bringing the group’s activities to a halt. However, as experts point out, “Since the underlying reasons for its existence were never addressed, the possible re-emergence of PAGAD or similar organizations cannot be discounted.”20

Al-Qaeda

South Africa has provided a safe haven and financing for al-Qaeda operatives while South African jihadists have fought in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union, in Kashmir against India, as well as in Chechnya.21 In October 1999, South African police arrested Khalfan Khamis Mohamed in Cape Town for his role in the August 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi. He had been hiding in South Africa since a few days after the embassy bombings.22 Then, in June 2011, Fazul Abdullah Mohammad, an al-Qaeda operative and mastermind behind the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombings, was killed in Somalia. Reports indicate that he was carrying a South African passport under the name of Daniel Robinson.23

In January 2007, the U.S. Treasury Department designated two South African cousins, Farhad and Junaid Dockrat, as financiers of al-Qaeda.24 In addition to acting as an al-Qaeda fundraiser, Junaid helped send South Africans to Pakistan to train with al-Qaeda, communicating via phone and email with then al-Qaeda operations chief Hamza Rabi’a.25 In September 2009, the United States government closed its facilities across South Africa after it received credible threats against their safety.26 The threats reportedly came from an al-Qaeda splinter group.27 The U.S. State Department reopened its embassies and consulates a few days later.

Furthermore, evidence has come to light that demonstrates that al-Qaeda’s top leadership have an interest in South Africa. In the May 2011 raid conducted by U.S. Navy Seals in Pakistan that targeted Osama bin Laden, the U.S. uncovered information regarding bin Laden’s designs on South Africa. In
documents retrieved during the raid, bin Laden articulated that it may be: “suitable to target Americans in South Africa, because it is located outside the Islamic Maghreb.”

**Al-Shabaab**

In 2015, documents leaked to the *Al Jazeera* television network revealed that the South African State Security Agency and foreign intelligence services had prevented terror attacks on South African soil between 2007 and 2010. The thwarted attacks were connected to Samantha Lewthwaite, known as the “white widow,” who resided in South Africa between 2009 and 2011 on a fraudulent South African passport. Lewthwaite was married to Germaine Lindsay, one of the suicide bombers responsible for the death of 26 people in the London underground in July 2005. Lewthwaite has been linked to both the al-Shabaab Westgate Mall attack in Nairobi and the attack on Garissa University in Kenya that killed 148 people.

**The Islamic State**

In September 2015, the U.S. Embassy issued a security warning regarding a possible terrorist threat to American interests in South Africa. The statement, which came as the Islamic State appealed to its followers to attack Western targets during Ramadan, did not include any specifics regarding the location or timing of the attack but urged U.S. citizens to take the appropriate steps to enhance their personal security. In June 2016, the U.S. Embassy in South Africa again issued a security message to warn U.S. citizens that the U.S. government had “received information that terrorist groups are planning to carry out near-term attacks against places where U.S. citizens congregate in South Africa.” The British and Australian Embassies issued similar warnings the same day, encouraging their citizens to be vigilant about personal security. The warnings caused a furor— the South African Department for International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) and the State Security Agency (SSA) feeling that the statements questioned South Africa’s ability to protect foreign citizens on its soil. DIRCO questioned the credibility of the threats, raising alarm among citizens who doubted the government’s capacity to advance counterterrorism efforts.

In July 2016, the South African authorities arrested twin brothers Brandon-Lee and Tony-Lee Thulsie, along with two accomplices, for plotting to attack the U.S. embassy and a Jewish Building in Pretoria. South Africa’s State Security Agencies had twice prevented the brothers from leaving to join the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria. The brothers were charged with “conspiracy and incitement to commit the crime of terrorism.”

It is estimated that between 60 and 100 South Africans fought for ISIS and that half of them had returned by 2017. South African authorities have kept details of their investigations and monitoring efforts classified. In April 2015, a 15-year old girl was removed from an aircraft leaving South Africa on suspicion that she was travelling to Turkey with the intention of joining the Islamic State. There has been no documented evidence of ISIS organizing in South Africa.

**Islamism and Society**

The Rushdie Affair of the late 1980s/early 1990s illustrates the gains made by Islamist organizations over the past several decades. After the *Daily Mail* and Congress of South African Writers (COSAW) invited controversial author Salman Rushdie to deliver a keynote speech at a conference on censorship, the event organizers were bombarded with death threats, almost all of which were signed and included return addresses. Under Muslim pressure, the government banned the book and COSAW withdrew Rushdie’s invitation. The furor surrounding Rushdie has not abated over the past two decades. In 2015, three Islamists attacked South African writer Zainab Dala after she expressed admiration for Rushdie’s literary style at Durban’s Time of the Writer Festival. They drove her off the road, held a knife to her throat, and hit her with a brick while calling her “Rushdie’s bitch.”
Islamists have also targeted mosques in the country that preach a tolerant form of Islam. In 2014, Taj Hargay founded Cape Town’s Open Mosque, which only recognizes the Quran as authoritative, rejecting the hadith, and promotes gender equality as well as tolerance of homosexuals. In the months after its opening, Islamists firebombed the mosque three times and threatened Hargay in anonymous letters with hanging and castration. The Saudi-funded Muslim Judicial Council, an umbrella group with about 150 affiliated mosques, better reflects the zeitgeist of South African Muslim opinion. The organization’s spokesman, Shuaib Appleby, condemned Bin Laden’s killing, saying that “extrajudicial killing is totally condemned by Islam. A person must be duly tried, with a court deciding on a punishment if the person is found to be guilty. We hope that with (Bin Laden’s) death, the kinds of ideas that Muslims globally were subjected to - the Islamophobia - and being associated with terrorism will cease with immediate effect.”

As in other countries outside the Muslim world, Islam in South Africa has been influenced by international groups and events. South Africa’s position as the economic powerhouse on the continent has made it a destination for immigrants from all over Africa. Reports indicate that immigrants from Central and West Africa have “brought with them a new ‘Africanised Islam’ more in line with black South Africans’ identities than the religion practiced by followers with closer links to Asia.” Islam in South Africa appears to have been more influenced by the Iranian Revolution than by the global Salafi movement. Nevertheless, South Africa’s Muslims largely identify with more libertarian Sufism, which has been a long established tradition among the Islamic population in the country.

A number of incidents in recent years have exposed some of the racial and ethnic cleavages in South African society. In August 2012, for example, a Muslim man was beaten to death, reportedly over the fact that he wore a beard. Then, in January 2013, two Muslim students were expelled from their high school in Cape Town for refusing to remove their head coverings. The South African constitution prevents schools from banning wearing certain religious garments including yamulkes and headscarves. Within weeks, however, the students were readmitted after a meeting was held between representatives from the school and education department, the parents, a local imam, and representatives from the South African Human Rights Commission. Islamophobes have also vandalized mosques. In January 2017, a bloody pig’s snout was found outside the historic Nurul Islam Mosque in Simon’s Town. Soon thereafter, blood was found smeared on the walls of a mosque in the Cape Town suburb of Kalk Bay.

The legacy of Apartheid has left deep cleavages within South African society. Within the Muslim community, reports indicate that there is a growing hostility between black Muslims and other Muslims in South Africa. As Israeli scholars Reuven Paz and Moshe Terdman have noted, “[t]he grievances of Black Muslims run the gamut, from racism and exploitation to the unfair distribution of zakat (alms).” The divide presents a factor that could potentially be exploited by Islamists seeking greater influence and followers.

**Islamism and the State**

Since the fall of Apartheid, the ANC has dominated South African politics. As many Muslims participated in the anti-Apartheid movement, they have been amply represented in government since 1994. Some of these politicians have expressed support for Islamist terrorist groups and anti-Semitism. Then-Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Aziz Pahad met with the chief of Hezbollah’s political bureau, Mohammad Raad, in Beirut in June 2003 and characterized the group as a “legitimate liberation movement in terms of international law.” Then, at a January 2009 protest against Operation Cast Lead in Gaza, then-Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Fatima Hajaig stated that “They [ie, the Jews] in fact control [America]. No matter which government comes in to power, whether Republican or Democratic, whether Barack Obama or George Bush. The control of America, just like the control of most Western countries, is in the hands of Jewish money and if Jewish money controls their country then you cannot expect anything else.”
Competing with the ANC are a variety of smaller political parties representing geographic, ethnic and religious groups. Notably, some advocate the imposition of sharia law as the governing mechanism for the state. One such group is Al-Jama-ah, which was created in April 2007 as a political party for South Africa’s Muslim youth. Ahead of the 2009 elections, Al-Jama-ah aimed its campaign at sixteen and seventeen year olds, noting that, come 2009, they would be eligible to vote. Ahead of the elections, the group posted a statement on their website calling on voters to opt for sharia law. Although Al-Jama-ah did not secure any representation in either the parliamentary or the provincial elections of 2009 and 2014, they won 9 seats in the 2016 municipal elections. Controlling the balance of power in the Estcourt municipality, the party even obtained the deputy mayorship.

Similar to other western states, South Africa’s government does not legally recognize Muslim marriages, even those that are monogamous. In 2012, the South African pension fund authority allowed a spouse a portion of their partner’s pension after a Muslim divorce had been granted. While the decision does not put in place any binding precedent on the South African courts, some South African Muslims “hope the case could open the way towards acknowledging the dissolution of an Islamic marriage as a divorce in terms of the Divorce Act.”

South Africa has porous borders and large immigrant communities that have the ability to harbor jihadists. South Africa also suffers from a high crime rate. This propensity towards violence, if coupled with a rise in Islamist activity, may increase the risk of Islamist-inspired attacks against targets within the country. However, the state appears to have been making efforts to reach out to the religious communities in South Africa to “manage the expression of Islam.” The ANC’s Commission for Religious Affairs, developed in 1995, meets with the President several times a year to discuss relevant issues.

In terms of counterterrorist response and readiness, however, South Africa remains lackluster. The South African government has generally hoped that its neutrality in the war on terror and a pro-Palestinian stance would spare the nation from being targeted by Islamists.

Furthermore, there has long been concern that South Africa’s weak intelligence services and high crime rate would render it vulnerable to large-scale terrorist attacks. In the wake of U.S. terror warnings in 2016, Minister of State Security David Mahlobo issued his own statement claiming that South Africa remains a “strong and stable democratic country and there is no immediate danger posed by the threat,” further urging that there was “no need to panic.” The apparently contradictory messages from the South African government and international embassies do not instill confidence that the South African government is taking the threats seriously. An important first step would be the acknowledgement of potential danger from radical Islamic ideology—something currently missing from state discourse.

ENDNOTES


10. Lefkowitz, “Terror’s South African Front.”


18. Holt, “South Africa in the War on Terror.”


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32. Reuters, May 22, 2016, Islamic State calls for attacks on west during Ramadan in audio message.
46. Schmidt, “Islamic Terror is Not a Problem for SA.”
53. Lefkowitz, “Terror’s South African Front.”
64. Schmidt, “Islamic Terror Is Not a Problem for SA.”
68. “Militancy Among South African Muslims.”