

American Foreign Policy Council

ETHIOPIA

QUICK FACTS

Population: 88,013,491

Area: 1,104,300 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Oromo 32.1%, Amara 30.1%, Tigraway 6.2%, Somalie 5.9%, Guragie 4.3%, Sidama 3.5%, Welaita 2.4%, other 15.4%

Religions: Christian 60.8% (Orthodox 50.6%, Protestant 10.2%), Muslim 32.8%, traditional 4.6%, other 1.8%

Government Type: Federal Republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$34.32 billion

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated July 2010)



The U.S. Department of State describes Ethiopia as “a strategic partner in the Global War on Terrorism.”²¹ The title is more than merited, both for the Ethiopian government’s actions abroad and for the challenges it faces at home. As the 2008 edition of the Department’s Country Reports on Terrorism noted: “The Government of Ethiopia, facing a deteriorating security environment in Somalia that resulted in increased threats to its own security, and in support of the internationally recognized Transitional Federal Government of Somalia, battled insurgents and extremists that were formerly affiliated with the Council of Islamic Courts, including the al Qa’ida (AQ)-affiliated al-Shabaab factions. Until they announced their military with-

drawal from Somalia in late 2008, Ethiopian forces provided critical support to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) peacekeeping force, which was also targeted by extremist elements. In addition, Ethiopian forces countered individuals affiliated with organizations that attempted to conduct attacks inside Ethiopia."²

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

For the moment, the primary Islamist threats to Ethiopia's security are external, coming from Somalia and Sudan, albeit less from the latter than was the case previously.

While a certain controversy surrounds the precise details of Islamism's introduction into Ethiopia, a bridgehead seems to have been established in and around the town of Harar fairly early on in the 20th century, perhaps during the Italian occupation (1936-1942), by pilgrims returning from the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, or *Hajj*. Later, in the 1960s and 1970s, a number of Oromo students returning from religious studies in Saudi Arabia further propagated the creed, not only in their native regions but also in Addis Ababa and Wollo. The May 1991 fall of the Derg dictatorship gave new impetus to these trends, as many returning Oromo exiles had been influenced by Wahhabi doctrines during their time abroad and the new government's policies facilitated contact with correligionists in other countries, who supported the establishment of mosques, schools, and associations.³ Among the latter were two entities in Addis Ababa: the Ethiopian Muslim Youth Association, founded in the 1990s and linked to the Riyadh-based World Association of Muslim Youth (WAMY), and the Alawiyah School and Mission Center, owned since 1993 by the Saudi-controlled World Muslim League's International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO).⁴ IIRO has also donated food and medical relief to Ethiopia following natural disasters.⁵ (In August 2006, the U.S. Treasury Department formally designated the Philippine and Indonesian branches of the IIRO for facilitating terrorism.⁶)

Like their Wahhabi confrères elsewhere, Ethiopian Islamists have attacked what they regard as syncretism among other Muslims, as exemplified by certain Sufi-inspired practices like pilgrimages to

various shrines and the celebration of *Mawlid* (the birthday of the prophet Muhammad). More recently, some zealots have pushed for a stricter observance of what they regard as compulsory practices such as the wearing of pants above the ankles and the use of face coverings by women. The tensions within the Muslim community were further aggravated when a branch of *Takfir wal-Hijrah* (“Excommunication and Exodus”), a radical group which originated in Egypt in the 1970s, was driven from Sudan and decamped first to Gondar and, subsequently, to a northern suburb of Addis Ababa.⁷ The group labels most fellow Muslims, including other Wahhabis, as *kuffar* (“non-believers”). Although it has caused less of a sensation since the 2004 death of its leader in Ethiopia, Sheikh Muhammad Amin, the group continues to exist.⁸ Details of the group’s activities, capabilities and resources within Ethiopia, however, remain sketchy at best.

Al-Qaeda is also known to be active in Ethiopia. The organization has long viewed East Africa as a priority within its overall strategy. According to the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, the nascent al-Qaeda, then based in Sudan, sought both to establish working relations with Islamist extremists in Somalia and create training camps in ethnic Somali areas of Ethiopia in the early 1990s.⁹ More recently, the Ethiopian intervention in Somalia has given al-Qaeda reason to renew its interest both in the Horn of Africa in general and in targeting Ethiopia in particular. For example, in early 2007, Ayman al-Zawahiri called for attacks on Ethiopian forces in Somalia using “ambushes, mines, raids and martyrdom-seeking raids to devour them as the lions devour their prey,” which analysts at the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point note “strongly suggests that al-Qa’ida desires to use the Horn as a theater of operations.”¹⁰ However, like with *Takfir wal-Hijrah* (above), accurate information on al-Qaeda’s organizational make-up and capabilities in Ethiopia is far from complete, at least at the open-source level.

Another Islamist group active in Ethiopia is the world’s largest *dawa* (proselytizing) movement, *Tablighi Jamaat*. Founded in India in 1929, the group first came to Ethiopia from South Africa in the

1970s. Its activities, however, were very limited until after the fall of the Derg. Little is known about the group's activities other than that its center of operations seems to be the Kolfe district of Addis Ababa, where it is especially active within the Gurage community that has migrated to the city from their mountainous homeland southwest of there.

The principal Islamist threat to Ethiopia, however, comes from its regional neighbor, Somalia. Following the January 1991 collapse of the Muhammad Siyad Barre regime, the last effective central government of Somalia, the rise of *al-Itihaad al-Islamiya* (AIAI, "Islamic Union") posed serious challenges to Ethiopian security during the 1990s. While the AIAI's primary focus was on the establishment of an Islamist state in Somalia, it also encouraged subversive activities among ethnic Somalis in the Somali region of Ethiopia and carried out a series of terrorist attacks, including the bombing of two hotels and the 1995 attempted assassination of a cabinet minister in Addis Ababa, Abdul Majeed Hussein, an ethnic Somali Ethiopian whom the AIAI accused of being a traitor in claiming responsibility for the attack. AIAI's hostility to Ethiopia arises from its toxic mix of Islamism with Somali irredentism and the latter's designs on Ethiopian territory. The exasperated Ethiopian regime finally intervened in Somalia in August 1996, wiping out al-Itihaad bases in the Somali towns of Luuq and Buulo Haawa and killing hundreds of Somali extremists as well as scores of non-Somali Islamists who had flocked to the Horn under the banner of *jihad*.¹¹

As it turns out, the defeat was only a temporary setback for the Somali Islamists, who regrouped under the banner of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) with many of the same leaders as AIAI, including Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys, who had served as number two in AIAI and went on to chair the ICU's *shura* and later head the Asmara, Eritrea-based Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia (ARS) after Ethiopian forces intervened in Somalia in December 2006 in support of the country's internationally-recognized, but weak "Transitional Federal Government." The presence of Ethiopian troops in Somalia, which lasted until early 2009, occasioned an Islamist insurgency spearheaded by the radical *Harakat al-Shabaab*

al-Mujahideen (“Movement of Warrior Youth,” al-Shabaab), a group that was designated a “specially designated global terrorist” by the U.S. Department of State in 2008¹² and “listed terrorist organization” by the Australian government the following year.¹³ While the threat is external, it cannot be entirely separated from the internal threat to Ethiopian national security posed by dissidents within who align themselves with the country’s foreign enemies.

Among the latter, Eritrea falls into a category all of its own given the bitter two-year war which the tiny state precipitated in May 1998, when it occupied a small sliver of territory that had up to then been peaceably administered by Ethiopia. While the regime of Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki is not known for its religiosity—in fact, the country was one of only eight countries placed on the list of “particular concern” by the George W. Bush administration and has been criticized by the Obama administration for its “very serious restrictions on free exercise of religion”¹⁴—that has not prevented it from supporting Islamist movements if they serve its overall strategic objective of undermining the Ethiopian government. To this end, it has lent support to, among other groups, the Islamist insurgency in Somalia¹⁵ as well as the secessionist Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) in Ethiopia, which has frequently partnered with its extremist ethnic kin in Somalia.¹⁶

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Traditionally, the dominant ethnic group in Ethiopia has been the Amhara who, together with the Tigray, currently make up about 36.3 percent of the population, according to the last national census, conducted in 1994.¹⁷ The Oromo, who live largely in the southern part of the country, constitute another 32 percent. Other important ethnic groups include the Somali (5.9 percent), Gurage (4.3 percent), Sidama (3.5 percent), and Welayta (2.4 percent). Religiously, about half of the population is Christian, mainly adherents of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, an Oriental (Monophysite) Orthodox Christian body in communion with the Armenian, Coptic, and Syrian Churches. Another 40 percent or so is Muslim, drawn primarily from the Oromo and other southern

peoples as well as the ethnic Somali. Given that the population of Ethiopia is estimated to be at least 85 million, the country has more Muslims than many Muslim states, including Afghanistan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan.¹⁸

Until the modern period, interactions between Christians and Muslims in Ethiopia have been relatively cordial. According to tradition, the prophet Muhammad even sent a group of his early followers to take refuge in Ethiopia, where they succeeded in obtaining the protection of the king of Aksum from the persecutions they were then being subjected to in Mecca.¹⁹ The relationship became testier beginning in the fifteenth century, when Muslim raiders from the Somali port of Zeila began a series of incursions into the Ethiopian highlands. Although these forays were repulsed, the following century saw a full-scale *jihad* led by Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi, who aimed to end Christian power in Ethiopia. He succeeded in overrunning most of eastern and central Ethiopia, destroying numerous Christian churches and monasteries in the process before he was defeated and killed in 1543 by the Ethiopians with aid from the Portuguese.²⁰ In later centuries, the Ethiopians defeated several other Muslim attempts to overrun them, including invasions by the khedive of Egypt in 1875 and the forces of the Mahdi in the Sudan in 1888, although the latter were not repulsed until after they had sacked the former capital of Gondar, burning many of its churches.²¹ Another milestone in Christian-Muslim relations in Ethiopia came when the Emperor Menelik II died in 1913 and was succeeded by his grandson Lij Iyasu. Three years later, Lij Iyasu announced his conversion to Islam, provoking a political firestorm among the ruling elite, who deposed him for abjuring the faith of his ancestors.²²

Almost all Muslims in Ethiopia are Sunni, with a plurality, if not a majority, adhering to one or another Sufi *tariqa* (order), the most widely-diffuse being the Qadiriyya, although the Tijaniyya, Shaziriyya, and Semaniyya also have significant followings. Islam is most prevalent in eastern Ethiopia, particularly in the Somali and Afar regions, as well as in many parts of the Oromo region. While institutional Islam in Ethiopia tends to be decentralized, the Ethiopian

Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, formally established (although not accorded *de jure* recognition) in 1976, enjoys a certain prestige and its chairman is treated by the government as “representative of the Ethiopian Muslim community” and accorded the same courtesies as the heads of the Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant Churches in state ceremonials.²³

By and large, the Muslim community in Ethiopia has done well under the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) government, which lifted its predecessor’s restrictions on the *Hajj*, ban on the importation of religious literature, and obstacles to the construction of mosques and religious schools.²⁴ The opening “produced a new consciousness among the Muslim population, generated new religious affiliations and paved the way for Islam in Ethiopia to become more visible.”²⁵

By and large, Ethiopian Muslims have resisted the attempts of radical co-religionists to promote political Islam. The main reasons for this failure of Islamism to gain traction include not only the deep roots of more traditional forms of Islam, especially those represented by the Sufi orders, and the strength of social ties that cross religious boundaries, but also the fact that the extremists have failed to offer concrete solutions to many of the problems faced by ordinary Ethiopians while the government, despite its limitations, has managed to deliver impressive rates of economic growth.²⁶ Nonetheless, the potential does exist for religion to be exploited to mobilize greater support by various separatist movements.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Following the 1974 overthrow of the Emperor Haile Selassie, the communist Derg regime of Mengistu Hailemariam persecuted religious leaders and discouraged the practice of religion by Christians and Muslims alike. Since the defeat of the dictatorship, and the subsequent assumption of power of the current government led by the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in 1991, the policy has shifted to one of religious tolerance, although the formation of political groups on the basis of religion is forbid-

den. According to the State Department's 2008 annual report on religious freedom, the Ethiopian constitution "provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion" and "the law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors."²⁷

Despite this tolerance, the Ethiopian government has taken a significant role in regional and international counterterrorism efforts. It served as host for the African Union's Center for Study and Research on Terrorism, and in 2008 ratified the Protocol to the OAU Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism.²⁸ From 2006 through late 2008, Ethiopia led the efforts in Somalia against extremists connected with the ICU, and provided "critical support" to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) in their efforts against extremist groups.²⁹ The U.S. State Department currently considers Ethiopia to be an "important regional security partner."³⁰

However, Ethiopia's counterterrorism efforts have drawn mixed reviews. Last summer, Ethiopia's Council of Ministers drafted an anti-terrorism law designed to discourage radical groups within Ethiopian borders, carrying penalties ranging up to life imprisonment and even the death penalty. Expressing support for terrorism was likewise criminalized: "Whosoever writes, edits, prints, publishes, publicises, disseminates, shows, makes to be heard any promotional statements encouraging... terrorist acts is punishable with rigorous imprisonment from 10 to 20 years."³¹ The legislation, while recognized as an attempt to combat extremism, has drawn criticism from some human rights organizations who claim that the law's ambiguous language is an attempt by the EPRDF to cement its power and justify oppression of opposition groups.³²

Other have pointed to the country's recent elections as further reason for concern. In the May 2010 vote, the EPRDF and its allies won 545 out of 547 seats in the country's parliament. While the lopsided results were partially attributable to divisions within the opposition, they nonetheless raised questions among some analysts about the future of democracy in the Ethiopia.³³ Not all experts see cause for concern, however. Rather, they emphasize the progress

Ethiopia has made since ousting the Soviet regime in 1991—especially when placed into the context of its neighbors Eritrea, Somalia, and Kenya, who have all struggled with instability.³⁴ In fact, shortly after its victory was confirmed by the country's highest court, the Ethiopian government announced a peace deal with one faction of Ogadeni rebels.³⁵

Nevertheless, the potential for conflict remains. After the fall of the communist Derg dictatorship, a constituent assembly convened by the EPRDF government adopted a constitution in 1994 that carried “a radical recognition of diversity and of a new kind of equality.”³⁶ Each ethnic community is accorded the right and duty to manage its own affairs under the aegis of a federal government that serves as the center for state unity. While it is too early to declare the success or failure of this system of ethnic federalism, it does raise the specter of struggles for allegiance between religion and ethnicity as well as the distinct possibility that Islam in particular may be used by groups seeking to mobilize their ethnic kin to exercise the secession that the constitution affirms is an inherent part of the “unconditional right of self-determination” accorded to every “group of people who have or share a large measure of common culture or similar customs, mutual intelligibility of language, belief in a common or related identities, a common psychological make-up, and who inhabit an identifiable, predominantly contiguous territory.”³⁷ Against this potential vulnerability, which external foes, both state and non-state will be eager to seize upon, the Ethiopian government will need to maintain constant vigilance.

ENDNOTES

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