

# American Foreign Policy Council

## TANZANIA

### QUICK FACTS

Population: 48,261,942

Area: 947,300 sq km

Ethnic Groups: mainland - African 99% (of which 95% are Bantu consisting of more than 130 tribes), other 1% (consisting of Asian, European, and Arab); Zanzibar - Arab, African, mixed Arab and African

Religions: mainland - Christian 30%, Muslim 35%, indigenous beliefs 35%; Zanzibar - more than 99% Muslim

Government Type: Republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$28.25 billion (2012 est.)

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated August 2013)



*Tanzania currently harbors a low level of Islamist activity, especially as compared to regional neighbors such as Sudan, Somalia, and Egypt. However, a number of factors—among them secular nationalism, a lame parliamentary democracy, slow and uneven economic growth, and perceived unequal opportunity—have spurred at least some Muslim Africans in Tanzania, as elsewhere, to adhere to Islamism as an ideological alternative.*

*Like other states of Africa south of the Sahara with large Muslim populations, Tanzania remains vulnerable to the popular unrest that has swept North Africa and the Gulf region since January 2011. The Arab Spring phenomenon presents a “backdoor” opening for radical jihadist Islam, which already main-*

*tains a strong presence in North Africa and the Sahel. Tanzania is significant for the number of Muslims in the population—about a third of the total—for its proximity to the eastern African cockpit of Islamism (Somalia), and for the character of its internal politics: a one-party-dominant political system. Several factors, including restrictive economic and political conditions as well as an expanding youth population, have combined to posit Islamist ideology as a plausible alternative for at least some disenfranchised elements of the population.<sup>1</sup>*

## **ISLAMIST ACTIVITY**

The bombing of the U.S. embassy in Dar es Salaam in 1998, which killed eleven people and injured eighty-five others, revealed the existence of a cell of *jihadi* terrorists in Tanzania. The bombing was not a plot planned inside the country or even by Tanzanian Muslims, although two Zanzibari residents were implicated. The attack was actually orchestrated by a handful of Somalis: al-Qaeda operatives and sleepers with regional links to cells in Tanzania and Kenya.<sup>2</sup> These extremists, based in Nairobi, began in 1993 to use the trade in diamonds, tanzanite, and rubies to render the al-Qaeda cells in Tanzania financially self-sufficient. The Saudi charity, al-Haramain Islamic Foundation in Tanzania (now shut down) supplied the necessary funds.<sup>3</sup>

Although no other attacks of that profile have occurred since, Tanzania overall has remained vulnerable to radical Islamists. The country has a limited-capacity government presiding over a large territorial expanse (the size of France and Germany combined). Thirty-six percent of the population lives below the poverty line.<sup>4</sup> Violent *jihadi* attacks have occurred just across its northern border in the neighboring countries of Kenya and Uganda, and small arms and other weapons are readily available on the black market in East Africa. With rudimentary border controls, a wide-open coastline and troubled neighbors, Tanzania's large coastal trade and extensive illegal smuggling industry provide excellent logistical cover for extremists. Meanwhile, the Tanzanian police are unable, and sometimes unwilling, to provide even the most basic public safety services, and major crimes often go unsolved.

The Tanzanian National Security Service is more capable than its police force, but is better suited to spying on political opponents than combating criminal networks. These weaknesses make Tanzania a relatively soft target.<sup>5</sup> Currently, the Muslim population as a whole has not succumbed to extremist rhetoric, despite the efforts of a small and weak Islamist movement whose radical elements have concentrated on bringing their co-religionists more in line with fundamentalist Islamic practices.

The 2012 arrest of Ermah Erdogan, an associate of both al-Qaeda and

al-Shabaab, in Dar es Salaam was considered by the Tanzanian National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) to be a confirmation that extremist organizations “have elements and plans within the country’s borders.”<sup>6</sup> This looming threat was thrown into stark relief once again in May 2013 when a church in the predominantly Christian area of Arusha was bombed, wounding over 60. Four Saudi nationals and four Tanzanians were arrested in connection with the attack, but to date, no group has claimed responsibility.<sup>7</sup>

The potential for volatility and radicalization is higher in Zanzibar, a semi-autonomous archipelago situated off the northeastern Tanzanian coast. The islands are majority Muslim, and thus constitute a prime target for radical figures like Sheikh Ponda Issa Ponda. Ponda leads the Islamist organization Simba wa Mungu (God’s Lion), which in the past has forcibly taken over mosques in Dar es Salaam and violently targeted tourists.<sup>8</sup> He preaches *jihadi* Islamism and reputedly enjoys ties with al-Qaeda officials.<sup>9</sup> In early 2013, he was convicted for inciting violence “likely to lead to a breach of peace in the country” and given a year-long suspended sentence.<sup>10</sup> Only three months later, on August 9, unidentified men in a drive-by attack threw acid on two young British tourists in the Zanzibar town of Stone Town. Zanzibar authorities immediately arrested Ponda, asserting that his recent meetings with the leaders of the UAMSHO Muslim separatist group may have prompted the attack.<sup>11</sup>

UAMSHO (an acronym for the Association for Islamic Mobilization and Propagation, and also the Swahili word for “Awakening”) first began offering public lectures on Islam in the 1990s and later expanded into the sphere of Muslim rights.<sup>12</sup> It states its goals as increasing the standard of living for Muslims living in Zanzibar and ultimately achieving Zanzibari independence.<sup>13</sup> UAMSHO’s supporters have accused the government of intervening in religious affairs in violation of Article 19 of the Constitution, and they claim that government corruption has led to the moral decline of the country. Finally, they complain that the corrupt government does not properly enforce the laws in Tanzania regulating dress codes and alcohol.

The government of Zanzibar, for its part, has accused UAMSHO of holding and disseminating fundamentalist views. In addition, various Western groups and think tanks have accused the group of contemplating terrorist attacks against the tourist industry in Zanzibar. A 2009 inquiry by the British, American, and Danish embassies in Tanzania found the organization to be non-violent<sup>14</sup>, and its rhetoric of human rights and good governance in its critique of the Tanzanian government was originally perceived to be unique for an Islamic group. However, more recently, the group’s public

image has been tarnished. Tanzanian Prime Minister Mizengo Pinda opined in 2012 that UAMSHO “has of late lost direction and is propagating hatred among the people of Zanzibar.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the group has since been linked to outbreaks of violence, including the August 2013 acid attacks as well as religiously-motivated abductions, rioting, and arson.<sup>16</sup>

Outside Zanzibar, several Islamic groups associated with a loosely organized movement known as Ansar al-Sunnah seek a purified Islam in Tanzania. Although other revivalists are critical of Ansar, saying it is too closely linked to Salafism, Wahabism, and Hanbalism (all of which are conservative Muslim religious movements),<sup>17</sup> Ansar has recently grown more visible in Tanzania, both in small towns and in larger cities.<sup>18</sup> A second Islamist movement active in Tanzania is Tablighi Jama’at. Its main aim is to improve the “morality” of Muslim society by improving the behavior of Muslims. Instead of pointing a finger at the West or Christians for the current ills that have befallen society, adherents believe that they should start with themselves, calling for living by the rules of *sharia* law.<sup>19</sup>

So far, both movements are largely ripples on the surface of theology and social life across the country. Sufi Islam and Islamic traditions remain mixed with local tribal customs, creating a formidable barrier to radical Islamists.<sup>20</sup> As a further preventative measure, the NCTC intends to work directly with local police to encourage respected figures in Tanzanian communities, including elders and religious authorities, to try to promote conflict resolution through dialogue rather than violence.<sup>21</sup> Yet it is important to note that these efforts may easily be counterbalanced by foreign influence.

In recent years, expatriate Wahhabis from Saudi Arabia have been active in Muslim charitable organizations and in schools. According to a Western intelligence report, the Saudis are spending about \$1 million a year in Tanzania to build new mosques and buy influence with the ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) party.<sup>22</sup> “We get our funds from Yemen and Saudi Arabia,” says Mohammed Madi, a Zanzibari separatist activist.<sup>23</sup> “Officially the money is used to buy medicine, but in reality the money is given to us to support our work and buy guns.”<sup>24</sup> Indeed, Wahhabi-style fundamentalists have, on occasion, taken over 30 of the 487 mosques in Dar es Salaam, bombed bars, and beaten women who go out without being fully covered.<sup>25</sup> In 2011, a Muslim youth demonstration organized by a local imam turned violent and resulted in the destruction of a bar and a church.<sup>26</sup>

## **ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY**

Of Tanzania’s population of about 42 million, it is estimated that about

one-third are Muslim, another third are Christian, and perhaps one-third more are “animist.” The Christian population dominates the south-west and north-central areas of the country. Muslims live largely along the pre-colonial and colonial trade routes: coastal north-south, and east-west. In the past, these routes were active in the transport of slaves, ivory, sisal, coffee and tea. The Zanzibar islands, which once served as the hub of pre-colonial trade, now have a population of roughly one million, ninety-nine percent of which are Muslim.<sup>27</sup> In the traditional centers of Swahili culture along the coast, Muslims adhere to Sunni Islam. Beginning in the ninth century, Arab traders often married local women and “the new culture that developed merged Persian cultural elements with an indigenous substratum.”<sup>28</sup> As Islam expanded into the interior, so did syncretic practices combining Islam and traditional beliefs, some of which strayed far from the conventional practice of the religion.<sup>29</sup>

Tanzania’s major, simmering conflict is now the political struggle between the Tanzanian mainland and Zanzibar, which reflects the “shotgun marriage” between two separate former dependencies of Britain. Despite efforts to tie Zanzibar to the mainland, separatist sentiments never died in the islands, likely owing to the considerable autonomy of the administration of Zanzibar.<sup>30</sup> Because many Zanzibaris identify culturally with their supposed Arab ancestry from across the Indian Ocean, rather than the African mainland, the potential for Zanzibari sovereignty remains a political issue linked to religious tensions and thus relevant to the question of the spread of radical Islam.

On the Zanzibar islands, Muslim religious scholars are becoming more influential in setting rules for social behavior—such as enforcing a dress code and attempting to shut down establishments that serve alcohol. High levels of poverty on the islands continue to contribute to political discontent.<sup>31</sup> Zanzibar, which fared poorly from the economic liberalization of the 1990s, has fallen behind the mainland in economic growth, and its Western-focused tourist industry is small and fragile.<sup>32</sup> Thus its dissatisfied population is likely even more vulnerable to radicalization than the residents of the mainland.

Since the 1980s, wealthy individuals from the Gulf States have funded mosques, madrassas, health clinics, and secondary schools on Zanzibar.<sup>33</sup> In addition, young Zanzibari men have received scholarships to study in Medina and Khartoum. Two of Zanzibar’s universities are Islamic, funded by Saudis and Kuwaitis. Zanzibar University is funded by the Darul Iman Charitable Association, registered as a charity in Canada, while Chukwani College of Education offers classes in Islamic studies and Islamic education. The amount of money provided from abroad is formidable; as a Zanzibar parliamentarian stated, “it’s very difficult for the traditional madrassas that

are really in poor shape to rival the influence of those that are being funded by foreigners and Wahhabi-based institutions.”<sup>34</sup>

Three distinct factors have helped foster an Islamic revival in Tanzania. First, the demise of the single-party state via a 1992 law guaranteeing freedom of political organization allowed for alternative forms of association.<sup>35</sup> Groups that were formerly prohibited have emerged to proselytize for a more purified Islam.<sup>36</sup> Second, new Islamic organizations are opposing formerly state-sanctioned groups.<sup>37</sup> This Muslim revival is part of a “reconnecting” with the Muslim world that is taking place in Tanzania after years of isolation. It parallels, and may be due in part to, the new availability of Islamic satellite television channels and Islamic media in the country.<sup>38</sup> Third, Tanzania remains plagued by poverty. Despite mineral discoveries, its economy relies on agriculture, but only a small portion of its land is subject to sustainable cultivation. Comparatively paltry resources, combined with failed economic programs since independence, have translated into a \$1600 per capita GDP, with a large percentage of the population living below the poverty line.<sup>39</sup>

The religious figures leading this revival portray Muslim traditions as threatened by a secular state, requiring a return to the basics in order to protect the Islamic way of life.<sup>40</sup> The revival includes all age groups and socioeconomic classes. On the Zanzibar islands, the revival is directed toward Muslims who are *munafik* (“Muslims in name only”) and the Sufi brotherhoods, which grew strong in the 19th century. On the mainland it is directed toward Christians because of the increasing belief in a version of Islam that is hostile to all other religions.<sup>41</sup> While concerned with the “onslaught and failure” of Western values, the revival in Tanzania also seeks to address the lack of effective governance in the country and tap into widespread dissatisfaction within the Muslim population.<sup>42</sup> The revival groups offer an alternative to the older, state-sanctioned Muslim identity. New sources of information on Islam are now available to Tanzanians, offering alternative avenues from the leading clerics inside the country.

Additionally, the translation of the Quran into Swahili has ensured that the established Arabic-speaking scholars no longer have a monopoly on its interpretation.<sup>43</sup> There is currently an abundance of Islamic literature, tapes, CDs, and DVDs available in Arabic, English, and Swahili. These products are widely available in bookstores, streets, and outside mosques after Friday prayers, further aiding the individualization of Islam and allowing more freedom of interpretation of the religion through expanded access. Thus, the revival is not just directed at the state, but also toward those Muslims perceived as being a part of the state apparatus, who consist largely of an older group of Muslims who worked within the state’s construction of a passive

Muslim identity.

For the most part, a long history of cooperation in the name of nationalism has mitigated religious conflict in the country. Indeed, “while there are some ethnic identities and geographic areas that coincide with a certain religious tradition, often other identities, such as class divisions or support for political parties, are cross-cutting and do not reinforce these religious divisions.”<sup>44</sup> The legacy of the Tanganyika African National Union’s (TANU) emphasis on inter-religious cooperation, has, for the most part, endured. Yet, in the past decade, circumstances have changed. In the past year especially, the U.S. Department of State has noted a rise in political and sectarian tensions<sup>45</sup> that threaten a spillover into violence and a new opportunity for terrorist attacks like that of the May 2013 Arusha church bombing.<sup>46</sup>

## ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Tanganyika (as Tanzania was formerly known), came into being after achieving independence from Britain in 1962. Zanzibar achieved independence shortly thereafter, in 1963, and in the election that followed, the ZNP coalition (generally representing the islands’ Arab population) narrowly defeated the ASP (representing the African “labor” class).

Subsequently, an uprising of African laborers and ex-soldiers mushroomed into the anti-Arab Zanzibari Revolution of 1964, which overthrew the ZNP government, the Sultan, the Arab elite, and the whole enterprise of constitutional monarchy.<sup>47</sup> Abeid Karume, the leader of the ASP coalition, ruled by decree, warding off any challenges to the new regime. Three months later, Karume and Tanganyikan President Nyerere united Zanzibar and Tanganyika into what would come to be known as “Tanzania.” The rapid pace and questionable constitutionality of these origins remains a factor in the growing demands for full autonomy in Zanzibar, a demand which is frequently linked to the differing ethnic and religious composition of the islands’ population. The idea of full autonomy for Zanzibar was first raised in 1994, but Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM), the ruling party since 1963, has constantly rejected the notion.<sup>48</sup>

During the early years of one-party socialist rule, President Julius Nyerere was adamant about creating a nation free of racial and religious divisions.<sup>49</sup> The demise of *ujamaa* (“community”) socialism in the 1980s, as well as the rise of the multi-party system, permitted region and religion to divide the population, frustrating Nyerere’s plans. Today, ethnic differences and overlapping religions have become salient rallying points in the search for the “true” identity of Zanzibar, which have faint echoes on the mainland. All

across Tanzania, “people at the grassroots level advance religious identities in pursuit of their interests in regard to spiritual, material, and political interests.”<sup>50</sup>

In Tanzania, religion has taken a subservient position to the unifying nationalist agenda of the CCM. But politically, the CCM faces a challenge from the Zanzibar-based Civic United Front (CUF). A minority party whose various elements have even professed their goal to “release Tanzanian society from the dictatorship of Christianity,”<sup>51</sup> the CUF’s primary constituents are Zanzibaris of Arab descent. Although its supporters have clashed violently and repeatedly with the police since 1995, the CUF has maintained that it does not use or condone violence as a means of gaining power, preferring to operate through legitimate, democratic means. Yet, it has not totally dismissed the use of violence as a means for establishing itself in Zanzibar, especially if political corruption and marginalization continue to occur there.

Although the Tanzanian state is officially secular and its constitution guarantees freedom of religion and prohibits religious political parties, the more moderate groups, which offer no structural challenge to the system, are more likely to be candidates for co-optation, while radicals are forced to work outside the system. Thus, the government risks pushing Islamist believers in more radical directions by sheer clumsiness: its entrenched corruption, election rigging, and alleged detentions and torturing of opposition members dramatically exacerbates the perception of marginalization among the moderates.

Indeed, there have been several instances in the past two decades that have fueled Muslim fears of marginalization. In a significant episode in 1992, the government announced that in order to reduce public spending, it would transfer the country’s health and education system to the country’s powerful Catholic Church. In response, the Council for the Propagation of the Quran (commonly known as Balukta) accused the Tanzanian government’s National Muslim Organization (Bakwata) of corruption and temporarily seized its headquarters. Balukta was Tanzania’s first militant Islamist group, but its actions were short-lived. President Ali Hassan Mwinyi expelled them from the Bakwata headquarters, and the group was banned in 1993.<sup>52</sup>

Since the end of socialist rule in the 1990s, people claiming Zanzibari Arab identity have also alleged that the government of Zanzibar (directed by the CCM) deliberately and systematically discriminates against them, denying them access to government jobs, housing, and business licenses. Similar dissatisfaction has spread to the mainland among the coastal Swahili and Arab population.<sup>53</sup> When the Tanzanian government signed “The Prevention of



Terrorism Act” into law in December 2002 (largely under pressure from the United States), it further aggravated this demographic and prompted waves of criticism for specifically targeting Muslims. Opponents of the law noted that it borrowed heavily from the U.S. Patriot Act, the British Prevention of Terrorism Act, and the Suppression of Terrorism Act of apartheid South Africa.<sup>54</sup>

Finally, although Muslims have always been held key governmental positions (and the presidency has unofficially rotated between a Christian and a Muslim), many Muslims perceive the governing elite as Christian, which adds to the sense of marginalization. Such frustrations with the state tend to manifest themselves in attacks upon Christians.<sup>55</sup> Additional dissatisfaction is aimed at the police, since in many Muslim areas, the police are often Christians that tend to disregard local customs and further alienate residents.<sup>56</sup>

The rise in tensions has paralleled the rise in political visibility and assertiveness of the Muslim community in the past decade.<sup>57</sup> The government-sponsored Islamic association, the Supreme Council of Muslims in Tanzania, attracts only limited legitimacy. Instead, marginalized Muslims often seek out alternative associations, some of them extremist, as Islam serves as an “ideology of protest.”<sup>58</sup>

## ENDNOTES

- [1] This essay is derived, with permission, from an E-Note published by the Foreign Policy Research Institute ([www.fpri.org](http://www.fpri.org)) in March 2011.
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- [4] "Tanzania" CIA World Fact Book, n.d., <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/tz.html>.
- [5] Jeffrey Haynes, "Islamic Militancy in East Africa," *Third World Quarterly* 26, iss. 8 (2005), 1323; William Roseneau, "Al Qaida Recruitment Trends in Kenya and Tanzania," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 28 (June 2004), 1, 4; Jodi Vittori, Kristen Bremer, and Pasquale Vittori, "Islam in Tanzania and Kenya: Ally or Threat in the War on Terror?" *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 32, no. 12 (2009), 1082; Bruce E. Heilman and Paul J. Kaiser, "Religion, Identity, and Politics in Tanzania," *Third World Quarterly*, August 2002, 1083.
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- [7] "Tanzania church attack: Saudis held for 'act of terror,'" BBC, May 6, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-22425364>.
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- [9] Turner, "'These Young Men Show No Respect for Local Customs' - Globalisation and Islamic Revival in Zanzibar," 239.
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- [14] Simon Turner, "'These Young Men Show No Respect for Local Customs' - Globalization and Islamic Revival in Zanzibar," *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 39, 2009, p.242.

- [15] “Tanzania: Pinda Concerned With Uamsho Group,” AllAfrica.com, June 14, 2012, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201206150142.html>
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- [17] Roman Loimeier, “Perceptions of Marginalization: Muslims in Contemporary Tanzania,” in Rene Otayek and Benjamin F. Soares, eds., *Islam and Muslim Politics in Africa* (New York: Palgrave, 2007), 145.
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- [19] Vittori et al., “Islam in Tanzania and Kenya: Ally or Threat in the War on Terror?” 1084
- [20] Jeffrey Haynes, “Islamic Militancy in East Africa,” *Third World Quarterly* 26, iss. 8 (2005), 1330.
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- [29] *Ibid.*, 38.
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[31] Vittori et al., “Islam in Tanzania and Kenya: Ally or Threat in the War on Terror?” 1082.

[32] Turner, “These Young Men Show No Respect for Local Customs’-Globalisation and Islamic Revival in Zanzibar,” 259.

[33] Haynes, “Islamic Militancy in East Africa,” 1330; LeSage, p. 81; Vittori et al., “Islam in Tanzania and Kenya: Ally or Threat in the War on Terror?” 1088.

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[36] Loimeier, “Perceptions of Marginalization: Muslims in Contemporary Tanzania,” 143.

[37] Turner, “These Young Men Show No Respect for Local Customs’-Globalisation and Islamic Revival in Zanzibar,” 238.

[38] *Ibid.*; Larson, “Introduction,” 20; Heilman and Kaiser, “Religion, Identity, and Politics in Tanzania,” 695.

[39] The last available statistic for percentage of the population below the poverty line is 36% (2002). As GDP per capita has increased in recent years, it is likely that the number of Tanzanians living below the poverty line has decreased correspondingly, but economic poverty remains a force to be reckoned with. See Bernadeta Killian, “The State and Identity Politics in Zanzibar: Challenges to Democratic Consolidation in Tanzania,” *African Identities* 6, no. 2 (May 2008), p. 113; see also “Tanzania,” *CIA World Factbook*, August 13, 2013, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/tz.html>.

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[55] Loimeier, “Perceptions of Marginalization: Muslims in Contemporary Tanzania,” 138. [56] Roseneau, “Al Qaida Recruitment Trends in Kenya and Tanzania,” 6.

[57] Vittori et al., “Islam in Tanzania and Kenya: Ally or Threat in the War on Terror?” 1082; Heilman and Kaiser, “Religion, Identity, and Politics in Tanzania,” 705.

[58] *Ibid.*, 1082