



# ETHIOPIA

## Quick Facts

Population: 110,871,031 (July 2021 est.)

Area: 1,104,300 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Oromo 34.9%, Amhara (Amara) 27.9%, Somali (Somalie) 2.7%, Tigray (Tigrinya) 7.3%, Sidama 4.1%, Gurage 2.8%, Welaita 3%, Hadiya 2.2%, Afar (Affar) 0.6%, other 12.6% (2016 est.)

GDP (official exchange rate): \$92.154 billion (2019 est.)

*Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated June 2021)*

## INTRODUCTION

*The U.S. Department of State has described Ethiopia as “a strategic partner in the Global War on Terrorism” and welcomed “Ethiopia’s dedication to maintaining security in the region.”<sup>1</sup> The country has received high-level visits from then-U.S. President Barack Obama and then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, both of whom lauded the partnership between the two countries in addressing governance issues, economic growth, and regional security concerns. Tillerson, speaking from the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa in 2018, highlighted the “many touch points where [the United States and Ethiopia] share a common interest of security, stability for the region...and opportunities for economic prosperity.”<sup>2</sup> This cooperation was strengthened in 2017, when Ethiopia joined the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS – one of only twelve African states to do so.*

*The encomia are more than merited, both for the Ethiopian government’s actions abroad and for the challenges it faces at home. As the State Department noted in 2017, “Ethiopia also focused its counterterrorism strategy on pursuing potential threats from armed opposition groups often based in neighboring countries. The Ethiopian Federal Police (EFP) and the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) shared information on counterterrorism matters pursuant to a memorandum of understanding.”<sup>3</sup>*

## ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

As of early 2019, radical Islamist threats to Ethiopia’s security are primarily external in nature, and emanate from Somalia.

While a certain amount of controversy surrounds Islamism’s introduction into Ethiopia, a bridgehead seems to have been established in and around the town of Harar fairly early on in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, perhaps during the Italian occupation (1936-1942), by pilgrims returning from the hajj. Later, in the 1960s and 1970s, a number of Oromo students returning from religious studies in Saudi Arabia further propagated political Islam, not only in their native regions but also in Addis Ababa and Wollo. When the Derg dictatorship (the Marxist junta led by Mengistu Haile Mariam that seized control of Ethiopia after deposing

Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974) fell in 1991, these trends found new life; many returning Oromo exiles had been influenced by *wahhabbi* doctrines during their time abroad, and the new government's policies facilitated the contact with coreligionists in other countries, who supported the establishment of mosques, schools, and associations.<sup>4</sup> 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).<sup>5</sup> IIRO has also donated food and medical relief to Ethiopia following natural disasters.<sup>6</sup> (In August 2006, the U.S. Treasury Department formally designated the Philippine and Indonesian branches of the IIRO as terror facilitators.<sup>7</sup>)

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. 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.<sup>8</sup> The group labels most fellow Muslims, including other *wahhabbis*, as *kuffar* ("non-believers"). While it has caused less of a sensation since the 2004 death of its leader in Ethiopia, Sheikh Muhammad Amin, the group continues to exist.<sup>9</sup> Details of the group's activities, capabilities, and resources within Ethiopia, however, remain sketchy at best; however, one well-respected researcher with extensive fieldwork on the Muslim community in the country has noted that Ethiopian adherents of Takfir wal-Hijrah refuse to recognize the national constitution, pay taxes, or carry identification cards.<sup>10</sup>

Al-Qaeda has also been 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, al-Qaeda 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 while the group was based in Sudan.<sup>11</sup> When Ethiopia intervened in Somalia in 2006 and again in 2014, al-Qaeda renewed its interest in targeting both the Horn of Africa in general and Ethiopia in particular. However, like with Takfir wal-Hijrah, known information on al-Qaeda's organizational make-up and capabilities in Ethiopia is far from comprehensive, at least at the open-source level. Moreover, there are indications that the foothold al-Qaeda once held in East Africa through links to al-Shabaab has eroded as the Somali insurgent group's capacity has been battered—but not eliminated—by its loss of territory and repeated strikes against it.<sup>12</sup>

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 migratory Gurage community.

The principal radical Islamist threat to Ethiopia, however, comes from neighboring 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 throughout the 1990's. The AIAI also encouraged subversive activities in the Somali region of Ethiopia and carried out a series of terrorist attacks, including two hotel bombings in 1996 and the attempted assassination of cabinet minister Abdul Majeed Hussein, an ethnic Somali-Ethiopian whom the AIAI accused of being a traitor. AIAI's hostility to Ethiopia arose from its toxic mix of Islamism and Somali irredentist perspectives about 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 *jihād*.<sup>13</sup>

As it turns out, the defeat was only a temporary setback for radical Somali Islamists, who regrouped under the banner of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) with many of the same leaders. One such leader was Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys, who had served as AIAI's second in command and eventually chaired the ICU's shura. Aweys later led the Eritrea-based Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia (ARS) after Ethiopian forces intervened 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, attracted an Islamist insurgency spearheaded by the radical Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen ("Movement of Warrior Youth," more commonly known as al-Shabaab), a group labeled a "specially designated global terrorist" by the U.S. Department of State in 2008.<sup>14</sup> Subsequently, in 2012, the U.S. Department of State added seven al-Shabaab leaders to its "Rewards for Justice" program, offering large rewards for information leading to their locations.<sup>15</sup> In 2014, Ethiopian forces returned to Somalia as official contributors to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). The move prompted renewed calls from al-Shabaab to attack Ethiopian forces in Somalia and at home. "We defeated Ethiopia before and we know how to battle them now," al-Shabaab spokesman Ali Mohamud Rage said at the time.<sup>16</sup> Years of protests and other security concerns within Ethiopia itself, coupled by the country's unprecedented political change, may affect the country's political will to continue its participation in AMISOM. Despite the advertised withdrawal of 1,000 troops from the AMISOM force, Ethiopia has remained extremely active militarily in Somalia, with more than 4,200 troops stationed in-country at present. This could further incentivize al-Shabaab to launch attacks against the country.<sup>17</sup>

Fortunately, much of the pressure has been relieved due to military and political setbacks suffered by al-Shabaab since the terrorist organization was forced to withdraw from Mogadishu in August 2011.<sup>18</sup> That said, the absence of a major al-Shabaab attack in Ethiopia is not due to a lack of effort; in 2013, two suspected al-Shabaab operatives were killed when an under construction bomb exploded. No one else was injured, though authorities arrested five people for their involvement and reported that al-Shabaab planned to target an upcoming football match.<sup>19</sup> Throughout 2018, al-Shabaab continued to demonstrate its ability to carry out deadly attacks in both Somalia and the wider region evidenced by the horrific assault on a Nairobi hotel-shopping complex in January 2019. Al-Shabaab's resurgence will undoubtedly further concern Ethiopia and its people.

While the threat from Somalia is external, it is critical to examine the changing dynamics of internal dissident groups and their exchanges with the country's foreign enemies. Among the latter, Eritrea falls into a category all its own. The bitter two-year war began when the tiny state invaded a small sliver of territory previously administered by Ethiopia. While the regime of Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki is not known for its religiosity, it supported Islamist movements assisting Eritrea's overall strategic objective of undermining the Ethiopian government. To this end, it has supported the Islamist insurgency in Somalia.<sup>20</sup> The Eritrean government has also assisted multiple dissident groups with Islamist affiliations in Ethiopia, including the secessionist Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and Ginbot 7.<sup>21</sup> However, to the surprise of many, the governments of Ethiopia and Eritrea renewed relations in the summer of 2018, and Eritrea thereafter vowed to stop supporting dissident groups. Since then, both the ONLF and Ginbot 7 have successfully returned to Ethiopia, and by all signs both have laid down their arms. The OLF has also returned to the country and accepted a peace offer from mediators to do the same.<sup>22</sup>

## ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

The dominant ethnic group in Ethiopia has traditionally been the Amhara, who, together with the Tigray, made up about 33 percent of the population per the last national census (conducted in 2007).<sup>23</sup> The Oromo, who live largely in the southern part of the country, constituted another 34 percent. Other important ethnic

groups include the Somali (6.2 percent), Gurage (2.5 percent), Sidama (4 percent), and Welayta (2.3 percent).

More than 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. Evangelical Christianity is the fastest growing denomination in Ethiopia, with some 14 million Protestants counted in the country's last census.<sup>24</sup> Another 34 percent or so is Muslim, drawn primarily from the Oromo and other southern peoples, as well as the ethnic Somali and the Afar. Given that the population of Ethiopia is estimated to number more than 100 million, the country has more Muslims than many Muslim states.<sup>25</sup>

Almost all Muslims in Ethiopia are Sunni, with a plurality, if not a majority, adhering to one or another Sufi *tarīqa* (order). The most widely followed of these is the Qadiriyya, although the Tijaniyya, Shaziriyya, and Semaniyya orders also have significant followings. While institutional Islam in Ethiopia tends to be decentralized, the Ethiopian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, formally established in 1976, 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 ceremonial matters.<sup>26</sup>

The Muslim community in Ethiopia has fared better 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.<sup>27</sup> 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.”<sup>28</sup>

By and large, Ethiopian Muslims have resisted the attempts of radical co-religionists to promote political Islam. The main reasons include not only the deep roots of more traditional forms of Islam and the strength of social ties that cross religious boundaries; extremists have failed to offer concrete solutions to many of the problems faced by ordinary Ethiopians. By contrast, the government, despite its limitations, has managed to deliver impressive rates of economic growth.<sup>29</sup>

Nonetheless, the potential does exist for religion to be exploited to mobilize greater support by various separatist or extremist movements. Beginning in 2011, tensions escalated between some parts of the Muslim community and the Ethiopian government; the former accused the latter of interfering in religious matters by trying to impose the quietist Al-Ahbash sect on the country's Supreme Islamic Council. Protests drew thousands, and grievances widened to include perceived government interference in Islam and in the selection of the Supreme Islamic Council.<sup>30</sup> In 2015, a court convicted eighteen Muslims who had been arrested during the protests under the country's anti-terrorism law.<sup>31</sup> Activists and some human rights organizations suggested that the trial of these Muslim activists—in addition to other, lower-profile cases—was politicized and not held in accordance with the law.<sup>32</sup>

In early 2018, four major leaders of the Ethiopian Muslim Arbitration Committee were released from prison as part of a larger act of clemency for political prisoners in Ethiopia. However, turmoil after the abrupt February 15 resignation of Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn and a subsequent state of emergency declaration by the government precipitated confusion. Almost two months later, Abiy Ahmed was sworn in on April 3 as Ethiopia's new prime minister. As both the first Oromo and first Muslim to head the government, many Ethiopians—particularly youths—have placed their hopes for political reform on Prime Minister Abiy.<sup>33</sup> However, there is great pressure on Prime Minister Abiy to follow-through on these promises, and a failure to do so could result in increased marginalization and resentment amongst Ethiopia's youth.

## ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Following the 1974 overthrow of the Emperor Haile Selassie, the communist Derg regime persecuted religious leaders and discouraged any religious practice. Since the defeat of the dictatorship and the



subsequent assumption of power of the current government led by the EPRDF in 1991, policies promote religious tolerance and interreligious cooperation, although the formation of political groups on the basis of religion is forbidden. According to the U.S. State Department's 2017 annual report on religious freedom, the Ethiopian constitution "codifies the separation of religion and the state, establishes freedom of religious choice, prohibits religious discrimination, and stipulates the government shall not interfere in the practice of any religion, nor shall any religion interfere in the affairs of the state."<sup>34</sup> While interreligious tensions in Ethiopia appear to be relatively low, ethnic tensions and economic disparities continue to be the root of most unrest.

Despite—or perhaps because of—this lack of domestic tension, the Ethiopian government has taken a significant role in regional and international counterterrorism efforts. It hosted the African Union's Center for Study and Research on Terrorism and ratified the Protocol to the Organization of African Unity Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism in 2008.<sup>35</sup> From 2006 through late 2008, Ethiopia led the efforts in Somalia against extremists connected with the ICU, and provided "critical support" to AMISOM in their efforts against extremist groups.<sup>36</sup> In 2014, Ethiopia intervened again in Somalia in support of AMISOM's effort to fight al-Shabaab. The U.S. State Department has generally considered Ethiopia to be an "important regional security partner," although military assistance funds "are explicitly limited to nonlethal assistance, training, and peacekeeping support at present."<sup>37</sup>

However, Ethiopia's counterterrorism efforts have drawn mixed reviews. In 2009, Ethiopia passed an anti-terrorism law designed to discourage radical group formation and activities within its 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, publicizes, disseminates, shows, makes to be heard any promotional statements encouraging... terrorist acts is punishable with rigorous imprisonment from 10 to 20 years."<sup>38</sup> The legislation, while recognized as an attempt to combat extremism, has drawn criticism from Ethiopia's international partners and from human rights organizations who claim that the law's ambiguous language and uneven enforcement is an attempt by the EPRDF to cement its power and justify oppression of opposition groups and independent media.<sup>39</sup>

Others have pointed to the country's recent elections as further reason for concern. In May 2010, 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, some analysts question the future of Ethiopian democracy.<sup>40</sup> In May 2015, the opposition did not win a single seat.<sup>41</sup>

Widespread demonstrations throughout the country's two largest regions – Amhara and Oromia – have been commonplace since late 2015. Protests began when the government announced a controversial land reallocation scheme. The authorities long blamed the unrest on terrorists, diaspora-based opposition groups, and "anti-peace" elements from Eritrea and Egypt.<sup>42</sup> While primarily peaceful, these protests triggered a lethal government crackdown, leaving hundreds dead, thousands injured, and tens of thousands arrested.

From October 2016 to August 2017, Ethiopian authorities imposed a ten-month state of emergency, which granted security services expanded powers. The state of emergency was lifted in mid-2017, and demonstrations against the government re-started at the end of the year. In January 2018, in what many saw as an government effort to ease tension, former Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn announced that the government would release some prisoners, including some opposition politicians, and close the infamous Maekelawi prison. While several hundred were freed, many objected to the slow pace of prisoner releases and the government's reluctance to grant key members of the opposition amnesty. Amid widespread demonstrations by the Oromo, and clear disagreements between the government and the opposition surrounding the release of prisoners, former Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn resigned on February 14.

Hailemariam Desalegn's resignation and Oromo politician Abiy Ahmed's election to Prime Minister are positive developments, as are the young prime minister's aggressive reforms and diplomatic peace

efforts. However, the declaration of a second state of emergency later that month, which ran until June 2018, caused a great deal of concern, with some recently freed prisoners actually being rearrested. While demonstrations are not overly religious, the Ethiopian government's claims of foreign meddling bear watching.

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."<sup>43</sup> 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 alliance between religion and ethnicity. Islam in particular may be used by groups seeking to mobilize their ethnic kin to exercise the secession constitutionally affirmed as 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."<sup>44</sup> The Ethiopian government will need to maintain constant vigilance, especially as the country enters a new political era and its leaders try to maintain its much-valued stability and economic growth amid rapidly changing societal expectations.

Beginning in November of 2020, a conflict erupted in the northern region of Tigray as Ethiopia's government launched an offensive in the semi-autonomous region against the country's most powerful armed opposition group (and former national controlling party), the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). Over time, the conflict has drawn in military forces from neighboring Eritrea, who have joined the fight against the TPLF.<sup>45</sup> The conflict has stirred considerable controversy, including allegations of atrocities perpetrated Ethiopian government forces which are now the subject of an African Union inquiry.<sup>46</sup> As of now, however, there are no signs that the conflict has taken on a sectarian character, or that Islamist forces are involved in the fighting.

## ENDNOTES

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