

Jamhuryadda Federaalka Somaliya

Did You Know?

- Some Mogadishu *mosques* (Muslim houses of worship) are around one thousand years old.
- When guests eat with a family, men and women often eat separately.
- *Oral* (spoken) poetry is an important part of Somali culture.
- Somalia did not have a working central government from 1991 to 2012.
- Family identity is important. Who your ancestors are is more important than where you are from.
- Less than 2 percent of Somalia's land is suitable for farming.
- The average Somali makes less than \$1 a day.
- To show sincerity, Somalis place their right hand over their heart after shaking hands.
- Somalis from the countryside often use their right hand to serve and eat food, but never the left hand because it is considered "unclean" to most Muslims.

Flag

Somalia's flag was adopted on 12 October 1954. Its blue background represents the United Nations, and the five-pointed white star in the center symbolizes each of the five regions in Somalia. White represents peace and prosperity.



National Image

The African leopard on Somalia's official coat of arms was adopted from the Italian coat of arms, first used in 1956 when Italy controlled part of Somalia. The leopard is Somalia's national symbol, and it is against the law to hunt them. According to legend, the leopard's spots resulted from being touched by an Ethiopian man who wanted to help the leopard blend in with the surrounding bush.



People and Places

Land and Climate

Area (sq. mi.): 246,201
Area (sq. km.): 637,657

Somalia is just a little smaller than France or the state of Texas. Shaped like a 7 and forming the outer tip of the Horn of Africa (the horn-shaped area on the eastern side of the continent), it wraps around Ethiopia's eastern border and shares borders with Djibouti in the north and Kenya in the south. Somalia is mostly a flat country, with gradually rolling hills and plateaus in the north and small areas of fertile farmland in the south. Its highest peak is Shimbir Berris (7,900 feet, or 2,400 m), in the Oogo Mountains. Somalia's coastline extends for 1,880 miles (3,025 m) along the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean and is more humid and mild than the interior, which is dry



and hot. It is also the second longest coastline on the African continent. Somalia occupies an important position because of its location at the mouth of the Gulf of Aden, the entrance point for ships traveling into the Red Sea and through the Suez Canal to the Mediterranean Sea.

Somalia's climate plays an important role in the history and politics of the country. Drought cycles and limited farmland have made it very difficult for Somalis to produce enough food to feed themselves. Although it is a very dry region, four distinct precipitation seasons divide the year: Gu (heavy rains, March–June), Haggaa (dry, June–August), Dair (short rains, October–November), and Jilal (harsh, dry period, December–March). Temperatures change very little from season to season. February is the driest month and droughts are common, happening every two to three years. These droughts are often followed by dust storms, which remove a lot of the good top soil used for planting crops. The climate is hot, and some cities have average annual temperatures of more than 88°F (31°C).

Population

Population: 10,428,043

About two-thirds of Somalis live in the countryside. Most of these people are related to the Afar, Oromo, and other ancient groups. Other important minority groups include the Somali-speaking Hamari in the capital of Mogadishu, the Bajun farmers and fishermen who speak Swahili (an African language shared by many different groups), and the Barawani, farmers who live along the Shebelle River.



Somali society is organized into large extended clan families, which range in size from 100,000 to more than one million. Each clan is made up of individuals who share a common ancestor, and members of each clan feel loyalty to one another. There are six large clans (Darod, Isaak, Hawiye, Dir, Digil, and Rahanwayn) and several medium-to-small groups. Individuals learn how to address each other and what level of respect to give each other based on which clan they are in and their position within that clan. In the countryside it is okay to ask someone directly about their clan and ancestors, but in cities, it is more polite to ask indirect questions, such as where the person is from, in order to identify which clan they belong to and determine their social status.

Nearly half of all Somalis are under the age of 15. On average, Somali men only live to be about 50 years old, and women live to age 53. By comparison, in the United States and most European nations, men live to be nearly 80, and women live to be 81.

Language

The Somali language has three main *dialects* (ways of pronouncing or speaking). Speakers of any one of these *dialects* would find it difficult to communicate with members of the other two groups. Af-Maymay is spoken by those living between the Shebelle and Juba rivers. Af-Benaadir is spoken on the coast from Mogadishu south. Standard Somali is spoken everywhere else. Some Somalis who are educated also speak English, Italian, or Arabic.

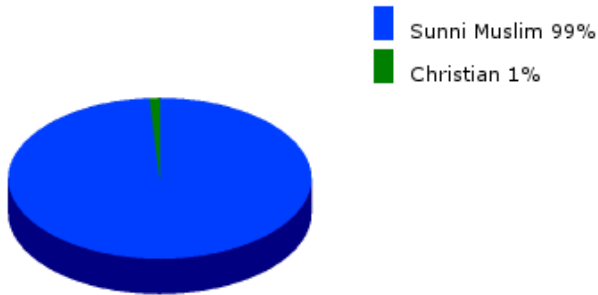
Until recently, Somali was an unwritten language. Instead of writing things down, people would sing songs, recite poetry, and tell stories to share important information. In the 20th century, a written form of the language began to develop. By the late 1960s, more than 10 different written forms were being used in Somalia, depending on the clan or the purpose of the writing. In 1972, the government introduced a single Latin-based writing form in schools and

government documents. This change helped more people learn to read and write. This standard written form has still not been accepted by everyone in the country, but teachers and others are making a great effort to teach it in *rural* (countryside) areas throughout Somalia.

Can You Say It in Somali?

Hello	<i>Iska Waran</i>	(IK-sah WAR-ahn)
Good-bye	<i>Nabad Gelyo</i>	(na-bad GEHL-you)
Please	<i>Min Fadlak</i>	(min FAD-lak)
Thank you	<i>Mahad Sanid</i>	(me-HAD SEN-eed)
Yes	<i>Haa</i>	(HA-AH)
No	<i>Maya</i>	(MAY-ah)

Religion



Source: *The World Factbook 2015. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2015.*




Nearly all Somali are Sunni Muslims. A small number are Christians. Every town has a *mosque* (Muslim house of worship), many of which are hundreds of years old. In fact, some *mosques* in Mogadishu, the capital, are as many as one thousand years old. Muslims believe the *Qur'an* (Muslim scripture) to be the word of *Allah* (God). Muhammad is admired as the last and greatest prophet. Muslims pray five times daily, give money to the poor, make a special trip (*pilgrimage*) to Mecca (the holy city in Saudi Arabia) at least once in their lifetime, and fast from morning until evening during the holy month of *Ramadan*. Muslims also do not drink alcohol or eat pork.

History

Time Line

	Thousands of years ago, traders from Persia, Greece, and Arabia establish trade with coastal Somali villages
900 BC	
900	Arab sheiks marry into Somali families
AD 600	
600s	Arab tribes establish the Sultanate (an area ruled over by a sultan) of Adel on the coast of the Gulf of Adel
1500	

1500s	The Sultanate of Adel breaks up into several smaller states	
1800		
1862	France establishes a port on the Somali coast, which later becomes French Somaliland	
1887	Britain establishes British Somaliland to the north of what is now Somalia	
1889	Italy sets up Italian Somaliland in the southern part of what is now Somalia	
1900		
1900	Somali rebels launch a 20-year failed attempt to push the British from Somaliland	
1940	Italy takes control of British Somaliland	
1941	Britain regains control of British Somaliland and occupies Italian Somaliland	
1960	Somalia gains its independence as Britain and Italian Somalilands join to become the Somali Republic	
1969	General Muhammad Siad Barre leads a <i>coup</i> (overthrow) of the government and becomes president	
1970	President Barre suspends the constitution and declares Somalia a <i>socialist state</i> (all land and economic functions are controlled by the government)	
1974	Severe drought causes widespread starvation	
1991	President Barre is overthrown; a power struggle follows between rival clans and kills or wounds thousands of Somalis; official government control in Somalia ends	
1993	U.S. Army Rangers (specially trained elite soldiers) are killed when Somali <i>militias</i> (unofficial bands of soldiers) shoot down two U.S. helicopters in Mogadishu and a battle takes place; hundreds of Somalis die in the battle	
2000		

2004	Tsunami waves resulting from an undersea earthquake hit the Somali coast; hundreds of deaths are reported; tens of thousands of people lose their homes	
2006	A temporary Somali government begins peace talks with a rebel group	
2007	Peace talks fail; African Union peacekeepers arrive in the capital of Mogadishu to help government forces; the Red Cross says it is the worst fighting in 15 years	
2008	Somali pirates hijack a Ukrainian ship; the United States and other countries send navy ships to the coast of Somalia	
2009	Somali pirates take over several ships, including a supertanker carrying oil from Saudi Arabia to the United States, and a Greek-owned vessel	
2011	The United Nations (UN) declares famine in southern Somalia as millions face starvation; tens of thousands of Somalis flee to refugee camps in Kenya and Ethiopia	
2012	Members of parliament are sworn into Somalia's first permanent government in more than 20 years; pirate attacks fall sharply	
2013	A cyclone hits the northeast, killing more than 140 people and damaging homes and livestock; the government declares a state of emergency, asking for international aid	
2013	Somalia-based terrorist group al-Shabab seizes a shopping mall in Nairobi, Kenya, killing 60 people in response to Kenya's military involvement in Somalia	
2014	The United States launches airstrikes targeting al-Shabab senior leaders; the government establishes the first postal service since the civil war	
PRESENT		

Ancient Somalia

The first Somali peoples were most likely farmers from southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya. Some time before the first century AD, these groups began to move northward in search of water and better pasture for their animals. They migrated north and came to occupy what is now southern Somalia. These people were known as Samaale, probably named for the legendary man who was said to be the father of one of the main clans in the area. The name Samaale eventually became Somali.

This group continued to expand northward until finally reaching the Red Sea, where they came into contact with Greek and Portuguese traders, who sailed across the Red Sea to trade for frankincense, myrrh, and other spices—very popular items that Somalia had in abundance. Beginning in approximately AD 600, Arab *sultans* (regional leaders) established a regional *sultanate* (an area controlled by a sultan) in the northern part of Somalia and ruled the area for the next several hundred years.

Mogadishu

Mogadishu is a very old and once beautiful city. By AD 900 it had already become an important trade destination, and by the 14th century it was a thriving business center where traders came from as far away as Persia, Greece, Egypt, Portugal, and China. African merchants brought their goods to Mogadishu to trade, as it was known for its exotic variety of spices, woven rugs, gold, and animals, and for nearly a thousand years, Mogadishu was a busy center of trade.

In 1960, soon after Somalia became an independent country, Mogadishu was declared the capital. Although it was once a beautiful coastal city with architecture that reflected both Persian and Arabic influences, the bombs and gunfire of civil wars in the 1980s and 1990s destroyed much of its magnificence. The city was the site of some of the most violent struggles in Somalia's history, and what were once gleaming white palaces and beautiful homes are now crumbling walls and crater-filled alleys. The city gained fame in 1993 when, following the failed military attack by the United States, two Blackhawk helicopters were shot down by a rebel militia and several U.S. soldiers were killed. This incident was depicted in the film *Black Hawk Down*.



Clans

A clan is a large group of people that can trace their ancestry back to a single person. Clans have existed in Somalia from the beginning of its history and still play an important role in how the country is governed. Today, there are six major clans in Somalia and several smaller family groups within each clan. These major clans have anywhere from 100,000 to over one million members. The smaller groups could have from 10,000 to 100,000 members.

Within clans, there are divisions and relationships that determine one's social standing and power. Until you know which clan someone is from, it is not clear how you should speak to them and what your relationship with them is. Although all Somalis claim to be of equal status, certain clans possess more power than other clans, and therefore it is important to know which clan someone is from. Children inherit their clan membership through their fathers. After 1991, when the government collapsed, Somalis tended to trust only members of their own clan for marriage and for political loyalty. After that, Somalia's temporary parliamentary government was mostly controlled by four clans, with the remaining two clans holding a smaller number of seats.



19th-Century Somalia

During the late 19th century, many European countries tried to expand their territory by taking control of various parts of Africa. Somalia offered gold, spices, ivory, wax, grain, and woven goods to the markets of Europe. By 1898, Great Britain and Italy had taken control of Somalia (then called Somaliland), with Britain occupying the northern third and Italy the southern two-thirds. Many in Somalia did not like the presence of foreign troops, who represented a threat to the political and religious freedom of Muslims in the area.



In 1900, Muhammad Abdullah Hassan began a series of military attacks against the British in an attempt to drive them from the northern region. With military aid from nearby Arab nations, he successfully pushed back the British several times. After 20 years of conflict, however, the British overpowered the Somalis and took control again of the northern part of Somalia. In 1935, Italy invaded the north in an attempt to gain control over the entire Horn of Africa. By 1940, Italy had established its authority in Somalia. In 1941, however, Britain's navy attacked the Italian forces and regained its territory in the north. Later, in 1960, Somalia gained its independence as British and Italian Somaliland were combined into a single self-governing nation.

Drought

Drought makes life very difficult in Somalia and, in many ways, is responsible for much of Somalia's troubled modern history. Because there is limited fertile farmland in Somalia, the lives of many people depend on the successful harvest of each year's crop. Without these harvests, many people die of starvation or suffer because their bodies do not get enough nutrition. Somalia suffered severe droughts in 1974–75, 1984–85, and again in 2001 and 2006. Although large donations of food came in from many other countries, this food was often stolen by thieves and then sold in the *black market* (an unofficial market where stolen goods are often taken to be sold).



In the drought of 2001, it is estimated that 1.4 million people did not have enough to eat, and many of them were forced to move to the cities in search of food and water, which led to greater overcrowding in the cities and increased violence as various groups struggled for control of what little food was available. The country's most recent drought, which began in 2006, hit the northern part of the country especially hard. It forced the movement of hundreds of thousands of people from their homes and destroyed the sheep, goats, and cattle that they depended on for food and milk. The droughts also result in the loss of plant life, which holds the soil in place. Areas that were once fertile are no longer so because the top soil, richer in nutrition, has been washed away. The United Nations has been involved in efforts to rebuild the country's existing canals and wells to make better use of what little water is available.

Modern Pirates

After 1991, Somalia did not have a working central government. Because of the lack of any central authority to enforce the laws of the country, Somalia became a haven for pirates. Every year, 30,000 ships pass through the Gulf of Aden, off Somalia's northern coast, many of them in danger of being boarded by pirates, who leave from camps on Somalia's coast to take the crews hostage and demand a *ransom* (payment) from the company who owns the ship or the cargo. With no effective government in place in Somalia, these pirates were able to rob with only a small chance of being caught by authorities. While a handful of nations have defended themselves against these pirates by sending armed escort ships to accompany the cargo ships or hiring armed security guards to guard the ships' cargo, the pirates continue to attack ships in the area. As political stability returns to Somalia, the pirates are encountering challenges as they continue their attacks.



Lifestyle

Games and Sports

Somalis love physical activity, especially activities requiring strength and agility. Soccer, basketball, and boxing are popular sporting events. Somalis also enjoy wrestling, foot-racing, spear throwing, and field hockey. Rhyming and clapping games are played by boys and girls alike. A game that many young Somalis enjoy, "Prisoner's Base," is best played at night and involves two teams that begin together in a circle. While the eyes of all players are closed, someone throws a small piece of wood as far off as possible. When the players hear the piece of wood land, they take off running in search of it. Whoever finds it must try to return with it to the circle before being caught by members of the opposite team. *Mancala*, which is played throughout Africa, involves moving small stones (or camel dung) across a playing surface until one has acquired the stones (or the camel dung) of the other player.



Holidays

Somalis celebrate all the holidays on the Islamic calendar, which is based on lunar (moon) movement. *Muharram* is celebrated during the first 10 days of the first month of the lunar calendar and marks the celebration of the earth and its produce. Other holidays include *Ramadan*, which is celebrated in the ninth month with 30 days of fasting (not eating) from sunrise to sunset. As Ramadan comes to an end, Somalis observe *Eid al-Fitr* (a three-day feast). Later in the year comes *Eid al-Adha*, the Feast of Sacrifice, honoring Abraham's (an important religious figure to Muslims, Jews, and Christians) willingness to sacrifice his son. They also celebrate Mawlid, the prophet Muhammed's birthday.



In the southern regions, many Somalis celebrate 26 June as the day they gained their independence from Britain, and in the north, 1 July is the designated day of independence from Italy. Somalis also enjoy festivals, which often have a religious meaning. Thousands of members of a particular clan might gather to celebrate a birth, a marriage, or some other public event. Weddings sometimes last as long as three days, with guests dancing and eating until the bride and groom leave for their honeymoon.

Food

For most Somalis, finding enough food to eat is a difficult task. Many depend on a simple diet of rice, corn, and beans, with the meat of sheep or goats available in some areas. Camel hump is a delicacy that is usually reserved for special guests. As a result of the Italian presence in Somalia, pasta and tomato sauce is a common dish. Most Somalis are Muslim and so do not eat pork or, if they are strict observers of Islamic diet restrictions, drink alcohol. Herdsmen often drink camel's milk while traveling with their herds, also making it into butter or yogurt, which can be preserved for weeks or months. Coffee and tea are typical beverages, and tea is often enjoyed mixed with fruit to thicken and sweeten it. *Muufo* is a favorite local bread that is enjoyed with a variety of side dishes. In some places, men and women who are not related eat in separate areas, although this practice is becoming much less common.

Schools

Adult Literacy: 38%

Because of several decades of political instability and war, Somali's educational system has suffered greatly. In fact, at one point during Somalia's civil war, the national teacher-training center in Mogadishu was completely robbed of all its desks. As a result the school had to be shut down, and the number of trained teachers diminished greatly. There have been times in Somalia's recent history when there was no functioning school system at all. Fortunately, this is no longer the case, but there is still much improvement to be made to the schools.



Today, fewer than half of Somali children have the opportunity to attend school. Those who do attend learn reading, writing, languages, and math. Later, a few of these students will go on to attend high school or a special school where they will receive training for a job in a factory, farm, or business. Many children, however, do not have the chance to continue studying because of their family's lack of money or because they are needed to work to contribute to the family income.

Life as a Kid

In Somalia, anyone under the age of 10 years old is considered a child. Life for kids in Somalia is quite different from that of children in more developed countries. Drought and *malnutrition* (a diet without enough nutrients) are always present. Children in Somalia often have to take on adult responsibilities early in life. It is not uncommon to see them doing jobs like polishing shoes, herding goats and sheep, collecting firewood, hauling water, and going to the market to purchase food for the family. Most children do not spend much of their time finding entertainment. There are no parks or recreational areas designed for children, and whatever games they play must come from their own imaginations. They enjoy playing soccer, police and thieves (a chase game where the police chase the thieves), and climbing rope. Somali children learn early on about living under the very harsh conditions of poverty.



Society

Government

Capital: Mogadishu

Head of State: Pres. Hassan Sheikh Mohamoud

Head of Government: PM Omar Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke

Somalia's government has struggled to stay together and often faces attacks and violence. It is organized with both a president and a prime minister. The prime minister does most of the daily work of running the government. Somalia also has a National Parliament made up of the 275-member lower house and the 54-member upper house. The current members were appointed by clan leaders, but future members will be elected by the people to serve four-year terms. Most of the political power is held by four clans, and leaders make decisions based on their study of Islamic law (called *shari'ah*). Clans also work together to solve local problems or to work out disagreements between families. Somaliland, a semi-independent region in the north, has its own elected president and parliament, but other countries do not recognize the authority of this government. Somalia is divided up into 18 regions. The voting age is 18.

Money and Economy

Currency: Somali shilling

Somalia's economy suffers due to poor land, famine, disease, war, and a lack of skilled workers. Most Somalis work as farmers but often do not produce enough crops to feed themselves or their families. Very few people earn any money. Much of the money in the economy comes from Somalis who live outside the country and send money back to friends and relatives. Animal products (meat, skins, and wool) are shipped to other countries. Many Somalis continue to be *nomadic* (moving from place to place with their herds), and most products are bought and sold in open-air markets. The currency is the Somali *shilling* (SOS), but it is common to see U.S. dollars, British *pounds*, and other currencies in use throughout the country.



Getting Around

Most of Somalia's roads are simple dirt tracks, although a few paved roads exist in and around large cities. People typically travel by wagon, ride animals or bicycles, or walk. During peaceful times, minivans can be seen loaded with passengers, and large trucks will often carry combinations of passengers and goods. Unfortunately, there aren't often roads between major cities, so travel between cities is very difficult. There is no official public transportation system and no railroads exist in the country. There are, however, a handful of air terminals that offer a small number of national and international flights.



Culture Facts & Contacts

A Moon Calendar

Many Somalis, particularly those who are Muslim, follow a different calendar than people in other parts of the world. Their calendar (called the Hijri) is based on the movement of the moon rather than the sun. Like the solar (sun) calendar, the lunar (moon) calendar is divided into twelve months, but each month begins when a new full moon appears in the sky. So, it is possible for a celebration such as the Muslim holy month of *Ramadan* to happen during slightly different seasons from year to year because *Ramadan* always falls on the ninth new moon of the year. The lunar calendar lines up with the traditional solar calendar every 33 years.



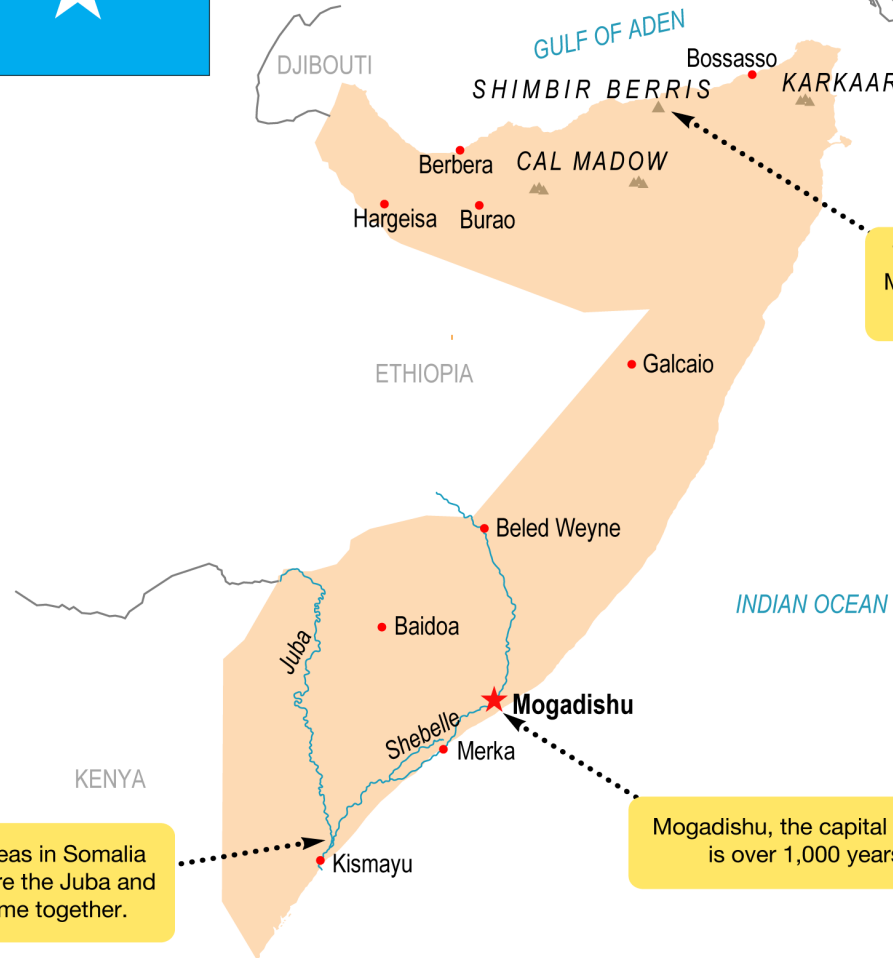
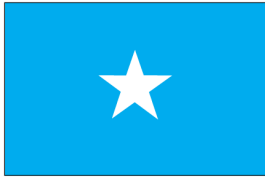
Learn More

Contact the Permanent Mission of Somalia to the United Nations, 425 East 61st Street, Suite 702, New York, NY 10065; phone (212) 688-9410; web site www.un.int/wcm/content/site/somalia.

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Somalia



The highest peak in Somalia is Mt. Shimbir, which stands 7,906 feet (2,410 km) high.

Somalia is located on what is known as the Horn of Africa, which is named for its horn-like shape.

The best farming areas in Somalia are in the south where the Juba and Shebelle rivers come together.

Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia is over 1,000 years old.