

Reaching the Nations International Church Growth Almanac

Country reports on the LDS Church around the world from a landmark almanac. Includes detailedanalysis of history, context, culture, needs, challenges and opportunities for church growth.



Jordan

Population: 7.93 millions (#99 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 89,342 square km. Landlocked in the Middle East, Jordan borders Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Palestine, Syria, the Dead Sea, and the Gulf of Aqaba. The Jordan River empties into the Dead Sea, the lowest land elevation location on Earth, and forms the northeastern border with the West Bank and Israel. Most of the terrain is desert and consists of plains and plateaus. Some highlands occupy western areas where a rainy season occurs. Droughts and earthquakes are natural hazards. Environmental issues include limited fresh water supplies, deforestation, desertification, overgrazing, and soil erosion. Jordan is divided into twelve administrative governorates.

Peoples

Jordanian: 69.3%

Syrian: 13.3%

Palestinian: 6.7%

Egyptian: 6.7%

Iraqi: 1.4%

Other (i.e. Armenian, Circassian): 2.6%

The population of Jordan has significantly increased in the past decade due to the increased flow of refugees from nearby countries such as Syria and Palestine.

Population: 10,248,069 (July 2017)

Annual Growth Rate: 2.05% (2017)

Fertility Rate: 3.19 children born per woman (2017)

Life Expectancy: 73.4 male, 76.3 female (2017)

Languages: Arabic dialects (98%), Circassian dialects (2%). Arabic is the official language and only language with over one million speakers (10.0 million).

Literacy: 95.4% (2015)

History

The territory of Jordan was settled by Semitic Amorites around 2000 BC. According to the Book of Abraham, Abraham traveled through Jershon (Jerash or Gerasa) in the territory of modern Jordan on his way into Canaan. Akkadian, Assyrian, Egyptian, Israelite, Babylonian, and Persian kingdoms at times controlled portions of Jordan. Monumental architecture from the Kingdom of Petra, founded by the Nabataens, still stands. The Romans later took control of the region, followed by the Byzantines. After the advent of Islam, most the population became Muslim. Jordan was integrated into the Islamic Empire in the seventh century. Various Islamic empires governed Jordan until the region was absorbed by the Ottomans in the early sixteenth century. Following the demise of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, the United Kingdom took control of much of the Middle East and created the semi-autonomous region of Transjordan in the 1920s. The region gained independence in 1946 and changed its name to Jordan in 1950. King Hussein ruled for five decades starting in the 1950s. Israel captured the West Bank in 1967 from Jordan and in 1988 gave up ambitions on retaking lost territory. Greater democratization occurred in the 1990s with the legalization of political parties and holding parliamentary elections. Jordan strengthened ties with the West in the 2000s, joining the European Free Trade Association in 2001 and supporting the coalition to oust Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in 2003. As a result of the Iraq War, Jordan continues to house hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees. In 2009, King Abdallah dissolved parliament and the government and created a new government with powers vested in him by the constitution. In January 2013, Jordanians voted in parliamentary elections in which the king transferred considerable powers to the new legislature. In March 2013, a prime minister was elected by the parliament for the first time in Jordanian history rather than being appointed by the king. Today Jordan supports a significant migrant population from neighboring Arab countries.

Culture

One of the most progressive Arab states, Jordan has taken many social, governmental, and political reforms that have strengthened ties with the West. There are minimum quotas for the number of women in parliamentary positions. Jordan hosted the first women's sports tournament in the Middle East in 2016. Islam strongly influences daily living and cultural customs and practices. Jordan shares many cultural similarities with neighboring Arab states, as Arabs constitute almost the entire population. Cuisine primarily consists of lamb, rice, yogurt, nuts, and vegetables. Mansaf is the national dish, made from lamb cooked in yogurt sauce. Polygamy is legal. Cigarette consumption rates are close to the worldwide average, whereas alcohol consumption rates are very low due to large Muslim population.

Economy

GDP per capita: $12,500 (2017) [21% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.735

Corruption Index: 48 (2017)

With few natural resources, Jordan has one of the smallest economies in the Middle East, depends on international assistance to stabilize the economy, and faces challenges meeting energy needs. King Abdullah initiated economic reforms in the 2000s to spur greater economic growth and attract foreign investment, such as cutting taxes, privatizing state-owned companies, and removing trade subsides on oil. The global financial crisis reduced economic growth rates but did not lead to recession. Official rates for unemployment and living below the poverty level are 18.5% and 14.2%, respectively. Services generate 66.8% of the GDP and employ 78% of the population, whereas industry generates 28.9% of the GDP and employs 20% of the population. Primary industries include tourism, information technology, clothing, fertilizers, refining, potash, mining, cement, and manufacturing. Some agricultural activity occurs, and common crops include citrus fruits, tomatoes, vegetables, olives, and strawberries. Primary trade partners include Saudi Arabia, the United States, Iraq, India, and China.

Corruption is perceived to be average for the Middle East and comparable to Saudi Arabia. Corruption is generally observed to be of a moderate or low concern in most areas such as the judicial system, law enforcement, public services, and customs. The implementation of anti-corruption legislation remains a problem.[1]

Faiths

Muslim: 97.2%

Christian: 2.2%

Other: 0.6%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Roman Catholic – 30,000

Melkite Catholic – 27,000

Evangelical – 19,116

Latter-day Saints – ~200 – 3

Seventh Day Adventists – 185

Religion

Muslims constitute more than 97% of the population. Most of the remainder of the population is Christian, primarily consisting of traditional Christian churches in the region, such as Roman Catholic and Melkite Catholic denominations. The Christian population has fallen dramatically due to heavy emigration. There are small populations of Baha'is, Druze, and Shi'a Muslims.[2]

Religious Freedom

Persecution Index: 21st (2018)

The constitution acknowledges Jordan as an Islamic state but grants the population the right to practice individual religious beliefs as long as they are in harmony with native customs and in good moral standing. The constitution forbids religious persecution, but the implementation of Shari'a Law by the government limits the religious freedom of non-Muslims. Overall there is little conflict between Muslims and the Christian minority, although the latter can be heavily discriminated against and persecuted, particularly formerly Muslim converts. Religious freedom conditions have appeared to worsen in recent years, particularly for Christians. The proselytism of Muslims is illegal. The government has harassed those accused of proselytizing Muslims. Formerly Muslim Christian converts can lose their civil rights, and the government has, at times, attempted to reconvert them back to Islam, considering Christian converts to still be Muslims. Expatriate Evangelical Christians appear to have the poorest relationship with the government among Christians as they are among the most aggressive proselytizers, are more informal with managing their religious affairs with the government, and were accused of violating immigration laws. [3] Officially recognized Christian groups include Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Melkite Catholic, Maronite Catholic, Syrian Orthodox, Coptic, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Seventh-Day Adventist, and United Pentecostal churches. The government continues to deny registration for some religious groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.[4]

Largest Cities

Urban: 91%

Amman, **Zarqa,** Irbid, **Russeifa, Quwaysimah - Jweideh - Abu Alanda - Rajeeb, Khilda - Umm Essommaq, Wadi Essier, Jubeiha, Khraibet Essooq - Jawa - Yadoodeh, Sahab, Ramtha, Sweileh, Aqaba, Zaatari Camp, Al-Mafraq, Madaba.**

Cities listed in **bold** have no LDS congregations.

Two of the sixteen largest cities have an LDS congregation. Fifty-eight percent (58%) of the national population resides in the sixteen largest cities.

LDS History

Latter-day Saints have lived in Jordan since approximately the 1950s. In 1989, the Church obtained permission from the government to register a visitor center in Jordan.[5] The center is used for local branch functions and for educating the public about Brigham Young University (BYU). In 1990, 180 BYU students and local members met with Jordan's Queen.[6] Elder Neuenschwander visited the Amman Branch in July 2010. The Church remains without official recognition from the government but is registered as a society.

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: ~200 (2018)

LDS Membership in Amman is primarily comprised of American government employees and their families, whereas Jordanians constitute most of the members in Irbid. In Irbid, there are five or six Arab Latter-day Saint families who are related to each other and belonged to traditional Christian denominations prior to their conversion. In 2018, approximately one in 51,200 was LDS.

Congregational Growth

Branches: 3 (2018)

Congregations have functioned in Jordan for at least two decades. Three branches once operated in Jordan in Amman, Al-Husn, and Irbid. Sometime in the past decade, the Al-Husn and Irbid Branches were consolidated to form the North Jordan Branch. In 2010, two branches functioned in Amman and Irbid that pertained to the Amman Jordan District. In 2011, the Amman Branch was divided into two branches: one for English speakers and one for Arabic speakers. The North Jordan Branch met in Al-Husn as of 2018.

Activity and Retention

Although the LDS Church does not proselyte in Jordan, several Jordanians have joined the Church, all of whom appear to have been formerly adherents of traditional Christian denominations. Missionary activity occurs through members and on a referral basis to Christians. Although many native members attend church regularly, many have also become less active. Some less active Jordanian members appear to have joined the Church in hopes of receiving financial aid and visas to the United States. Some have become less active due to personal conflicts with other members, especially in the mid-2000s. Member activity rates for non-Jordanians appear consistent with foreign Latter-day Saint populations in other Middle Eastern nations or in the United States. In 2010, several Arab Christian investigators attended church in Irbid and requested missionary lessons in their homes, and a few convert baptisms occurred. The North Jordan Branch appeared to have approximately twenty active members in 2016 – all of whom were native Jordanians. Special meetings, such as convert baptismal services, have had up to 61 people in attendance. Active membership in Jordan appears to be less than one hundred, or no higher than 40%–50% of total membership.

Language Materials

Languages with LDS Scripture: Arabic, English.

All LDS scriptures and a wide selection of church materials are translated into Arabic.

Meetinghouses

In 2010, the Amman Branch chapel could hold up to seventy people. The only baptismal font in the country is located in the North Jordan Branch meetinghouse.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The LDS Church has conducted significant humanitarian and development work, with 356 projects completed since 1985. Projects have included clean water projects, community projects, emergency response, maternal and newborn care, refugee response, vision care, and wheelchair donations.[7] In 1991, the Church donated a machine for eye surgery to Jordanian doctors.[8] In 2004, over 500 wheelchairs were donated by the Church to the disabled.[9] In 2010, a humanitarian senior missionary couple was stationed in Irbid and also mentored local church members.[10] Senior missionaries continued to serve in the Irbid area as of 2016.

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

The LDS Church is registered as a society but is not officially recognized by the government. It is unclear why the Jordanian government has not officially recognized the Church, as a few recognized Christian groups have approximately as many members as the Latter-day Saints such as Seventh-Day Adventists. Humanitarian missionaries have served regularly in Jordan and report no difficulties entering the country. Overall, the Church appears to enjoy one of the most positive relationships among Middle Eastern governments with Jordan, which has come as a result of decades of humanitarian and development work, positive member example, and respect for local laws and customs regarding proselytism. There are no legal restrictions for members to teach with the exception of recent government prohibitions with Muslim-targeted proselytism by Christian groups. Jordanian converts face some restrictions of civil liberties, such as being unable to serve in the military, as the LDS Church is not officially recognized.

Cultural Issues

The implementation of Shari'a law and the strong presence of Islam throughout the country is a major obstacle to growth, as over 97% of the population is unreached by the Church due to their religious affiliation. The Church has historically not pursued the teaching of Muslims, in accordance with local customs, and missionary activity is limited to foreigners and Christian Jordanians. In accordance with the Muslim holy day and day of rest for the week, Latter-day Saints hold church on Fridays. If proselytism occurs among the Muslim population one day, polygamy will be an issue for the Church to face. Those engaged in a polygamous marriage must end these relations in divorce and be interviewed by a member of the mission or area presidency to be considered for baptism. Low alcohol consumption rates is a cultural characteristic that falls in line with LDS teachings. Jordanian Latter-day Saints, particularly men, face significant challenges to remain active in the Church due negative cultural views of the Church.

National Outreach

Congregations are established in two cities, which constitute 25% of the national population. However, with the exception of family and personal contacts of LDS members, the entire population in Amman and Irbid is unreached. Informal member-missionary activity occurs through local members among Christians, especially in northern areas. Future member-missionary activity will likely be most productive among Jordanian Christians.

Internet outreach may be an effective means to provide opportunity for more of the population to become aware of the Church and its teachings. Humanitarian and development work has established a positive reputation among many. Maintaining a continual presence in Amman and Irbid will be paramount to future missionary activity, especially if the population becomes more receptive to the Church.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

The Church has attempted to maintain a delicate balance in providing assistance to local converts in need without attracting converts who join the Church just to obtain financial assistance. Several members have joined the Church for welfare purposes and are inactive today. Poor ethnic relations between native converts has also occurred in the past, resulting in some leaving the Church.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

Ethnic integration issues have been a major challenge among the small native Latter-day Saint population despite relatively little ethnic diversity in Jordan. These issues occurred primarily in the mid-2000s in Irbid as a result of several Christian Iraqi refugees joining the Church. Some Jordanian members, who do not appear active today, so heavily persecuted these Iraqi converts that they returned to Iraq in 2007.

Language Issues

Both functioning branches face significant challenges accommodating Arabic and English speakers. Some members in the Amman Branch have reported that there have been challenges maintaining doctrinal purity among new members, which appears to be partially the result of language barriers. The creation of a second Arabic-speaking branch in Amman in 2011 provides opportunities for carefully-implemented outreach among the indigenous population through member referral but presents administrative challenges with training branch leaders due to language barriers, as English speakers comprise most church leadership in the region.

Missionary Service

Despite few active local members, recently full-time missionaries have served from Jordan. In 2010, the Irbid Branch had two native missionaries serving as full-time missionaries, one of whom was the first Arab sister missionary to serve a full-time LDS mission at Temple Square in Salt Lake City. Prospects appear poor for increasing the numbers of Jordanian missionaries due to very few youth in the church. Performing youth-directed outreach among Christians may be an effective means of attracting more youth converts who can serve full-time missions.

Leadership

Although many natives have joined the Church, many leadership positions are primarily filled by foreigners. There have been times when Arabic-speaking branches and the district presidency have been entirely composed of native members or Arabic speakers. However, the Church has struggled to maintain self-sufficiency in church leadership despite periods in which essential leadership positions are entirely staffed by Jordanians. This has likely occurred as expatriate Latter-day Saints tend to have greater experience in leadership positions and are more knowledgeable about the gospel. English-speaking leadership also facilitates communication with the area presidency, which is entirely comprised of Westerners. However, the lack of local leaders will hurt church growth in the long run as local members will rely on foreigners for administrative tasks and responsibilities. Returned missionaries, albeit very few in number, will be instrumental in establishing long-term leadership as long as they remain in their home country.

Temple

Jordan pertains to the Bern Switzerland Temple district. In 2010, only one known Jordanian Latter-day Saint family had been sealed in the temple. Distance to the temple, travel expenses, and a lack of sufficient native members to coordinate temple trips is a major challenge that has severely limited temple attendance. Obtaining visas for European nations with temples may also be an issue in addition to a lack of Arabic-speaking members in Europe who can assist in temple ordinances. Prospects for a closer temple appear unlikely for the foreseeable future although a temple may one day be constructed in the Gulf States such as in the United Arab Emirates.

Comparative Growth

Several Middle Eastern countries have had small numbers of native converts in the past 15 years such as Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. However, only Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria appear to have a well-established community of native members. Jordan has yet to be consistently self-sustaining in staffing local church leadership. Jordan has had an unofficial Church presence for about as long as most Middle Eastern nations that have LDS congregations functioning today. Arab countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates have larger LDS Church memberships due to the large expatriate presence.

Other nontraditional missionary-minded Christian groups report slow growth due to the small traditional Christian population and cultural restrictions proselytizing Muslims. Seventh-Day Adventists have declined in membership over the past 15 years and appeared to open no additional congregations. Christian groups have been successful in attracting small numbers of converts but are unable to experience greater growth due to heavy emigration of converts and adherence to traditional beliefs among Jordanian Christians.

Future Prospects

Jordan offers some of the most favorable medium-term prospects for LDS church growth in the Arab world due to an established local Latter-day Saint community, mission outreach centers in two of the three largest cities, positive relations with the government, periodic convert baptisms, and local missionaries occasionally serving missions. However, the Church continues to lack official government registration. Ethnic integration issues among non-Westerners and language barriers at church present ongoing challenges. Jordan has yet become self-sufficient in local leadership. Indigenous membership faces challenges obtaining adequate teaching and training in Arabic. Additionally, Jordanian converts experience significant pressure to abandon their beliefs and return to their previous denominations.

[1] “Jordan.” GAN Business Anti-Corruption Portal. Accessed 14 September 2018. https://www.business-anti-corruption.com/country-profiles/jordan/ http://lynch.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/03/10/a_rare_crackdown_on_corruption_in_jordan

[2] “Jordan.” International Religious Freedom Report 2017. Accessed 14 September 2018. https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dlid=280990#wrapper

[3] “Jordan,” International Religious Freedom Report 2009, 26 October 2009. http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127350.htm

[4] “Jordan.” International Religious Freedom Report 2017. Accessed 14 September 2018. https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dlid=280990#wrapper

[5] “Jordanian leaders approve LDS center,” LDS Church News, 9 September 1989. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/19128/Jordanian-leaders-approve-LDS-center.html

[6] “Jordan’s queen greets 180 LDS visitors in palace reception,” LDS Church News, 23 June 1990. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/19891/Jordans-queen-greets-180-LDS-visitors-in-palace-reception.html

[7] “Where We Work,” LDS Charities. Accessed 14 September 2018. https://www.ldscharities.org/where-we-work

[8] “Gift to Jordan aids eye care,” LDS Church News, 5 October 1991. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/21379/Gift-to-Jordan-aids-eye-care.html

[9] “Jordan’s Queen Noor joins in wheelchair ceremony,” LDS Church News, 28 August 2004. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/46041/Jordans-Queen-Noor-joins-in-wheelchair-ceremony.html

[10] “Pure religion: A new vision,” LDS Church News, 19 June 2010. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/59482/Pure-religion-A-new-vision.html