



# Reaching the Nations International Church Growth Almanac

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



Israel

Population: 8.05 millions (#98 out of countries)

By David Stewart and Matt Martinich

## Geography

**Area:** 22,770 square km. Located in the Middle East, Israel borders Jordan, Egypt, the Gaza Strip, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank, the Red Sea, and the Mediterranean Sea. Part of a rift system that stretches from East Africa to Syria, the Jordan Rift Valley is the dominant geographic feature and holds the Jordan River, the fresh-water Sea of Galilee, and the salty Dead Sea. Highlands occupy central areas, whereas plains cover coastal areas. The Negev Desert comprises the southern portion of Israel where hot, dry climatic conditions occur; temperate climate prevails elsewhere. Sandstorms, droughts, and earthquakes are natural hazards. Environmental issues include water scarcity, lack of arable land, desertification, and pollution. Israel is divided into six administrative districts.

## Peoples

Jewish: 74.5%

Arab: 20.9%

Other: 4.6%

Jews born in Israel are 76.9% of the Jewish population, whereas 15.9% were born in Europe, the United States, or Oceania, 4.6% in Africa, and 2.6% in Asia. Arabs constitute approximately one-fifth of the population. In 2009, the government issued approximately 90,000 foreign work permits and estimated that there were 118,000 illegal foreign workers in Israel.<sup>[1]</sup> Arabs are concentrated in northern Israel and in some West Bank border regions.

**Population:** 8,424,904 (July 2018)

**Annual Growth Rate:** 1.49% (2018)

**Fertility Rate:** 2.63 children born per woman (2018)

**Life Expectancy:** 80.8 male, 84.7 female (2017)

**Languages:** Hebrew (53%), Arabic dialects (31%), Russian (12%), other (4%). Hebrew is the official language. Languages with more than one million speakers include Hebrew (4.4 million), Arabic (2.5 million), and Russian (1.0 million). Commonly spoken languages among Jewish immigrants include Arabic dialects, Russian, Yiddish, Romanian, Polish, Ladino (Judeo-Spanish), and English.

**Literacy:** 98% (2017)

## History

Known as the “Promised Land” of the Jewish people, Israel numbers among the oldest inhabited nations in recorded history. The Kingdom of Israel was established likely around the eleventh century before Christ and divided into two kingdoms (Judah and Israel). The Assyrians, and later, Babylonians, invaded the region, with the latter taking captive the remaining Jews to Mesopotamia until their return decades later. Israel was later ruled by the Persians, Greeks, and Romans. Christianity began in Israel in the first century AD, and the majority of Christ’s ministry occurred in present-day Israel. The Romans subdued Jewish revolts in the first century BC and ultimately relocated most of the Jewish population elsewhere in the Roman World, leading to the Diaspora of Jewish peoples throughout North Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia. The Byzantines, and later, the Ottomans, controlled Israel. Efforts to establish a Jewish state in Palestine lasted for half a century before coming to fruition in 1948. In 1917, the Balfour Declaration secured British government assistance in the creation of Jewish state, and Jewish immigration accelerated despite increasing violence between Jewish and Arab communities. Surrounding Arab states invaded Israel immediately after independence was declared, but once armistice agreements were signed with Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan, Israel gained 50% more territory in 1949. The Six Days War in 1967 was triggered by mounting tension between Israel and Egypt over the future status of the Sinai Peninsula and Israel’s right to exist as a nation-state in the Arab Middle East. During the conflict, Israel gained control of the Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights. Conflict persisted throughout much of the 1970s over cease-fire lines, and a formal peace treaty between Israel and Egypt was not reached until 1979. Border conflicts and skirmishes occurred along the Lebanese border during the 1970s and 1980s. Israel has retained occupation of the Palestinian-populated West Bank and Gaza Strip and granted greater self-rule and autocratic government rights in 1994. In the 2000s, the international community composed of the United States, European Union, the United Nations, and Russia collaborated with Israeli and Palestinian forces for the establishment of a democratic Palestinian state that can peacefully coexist with Israel, but these efforts have met consistent frustration and delay due to ongoing hostilities, the terrorist activities of Hamas, Hezbollah, and other groups, and difficult negotiations between the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli government. Israel has constructed several walls and barriers to restrict the movement of Palestinians in an effort to increase security and protect the safety of Israeli citizens. Hezbollah terrorist activities culminated in war with Lebanon in 2006 that severely crippled Lebanon. The political destiny of Israeli-occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip remains undetermined. The most recent negotiations regarding a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict occurred in 2013-2014 and were suspended.

## Culture

Both Jewish and non-Jewish cultures brought by Jews immigrating from around the world over the past century has resulted in a diverse and dynamic Israeli culture that thrives today. The indigenous Arab population that predated the modern arrival of Jewish settlers to the region has continued to influence architecture, society, music, and cuisine. Holy sites in the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish traditions dot the landscape such as the Western Wall, the Temple Mount, the Cave of the Patriarchs, the Garden of Gethsemane, the Dome of the Rock, Joseph’s tomb, and the Al-Aqsa Mosque. The revival of the Hebrew language began in the nineteenth century and has been a success as there are now over four million first language speakers of Hebrew, and most of the population speaks Hebrew fluently. As a result of superimposing the Hebrew language onto the traditional Arabic-speaking region, many place names were changed or have multiple names today. Most signs are written in Hebrew, Arabic, and English. Societal tensions between differing Jewish sects, Arab Muslims, and Christians remain high. Israel is known for its music, dance, theater, cinema, museums, and athletics. Cigarette consumption rates are higher than the worldwide average, whereas alcohol consumption rates are low.

## Economy

**GDP per capita:** \$36,400 (2017) [61.2% of U.S.]

**Human Development Index:** 0.903 (2017)

**Corruption Index:** 62 (2018)

Israel possesses an advanced market economy that has diversified and developed over the past several decades despite limited natural resources and regional instability. Strong political and economic ties with the United States have facilitated growth. Timber, potash, copper, natural gas, phosphate, magnesium bromide, clay, and sand are natural resources. Services employ 81.6% of the population and generate 69.5% of the GDP, whereas industry employs 17.3% of the labor force and generates 26.5% of the GDP. High-technology products, wood products, mining and minerals, food processing, tobacco, cement, construction, metal products, diamond cutting, and textiles are the major industries. Common crops include fruits, vegetables, and cotton. Beef, poultry, and dairy products are agricultural goods. The United States is the primary trade partner.

Corruption is perceived as less prevalent than in most nations in the region, and the enforcement of local laws and government policies is generally consistent. Israel is a money-laundering center in the region, and illegal drugs are trafficked into the country from neighboring Lebanon and Syria. Domestic illicit drug use is a concern.

## Faiths

Jewish: 74.7%

Muslim: 17.7%

Christian: 2.0%

Druze: 1.6%

Other: 4.0%

## Christians

### Denominations Members Congregations

Catholic – 90,000

Evangelicals – 31,045

Orthodox – 30,000

Messianic Jews – 20,000

Jehovah's Witnesses – 1,707 – 30

Seventh Day Adventists – 752 – 20

Latter-day Saints – 288 – 3

## Religion

Three-quarters of the Israeli population is Jewish, of which 59% is nonreligious or secular, 18% is "Zionist Orthodox," 11% is ultra-Orthodox, 6% Reform, and 5% Conservative. Additional Jewish sects include Reconstructionist and Zionist ultra-Orthodox Jews.[\[2\]](#) Approximately 30% of the Jewish population was born abroad.[\[3\]](#) Arab Sunni Muslims account for most of the non-Jewish population. Christians and Druze account for a tiny minority, together accounting for fewer than 5% of the population. There are approximately 20,000 Messianic Jews. There is a high degree of geographic segregation among religious communities.

## Religious Freedom

The Israeli Basic Law on Human Dignity and Liberty protects religious freedom, which is generally upheld by the government. However, the government discriminates against non-Orthodox Jewish sects and non-Jews. Orthodox Jews receive ample government funding, and many government practices and laws are aligned to the Orthodox tradition, resulting in discrimination and intolerance towards religious minorities. Religious groups recognized by the British prior to independence have been consistently referred to as religious communities by the Israeli government. Only three additional groups have been granted religious community status since 1948: the Druze, the Evangelical Episcopal Church, and the Baha'i Faith. Many large Protestant groups are not recognized by the government but have operated for many years, such as Baptists, the Assemblies of God, and Lutherans. Obtaining visas for religious representatives has been challenging for recognized and unrecognized religious groups alike. Any religious group may legally proselyte without restrictions among the entire population, but there have been counter-proselytism efforts by the government to discourage missionary activity. Also, proselytism among minors is only permitted if approval is given by both parents.[\[4\]](#) Major Jewish holidays are recognized by the government, and all workers have the right to determine their respective weekend day of worship on which they may rest for thirty-six consecutive hours.[\[5\]](#)

Gender segregation on public buses and other places frequently occurs in areas with ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities. Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad have periodically launched rocket and mortar attacks on Israelis from Palestinian-controlled areas. Interethnic and interreligious tensions between Muslim Arabs, differing Jewish sects, and Christians continue to be strained. Messianic Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Evangelical Christians report the greatest societal abuse of religious freedom, as they are frequently targeted by anti-missionary Jewish groups such as Yad L'Achim and Lev L'Achim.

## Largest Cities

**Urban: 92.4% (2018)**

Jerusalem, Tel Aviv-Jaffa, **Haifa**, **Rishon LeZion**, **Petah Tikva**, **Ashdod**, **Netanya**, Beersheba, **Bnei Brak**, **Holon**, **Ramat Gan**, **Rehovot**, **Ashkelon**, **Bat Yam**, **Beit Shemesh**, **Kfar Saba**.

Cities listed in **bold** have no congregations of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Three of the sixteen cities with over 100,000 inhabitants have a Church congregation. Forty-five percent (45%) of the national population resides in the fourteen largest cities.

## Church History

Apostle Elder Orson Hyde traveled to Palestine and dedicated the Holy Land on October 24th, 1841 for the gathering of the Jews.<sup>[6]</sup> Organized first to serve Armenians in the Near East, the Palestine/Syrian Mission operated from 1933–1939 and 1947–1951. One of the mission presidents in the 1930s was Armenian, but the mission closed, and the branches were discontinued during World War II. The Church in Israel was administered from Switzerland in the early 1970s.<sup>[7]</sup> Several senior missionary couples were called to serve as special representatives for the Church in the 1970s. At the time, branches operated in Galilee, Jerusalem, Haifa, and Tel Aviv. In the early 1990s, the Galilee Branch nearly closed, as there were no more than three active members. Special representative missionaries were removed in 1985 due to conflict regarding the building of the Brigham Young University Jerusalem Center in Jerusalem. The center is 120,000 square feet, is located on southern Mount Scopus, and can house 175 students.<sup>[8]</sup> A 1986 deal with the Knesset permitted the Church to build its Jerusalem Center in exchange for the Church promising to refrain from any proselytism activity.<sup>[9]</sup> In late 1992 and early 1993, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir performed in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Haifa. Nearly 3,000 attended the performance in Tel Aviv, and the choir received favorable reviews.<sup>[10]</sup> Senior missionary couples have been assigned to the Jerusalem Center and in the 2000s were also called to work in the Galilee area. The Church has a ninety-nine-year lease for the land on which the Jerusalem Center stands.<sup>[11]</sup> Israel has been assigned to the Middle East/Africa North Area since 2008. Church President Russell M. Nelson visited Jerusalem in April 2018 during his global ministry tour.<sup>[12]</sup>

## Membership Growth

**LDS Membership: 288 (2017)**

Although there are some native Latter-day Saints, non-Israeli citizens appear to constitute the bulk of Church membership in Israel. Some members are converts from the former Soviet Union. In 2003, there were 156 Latter-day Saints. Membership increased to 185 in 2004, 219 in 2006, and 246 in 2007. Membership vacillated from 200-300 between the late 2000s and late 2010s. Membership slightly declined to 234 in 2009, increased to 286 in 2010, decreased to 216 in 2015, and rebounded to 288 in 2017.

In 2017, one in 29,253 was a member of the Church.

## Congregational Growth

**Branches: 3 (2018)**

The Jerusalem Branch was organized in the early 1970s, followed by the Galilee Branch in 1976. The Israel District was organized in 1980. In the early 2000s, there were two branches: one each in Galilee and Jerusalem. The number of branches increased to three in 2006 and four in 2007 as a result of the creation of the Tel Aviv and Middle East/Africa North Area Branches, both of which pertained to the Israel District. In the mid-2010s, the Church appeared to discontinue the area branch and renamed the Israel District as the Jerusalem District. In late 2016, there were members who lived in additional cities such as Haifa, Beer Sheva, and Eilat.<sup>[13]</sup> The Galilee Branch was discontinued in 2017. In 2018, the Church organized a branch in Beer Sheva. In 2018, there were four branches in the Jerusalem District – one of which operated in the West Bank in Bethlehem.

## Activity and Retention

Forty-five attended the dedication of the Galilee Branch meetinghouse in Tiberias in 2007.<sup>[14]</sup> The average number of members per congregation declined from seventy-eight in 2003 to fifty-nine in 2009, and increased to ninety-six in 2017. In 2007, approximately twenty-five of the sixty members in the Galilee Branch were active.<sup>[15]</sup> In early 2011, the Jerusalem Branch had few active members. Most members in the Jerusalem Branch are transient. BYU students constitute a significant majority of church attendance for most of the year. Nationwide active membership is estimated at approximately 80-90, or 30% of total membership.

## **Language Materials**

**Languages with LDS Scripture:** Arabic, Russian, Romanian, Polish, English.

All Latter-day Saint scriptures and most church materials are translated into Arabic, Russian, Romanian, and Polish. Hebrew translations available to the public are limited to the sacrament prayers.<sup>[16]</sup> The Liahona magazine has twelve issues a year in Russian and four in Romanian and Polish.

## **Meetinghouses**

In 2007, there were two Church facilities in Israel, one being the BYU Jerusalem for Near Eastern Studies and the other being the Galilee Branch meetinghouse. The Galilee Branch meetinghouse was a renovated villa.<sup>[17]</sup> The Church later dedicated a facility in Tel Aviv.

## **Health and Safety**

Christian missionary groups are often physically intimidated and harassed by some radical Jewish groups. Terrorist attacks pose a safety risk.

## **Humanitarian and Development Work**

There have been 133 humanitarian and development projects in Israel since 1985.<sup>[18]</sup> The Church has donated x-ray equipment for dental workers, a computer system for the disabled, equipment for teaching employment skills, supplies for mothers and newborns, and blankets for the elderly. Additional development work has included providing health information to Palestinian women and providing educational materials for children.<sup>[19]</sup>

## **Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects**

### **Religious Freedom**

Latter-day Saints are permitted to assemble and worship but face many restrictions regarding proselytism, the baptism of converts and children of record, and the translation and printing of Hebrew-language materials. There are no full-time proselytizing missionaries, and local members are not permitted to conduct missionary work. Many of these restrictions were imposed by the Church itself to safeguard against misunderstandings from the Jewish community and Israeli government and to secure the construction and operation of the BYU Jerusalem Center. Overall, Latter-day Saints have positive relations with the government, as the Church has honored agreements. The Church has experienced some friction with Jewish communities internationally regarding the proxy baptism of deceased Jews in temples, but in recent years, these tensions have been diffused by Church leaders enforcing a policy that Latter-day Saints are to submit proxy temple ordinance work only for their deceased ancestors. Those desiring baptism in the Church in Israel must travel to a nation in which the Church permits baptisms to receive this ordinance. Foreign service missionaries serve regularly and provide leader and member support.

### **Cultural Issues**

Unstable societal conditions, wars, and intolerance for Christian proselytism have contributed to the lack of missionary activity in Israel for decades. Recognizing the persisting societal and governmental challenges for prospective missionary work likely contributed to the decision of Church leaders to promise to Israeli government officials that no proselytism would occur in the country if the building of the BYU Jerusalem Center was permitted. The reception of Christian missionaries (and missionaries from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints before the proselytism ban) has been low among Jews and Muslims, and threats of violence or persecution have been widespread to those accused of proselytism. Conflict in the region has strained ethnic and religious ties among Jews and Muslims, making these groups unreceptive to missionary activity. Poor

Christian-Jewish relations and the persecution of Jews for centuries have made Jews resistant and sensitive to perceived threats of Christian proselytism. Strong ethno-religious ties further challenge Jews and Muslims to investigate and join the Church, as involvement in the Church may result in ostracism from family and the community. In accordance with the traditional Jewish Sabbath, Church congregations worship on Saturday.

## **National Outreach**

Proselytism bans among missionaries and members alike render the entire population unreached by the Church. Eighteen percent (18%) of the national population resides in cities with official branches. Coastal areas in central Israel are the most densely populated. The current Church presence is primary due to the immigration of Latter-day Saints from around the world to Israel and the special interest of Church leaders in the historical religious significance of Israel.

Indigenous Christian communities may offer the greatest prospects for expanding national outreach in Israel in the event that proselytism bans are lifted, due to similarities in doctrine and generally less opposition toward foreign missionary groups. The increasing number of foreign workers from traditionally Christian nations are culturally more reachable by the Church and may also improve prospects for widening national outreach.

Israelis do not appear to have any restrictions preventing access to Church Internet websites. The Church's official websites at [lds.org](http://lds.org) and [mormon.org](http://mormon.org), and the wide range language materials available online on both these sites offer opportunities for Israelis to learn about the Church online. The Church's online meetinghouse locator provides meetinghouse locations in Israel. There are no translations of Hebrew Church materials online.

## **Member Activity and Convert Retention**

As nearly the entire Latter-day Saint population joined the Church prior to their arrival in Israel, member activity and convert retention rates reflect the rates experienced in members' countries of origin. Member activity rates may be lowest for Russian and Spanish-speaking immigrants, as most countries where these languages are spoken have relatively low convert retention and member activity rates. North American members appear to have the highest member activity rates. Israeli Latter-day Saint member activity rates appear low to moderate. Distance from meetinghouses, a small number of active members, and societal intolerance for nontraditional Christian groups have also likely contributed to low member activity rates. Emphasis from local leaders on institute and seminary attendance can help ameliorate some of these issues and strengthen doctrinal understanding and testimony building.

## **Ethnic Issues and Integration**

The Church in Israel is unique regarding the diverse demographic composition of its tiny membership as congregations do not appear to have any ethnic majority. Members report that the Latter-day Saints in Israel consist of Americans, Spanish-speakers, Russians, ethnic Jews, Arabs, Brazilians, and others. There is a large number of immigrant or migrant worker Filipino Latter-day Saints in congregations in Jerusalem and Galilee.<sup>[20]</sup> Many members are transient, posing challenges to develop a strong, integrated community.

## **Language Issues**

In 2007, Church services in the Galilee Branch were conducted and translated into English, Hebrew, Spanish, and Russian<sup>[21]</sup> and in English, Russian, and Spanish in Tel Aviv. There are no Hebrew translations of Latter-day Saint scriptures or materials. The Church has not granted permission for the translation of scriptures and materials into Hebrew. Hebrew-speaking Latter-day Saints must use other language materials.

## **Missionary Service**

Very few, if any, local members have served full-time missions from Israel. Prospects may improve for the children of the few Israeli Latter-day Saint families to serve missions over the medium term.

## **Leadership**

Expatriate and immigrant members appear to staff most, if not all, church leadership positions in Israel. There are only a few Israeli members qualified to lead congregations due to language barriers and the small size of church membership. Leadership has demonstrated some sustainability as indicated by the continuous operation of the Jerusalem District and multiple branches over the past three decades.

## **Temple**

Israel is assigned to the Bern Switzerland Temple district. Organized temple trips likely occur as a district or in conjunction with the Amman Jordan District or other stakes and districts in the region. Prospects for a closer small temple in the United Arab Emirates may materialize for the sparse, remote Latter-day Saint population in the region over the medium term.

## **Comparative Growth**

The only Jewish-majority nation, Israel shares many similarities with Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey regarding the size and status of the Church, as these are the only Middle Eastern nations that have had multiple Latter-day Saint native converts in recent years. However, only Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria appear to have a well-established community of native members, whereas in Israel local members are few in number and primary consist of immigrants. Palestine has a few Arab families in Bethlehem. Only Israel and Jordan have church institutions. Arab Gulf states like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have larger Church memberships due to the large expatriate presence.

Missionary-minded Christian groups share special interest in growing their denominations in Israel but success appears primarily limited to immigrant groups. Few Jews and Muslims have become Christians. Messianic Jews appear among the most successful largely due to their ability to culturally tailor a missionary approach to those of the Jewish faith and a permanent community of converts that is self-sustaining. Jehovah's Witnesses have noted a net increase of hundreds of active members and several congregations in the past decade. Seventh-Day Adventists report slight membership decline. Concerns over persecution and violence in the region have limited missionary outreach for most Christian groups.

## **Future Prospects**

The unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict, historically poor diplomatic relations with neighboring Arab states, government agreements forbidding Latter-day Saint proselytism, no missionary approaches specially tailored to Jews, and lack of Israeli Latter-day Saints create an unfavorable outlook for church growth for the foreseeable future. Maintaining current congregations, immigration of additional converts, and the growing foreign worker population may sustain the church infrastructure in Israel until conditions become more favorable for later growth. The development of Jewish-directed missionary approaches in areas with sizeable Jewish minorities and translation of materials into Hebrew may improve the prospects of future missionary activity in Israel if permitted one day.

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- [4] Israel, Golan Heights, West Bank, and Gaza." Accessed 15 November 2018. <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dldid=280986#wrapper>
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- [11] "Dedication of the Galilee Branch House," [jerusalem.nielsonpi.com](http://jerusalem.nielsonpi.com/galileebranch.pdf), retrieved 17 January 2011.
- [12] "President Nelson's Visit to the Holy Land Is "Significant," Says Elder Holland," [www.lds.org](https://www.lds.org/church/news/president-nelsons-visit-to-the-holy-land-is-significant-says-elder-holland?lang=eng). 16 April 2018. <https://www.lds.org/church/news/president-nelsons-visit-to-the-holy-land-is-significant-says-elder-holland?lang=eng>
- [13] Weaver, Sarah Jane. "Leaders Address Members of the Jerusalem District," Church News, 17 November 2016. <https://www.lds.org/church/news/leaders-address-members-of-the-jerusalem-district?lang=eng>
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- [15] "Dedication of the Galilee Branch House," [jerusalem.nielsonpi.com](http://jerusalem.nielsonpi.com/galileebranch.pdf), retrieved 17 January 2011.
- [16] "Dedication of the Galilee Branch House," [jerusalem.nielsonpi.com](http://jerusalem.nielsonpi.com/galileebranch.pdf), retrieved 17 January 2011.
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