

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.



Bahrain

Population: 1.31 millions (#157 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 741 square km. Bahrain consists of a small archipelago off the Arabian Peninsula in the Persian Gulf. The surrounding sea creates a humid climate with mild temperatures in the winter and hot, humid conditions in the summer. Most of the islands are low elevation plains with little vegetation. The King Fahd Causeway connects Bahrain with Saudi Arabia, and another causeway is planned connecting Bahrain to Qatar. Drought and dust storms are natural hazards, whereas desertification, oil spills, a lack of fresh water, and the damage to the ocean ecosystems from human activity are environmental issues. Bahrain is divided into four administrative governorates.

Peoples

Bahraini: 46%

Asian: 45.5%

Other Arab: 4.7%

African: 1.6%

European: 1.0%

Other: 1.2%

Approximately 750,000 foreigners reside in Bahrain. Indians are the largest non-Bahraini group. Other prominent ethnic groups include Iranians, Pakistanis, and Westerners.

Population: 1,410,942 (July 2017)

Annual Growth Rate: 2.26% (2017)

Fertility Rate: 1.75 children born per woman (2017)

Life Expectancy: 76.8 male, 81.3 female (2017)

Languages: Arabic dialects (78%), Persian [Farsi] (10%), Urdu (4%), Northern Kurdish (3%), Kerinci (2%), Gujarati (1%), English (1%), other (1%). Arabic is the official language. Only Arabic has more than one million speakers (1.1 million).

Literacy: 95.7% (2015)

History

The island of Bahrain is believed by some scholars to be the paradise land of Dilmun referred to in early Sumerian writings. Various ancient civilizations controlled or influenced Bahrain, including the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Persians. Since the birth of Christ, the islands have been controlled by Persians, Sassanids, Qarmatians, and Portuguese. Islam arrived shortly after its advent in the seventh century. Bahrain returned to Persian rule around 1600 AD until the al-Khalifa family took the island and signed treaties with the British to ensure its protection from neighboring nations. Bahrain became a British protectorate and gained independence in 1971. Greater modernization occurred in the 1970s and 1980s due to Bahrain's abundant oil reserves and efforts to diversify the economy. Bahrain has become a banking center in the Middle East in the past several decades. Tensions between the Sunni and Shi'a Muslims persist over differences in theology, wealth, and government representation.

Culture

Bahrain's tolerance for non-Arabs and non-Muslims has produced a more cosmopolitan atmosphere than in many Gulf States. Different religious groups peacefully coexist, but Islam is the primary influence on culture. Education has become increasingly emphasized due to competition for employment. Car racing has become increasingly popular in recent years following the completion of the Bahrain International Circuit, the first racing track in the Middle East. Tourism has grown in recent years. Bahrain has one of the highest rates of alcohol consumption in the Middle East due to the sizable non-Muslim population and tourism. Polygamy is legal but not widely practiced.

Economy

GDP per capita: $48,500 (2017) [81.5% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.824

Corruption Index: 36 (2017)

Bahrain competes with Malaysia as a center of banking in the Muslim world. Oil profits continue to drive the economy despite the shrinking size of oil reserves, which are among the smallest in the region. Oil related activities account for 85% of government revenue and 10% of the GDP. Industry accounts for 38% of the GDP and employs 32% of the workforce. Primary industries include oil extraction and refining and aluminum smelting. Services produce 62% of the GDP and employ 67% of the workforce. Limited agriculture produces fruit, vegetables, and poultry. Primary trade partners include the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, China, and the United States.

Corruption used to be lower than many Middle Eastern nations but has worsened in recent years due to Bahrain's role as an international financial center. Money laundering is a serious concern.[1] Perceived corruption in Bahrain has significantly worsened in the 2010s.

Faiths

Muslim: 70.3%

Christian: 14.5%

Hindu: 9.8%

Buddhist: 2.5%

Jewish: 0.6%

Unaffiliated: 1.9%

Other: 0.4%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Catholic – 140,000

Evangelicals – 23,579

Latter-day Saints – 208 – 1

Seventh-Day Adventist – 82

Religion

Ninety-nine percent (99%) of ethnic Bahrainis are Muslim. Shi'a Muslims constitute the majority but make up poorer classes. The Shiite majority dates to Persian control of Bahrain from 1603 to 1783, when the Sunni Al Khalifa family came to power. Friction between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims is pronounced due to economic and social differences. These groups have historically lived separate from each other but greater mingling now occurs. Half the foreign workers are Muslim whereas the remainder includes Christians, Hindus, Baha'is, Buddhists, and Sikhs.[2]

Religious Freedom

Persecution Index: 48th (2018)

The constitution does not limit individuals from choosing, practicing, or changing their religious affiliation. Islam is the state religion, and Islamic holidays are national holidays. Government prohibits the persecution or discrimination of religious sects. Non-Muslims can practice their religions with little government interference. Religious groups must receive a license from the government to assemble; however, unregistered congregations of some faiths meet without government interference. Bahraini authorities do not restrict Christians from distributing or selling of religious literature. However, society discourages Muslims from converting to other religions. Religious violence or conflict occurs primarily between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims.[3]

Largest Cities

Urban: 89.3%

Manama, **Muharraq, Riffa, Hamad Town, A'ali, Isa Town, Sitrah, Budaiya, Jidhafs, Al-Malikiyah.**

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

One of the ten largest cities has a congregation. Eighty-three percent (83%) of the national population lives in the ten largest cities.

LDS History

Church members have lived in Bahrain since the early 1970s. A group functioned prior to the creation of the Bahrain Branch in 1971. In 1976, membership consisted of eight adults and eight children in Bahrain.[4] Four members were received by the Emir of Bahrain in 1989 and cordially welcomed to Bahrain from other Middle Eastern nations for Church leadership meetings.[5] The Church has been legally recognized since at least 2001. [6] Many stake activities for the Manama Bahrain Stake, which includes approximately ten congregations in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, occur in Bahrain due to the level of religious freedom.

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: 208 (2017)

In 1988, the Bahrain Branch grew to thirty-five members. In 2001, members came from the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, the Philippines, and South Africa.[7] By 2007 there were seventy-six members, growing to 114 in 2009. Membership reached 170 in 2013. In 2017, one in 6,783 was LDS.

Congregational Growth

Branches: 1 Groups: 1? (2018)

In 2000, Bahrain became part of the Europe Central Area and in the late 2000s was assigned to the newly created Middle East/Africa North Area. The Bahrain Branch pertained to the Manama Bahrain Stake, formerly known as the Arabian Peninsula Stake, prior to the relocation of the stake to Dubai, United Arab Emirates in 2011. In 2011, the Manama Bahrain District was formed and included branches in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. In 2014, the Manama Bahrain District became a stake. A group has historically operated in Bahrain to meet the needs of American military.

Activity and Retention

Very few converts have joined the Church in Bahrain, as most members have temporarily lived in the country for employment. Active membership is likely between 100 and 150, or 48%–72% of total membership.

Language Materials

Languages with LDS Scripture: Arabic, English, Farsi, Hindi, Telugu, Tagalog, Tamil, Urdu.

All LDS scriptures are available in Arabic and Tagalog. Book of Mormon translations have been completed for Farsi, Hindi, Telugu, and Urdu. Most Church materials are available in Arabic and Tagalog, whereas Hindi, Telugu, Urdu, and Farsi have more limited Church materials. Gospel Principles and The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith are available in Farsi. The only Church materials in Malayalam are Gospel Fundamentals and Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith. The Liahona annually has twelve issues in Tagalog, four in Telugu, three issues in Urdu, and one issue in Hindi.

Meetinghouses

Church meetings for the Bahrain Branch likely occur in a rented space. The Church did not publish the location of the Bahrain Branch meetinghouse on its official meetinghouse locator as of 2018 albeit the phone number for the branch president was provided.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church has only conducted one community project in Bahrain.[8]

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

Unlike most Middle Eastern nations, Bahrain does not legally prohibit proselytism. However, open proselytism is not permitted due to cultural restrictions on proselytizing Muslims. There do not appear to be any major limitations on conducting missionary work or distributing religious literature among non-Muslims. Muslims have access to non-Islamic religious materials, although very few have become Christians. The level of religious freedom has made Bahrain the headquarters for Church activities in neighboring Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

Cultural Issues

Church meetings are held on Fridays, the Islamic day of worship. Bahrain’s cosmopolitan atmosphere provides opportunity for the Church to reach individuals from a wide variety of nationalities and backgrounds. Muslims have greater potential opportunity to learn about the Church in Bahrain than in many other Gulf States, although active mission outreach among Muslims has not been pursued due to cultural restrictions. Converts who were formerly Muslim will likely experience less persecution and ostracism than many other Arab nations, but mission outreach among this religious group remains a sensitive issue. Those engaged in polygamous relationships must divorce polygamous spouses and be interviewed by a member of the area presidency in order to join the Church. The Church has yet to develop teaching and missionary resources tailored to those from an Islamic religious background. The Bahraini population presents unique opportunities for the Church to reach Shi’a Muslims.

National Outreach

Bahrain's urbanized population reduces logistical challenges in reaching the entire population. Most reside within fifteen miles of Manama, reducing the number of needed congregations to administer such a small geographic area. Membership size and activity have not yet required the creation of additional congregations for different sections of the Manama metropolitan area.

Christians are likely the most receptive religious group to the Church and number over 200,000. Little effort to reach other Christian groups appears to have occurred despite few restrictions. No full-time missionaries are assigned to Bahrain, leaving these responsibilities to local members, most of whom are transient expatriates with no knowledge of Arabic or other local languages. Many expatriates have only limited contact with native peoples and often tend to socialize primarily with other expatriates, resulting in few opportunities for sharing the gospel with native peoples. Local and area LDS leadership may have instituted restrictions regarding how, when and where members may speak and teach nonmembers about the Church to respect local cultural sensitivities.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Few converts appear to have joined the Church in Bahrain. Member activity and convert retention primarily reflect the strength, doctrinal understanding, and habits of church attendance of the nations from which members relocated.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

The greatest ethnic tensions are between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. Most members come from North America, Europe, or the Philippines, making member-missionary work among these groups most favorable. Iranians, Kurds, and other predominately Muslim ethnic groups present challenging for outreach, as these groups have few or no Church members. However, Iranians have exhibited unique receptivity to the LDS gospel witness in many nations where formal proselytism occurs.

Language Issues

Church materials are available in most languages spoken by migrant workers and Bahrainis, although church services are conducted in English, and few members are proficient in Arabic or other local languages. Kurdish is the only language with a significant number of speakers without any Church materials.

Leadership

Although the Manama Bahrain Stake is headquartered in the country, insufficient active membership and limited leadership prevent the creation of more than one branch or the organization of a ward even though there are enough members on church records to create a ward. Present branch and stake leaders are English-speaking expatriates; there appear to be few if any native Bahraini LDS leaders.

Temple

Bahrain pertains to the Frankfurt Germany Temple district. Temple trips occur rarely, as most members are transient expatriates with more convenient access to temples when returning to their native lands to visit or at the conclusion of their assignments. A future, closer temple may meet the needs of LDS members in Bahrain, perhaps in the United Arab Emirates, although such needs are presently limited by the small number of church members.

Comparative Growth

The size of LDS membership is comparable to many Middle Eastern nations. The Church in Bahrain has experienced substantial membership growth in the past decade as church membership has approximately doubled since 2009. No other country in the Gulf States has as many members and no ward as only one branch continues to operate in Bahrain.

Other Christian groups meet the needs of their members who relocate to Bahrain with little effort to grow their congregations. Some Christian groups also use Bahrain as a headquarters for the region due to its tolerance towards religious minorities. However, these groups generally report slow or stagnant growth despite better religious freedom conditions in comparison to surrounding nations.

Future Prospects

Greater religious freedom in Bahrain than in many other Arab nations provides meaningful potential for future growth, although

considerable vision and effort will be needed to harness this potential. Although open proselytism in Bahrain is legal among both Muslims and non-Muslims, the assignment of full-time missionaries is unlikely at present due to cultural limitations and regional geopolitical concern, and so growth in coming years will depend primarily on member-missionary efforts. Member-missionary outreach is limited by primary reliance of LDS members on English, the lack of proficiency of most members in Arabic and other local languages, social circles of members that are largely confined to the expatriate community, and the transient nature of expatriate workers without long-term commitment to the region. The need and opportunity exist for organized LDS outreach among non-Muslims, including Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and Sikhs, who together constitute nearly 30% of the population. Future growth and transition from a transient expatriate membership to indigenous membership with stable local leadership will depend on efforts to reach out to native Bahrainis.

[1] Mahdi, Mazen. “Bahrain minister ousted over corruption charges,” The National Newspaper, 22 March 2010. http://www.thenational.ae/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20100323/FOREIGN/703229820/1002

[2] “Bahrain,” International Religious Freedom Report 2017. Accessed 8 September 2018. https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dlid=280978#wrapper

[3] “Bahrain,” International Religious Freedom Report 2017. Accessed 8 September 2018. https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dlid=280978#wrapper

[4] Platt Joseph B. “Our Oasis of Faith,” Ensign, Apr 1988, 39.

[5] “LDS greeted in Bahrain,” LDS Church News, 23 December 1989. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/19451/LDS-greeted-in-Bahrain.html

[6] Shurtliff, Diane. “Oasis of Faith,” New Era, Aug 2001, 34.

[7] Shurtliff, Diane. “Oasis of Faith,” New Era, Aug 2001, 34.

[8] “Where We Work,” LDS Charities. Accessed 8 September 2018. https://www.ldscharities.org/where-we-work