



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.



United Arab Emirates

Population: 5.63 millions (#113 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 83,600 square km. Situated on the Arabian Peninsula, the United Arab Emirates borders Oman, Saudi Arabia, the Persian Gulf, and the Gulf of Oman. Oman claims an enclave in eastern United Arab Emirates and the northern tip of the eastern Arabian Peninsula. Desert and plains cover the entire country with a small section of mountains in the extreme east by the ocean. Most of the territory is unproductive desert wasteland. The few oases provide water for limited agriculture. The country occupies a strategic location on the Strait of Hormuz where crude oil from the Persian Gulf exits into the Indian Ocean for worldwide distribution. Sand and dust storms are frequent natural hazards. Environmental issues include pollution, lacking natural fresh water resources, and desertification. Much of the fresh water comes from distilling ocean water. The United Arab Emirates is divided into seven emirates.

Peoples

Indian: 38.2%

Other non-South Asian: 12.8%

Emirati: 11.6%

Egyptian: 10.2%

Bangladeshi: 9.5%

Pakistani: 9.4%

Philippine: 6.1%

Other South Asian: 2.3%

Citizens account for less than 12% of the population. The remainder of the population includes South Asians, other Arabs, Iranians, and expatriates from Western countries. The United Arab Emirates has one of the highest population growth rates in the Middle East due to immigration.

Population: 6,072,475(July 2017)*

Annual Growth Rate: 2.37% (2017)

Fertility Rate: 2.32 children born per woman (2017)

Life Expectancy: 75.0 male, 80.4 female (2017)

*the United Nations estimated the United Arab Emirates' population in mid-2017 at 9.4 million

Languages: Arabic dialects (53%), Malayalam (11%), Telugu (5%), Northern Pashto (4%), Southern Balochi (4%), Bengali (4%), Iranian Persian (3%), Tagalog (3%), Eastern Punjabi (2%), Southern Pashto (1%), Sinhala (1%), other/unspecified (9%). Arabic is the official language. Languages with more than one million speakers include Arabic dialects (5 million), and Malayalam (1 million).

Literacy: 93.8% (2015)

History

The eastern Arabian Peninsula was inhabited for millennia prior to the birth of Christ. Roman and, later, Arab trade occurred in the Indian Ocean. The Portuguese controlled the peninsula for 150 years during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; British and Ottoman rule followed. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the region was economically viable for the pearling industry. The present day United Arab Emirates were formally known as the Trucial States and received military protection by the British under condition that the Trucial States were not to allow other foreign nations to make territory claims. Oil exploitation began in the 1960s. Independence from the United Kingdom occurred in 1971 for six emirates and the seventh emirate in 1972. Economic growth accelerated through the rest of the twentieth century, bringing the GDP per capita up to Western European levels. The United Arab Emirates largely avoided the Arab Spring protests that occurred in most nations in the Middle East and North Africa. In recent years, the United Arab Emirates has become increasingly more involved in regional affairs.

Culture

Emirati culture consists of a cosmopolitan blend of Arab, South Asian, Iranian, and Western influences. Architecture, cuisine, and art are heavily influenced by Arab culture. Indigenous Emirati Arabs constitute less than 12% of the population and consequently have allowed greater religious and cultural tolerance than perhaps any other Middle Eastern nation. Some ethnic tensions occur primarily between differing immigrant groups. The selling and distribution of alcohol and pork is limited. Football and cricket are popular sports. Polygamy is practiced by some Muslims. Islamic dress code is not mandatory. Men outnumber women more than two-to-one due to the high numbers of immigrant workers who are single or unable to bring their families from native countries.

Economy

GDP per capita: \$67,700 (2017) [114% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.863 (2017)

Corruption Index: 71 (2017)

The government has worked over the past several decades to diversify the economy from oil and natural gas production. Free Trade Zones exempt foreign investors from taxes and allow full ownership of businesses. Due to the global financial crisis in the late 2000s and lower oil prices, the GDP dropped by around 4% in 2009. The large number of transient noncitizen foreign workers who account for 85% of the workforce present challenges for integration and communication. Unlike the situation in the United States and many European nations, legal foreign workers have no path to citizenship, as Emiratis have become minorities in their own land and desire to retain control over government and economy. The nation has historically depended on oil revenues for economic growth although oil and gas constituted only 30% of the GDP by the late 2010s. Seventy-eight percent (78%) of the workforce labors in services and 15% in industry. GDP is nearly evenly divided between industry and services. Crude oil accounts for 45% of exports, many of which are destined to India, Japan, and China. Other trade partners include Iran and the United States.

The United Arab Emirates has the lowest perceived level of corruption in the Middle East. Perceived corruption in the United

Arab Emirates is comparable to Japan and France.

Faiths

Muslim: 77%

Christian: 13%

Hindu: 7%

Buddhist: 2%

Other: 1%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Catholic – 750,000

Orthodox – 100,000

Evangelicals – 60,774

Latter-day Saints – 1,555 – 6

Seventh Day Adventists – 934

Religion

Most living in the United Arab Emirates are Muslim. Emiratis are 85% Sunni Muslim, and approximately 14% Shia Muslim. Sunnis comprise 80% of non-citizen Muslims. Christianity and Hinduism are the most practiced minority religions. There are also small numbers of Buddhists, Bahais, Druze, Sikhs, Zoroastrians, and Jews.[\[1\]](#)

Religious Freedom

Persecution Index: 40th (2018)

The constitution allows for freedom of religion within the bounds of Emirati customs. The government has typically upheld the religious freedom of the population and imposes some restrictions, including defining all citizens as Muslims. Islam is the official religion, and government controls Sunni mosques. The government has interfered very little with the religious activities of non-Muslims but bans proselytism and distributing non-Islamic literature. In contrast, Emirati missionaries have been active in spreading Islam and funding mosque construction in Central Asian nations like Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. More than thirty Christian denominations have received government recognition in the UAE, allowing for the construction of chapels.[\[2\]](#) Some non-Muslims received trials according to Shari'a law. The entire population is forbidden from eating, drinking, and smoking in public during daylight hours of fasting during the month of Ramadan. Muslims who convert to a different religion face societal pressures to return to Islam albeit there is no government legislation that bans conversion to non-Islamic faiths.[\[3\]](#) The United Arab Emirates is considered perhaps the most tolerant Islamic nation in the Middle East toward non-Muslims.

Largest Cities

Urban: 78%

Dubai, Sharjah, Abu Dhabi, Al Ain, **Ras Al Khaimah, Fujairah, Khor Fakkan, Kalba', Dibba, Ad-Dhaid.**

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

Four of the ten largest cities have a congregation of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Sixty-six percent (66%) of the national population lives in the ten largest cities.

Church History

The Latter-day Saint congregation was organized in Dubai in 1979. Sacrament meetings were held in a member's home with one expatriate family, one woman from the United States, and two Filipino men. Elder Boyd K. Packer became the first apostle to travel to the United Arab Emirates in 1983. At the time, he organized the Arabian Peninsula Stake for expatriate members primarily from Western countries. Meetings were later held in a rented space in an American school.^[4] The United Arab Emirates was assigned to the Europe Central Area in 2000 and reassigned to the newly organized Middle East Africa North Area in 2008. Elder M. Russell Ballard became the second apostle to visit in 2007 when he visited members in Dubai.^[5] Elder Holland visited in 2009 to conduct stake conference.^[6] In 2013, the Church completed its first church-built meetinghouse in the Arabian Peninsula in Abu Dhabi - a stake center to house the Abu Dhabi Stake.^[7]

Membership Growth

Church Membership: 1,555 (2017)

Membership increased to twenty-four in 1983 and thirty-six by 1985. Membership in the Arabian Peninsula Stake stood at 900 in 2004. By 2009, membership increased to 1,950.^[8] In 2008, membership stood at 300 in Abu Dhabi and 250 in both Dubai and Sharjah, indicating that at least 750 members resided in the country. The Al Ain Branch has the smallest membership, likely less than fifty. Increases in membership growth come primarily from members moving to the area and non-Muslim converts, mainly Filipinos. Rapid membership growth occurred during the 2000s and early 2010s, but stagnant membership growth has persisted since 2015. Reduced emphasis on the oil industry has appeared to affect membership growth trends in the country in the past few years likely as a result of fewer members who work in the petroleum industry being transferred to the United Arab Emirates for employment purposes.

In 2017, one in 6,045 was a Latter-day Saint per mid-2017 United Nations population estimates for the United Arab Emirates.

Congregational Growth

Wards: 5 Branches: 1 (2018)

The Church organized its first branch in Dubai in 1979 and its first branch in Abu Dhabi in 1980. Both branches had become wards by the mid-2000s. A branch in Sharjah was organized in 2006. A second congregation was organized in Dubai in 2008, followed by a second congregation in Abu Dhabi in 2011.

In 2011, the Church relocated the headquarters of the Manama Bahrain Stake to Abu Dhabi, renamed the stake the Abu Dhabi Stake, and congregations in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia were reassigned to the newly created Manama Bahrain District. No missionaries have ever served in the country. All six congregations in the United Arab Emirates pertain to the Abu Dhabi Stake.

Activity and Retention

In 2008, the Dubai session of stake conference had a record 450 in attendance. The following year, attendance increased to 636.^[9] Activity rates appear very high, but this is also likely due to the many inactive members who reside in the country—primarily expatriate workers from the United States, the Philippines, or other Southeast Asian nations—who are unknown to the Church. Activity rates may be as high as 65%.

Language Materials

Languages with LDS Scripture: Arabic, English, Bengali, Iranian Persian (Farsi), Hindi, Sinhala, Tagalog, Urdu

All LDS scriptures are available in Arabic and Tagalog. Book of Mormon translations have been completed for Hindi, Iranian Persian, Sinhala, and Urdu; only Book of Mormon selections are available in Bengali. Most Church materials are available in Arabic and Tagalog whereas Iranian Persian, Sinhala, and Urdu have more limited translations of Church materials. Gospel Principles and The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith are available in Farsi and Gospel Principles, The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith, and the Articles of Faith are translated into Bengali. The Liahona annually has twelve issues in Tagalog, three issues in Urdu, and one issue in Hindi. Only The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith is available in Malayalam.

Meetinghouses

The Church houses its two Abu Dhabi wards in the first Church-built meetinghouse in the country. Historically, church meetings have been held in rented spaces. In the early 2010s, additional Church-built meetinghouses were considered for Dubai and Sharjah. Both Dubai wards and the Sharjah Ward meet in a large building in the Al Safa neighborhood of Dubai although it was unclear whether this was a church-built meetinghouse as of late 2018.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church has conducted three humanitarian projects in the United Arab Emirates since 1985, including a community project in 2017.[\[10\]](#)

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

Unlike many nations in the region, the Church publishes the location and meeting times for all six of its congregations in the United Arab Emirates. There has been sufficient religious freedom for the Church to construct meetinghouses in recent years complete with public outdoor sign displaying the Church's name in English. Government legislation forbids proselytism and limits outreach among non-Muslims. However, outreach among non-Muslims, particularly Christians, can occur through individual Church members, who must respect laws prohibiting the distribution of non-Islamic literature.

Cultural Issues

In accordance with the Muslim day of worship, Church meetings are held on Fridays. The Church is banned from teaching Muslims. Muslims who desire to convert to Christianity face ostracism and often move out of the country. The cosmopolitan atmosphere of the larger cities allows for greater religious tolerance of Christian denominations. Opportunities are high for developing local priesthood leadership among the immigrant population as men outnumber women. However, this also results in fewer member families from these nations.

National Outreach

Congregations are established in cities which account for 60% of the national population. Emirates without reported congregations include Ajman, Fujairah, Ras Al Khaimah, and Um Al Quwain. Areas that have the highest population density without congregations are northeast of Sharjah, Ras Al Khaimah, and Fujairah. No foreign missionaries serve in the country, and efforts to reach out to non-Muslims are limited due to bans on proselytism.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

The sensitive nature of the Church in an Islamic country has challenged member activity. Over the years, many members have had trouble learning when and where Church meetings are held, as the Church did not publish this information for many years. In 2009, the Church made available congregation names and contact information for Church leaders in the United Arab Emirates on its meetinghouse locator site. This has provided opportunity for more members to find the Church and participate in meetings.

Convert baptisms occur regularly and appear concentrated among the non-Muslim Filipino and South Asian immigrant population. Retention also appears good from the growth in congregations and increases in attendance at stake conference in the late 2000s. Trends in membership growth and convert retention may be influenced by the economic situation of the United Arab Emirates with the influx of many foreign workers from Southeast Asia. Economic hardship may result in slower growth or a decrease in membership from Western expatriates returning to their home countries.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

The Church has established a Tagalog-speaking ward in both Abu Dhabi and Dubai to better meet member language needs. The Muslim majority combined with most temporarily living in the country has facilitated member fellowship despite differences in ethnicity and culture among members. Emiratis and Muslims remain legally and culturally unreached by the Church.

Language Issues

Church services held in English meet the needs of most members. Churches in the United Arab Emirates report that most Christians speak English, Tagalog, Mandarin, Korean, Arabic, or Hindi. Those investigating the Church may experience language difficulties if unfamiliar with English or Tagalog. The Church has language materials in most of the immigrant languages that have Christian speakers, but significant outreach likely only occurs among Tagalog speakers. There are no language materials in Balochi, which has a couple hundred thousand speakers, but this group remains unreachable as there are very few reported Christians. Non-Muslim immigrant workers from South Asia are difficult to reach by the Church, as the Church has few members in these countries. Nevertheless, many of these individuals likely have some competency in English. Very few members likely speak Arabic fluently, limiting associations between members and Arabs.

Leadership

Member leadership in the United Arab Emirates matches the quality and availability seen in the United States on a smaller scale. This is due to most members coming from the United States or Western Europe for business. Experienced leadership has facilitated the independence and organization of the Church in the Abu Dhabi. However, life-long members in leadership positions may lack the vision needed for mission outreach among immigrant Christian groups.

Temple

The United Arab Emirates pertains to the Frankfurt Germany Temple district. Temple trips are arduous due to a 3,000 mile trip to Frankfurt. The United Arab Emirates appears the most likely country in the Middle East for a temple to be built as it has the greatest tolerance towards non-Muslims, an active, rapidly growing LDS membership, and the potential for construction of religious buildings.

Comparative Growth

The United Arab Emirates has one of the strongest Church presences in the Middle East. Only Saudi Arabia has a larger number of wards and branches. Among Middle Eastern countries with a nonsensitive presence, only the United Arab Emirates has more than one thousand members. Together with Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar, the United Arab Emirates is among the most accommodating nations to Latter-day Saints in the Middle East. Members living in many other Arab countries face greater restrictions on religious freedom.

Many Christian denominations have a larger presence than The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the United Arab Emirates, as these groups have a stronger presence among South Asians. The Catholic Church claims the largest membership mainly consisting of Filipinos, Indians, and Americans. Christian groups tend to have good relations with the government.

Future Prospects

Conditions for future growth appear favorable but limited due to a ban on proselytism. Social networking and a more visible Church presence allows for greater outreach among members who were previously unaware of the location and times of Church meetings. A small temple may be constructed one day if permitted by government authorities and warranted by the size and strength of the Latter-day Saint community in the Gulf States.

- [1] "United Arab Emirates," International Religious Freedom Report 2017. Accessed 12 November 2018. <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dliid=281010#wrapper>
- [2] "United Arab Emirates," International Religious Freedom Report 2009, 26 October 2009. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127360.htm>
- [3] "United Arab Emirates," International Religious Freedom Report 2017. Accessed 12 November 2018. <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dliid=281010#wrapper>
- [4] Platt, Joseph B. "Our Oasis of Faith," Liahona, Oct 1988, 27.
- [5] Swensen, Jason. "Message-laden tour," LDS Church News, 10 March 2007. <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/50227/Message-laden-tour.html>
- [6] Chatterly, Matt. "Middle East stake: 10 cities in 10 days," LDS Church News, 7 March 2009. <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/56729/Middle-East-stake-10-cities-in-10-days.html>
- [7] Avant, Gerry. "Stake center in Abu Dhabi: Elder Holland dedicates chapel in Middle East," LDS Church News, 2 March 2013. <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/63295/Stake-center-in-Abu-Dhabi-Elder-Holland-dedicates-chapel-in-Middle-East.html>
- [8] Chatterly, Matt. "Growth, friendship serve as Middle East 'Miracles,'" LDS Church News, 7 March 2009. <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/56735/Growth-friendship-serve-as-Middle-East-miracles.html>
- [9] Chatterly, Matt. "Growth, friendship serve as Middle East 'Miracles,'" LDS Church News, 7 March 2009. <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/56735/Growth-friendship-serve-as-Middle-East-miracles.html>
- [10] "Where We Work," LDS Charities. Accessed 12 November 2018. <https://www.ldscharities.org/where-we-work>