



# 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.



**Western Sahara**

**Population: 0.55 millions (#173 out of countries)**

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## Geography

**Area:** 266,000 square km. Located in Northern Africa and occupied by Morocco, Western Sahara borders Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, and the North Atlantic Ocean. Terrain consists of sandy and rocky low-laying, flat desert that gradually rises in elevation inland to some small mountains and plateaus. Precipitation is uncommon, and hot, dry climate prevails year round. Fog and heavy dew generated by cool offshore currents offer some relief from hot, dry weather conditions. Blowing dust and sand known as the sirocco wind and frequent Harmattan haze are natural hazards. Environmental issues include dismal fresh water supplies and a lack of arable land.

## Peoples

Arab/Berber: 100%

**Population:** 603,253 (July 2017)

**Annual Growth Rate:** 2.7% (2017)

**Fertility Rate:** 3.86 children born per woman (2017)

**Life Expectancy:** 61.1 male, 65.8 female (2017)

**Languages:** Arabic [Hassaniyya and Moroccan-spoken dialects] (100%). Hassaniyya Arabic is not mutually intelligible with other Arabic dialects, whereas Moroccan-spoken Arabic is mutually intelligible with standard Arabic, although there are many linguistic differences with other dialects.

**Literacy:** N/A (Morocco—68.5% in 2015)

## History

The Bafour were Western Sahara's first known inhabitants who predated the arrival of Islam to the region. Berber-speaking tribes later replaced and intermingled with the Bafour and occupied the region by the time Islam arrived in the eighth century.

Invading Maqil Arab tribes originating from Yemen mixed with Berber populations in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, contributing to the development of local culture known today as Sahrawi. Population and demographic shifts also affected neighboring Mauritania and Morocco. Spain claimed Western Sahara in the 1880s following the Berlin Conference and established a colony that came under administration of Spanish Morocco in 1939. Western Sahara remained under Spanish control following the independence of Morocco in 1956.<sup>[1]</sup> Independence prospects began to materialize for Western Sahara in the mid-1970s when Mauritania and Morocco instigated campaigns to annex the territory following Spanish withdrawal, citing historical Sahrawi allegiance to their respective civic authorities. Independence-seeking Sahrawi Polisario forces backed by Algeria attempted to repel Moroccan, Mauritanian, and Spanish occupational interests. In an event known as the “Green March,” 350,000 unarmed Moroccan citizens crossed over the border into Western Sahara in November 1975. During that time Morocco strengthened its territorial claims and eventually occupied the upper two-thirds of the country. Spain, Morocco, and Mauritania shared administration over Western Sahara beginning in late 1975, but Spain quickly fell out of the picture, and Mauritania ultimately relinquished its territorial claims and administration of the southern regions by 1979.<sup>[2]</sup> Morocco did not gain control of the southernmost regions until the late 1980s. Polisario forces continue to maintain a separate government in exile and control the barren interior regions along the Mauritanian border. The status of Western Sahara sovereignty, independence, and integration into North Africa remains undetermined at present as both Morocco and the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic continue to claim the entire territory. A foreign community working with the United Nations Mission for a Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) continues to operate in the country.<sup>[3]</sup> There are approximately 100,000 Sahrawis who reside in refugee camps in Tindouf, Algeria.

## Culture

Traditionally living nomadic lifestyles relying on livestock for survival, Sahrawis share many cultural similarities with neighboring Hassaniyya Arabic-speaking Moors in Mauritania, albeit Sahrawis inherited a Spanish colonial past rather than a French legacy. Tribalism dominated society until Moroccan occupation began, and many families were fractured, and a sizable minority of the population moved to the Sahrawi refugee camp on the Algerian border. Islam is the primary social influence and traditionally differed in practice in Western Sahara from other Muslim nations in that there is a lack of mosques. Cigarette and alcohol consumption rates appear low compared to the worldwide average. Polygamy is uncommon, and the Moroccan government has tried to eradicate its practice.

## Economy

**GDP per capita:** \$2,500 (2007) [5.2% of U.S.]

**Human Development Index:** N/A

**Corruption Index:** N/A

The Moroccan government controls trade and all economic affairs. Living standards are substantially lower than Morocco. Nomadic herding, fishing, and phosphate mining generate revenue and economically sustain the population. Most food is imported, as rainfall is insufficient to grow crops outside of the few oases. Phosphates and iron ore are natural resources. Agriculture employs 40% of the work force, whereas industry and services employ the remaining 60% of the work force.

Corruption is perceived as widespread but has been highly publicized in Morocco, and some progress has been achieved in recent years in addressing petty corruption. Government transparency has increased, and legislation to prevent or discourage corruption appears to be in place. Prosecuting corruption charges on high-profile individuals remains a challenge.<sup>[4]</sup> Drug trafficking is a concern, as Morocco is a major transshipment point for South American cocaine to Europe and is one of the world’s largest producers of cannabis.

## Faiths

Muslim: 99%

Other: 1%

## Christians

### Denominations – Members – Congregations

Catholic – 100?

Seventh Day Adventists – 0 – 0

Latter-day Saints – less than 5 – 0

Jehovah's Witnesses – less than 10 – 0

## Religion

Sahrawis and Moroccans are Sunni Muslim. A lack of mosques and the veneration of religious figures and their alleged tombs (maraboutism) are unique characteristics in the practice of Islam in Western Sahara. There is a tiny Catholic minority that practices openly and many foreigners residing in the country are non-Muslims.<sup>[5]</sup> There are dozens of Moroccan Christians.<sup>[6]</sup>

## Religious Freedom

Laws and policies regarding the practice of religion in Western Sahara are the same as in neighboring Morocco due to Moroccan occupation of the country.<sup>[7]</sup> The constitution allows for the practice of religion on an individual basis but declares Islam as the state religion. The King possesses the responsibility to defend Islam. The government has taken steps to prevent the spread of radical Islamic teachings and preserve its historical Islamic identity. Non-Muslim foreigners may openly practice their beliefs, but local non-Muslims and non-Jews face threats of government surveillance, ostracism, and persecution for worshipping. Local Christian converts tend to meet in private homes to worship. There have been consistent efforts by the government to limit the spread and practice of Shi'a Islam and Christianity. The government bans proselytism and the distribution of non-Islamic literature. Attempting to convert a Muslim to another religion is illegal. Foreign Christian missionaries do operate in Western Sahara and either work among non-Muslims or secretly among Muslims but can be expelled if their activities are made public. Christian groups registered with the government include the Roman Catholic, Russian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Protestant, and Anglican Churches.<sup>[8]</sup>

## Largest Cities

**Urban: 86.7%**

**Laâyoune, Dakhla, Es Semara, Boujdour, El Marsa.**

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

None of the five largest cities have an LDS presence. Eighty-six percent (86%) of the population resides in the five largest cities.

## LDS History

There has never been an LDS presence in Western Sahara, which was assigned to the Africa West Area in 1998.<sup>[9]</sup>

## Membership Growth

**LDS Membership: less than 5 (2018)**

There are no known Latter-day Saints living in the country and no known Sahrawi Latter-day Saints.

## Congregational Growth

**Wards: 0 Branches: 0 (2018)**

In 2018, the Church reported no organized congregations.

## Language Materials

**Languages with LDS Scripture:** Arabic, Spanish.

All LDS scriptures and most church materials are available in Arabic and Spanish. The LDS Church publishes a Spanish

translation of the LDS edition of the Bible complete with full LDS footnotes, Bible dictionary, and topical guide.

## **Health and Safety**

Access to healthcare is limited. Living conditions in many areas are harsh and dangerous due to hot, dusty weather conditions and political instability.

## **Humanitarian and Development Work**

In 2005, LDS institute attendees and instructors in Lyon, France purchased and assembled hygiene and education kits to send to orphans in Laayoune, Western Sahara and in the Sahrawi refugee camp on the Algerian border. French members have donated food and hygiene and newborn kits to Sahrawi refugees for several years.[\[10\]](#)

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

### **Religious Freedom**

The Moroccan government grants greater religious freedom to non-Muslim foreigners than many other Arab states, and the local Sahrawi population has been tolerant of the small Catholic minority, which may indicate some tolerance for a potential LDS presence. The LDS Church is unregistered with the Moroccan government, and local laws and government policy ban any prospective missionary activity for Latter-day Saints at present. Sahrawi government officials do not appear any less restrictive regarding the rights and privileges of religious minority groups. Political instability and an undeveloped economy have prevented any foreign Latter-day Saints from residing in the country and establishing an expatriate presence. In 2005, LDS public affairs missionaries did visit Western Sahara in person to deliver humanitarian aid donated by French members.[\[11\]](#)

### **Cultural Issues**

Poor living conditions, nomadic lifestyles, and the strong ethno-religious ties of Sahrawis and Moroccans to Islam present challenging conditions for LDS mission outreach in the event that government restrictions were relaxed to permit proselytism. A lack of Christian missionary activity in Western Sahara among Sahrawis generate an unclear picture of whether LDS mission outreach would be more or less effective than in other Islamic nations in the region as Western Sahara demonstrates unique characteristics regarding the practice of Islam. Tribalism remains a dominant social force that would likely leave prospective LDS converts ostracized from their communities and may put their personal safety in jeopardy.

### **National Outreach**

The entire population remains unreached by the LDS Church. If missionary activity were to commence with government approval and the lifting of proselytism bans, a mission outreach center in Laâyoune would reach 43% of the national population. However, at present, there appear to be no realistic prospects for the amendment of restrictive religious laws, which also prohibit the dissemination of non-Muslim religious literature. The small Catholic community may provide some mission outreach prospects, but its tiny presence offers little sustainable opportunity. There are few Sahrawi citizens abroad in nations with LDS missions, which further delays any potential LDS witness.

### **Member Activity and Convert Retention**

No convert baptisms have occurred in Western Sahara. The lack of Sahrawi Latter-day Saints challenges any future efforts to establish the Church among the indigenous population.

### **Ethnic Issues and Integration**

Tensions between Sahrawis and Moroccan settlers may become manifest at church if Latter-day Saint converts from both ethnicities assemble in the same congregations. Language barriers may segregate these groups and reduce potential ethnic integration issues.

### **Language Issues**

LDS materials are only available in standard Arabic. Moroccans and Sahrawis suffer from low literacy rates, creating

opportunities for future development projects teaching literacy but also posing leadership and gospel learning obstacles. Hassaniyya Arabic translations of LDS materials will be needed if mission outreach occurs. Language-specific congregations for Moroccan-speaking and Hassaniyya Arabic speakers may be organized, dependent on local receptivity.

## **Missionary Service**

No Sahrawis have served full-time missions. Missionaries have never been assigned to Western Sahara, but public affairs missionaries have visited in the past on humanitarian assignment.

## **Leadership**

No Sahrawi leadership has been developed. Initial church leadership will most likely rely upon foreign members.

## **Temple**

Western Sahara is assigned to the Accra Ghana Temple district.

## **Comparative Growth**

Western Sahara has no LDS Church presence like most Islamic African nations. The only African nations with a clear Muslim majority and a permanent LDS presence are Djibouti, Egypt, Guinea, Mali, Morocco, Senegal, and Sierra Leone. Most Christian groups have no presence in Western Sahara, and denominations with a presence are limited to foreigners living in the country.

## **Future Prospects**

Ongoing political uncertainty, government and cultural restrictions on the religious practice of non-Muslims, poor living conditions, an undeveloped economy, comparatively small population, and isolation from currently established LDS mission outreach centers render no realistic prospects for an LDS Church establishment for the foreseeable future and may make Western Sahara among the last nations to ever have an LDS presence. Latter-day Saints assigned to the MINURSO convoy may facilitate the establishment of a temporary presence, but prospects for an enduring, long-term presence among foreigners or among native Sahrawis are nearly nonexistent at present. The translation of some LDS materials into Hassaniyya Arabic over the medium-term may help prepare for potential mission outreach one day, especially if Sahrawis venture to nations with LDS mission outreach.

[1] "Western Sahara," Wikipedia.org, retrieved 7 January 2011. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western\\_Sahara](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_Sahara)

[2] "Background Note: Morocco," Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, 26 January 2010. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5431.htm>

[3] "Western Sahara," International Religious Freedom Report 2010, 17 November 2010. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148852.htm>

[4] "Snapshot of the Morocco Country Profile," Business Anti-Corruption Portal, retrieved 16 September 2010. <http://www.business-anti-corruption.com/country-profiles/middle-east-north-africa/morocco/>

[5] "Western Sahara," International Religious Freedom Report 2010, 17 November 2010. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148852.htm>

[6] "Western Sahara," International Religious Freedom Report 2017. Accessed 18 August 2018. <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dldid=281012#wrapper>

[7] "Western Sahara," International Religious Freedom Report 2010, 17 November 2010. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148852.htm>

[8] "Morocco," International Religious Freedom Report 2017. Accessed August 7th, 2018. <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dldid=280998#wrapper>

[9] "5 new areas announced worldwide," LDS Church News, 4 July 1998. <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/31389/5-new-areas-announced-worldwide.html>

[10] "French members send aid," LDS Church News, 28 May 2005. <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/47360/French-members-send-aid.html>

[11] "French members send aid," LDS Church News, 28 May 2005. <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/47360/French-members-send-aid.html>

