

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.



Tunisia

Population: 10.94 millions (#79 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 163,610 square km. Tunisia is the smallest country in North Africa and borders Libya, Algeria, and the Mediterranean Sea. Northern areas consist of mountains, whereas plains cover central and southern areas. Temperate climate subject to rainy, mild winters and hot, dry summers occurs in the north, whereas hot, arid conditions persist year round in the south. Flooding, earthquakes, and droughts are natural hazards. Environmental issues include proper hazardous waste disposal, limited fresh water, desertification, deforestation, soil erosion, and overgrazing. Tunisia is divided into twenty-four administrative governorates.

Peoples

Arab: 98%

European: 1%

Jewish/other: 1%

Population: 11,403,800 (July 2017)

Annual Growth Rate: 1.01% (2017)

Fertility Rate: 2.23 children born per woman (2017)

Life Expectancy: 74.1 male, 77.4 female (2017)

Languages: Tunisian spoken Arabic (99%), other (1%). Standard Arabic is the official language and only language with over one million speakers (11.3 million). Shilha is the most commonly spoken minority language belonging to the Berber language family with 50,000 speakers.

Literacy: 81.8% (2015)

History

The Phoenicians founded Carthage in present-day Tunisia along with several other North African settlements in the eight century BC The Carthaginians and Romans vied for control of the Mediterranean until the defeat of Carthage in 146 BC The Roman empire maintained control of Tunisia until the fifth century AD when European tribes invaded. Arabs conquered North Africa in the seventh century, significantly changed the ethnic composition of the population from immigrating Middle Eastern and Anatolian peoples, and introduced Islam. By the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Spanish Jews and Muslims resettled in Tunisia to escape persecution in Spain during the Spanish Inquisition, and the Arabs established a center of culture and education in Tunis. Tunisia came under rule of the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth century and became a French protectorate between 1881 and 1956. Independence from France occurred in 1956, and today, Tunisia maintains strong cultural, political, and economic relations with France.[1] In early 2011, the government was overthrown through mass protests calling for improved economic, political, and living conditions. Human rights activist Moncef Mazouki served as intern president until Beji Caid Essebsi was elected president under the new constitution.

Culture

Islam heavily influences daily life, social attitudes, and local culture. Various regional ancient, medieval, and contemporary civilizations have affected the evolution of Tunisian culture, including Phoenicians, Romans, Vandals, Arabs, Turks, Spanish, and French, all of whom have left their legacy behind in ruins and historical sites. Theater, art, cinema, education, festivals, and architecture are all proud national traditions. Mediterranean and Arab foods and dishes are common and are particularly noted for their use of olives, spices, couscous, and eggs.[2] Tunisia is one of the most progressive Arab states and ranks among Muslim countries with the lowest fertility rates. Unlike many Arab nations, Tunisia has outlawed the practice of polygamy. Cigarette consumption rates are among the highest in the Muslim world, whereas alcohol consumption rates are extremely low.

Economy

GDP per capita: $11,900 (2017) [20.0% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.725

Corruption Index: 42 (2017)

Economic growth has been a persistent challenge for Tunisia due to problems with terrorism that negatively affect tourism, high youth unemployment, and worker strikes. Economic problems and hardships in the 2000s helped spark the Tunisian Revolution in 2011. The government has currently focused on increasing foreign investment to accelerate economic growth. Services employ approximately half the labor force and generate 64% of the GDP, whereas industry employs a third of the labor force and generates 36% of the GDP. Major industries include oil, mining, tourism, textiles, and food processing. Agriculture employs 15% of the labor force and generates 10% of the GDP. Common agricultural crops and goods include olives, olive oil, grain, fruit, sugar beets, dates, almonds, beef, and dairy products. France, Italy, and Germany are the primary trade partners.

Tunisia is perceived as the least corrupt North African nation, but corruption is still an issue, especially with petty corruption and brutality among law enforcement. Instances of corruption in government are difficult to prove.[3] There has been little improvement in reducing perceived corruption in Tunisia since the 2011 Tunisian Revolution.

Faiths

Muslim: 99%

Christian/Jewish/other: 1%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Catholic – 5,000

Evangelicals – 500

Russian Orthodox – 100

Seventh Day Adventists – 47

Latter-day Saints – less than 20

Religion

Muslims account for all but approximately one percent of the national population, with the remainder of the population primarily following Christianity. Catholic leaders estimate that there are fewer than 5,000 Catholics dispersed throughout the country. There are approximately 2,000 Protestants, which primarily includes the French Reform, Anglican, and Seventh Day Adventist Churches. There are one hundred Russian Orthodox Christians. Arab-Tunisian Christian converts number in the hundreds. Half of Jehovah's Witnesses in the country are native Tunisians. [4] There are approximately 1,400 Jews, most of whom live on the island of Djerba and in the town of Zarzis.[5] These Jewish communities have maintained a presence for 2,500 years.

Religious Freedom

The constitution protects religious freedom and grants the right for individuals to practice their respective religion if they maintain public order. The constitution declares that Tunisia is a civil state although it describes the country's religion as Islam and identifies the government as the "guardian of religion." Salafists are targeted by government officials due to suspected terrorist ties to radical Islam. Christian and Jewish communities are permitted to worship in government-approved houses of worship. However, the government restricts Christian activities outside of churches or public religious services. To register with the government, a religious group must submit the names of its Tunisian-citizen founders, signed copies of the articles of association, and a letter that outlines the purpose of the organization. Members of the Baha'i faith report restrictions on their ability to practice their faith. Few societal violations of religious freedom have been recently reported.[6]

Largest Cities

Urban: 68.9%

Tunis, Sfax, Sousse, Ettadhamen-Mnihla, Kairouan, Bizerte, Gabès, La Soukra, Ariana, Sidi Hassine, Mohamedia-Fouchana, El Mourouj.

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

None of the twelve largest cities has an LDS congregation. Twenty percent (20%) of the national population resides in the twelve largest cities.

LDS History

LDS servicemen held worship services in Tunisia during World War II.[7] No permanent Church presence was established, and by 1974, there was only one LDS family residing in Tunis.[8] The BYU Young Ambassadors performed in Tunisia in 1994.[9] Starting in 2000, Tunisia became part of the Europe West Area.[10] In the early and mid-2000s, the Greece Athens Mission administered the Tunis Branch, which appears to be created in the 1980s or 1990s. In the late 2000s, the Middle East/Africa North Area began administering Tunisia. The Tunis Branch appeared to be discontinued sometime in the late 2000s.

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: less than 20 (2018)

LDS membership appears to entirely consist of nonnatives from Europe and the United States temporarily living in the country for vocational purposes.

Congregational Growth

Wards: 0 Branches: 0 Groups: 1? (2018)

A group may operate in Tunis under the supervision of the Middle East/Africa North Area Branch.

Activity and Retention

Active membership is comprised of those who attend private church meetings held at an undisclosed location. Over half of known membership may be active due to higher activity rates in Middle Eastern and Northern African nations among Westerners, often influenced by increased desire for social interaction.

Language Materials

Languages with LDS Scripture: Arabic, French, English.

All LDS scriptures and many church materials are available in Arabic and French.

Meetinghouses

Church services are likely held in a rented space or a member's home.

Humanitarian and Development Work

As of 2018, there had been no known LDS humanitarian or development work in Tunisia.

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

Latter-day Saints do not appear to have any formal recognition or agreements with the government and hold Sunday meetings, if they continue to occur, in a private, undisclosed location. There are no realistic opportunities for the Church to gain an official presence in the foreseeable future due to the lack of religious freedom granted to Christian groups overall, the requirement that Tunisian citizens be listed as founders for religious groups in Tunisia, and few Latter-day Saints. Restrictions on Christian religious activity outside of approved locations prevent the LDS Church from conducting missionary activity in public. Any proselytism efforts would have to occur by member referral. Unlike some Muslim countries, there is no legislation that restricts the right of Muslims to convert to another religion. With recent changes in the constitution, there may be opportunities for humanitarian and development work for the Church if approved by government officials.

Cultural Issues

The homogenous Muslim society of Tunisia creates significant cultural challenges for Latter-day Saints to perform missionary activity. The lack of religious diversity and pluralism fosters negative stereotypes and persecution of non-Muslim religious groups. Potential Latter-day Saint Tunisian converts from the Muslim majority would face significant societal disapproval for leaving their traditional faith and would be ostracized from their communities. Missionary activity targeting foreigners and the small community of Tunisian Christian converts may offer greater breakthroughs in establishing a greater church presence, but their numbers remain few and often difficult to locate due to local Christians keeping a low profile to avoid harassment. High rates of cigarette use among many Tunisians create challenges for prospective missionary activity. The Church has yet to develop Muslims-specific teaching approaches tailored to the religious background and understanding of Muslims in order for the LDS gospel message to be properly understood.

National Outreach

The entire population is unreached by the Church with the possible exception of personal contacts of expatriate Latter-day Saints. If missionary activity occurred in the greater Tunis metropolitan area without proselytism restrictions, as many as one-quarter of the population may be reached. Historical reasons for why Tunisia has not had a greater LDS presence include its homogenous Muslim population, strict government restrictions on Christian groups and religion in general, regulated NGO service projects, and lack of indigenous LDS converts.

France has a large Tunisian community that LDS missionaries can reach, but little has been done to proselyte North Africans in Europe. Few Tunisians have joined or investigated the LDS Church abroad, and many of these individuals do not return back to Tunisia due to lower standards of living, economic challenges, and societal challenges for Christian converts to function in a Muslim society. LDS Internet outreach presents some of the most realistic prospects for the Church to reach Tunisia. Tunisia has the highest rate of internet usage in North Africa. The development of online Arabic proselytism and teaching efforts may be successful to identify self-referred investigators and potential converts.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Member activity rates appear moderate to high among expatriate Latter-day Saints residing in Tunis. Foreign members residing outside the capital and local Tunisian members appear the most susceptible to lower activity rates due to travel distances to congregation meeting locations and societal pressures to conform to the Sunni Muslim majority.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

Arabs and Arab-Berbers constitute the entire population, excluding foreigners. The lack of ethnic diversity creates few ethnic integration problems at church if LDS mission outreach occurs one day. However, the lack of ethnic diversity has contributed to little tolerance for religious minorities.

Language Issues

LDS scriptures and church materials are available in the native language of 99% of the population. Tunisian Arabic varies in many linguistic aspects with standard Arabic and shares many similarities with Maltese, but most the population is proficient in standard Arabic,[11] reducing the need for Tunisian Arabic LDS materials over the medium term. Illiteracy creates challenges for future proselytism initiatives with church literature among approximately twenty percent of the population if such efforts are permitted one day.

Missionary Service

No known members from Tunisia have served full-time missions. No LDS missionary activity has occurred.

Leadership

Potential church leadership may depend on non-Tunisians for many years due to the lack of native members.

Temple

Tunisia pertains to the Frankfurt Germany Temple district. Temple trips are costly and time consuming. Organized temple trips from the sole LDS congregation likely do not occur due to a lack of members. Temple excursions likely occur on an individual basis or with a stake or district in the Middle East/Africa North Area. With the exception of the Rome Italy Temple, no temples appear likely to be built closer to Tunisia in the near future.

Comparative Growth

Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt are the only North African nations with branches or permanent groups that have operated for many years. Egypt appears to be the only nation in North Africa that has historically had some native members attending congregations, whereas there are greater numbers of native Latter-day Saints in the Middle East in Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel. Algeria and Libya appear to have only small groups of Latter-day Saints meeting on an inconsistent basis, if any groups operate at all. No nations in North Africa have an official LDS presence. No Islamic nations in the Middle East or North Africa have proselytizing missionaries.

Some missionary-oriented Christian denominations have gained indigenous converts among former Muslims, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and some Evangelical groups. These groups have only succeeded in creating a small Tunisian Christian community and face challenges with member activity due to societal pressures. Latter-day Saints have no realistic opportunities to perform open missionary work among Muslims due to respect for proselytism bans in Tunisia and a lack of coordinated mission outreach to Tunisians and other North Africans in Europe.

Future Prospects

Government restrictions on Christian activities outside of approved locations, cultural barriers to conversion, a lack of LDS humanitarian and development activities, few Latter-day Saints, and distance from the nearest LDS mission outreach centers create an unfavorable outlook for an official Church establishment in the coming years. Prospects for future mission outreach among the general population will depend on greater numbers of Tunisians abroad joining the Church and returning to their homeland combined with improving religious freedom conditions for Christian groups. Internet-based LDS proselytism efforts among Tunisians may also be effective if conducted in Arabic and tailored to the religious background of Muslims.

[1] “Background Note: Tunisia,” Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, 13 October 2010. http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5439.htm

[2] “Culture of Tunisia,” Wikipedia.org, retrieved 6 December 2010. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture_of_Tunisia

[3] “2008 Human Rights Practices: Tunisia,” 2008 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, 25 February 2009. http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2008/nea/119128.htm

[4] “Tunisia,” International Religious Freedom Report 2010, 17 November 2010. http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148847.htm

[5] “Tunisia,” International Religious Freedom Report 2017. Accessed 13 August 2018. https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dlid=281008#wrapper

[6] “Tunisia,” International Religious Freedom Report 2017. Accessed 13 August 2018. https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dlid=281008#wrapper

[7] Hart, John L. “Faith overcomes evil of World War II, leads to growth worldwide, 19 August 1995. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/25854/Faith-overcomes-evil-of-World-War-II-leads-to-growth-worldwide.html

[8] “Comment,” Ensign, June 1974, 47.

[9] “From around the world,” LDS Church News, 27 August 1994. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/24522/From-around-the-world.html

[10] Lloyd, Scott. “European continent realigned into three new areas,” LDS Church News, 16 September 2000. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/38475/European-continent—-realigned-into-three-new-areas.html

[11] “Tunisian Arabic,” Wikipedia.org, retrieved 6 December 2010. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tunisian_Arabic