

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.



Saudi Arabia

Population: 27.35 millions (#47 out of countries)

By David Stewart and Matt Martinich

Geography

Area: 2,149,690 square km. Saudi Arabia occupies the majority of the Arabian Peninsula and borders Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Yemen, Jordan, Iraq, and Kuwait. The climate is typically hot and dry and experiences temperature extremes as desert covers most of the country. Most areas are uninhabited, and fresh surface water is scarce. Mountains line the coastal areas along the Red Sea, whereas plains or hills occupy the rest of the terrain. Sand and dust storms are natural hazards. Environmental issues include desertification, reliance on ocean water desalination due to limited fresh water resources, pollution, and oil spills. Saudi Arabia is divided into thirteen administrative provinces.

Peoples

Arab: 90%

Afro-Asian: 10%

The majority of the population is Arab. Immigrants constitute 37% of the total population.

Population: 28,571,770 (July 2017)

Annual Growth Rate: 1.45% (2017)

Fertility Rate: 2.09 children born per woman (2017)

Life Expectancy: 73.4 male, 77.7 female (2017)

Languages: Arabic dialects (95%), Rohingya (1.5%), Tagalog (1.4%), Urdu (1.2%), other (1.1%). Reliable recent data on languages spoken by speakers is not available and numbers provided are estimates. Languages with over one million speakers include Arabic dialects (27 million).

Literacy: 94.7% (2015)

History

Many ancient civilizations controlled and influenced modern-day Saudi Arabia prior to the advent of Islam in the early seventh

century. The Prophet Mohammad first preached in Mecca and Medina, where he claims to have begun receiving revelations. Muslims today revere these cities, which contain some of Islam's holiest shrines. By the mid eight century, Islam quickly expanded from the Arabian Peninsula to as far as the Indus River in the east to Spain and Morocco in the west. Other Islamic nations dominated the region for much of the following centuries. Saudi states emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but the present-day state of Saudi Arabia was not founded until 1932 following a unification of most the peninsula. Al Saud came to power of the new nation, and his descendants continue to rule today. Oil was discovered in the 1930s, and today Saudi Arabia has the largest proved oil reserves worldwide. Saudi Arabia greatly cooperated with the international community during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait by Allied forces by allowing troops to deploy from Saudi Arabia to liberate Kuwait and accepting Kuwaiti refugees. United States military forces withdrew in 2003 following pressure from the Saudi public. In recent years, Saudi Arabia has struggled to deal with Islamic extremists committing terrorist acts, its arid environment, and rapidly growing population. In recent years, significant economic, political, and social reforms have occurred such as granting women the right to vote and drive motor vehicles, and diversification of the economy.

Culture

Islam strongly influences everyday living. Cuisine includes cheese, goat, milk, bread, dates, and vegetables. Arabian coffee is the national beverage. Both coffee and tea are frequently and widely consumed. Alcohol and pork products are forbidden by Islam and are not found in Saudi cuisine. The large number of migrant workers has brought a large number of foreign foods and restaurants in recent years. Society is divided between citizens and foreign worker and segregated between men and women. Relations between men and women are supposed to only occur with relatives, and most marriages are arranged by families. Polygamy is legal but not widely practiced. Divorces rates have increased in recent years but are still much lower than Western nations. Smoking rates are comparable to most Arab nations with large numbers of foreigners.

Economy

GDP per capita: $54,800 (2017) [92.1% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.847

Corruption Index: 49 (2017)

Saudi Arabia continues to be dependent on foreign workers to continue economic growth and stability due to the limited training and education of many natives. Foreign workers constitute 78% of the workforce. Government has implemented greater training and education programs for youth in order to curb this problem. Oil drives the economy, as Saudi Arabia is the world's largest oil producer. Oil revenues produce 42% of the GDP and 90% of the export earnings. The government has a strong control of the economy. Low oil prices in the late 2000s and 2010s has slowed economic growth and development projects. The government has recently sought to diversify the economy into new sectors such as in regards to natural gas, pharmaceuticals, telecommunications, and power generation. Industry produces 44% of the GDP but employs 21% of the workforce, whereas services account for 53% of the GDP and employ 72% of the workforce. The unemployment rate was approximately 12% among Saudi nationals in 2017. Important trade partners include China, Japan, the United States, and the United Arab Emirates.

Strict laws, a lack of transparency with government spending, and massive oil revenues have invited allegations of corruption. Many allege police corruption. Corruption levels are average for countries in the Arabian Peninsula.

Faiths

Muslim: 93.0%

Christian: 4.4%

Hindu: 1.1%

Unaffiliated: 0.7%

Buddhist: 0.3%

Other: 0.5%

Christians

Denominations Members Congregations

Catholic – ~1,000,000

Evangelicals – 88,620

Latter-day Saints – 1,500? – 10?

Seventh-Day Adventists – 311

Religion

Although no official percentages are available for religious groups due to government refusal to recognize non-Sunni Muslim groups, 85%–90% of the population is Sunni Muslim. Shi'a Muslims constitute 10%–15% and primarily reside in Eastern Province. Christians and other religious groups appear to make up approximately 5-7% of the population. Millions of Muslims travel to Saudi Arabia for pilgrimages, including the annual Hajj and Umrah, the latter of which can occur at any time during the year.[1]

Religious Freedom

The law does not protect or guarantee religious rights. Government often restricts the rights of citizens and foreigners to assemble and worship. Private worship is allowed for both citizens and foreigners who do not adhere to Sunni Islam. However, those who practice their religious beliefs can be subjected to government harassment. The Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) acts as a religious police to ensure the adherence of the population to Islamic law. The CPVPV has confiscated religious materials from non-Muslims and conducted raids on both illegal non-Sunni Muslim religious meetings and private religious meetings. There has been some recent improvement in allowing non-Muslims to possess personal religious literature. The conversion of Muslims and proselytism can result in the death penalty, although there have been no recent instances where this punishment has been enforced.[2]

Largest Cities

Urban: 84%

Riyadh, Jiddah, Mecca, Medina, Sult,a-nah, Ad Damma-m, At, T,a-'if, Tabu-k, Buraydah, Khami-s Mushayt, Al Hufu-f, Al Mubarraz, Najra-n, Al Jubayl, Abha-, Yanbu' al Bah,r, Al Khubar, 'Ar'ar, Saka-ka-, Ji-za-n, Al Qurayya-t.

Fifty-seven percent (57%) of the national population lives in the twenty-one largest cities.

LDS History

Church members have lived in Saudi Arabia since as early as the 1960s and 1970s. The growing size of Church membership resulted in the creation of a stake for the Arabian Peninsula by Elder Boyd K. Packer in 1983.[3] At the time, all wards in the new stake likely met in Saudi Arabia. During the Persian Gulf War, more than one hundred groups served the needs of LDS military members throughout the Arabian Peninsula. These groups ranged from four to five to 175 attending worship services on Fridays or Sundays.[4] Saudi Arabia was assigned to the Europe/Mediterranean Area in 1991[5] and later was transferred to the Europe Central Area in 2000. In the late 2000s, the Arabian Peninsula Stake was renamed the Manama Bahrain Stake. The stake was renamed the Abu Dhabi Stake and divided to organize the Manama Bahrain District in 2011. The Manama Bahrain District advanced into a stake in 2014.

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: 1,500+ (2018 estimate)

The majority of Church membership in the Arabian Peninsula Stake resided in Saudi Arabia until recently. Membership in the Arabian Peninsula Stake stood at 900 in 2004. By early 2009, membership increased to 1,950.[6] In the past two decades, foreign members have lived in most of the largest cities. Membership is primary from North America, Europe, and the Philippines. In 2018, one in approximately 20,000 appeared to be LDS.

Congregational Growth

Units: ~10 (2018 estimate)

By 2009, sixteen units functioned under the Manama Bahrain Stake: five in the United Arab Emirates, two in Qatar, and one in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Oman. There was an increase of four congregations in 2008. As many as ten congregations may meet in Saudi Arabia in private, undisclosed locations. In 2011, units in Saudi Arabia were reassigned to the newly organized Manama Bahrain District. In 2018, most of the units in the Manama Bahrain Stake were located in Saudi Arabia.

Activity and Retention

The Church is likely aware of only a portion of inactive membership. Some members may live Church teachings but may be unaware of meeting locations or concerned about possible harassment from government officials. Activity rates appear to be around 75% for known nominal membership.

Language Materials

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

All LDS scriptures are available in Arabic, Chinese, Korean, and Tagalog. Book of Mormon translations have been completed for Farsi, Hindi, Telugu, and Urdu; only Book of Mormon selections are available in Bengali. Most Church materials are available in Arabic, Chinese, Korean, 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 and Somali. Gospel Principles, The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith, and the Articles of Faith are translated into Bengali. The only Church materials in Malayalam are Gospel Fundamentals and The Prophet Joseph Smith's Testimony. The Liahona annually has twelve issues in Tagalog, four in Telugu, and three issues in Urdu.

Meetinghouses

Congregations meet in private locations, most of which likely in compounds for foreigners.

Health and Safety

Church members must be very cautious to respect the law and avoid any proselytizing activities.

Humanitarian and Development Work

No church-sponsored humanitarian or development work occurs in Saudi Arabia.

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

The Church faces the challenge of both meeting the needs of its membership living in Saudi Arabia and at the same time keeping and sustaining the law. Strict laws and intolerance of non-Sunni Muslim religious meetings limit the Church's activities. The degree of religious freedom is so low that the Church does not publish information about the locations, names, and times of congregations. Since 2009, the Church has provided through the meetinghouse locator website a contact telephone number for members who relocate to Saudi Arabia from which local contact information can be obtained.[7]

Cultural Issues

Private worship meetings are held in accordance with the day of worship for Muslims on Fridays. The national pride and wide consumption of Arabian coffee pose a challenge for Church members to not offend Saudis offering this beverage. The cosmopolitan atmosphere in larger cities may allow for greater receptivity among non-Muslim groups if bans barring any proselytism are removed. Outreach among the Arab majority would be very challenging even without nonproselytism laws due to the strong influence of Islam on everyday living. The Church has no resources developed to teach individuals from an Islamic religious background if proselytism restrictions were relaxed one day.

National Outreach

The entire population remains unreached by Church mission efforts due to laws forbidding proselytism and intolerance towards minority religious groups.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Due to the Church's sensitive nature, very few, if any, converts have joined the Church. Any converts are likely expatriate foreign Christians rather than native Saudis. Activity rates most likely resemble areas from which members relocated.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

The greatest issue the Church currently faces in integrating ethnic groups is with Westerners and Filipinos. These challenges are primarily socio-economic and language based. Members report positive relations between Latter-day Saints from these two groups. Tagalog-speaking congregations may operate in a couple of the largest cities to address language needs among Filipino members.

Language Issues

The high diversity in language among the foreign population complicates meeting language needs for both members and investigators. However a large number of foreigners likely speak English proficiently as a second language and can be integrated into congregations where native English speakers are in the majority and also staff most of the leadership. Importation of scriptures and Church materials for members and sincere investigators is a major challenge, as proselytism is illegal.

Leadership

The amount of Church leadership and level of member activity is comparable to most areas in the United States. The strength and resilience of local membership is manifest by the functioning of stake for the Arabian Peninsula for more than thirty years. Most active members and leaders in the Manama Bahrain Stake reside in Saudi Arabia.

Temple

Saudi Arabia is assigned to the Frankfort Germany Temple district. Temple trips likely occur regularly through the Manama Bahrain Stake, but the 3,000 mile journey requires large sacrifice in time and money. A temple built in nearby United Arab Emirates would reduce challenges faced by members to attend the temple regularly.

Comparative Growth

Saudi Arabia ranks among nations with least degree of religious freedom for the Church. Other nations with comparable restrictions include Iran and Syria. Even China and Egypt offer considerably more freedom of worship and assembly and tolerate some member-missionary outreach. The size of Church membership and number of congregations in Saudi Arabia has surpassed all other Middle Eastern Nations for several decades. Some Middle Eastern nations have had a Church presence for many decades but have not seen multiple congregations organized like Saudi Arabia, including Egypt, Kuwait, and Bahrain. There does not appear to be any native membership base in Saudi Arabia whereas Jordan, Syria, and Israel have some congregations with native members outnumbering foreigners and leading congregations.

Christians view Saudi Arabia as the nation where religious freedom is most restricted. Most Christian groups do not report specifics concerning their activities, membership or congregations.

Future Prospects

Severely restricted religious freedom, the transient foreign population, and some cultural practices and customs produce challenging conditions for future growth. The presence of congregations for foreign expatriate LDS members does not appear to have any bearing on the development of native Saudi membership, which for the medium-term future appears unattainable. The Saudi government may limit foreign workers in order to reduce unemployment among natives, which could reduce the number of LDS members. Potential does exist for multiple congregations in the largest cities, particularly for Filipinos, due to challenges on holding private worship meetings and language issues.

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