

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.



Palestine (West Bank and Gaza Strip)

Population: 0 millions (#314 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 6,220 square km (West Bank: 5,860 square km, Gaza Strip: 360 square km). The Palestinian territories comprise the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The West Bank borders Jordan and Israel whereas the Gaza Strip borders Israel, Egypt, and the Mediterranean Sea. Rugged hills and highlands subject to temperate climate occupy most of the landlocked West Bank. The Jordan River marks the Jordanian border on the east, and the city of Jerusalem is divided between the West Bank and Israel. Sandy, flat coastal plains and sand dunes occupy the Gaza Strip. Droughts are a natural hazard. Environmental issues include fresh water scarcity, proper sewage disposal, desertification, salination of fresh water, and soil degradation. Israel occupies both the West Bank and Gaza Strip, portions of which are governed by the Palestinian Authority and Hamas.

Peoples

West Bank: Palestinian Arab/other (83%), Jewish (17%)

Gaza Strip: Palestinian Arab (100%)

Palestinian Arabs constitute the majority in the West Bank; most resided within the confines of the West Bank before the establishment of the state of Israel. Palestinian refugees and Jewish settlers constitute the primary minority groups. The population of Gaza Strip is homogenously Palestinian Arab, most of whom are the descendants of refugees from present-day Israel.

Population: West Bank: 2,747,943; Gaza Strip: 1,795,183 (July 2017)

Annual Growth Rate: West Bank: 1.84%, Gaza Strip: 2.33% (2017)

Fertility Rate: West Bank: 3.27, Gaza Strip: 4.13 (2017)

Life Expectancy: West Bank: 73.2 male, 77.4 female; Gaza Strip: 72.5 male, 75.9 female (2017)

Languages: Arabic [primarily Levantine dialect] (84%), Hebrew (15%), other (1%). Only Arabic has over one million speakers (3.8 million).

Literacy: 97% (2015)

History

Semitic-speaking peoples populated present-day Palestinian territories from antiquity. During Biblical times, the West Bank was populated by the Israelites and was governed by the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, whereas the Gaza Strip was ruled by Philistine city states. Various ancient civilizations successively ruled or invaded the region, including Egyptians, Persians, Romans, Byzantines, and Arabs. Various Christian crusader states were established in Palestine during the middle ages but were eventually overrun. Several Arab kingdoms occupied Palestine until the region was integrated into the Ottoman Empire. Jews began to immigrate to Palestine during the nineteenth century, and by 1917, the British took control under the British Mandate of Palestine. Palestinian Arabs began violently opposing Jewish immigration and settlement during this period and declared war against Israel immediately following Israel's declaration of independence. The West Bank came under Jordanian administration, and the Gaza strip came under Egyptian administration from 1948 until 1967 when both territories were annexed by Israel during the Six Days War. Beginning in 1993, Israel began transferring greater autonomy and self-rule to the Palestinian Authority (PA), later renamed the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), for some Palestinian-populated areas of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Progress establishing a sovereign, independent Palestinian state came to a halt in 2000 through a Palestinian uprising known as the Second Intifada, which lasted until 2005. Consisting of the United States, the European Union, the United Nations, and Russia, the Quartet proposed a plan granting the establishment of a democratic Palestinian state to peacefully coexist with Israel in 2003. Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat died in 2004, and Mahmud Abbas become president of the PA in 2005. Later that year, Israel agreed to withdraw its military and settlers from the Gaza Strip and from four settlements in the northern West Bank. In 2006, Hamas took control of the Palestinian Legislative Council, which precipitated into a violent takeover of the Gaza Strip by the Hamas-backed National Unity Government in 2007. Abbas relocated the Palestinian Authority to the West Bank, which is led today by Rami Hamdallah. At present, Hamas continues to control the Gaza Strip, whereas the PNA governs the West Bank. Efforts by Egypt to reconcile differences between the two Palestinian governments have not come to fruition. During the first half of 2008, intense fighting between Hamas and the Israeli military in the Gaza Strip left over one thousand Palestinians dead and damaged housing and infrastructure in the Gaza Strip. No progress toward the establishment of a democratic Palestinian state has occurred in recent years, as Palestinian leaders have refused to begin negotiations with Israel until Israeli settlement activity ceases in Jerusalem and the West Bank. Israel continues to control much of the airspace and sea access for the Gaza Strip, and reconstruction efforts in the Gaza Strip remain slow.

Culture

Palestine shares many cultural similarities with neighboring Levantine nations regarding religion, history, society, economics, and politics. Traditional Christian groups and the Muslim majority have peacefully coexisted for centuries. Hamas has enforced strict observance of a radical interpretation of Islam in the Gaza Strip. Poetry, folklore, and art are proud Palestinian traditions. Egyptian and Lebanese foods are commonly found among Palestinian cuisine, such as fish, olive oil, cheese, citrus, and taboon bread. Polygamy is permitted in both the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Economy

GDP per capita: $4,300 (2014) [7.86% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.686 (2017)

Corruption Index: N/A

Political instability and Israeli movement and access restrictions continue to pose significant barriers for economic growth and development. The economy in the West Bank remains fragile. The unemployment rate in 2017 was 26.7% for the West Bank and 26.7% for the Gaza Strip. The Gaza Strip remains isolated from the international community and is unable to regularly ship exports due to an Israeli blockade initiated after the takeover of the government in the Gaza Strip by Hamas. Natural resources include arable land and natural gas. Poverty in both the West Bank and Gaza Strip is a major concern. Major industries include textiles, food processing, manufacturing, and quarrying. Olives, fruit, and vegetables are common crops.

Corruption is perceived as severe and widespread. Black market economic activity occurs under the Egyptian border, including weapons trafficking. The situation continues to appear poor with no indication of improvements in reducing corruption in either the West Bank or Gaza Strip.

Faiths

Muslim: 90%

Jewish: 9%

Christian: 1%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Orthodox – 50,000

Catholic – 20,000

Evangelicals – 4,116

Jehovah's Witnesses – 83 – 2

Latter-day Saints – 30? – 1

Seventh-Day Adventist – 0

Religion

Palestinians are approximately 98% Sunni Muslim. The most recent government estimates for the number of Christians in Palestine was 50,000 in the West Bank and 1,000 in the Gaza Strip. Many West Bank Christians reside in East Jerusalem, Ramallah, Nablus, and Bethlehem. Most Christians are Greek Orthodox. The number of Christians in Palestine continues to precipitously decline due to emigration and low birth rates.[1]

Religious Freedom

Persecution Index: 36th (2018)

The Palestinian Authority uses the Palestinian Basic Law as a temporary constitution. Islam is the state religion, and legislation is derived from Shari'a law, but the Basic Law prohibits religious discrimination and protects religious freedom as long as religious practices do not interfere with morality and public order. Christian churches attain one of three statuses of government recognition from the Palestinian Authority. Traditional Christian denominations that made special agreements with Ottoman authorities in addition to Episcopal and Evangelical Lutheran Churches are legally recognized and may hold ecclesiastical courts on personal and property matters. Protestant churches that were established between the late nineteenth century and 1967 have unwritten agreements with the Palestinian Authority, can perform some legal functions like issuing marriage certificates, and operate freely. The third status pertains to missionary-focused Christian groups that have no formal agreements with the government but generally operate without restrictions. The government requires religious teaching in public schools tailored to Muslim and Christian students.[2] Religious groups are not permitted to openly proselyte. The Israeli government restricts the movement of people across borders with Israel, resulting in many being unable to visit holy sites or travel for religious purposes. Despite the strict interpretation of Islam enforced among Muslims by Hamas in the Gaza Strip, Christian are generally allowed to practice without harassment.[3] Societal tensions are highest between Jews and the non-Jewish population.

Largest Cities

Urban: 76.2% (2018)

Gaza, Jerusalem (Al-Quds), Khan Yunus, Jabalyah, Rafah, Al-Khalil, Nabulus, An-Nusayrat, Beit Lahia, Nuseirat.

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

None of the ten largest cities have a Church congregation. Forty-six percent (46%) of the population resides in the ten most populous cities.

Church History

Apostle Elder Orson Hyde traveled to Palestine and dedicated the Holy Land on October 24th, 1841 for the gathering of the Jews.[4] Organized first to serve Armenians in the Near East, the Palestine/Syrian Mission operated from 1933–1939 and

1947–1951. One of the mission presidents in the 1930s was Armenian, but the mission closed, and the branches were discontinued during World War II. A mission in Switzerland administered Palestine in the 1970s. There has been no formal Church presence in the West Bank or Gaza Strip since the mid-twentieth century. Palestine has been assigned to the Middle East/Africa North Area since 2008. In recent years, the few Latter-day Saints in the West Bank have experienced significant challenges worshiping with members in Israel proper and have been isolated due to border regulations. The Bethlehem Branch was organized in the early 2010s to provide closer church services to Palestinian Latter-day Saints.

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: less than 30 (2018)

There were at least three Latter-day Saints in Bethlehem in late 2009. There may be additional members in some other locations. There used to be a couple known members in the Gaza Strip although it is unclear whether these members continue to live there. Essentially all members are Arab Palestinians who joined the Church in other countries, and all appear to live in the West Bank. Church membership in Palestine has only grown once Palestinians join the Church abroad and return to their homeland. In recent years, there has been no measurable membership growth. Child of record baptisms are likely not permitted in Palestine due to current policies.

Congregational Growth

Wards: 0 Branches: 1 (2018)

In 2009, a group was organized in Bethlehem but appeared to operate on an irregular basis due to few members. The Bethlehem Branch was organized in the early 2010s and currently pertains to the Jerusalem District.

Activity and Retention

As many as 50-75% of Latter-day Saints in the West Bank may be practicing despite their limited numbers. However, there are likely converts who joined the Church elsewhere and returned to the West Bank, and whose whereabouts are currently unknown.

Language Materials

Languages with LDS Scripture: Arabic.

All Church scriptures and most church materials are translated into standard Arabic.

Meetinghouses

The Bethlehem Branch meets in a small rented facility.

Health and Safety

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues to pose a safety threat due to terrorism and extremist groups targeting Christians that proselyte. Access to healthcare is extremely poor in the Gaza Strip.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church has conducted numerous humanitarian and development work projects recently in Palestine in association with other nongovernment organizations. As of 2017, the Church had conducted 121 humanitarian and development projects since 1985.[5] In both the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the Church has donated hygiene kits, dry milk, school kits, newborn kits, blankets, orphanage modules, and wheelchairs. The Church also provided neonatal resuscitation training in Gaza, Nablus, and Ramallah. Aid has also specifically been delivered to the needy in East Jerusalem.[6]

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

The Church's agreement with the Israeli government to refrain from proselytism totally prohibits missionary activity in the West Bank and Gaza Strip as Israel occupies the territory. Any missionary work, even among family members, is not permitted by the Church in order to respect the agreement made with the Israeli government. The establishment of a sovereign, independent Palestine together with a reduction in Palestinian-Israeli tension may improve prospects for missionary activity at least on a member-referral basis one day. Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip at present has not realistic prospects of a Church presence due to violent extremism, poor living conditions, a lack of Latter-day Saints, and the strict adherence of the government to Islamic Sharia law.

Cultural Issues

Societal tolerance of Christians is a major opportunity for Latter-day Saints to establish a church presence and perform missionary activity on a member referral basis if the Church changes its policy regarding proselytism in Israeli-controlled areas. Most the population has demonstrated low receptivity to Christian missionary groups, and prospective converts face many societal challenges, which may include ostracism from family and the community and harassment. Those engaged in polygamy desiring baptism in the Church must end these relations in divorce and be interviewed by a member of the area presidency for approval. Continued humanitarian and development work may increase awareness of the Church and foster positive public opinions.

National Outreach

Palestine remains entirely unreached by missionary efforts. Local members are advised by church leaders to not share the gospel with friends or family to respect the Church's agreement with the Israeli government. The sole congregation in Bethlehem would reach less than 1% of the Palestinian population if missionary activity occurred due to the city's small population. Concentrating future missionary efforts and expanding national outreach among communities of Christian Palestinians one day may be more productive than among the general Muslim population. However, current Church policy appears unlikely to change to enable any type of overt missionary efforts. Low birth rates and high rates of emigration pose challenges developing self-sufficiency and permanent mission outreach centers.

The Internet has been a useful tool in introducing Arab Muslims in the Middle East to the Church's beliefs, primarily through unofficial websites run by Arab members. The Church publishes no meeting times or locations for Palestine as its presence is classified as sensitive. Individuals desiring to meet with church representatives or attend church meetings who are unaware of the operation of the Bethlehem Branch would most likely have to contact church leadership in Israel. Telephone contact information for branch presidents in Israel is available on the meetinghouse locator website. There are comparatively few Arabic language materials on the Church's official website.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Many, if not most, of the known Latter-day Saints residing in the West Bank are active. Moderate to high member activity rates appear linked to the high degree of devotion exemplified by converts to overcome societal challenges and the enduring personal desire to live church teachings. Isolation from membership in Israel through strict border regulations and limited contact with area church leadership pose challenges for members to attend church meetings and live gospel teachings. Diligent home teachers in the Jerusalem Branch visited Arab Palestinian families in Bethlehem in 2009 to offer encouragement, teaching, and support, as they were unable to cross over the Israeli border to attend church meetings in Jerusalem prior to the creation of the Bethlehem Branch.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

Ethnically Jewish converts may face challenges integrating into Palestinian-majority congregations if a more widespread church presence is established one day and Jewish settlers remain in the West Bank.

Language Issues

Widespread use of Arabic reduces challenges for the Church to meet multiple language needs. Some accommodation for Hebrew-speakers may be necessary if a widespread presence is established in the West Bank or if Jewish settlers are more receptive than Arab Palestinians if the Church conducts proselytism one day. Only the sacrament prayers and some hymns are translated into Hebrew. The Church has retracted some Hebrew translations out of concern that these materials may be viewed as efforts by the Church to engage in proselytism efforts in Israeli-controlled areas.

Missionary Service

Perhaps only one or two Palestinians have served full-time missions, and no missionary activity has occurred in Palestine since

the mid-twentieth century.

Leadership

The Bethlehem Branch is dependent on foreign members, usually American who live in Israel, to meet its executive leadership needs. Palestinian membership remains too limited in numbers and leadership experience to serve in a branch president position.

Temple

Palestine is assigned to the Bern Switzerland Temple district. No organized temple trips occur from Palestine. Border regulations, travel expenses, and long distances challenge local members to attend the temple. Prospects for a closer small temple in the United Arab Emirates may materialize for the sparse, remote Latter-day Saint population in the region over the medium term.

Comparative Growth

Palestine has achieved some progress developing a small, local community of Latter-day Saints, but their numbers remain insufficient to organize more than one branch. Only Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey have well-established, native Latter-day Saint communities that provide local leadership able to sustain branches without foreigner support. Palestine ranks among the few Middle Eastern nations that have had multiple converts residing in their homelands in recent years; other nations include Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey.

Missionary-minded Christian groups have a small presence in Palestine. Most gain few new converts. Unstable political conditions, risk of violence, and cultural obstacles surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have limited the outreach and activity of proselytizing Christians.

Future Prospects

The establishment of the Bethlehem Branch in the early 2010s marked a significant development in the development of the Church in Palestine. However, prospects appear dim for future growth within the foreseeable future as this branch functions only to meet the ecclesiastical needs of members. Current Church policies regarding missionary activity in Israeli-controlled areas of the Holy Land prohibit any proselytism activities, including among family and friends, and may even prevent children of record baptisms out of respect for the Church's agreement with the Israeli government. High rates of emigration threaten the long-term sustainability of the tiny Church community in Bethlehem and may result in its disappearance before an official church presence can be established. Humanitarian and development projects carried out by the Church have alleviated suffering and may secure a positive relationship with the Palestinian Authority when leaders determine to establish an official presence. However, such a presence appears only likely to be established if a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can be reached and implemented.

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