



## ISRAEL: Country Dossier

June 2018



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research Unit

June 2018 / 2

[research@od.org](mailto:research@od.org)

[www.opendoorsanalytical.org](http://www.opendoorsanalytical.org)

# World Watch List 2018

		1. Private Life	2. Family Life	3. Community Life	4. National Life	5. Church Life	6. Violence	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2018	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2017	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2016	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2015	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2014
Rank	Country	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.6	94	92	92	92	90
2	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	10.0	93	89	88	81	78
3	Somalia	16.0	16.2	16.1	16.3	16.4	10.4	91	91	87	90	80
4	Sudan	14.2	14.5	14.3	15.6	16.0	12.0	87	87	84	80	73
5	Pakistan	14.4	13.5	13.8	15.0	13.1	16.7	86	88	87	79	77
6	Eritrea	15.2	14.5	15.8	16.1	15.2	9.4	86	82	89	79	72
7	Libya	15.2	15.3	14.2	15.7	15.5	10.4	86	78	79	76	71
8	Iraq	14.7	14.7	14.9	14.9	15.1	11.3	86	86	90	86	78
9	Yemen	16.7	16.6	16.4	16.5	16.7	2.6	85	85	78	73	74
10	Iran	14.0	14.1	14.5	15.8	16.4	10.0	85	85	83	80	77
11	India	12.6	12.7	13.2	14.7	12.9	14.4	81	73	68	62	55
12	Saudi Arabia	14.9	13.7	14.2	15.5	16.4	4.1	79	76	76	77	78
13	Maldives	15.2	15.5	13.5	15.8	16.7	1.1	78	76	76	78	77
14	Nigeria	11.8	11.5	13.1	12.1	12.1	16.5	77	78	78	78	70
15	Syria	14.4	14.3	14.1	14.5	14.7	3.7	76	86	87	83	79
16	Uzbekistan	15.5	12.1	13.0	13.1	16.0	3.5	73	71	70	69	68
17	Egypt	11.3	12.8	12.2	11.7	9.5	12.4	70	65	64	61	61
18	Vietnam	12.4	8.4	12.7	14.2	13.8	7.4	69	71	66	68	65
19	Turkmenistan	15.2	10.3	12.9	12.8	15.2	1.9	68	67	66	63	62
20	Laos	12.9	8.6	13.6	13.9	14.9	3.5	67	64	58	58	62
21	Jordan	13.2	13.3	11.5	10.9	13.0	4.3	66	63	59	56	56
22	Tajikistan	13.3	11.3	11.8	11.8	12.9	4.3	65	58	58	50	47
23	Malaysia	12.0	14.9	12.8	12.4	9.3	3.9	65	60	58	55	49
24	Myanmar	11.6	11.1	13.2	10.4	11.0	7.8	65	62	62	60	59
25	Nepal	12.6	11.9	10.7	11.5	12.4	4.6	64		(not in WWL)		
26	Brunei	14.3	14.2	10.7	10.2	13.5	0.9	64	64	61	58	57
27	Qatar	13.4	12.9	11.7	11.3	14.1	0.0	63	66	65	64	63
28	Kazakhstan	12.8	10.0	10.2	12.2	13.7	3.7	63	56	55	51	49
29	Ethiopia	9.8	10.0	10.8	10.9	10.5	10.4	62	64	67	61	65
30	Tunisia	11.9	13.2	10.6	10.7	12.0	3.9	62	61	58	55	55
31	Turkey	12.5	9.7	9.8	11.7	9.6	8.7	62	57	55	52	(not in WWL)
32	Kenya	12.0	10.9	10.0	7.9	11.7	9.4	62	68	68	63	48
33	Bhutan	11.9	11.6	12.4	11.4	13.1	1.1	62	61	56	56	54
34	Kuwait	13.4	12.6	11.6	10.9	12.3	0.4	61	57	56	49	50
35	Central African Republic	9.0	8.1	10.1	8.9	8.8	16.1	61	58	59	67	67
36	Palestinian Territories	12.1	12.8	10.7	10.5	12.6	1.1	60	64	62	58	53
37	Mali	11.4	9.6	11.2	8.1	9.2	9.6	59	59	55	52	54
38	Indonesia	10.3	11.0	11.5	10.0	9.3	6.9	59	55	55	50	46
39	Mexico	8.3	7.6	12.1	10.7	9.7	10.4	59	57	56	55	(not in WWL)
40	United Arab Emirates	13.6	12.2	10.0	10.4	11.8	0.2	58	55	55	49	51
41	Bangladesh	10.4	8.8	11.4	9.6	7.5	10.0	58	63	57	51	46
42	Algeria	12.3	13.1	7.5	10.4	12.4	2.0	58	58	56	55	54
43	China	9.2	7.2	8.0	10.7	13.3	9.1	57	57	57	57	51
44	Sri Lanka	11.1	7.6	10.5	11.3	10.1	6.9	57	55	(not in WWL)	51	55
45	Azerbaijan	13.1	9.1	9.3	11.1	12.4	2.4	57	(not in WWL)	57	50	(not in WWL)
46	Oman	12.1	12.2	9.9	9.4	12.6	1.1	57	53	53	55	56
47	Mauritania	11.5	11.3	11.1	12.2	11.0	0.0	57	55	(not in WWL)	50	51
48	Bahrain	12.9	13.1	10.2	9.9	10.3	0.2	57	54	54	(not in WWL)	48
49	Colombia	7.9	7.6	11.9	8.6	8.5	11.9	56	53	55	55	56
50	Djibouti	12.2	12.2	10.3	9.9	11.7	0.0	56	57	58	60	46

## WWL 2018 Persecution Watch Countries<sup>1</sup>

		1. Private Life	2. Family Life	3. Community Life	4. National Life	5. Church Life	6. Violence	TOTAL SCORE WWL 2018
Rank	Country	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score	Score
51	Comoros	11.7	11.5	9.1	9.4	13.9	0.4	56
52	Kyrgyzstan	11.7	9.5	10.0	8.1	11.6	2.8	54
53	Tanzania	10.1	10.3	10.1	9.5	9.0	3.9	53
54	Russian Federation	11.1	8.4	10.1	8.9	10.7	2.0	51
55	Morocco	10.4	11.5	7.6	8.8	12.0	0.6	51
56	Cuba	8.5	4.9	10.7	10.4	12.2	2.4	49
57	Uganda	10.9	8.7	9.5	8.7	4.8	3.9	46
58	Niger	9.9	9.7	9.0	7.0	7.1	2.6	45

<sup>1</sup> These countries reached a score of 41 points or more but did not receive enough points to be included in the WWL Top 50.

# ISRAEL – Country Dossier (June 2018)

**No copyright** - This report is the property of World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge WWR as the source.

## Contents

World Watch List 2018.....	1
Introduction .....	2
WWL 2018: Keys to understanding ISRAEL.....	3
WWL 2018: Church History and Facts.....	5
WWL 2018: Short & Simple Persecution Profile .....	8
WWL 2018: Persecution Dynamics .....	9
WWR in-depth reports.....	17
Open Doors article(s) from the region.....	17
World Watch Monitor news articles.....	17
Recent country developments.....	19

## Introduction

This country report is a collation of documents based around [Open Doors World Watch List \(WWL\)](#)<sup>1</sup> including statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations, and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database ([WCD](#))<sup>2</sup>. Further news and analysis is supplied by [World Watch Monitor](#)<sup>3</sup> and WWR staff.

ISRAEL		
World Watch List	Score	Rank
WWL 2018	No published details	-
WWL 2017	No published details	-
WWL 2016	No published details	-
WWL 2015	No published details	-
WWL 2014	No published details	-

<sup>1</sup> See: <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/>

<sup>2</sup> WCD website: <http://www.brill.com/publications/online-resources/world-christian-database>

<sup>3</sup> See: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/>

# WWL 2018: Keys to understanding ISRAEL

## Link for general background information:

BBC country profile: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14628835>

## Recent country history

The State of Israel was founded in 1948 to serve as a homeland for Jewish people, many of whom were survivors of the Holocaust (in Hebrew: *Shoah*, 'catastrophe'). The establishment of the world's only majority Jewish country was opposed by inhabitant Palestinians and neighboring Arab countries, leading to continued conflict and a series of regional wars. Tensions and conflicts continue to flare up between the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli government over land rights and managing the coexistence of Israel and the Palestinian Territories. Among the political and military challenges for the industrially developed country are the threat of war from Iran and constant danger from terrorists, within and outside of the country. A potentially positive economic development is the discovery of large oil and gas fields under the Mediterranean, though this is also leading to tensions over ownership with Lebanon.

## The religious landscape

According to World Christian Database, around 71.9 % of the population is Jewish, around 20.1% Muslim and around 2.2% Christian. Approximately 0.78% adhere to Hindu, Buddhist or Chinese folk religions, around 0.16 % are Bahai and around 4.9% are Atheists, Agnostics or New religionists. The CIA World Factbook mentions there are 1.6% Druze in Israel. Most of the non-Jewish citizens are of Arab background.

According to Pew Research Center, a large part of the Jewish Israeli adults (49%) identify themselves as [non-religious](#)<sup>4</sup>, 29% as 'traditional', 13% as 'religious' or 'modern Orthodox', and 9% as 'ultra-Orthodox/Haredi'. Among them there is also a group of around [15,000 Messianic Jews](#)<sup>5</sup>, according to US Department of State IRF Report 2016. Bedouin Muslim communities are mostly located in the Negev, in the south of the country whereas many majority Muslim, Druze and Christian communities are concentrated in the Galilee region in the north. There are almost 100,000 foreign workers (both legal and undocumented) among whom there are Christians, Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims.

Politically, the growth of the Jewish right wing has resulted in fears among the Arab population (including Christians) of an increase in discrimination and racism. Religiously, a growing number of Muslims from Israel have joined Islamic State group (IS) forces abroad. This has created doubts in the hearts of many Christians about their Muslim neighbors, and whether they can trust them or not.

<sup>4</sup> See: <http://www.pewforum.org/2016/03/08/israels-religiously-divided-society/>, last accessed 21 February 2018.

<sup>5</sup> See: <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>, last accessed 21 February 2018.

## The political landscape

Israel has no formal constitution, but a Basic Law which characterizes the country as a “Jewish and democratic state” and refers to the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel, which guarantees freedom of religion and conscience and full social and political equality, disregarding religious background<sup>6</sup>. Unlike in many Western democracies, there is no separation of religion and state.

Israel is a parliamentary democracy where “top executive power is exercised by the Cabinet of Ministers, legislative power by the Knesset, and law interpretation overseen by a judicial selection committee.”<sup>7</sup> The Israeli government is comprised of the president, the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. Its head is the president, who only fulfills a ceremonial role. The head of the executive branch is the prime minister who also leads a multi-party system.

Israel has many political parties. These can be grouped together in five blocs: the Zionist party blocs, composed of right, left and centrist wings. Two other blocs represent minority groups: the non-Zionist Ultra-Orthodox bloc and the anti-Zionist Arab bloc. In the current Knesset, right wing parties form the largest block, followed by the left, the center block and finally the Ultra-Orthodox and Arab blocs. Though the Ultra-Orthodox parties form a minority, they have relatively great influence as the right wing block needs them to form a majority. Their influence is mainly felt on state policy regarding issues of religion in the public sphere. Parliamentary elections were last held in March 2015 and the next elections are set for November 2019 but considering corruption scandals affecting Prime Minister Netanyahu they will most likely be held earlier.

## The socio-economic landscape

In the past four decades Israel has gone through incredible development at all levels, bringing it up to Western European standard. Israel has a technologically advanced free market economy. However, decreasing domestic and international demand (including lower levels of investment due to the uncertain security situation) have recently led to reduced GDP growth.

Having depended heavily on coal production in the past, the discovery of large natural gas and oil fields off Israel’s coast since 2009 are a welcome development. A concern for many Israeli citizens are the high housing prices and income inequality. Israel’s income inequality and poverty rates are very high compared to Western countries. Another long-term concern is the low labor participation by the countries’ fastest growing social segments - the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish and the Arab Israeli populations.<sup>8</sup>

Socially and economically, Christians are in a good position. Most of them belong to the middle class and above. This is explained by the high percentage of educated Christians. However, this is a double-edged sword, since this fact makes it easy for some of them to leave the country and find jobs elsewhere in the world.

<sup>6</sup> See: <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>, last accessed 20 February 2018.

<sup>7</sup> See: <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/what-type-of-government-does-israel-have.html> last accessed 20 February 2018.

<sup>8</sup> See: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/is.html>, last accessed 20 February 2018.

## Concluding remarks

In general there is a high level of freedom of religion in Israel, especially compared to other Middle Eastern countries. Most of the violations of religious freedom that do occur are caused by radical individuals or small groups of religious militants. A difficulty within the wider Church in Israel is the fact that it finds itself in a context of intractable conflict. The historical narratives surrounding the formation of the State 'collide', causing a lot of tension between the Messianic community and the Arab Christian community.

Though most Muslim and Jewish Israelis generally hold moderate or even secular convictions, local Christians observe a radicalization among smaller sections of society. There were a number of Muslims from Israel who joined IS and, on a political level, the influence of the Jewish right wing is increasing. Consequently, some Arab Christians have difficulty trusting their Muslim neighbors and fear higher levels of discrimination resulting from Jewish right wing politics.

## WWL 2018: Church History and Facts

### How many Christians?

Pop 2017	Christians	Chr%
8,323,000	183,000	2.2

Source: WCD, May 2017

### How did Christians get there?

Jesus Christ's ministry, death and resurrection all occurred in the context of the first century Roman occupation of Israel/Palestine and Christians have been living in Israel ever since. "Christianity grew from a 1st century Jewish sect to a religion across the entire Greco-Roman world. ... There was intense periodic persecution of Christians. The persecution of Christians by the Roman Empire ended in 324 CE when Constantine the Great decreed tolerance for Christianity."<sup>9</sup> Israel was transformed into a Christian holy land and Christianity would dominate there until the 7th century, when Islam took over.

In the 11th century, brutal Latin crusaders invaded and the ensuing crusades brought with them the Roman Catholic Church. Several groups of Eastern Christians entered into communion with Rome during and after the crusader period. Their rule lasted until the end of the 13th century when Muslims recaptured large parts of the land. For the next centuries Israel/Palestine would be under different Islamic rulers. The Islamic Ottoman Turks ruled from the sixteenth century to World War I, when they were defeated by the allied powers.

<sup>9</sup> See: <http://www.israelandyou.com/christianity/>, last accessed 19 February 2018.

According to historical experts, the Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch split in the early eighteenth century. (...) “Western Churches of reformed tradition came into the Middle East in the nineteenth century. American Presbyterian missionaries worked in Egypt, Lebanon and other parts of the region. The Church of England and the Prussian Lutheran Church jointly set up a bishopric in Jerusalem in 1841. It came to an end in the early 1880s, and separate Anglican and Lutheran bishoprics were set up towards the end of the decade. The original purpose was to convert Jews to Christianity. In that aim it largely failed, but attracted a small number of existing Christians, mostly Orthodox or Greek Catholic, in what is now Israel, the Occupied Territories and Jordan.”<sup>10</sup> When the state of Israel was established in 1948, a very small group of Jewish believers in Jesus was left in the land. Those of them who spread the gospel were treated with hostility, especially as the Holocaust was generally perceived to be committed by Christians. The number of Messianic believers grew particularly after two waves of revivals, in the seventies and the nineties. The Christian population in Israel further increased during past few decades with the immigration of foreign workers and accompanying non-Jewish spouses in mixed marriages.

## What church networks exist today? <sup>11</sup>

Orthodox	Catholic	Protestant	Independent	Unaffiliated	Double-aff	Evangelical	Renewalist
41,300	117,000	15,200	32,600	6,100	-29,000	26,000	41,700

Source: WCD, May 2017

According to the World Christian Database (WCD), the main denominations are the Roman Catholic Church (numbering 117,000), followed by churches of the Orthodox tradition (numbering 41,300).

### Historical Christian communities:

Most of the Christians in Israel are Arabs and belong to the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions. Their members face restrictions and hostilities such as cuts in Christian school funding, "Price Tag" attacks and also social and economic pressure from Muslims in certain areas. In villages where Christian live as small minority, Christian businesses are facing an unofficial economic boycott by local Muslims. Some pressure and intermittent violence can also come from neighboring mosques - e.g. in Nazareth.

<sup>10</sup> See: *A History of Christianity in the Middle East and North Africa*, Jerusalem and Middle East Church association, last accessed 20 June 2017.

<sup>11</sup> **Orthodox:** Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world’s 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Believers who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelicals:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalists:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal movements.

### Communities of converts to Christianity:

Christian converts can be from a Muslim, Druze, historical Christian or Ultra-Orthodox Jewish background. Most opposition comes from the convert's family and community. Converts with a Jewish background experience opposition mostly in a few majority Ultra-Orthodox Jewish areas, especially in the forms of harassment and vandalism. Christians with a Muslim background face most problems in the north (Galilee) which is predominantly Islamic. It is worth noting that the opposition they experience is more moderate in these majority Islamic areas than in the rest of the Middle East. Israeli law provides legal means for prosecuting violators of religious freedom and this greatly influences the way people interact. There will be legal repercussions for religiously motivated violence or discrimination (e.g. honor killings as a result of conversion to other religions). Finally there is some opposition from Christians belonging to Historical Christian Communities if members 'convert' to non-traditional Christian denominations.

### Non-traditional Christian communities:

Non-traditional Protestant churches (such as Evangelicals and Pentecostals) are not officially recognized by the government as "religious communities", which makes it impossible for them to carry out marriages, burials and other religious rites. Non-traditional Christian groups are often known for their evangelistic activities. Though not illegal, these need to be done in a discrete way in Israel. It is legally prohibited for adults to evangelize youth younger than 18 years old. Also, in majority Jewish or Islamic areas, evangelism will not be accepted by its inhabitants. Foreign non-traditional Protestants have been refused entry into Israel because of involvement in missionary activities in the country.

## Religious context (selection)

Christian	Muslim	Hindu	Buddhist	Ethno-religionist	Jewish	Bahai	Atheist & others <sup>12</sup>
183,000	1,669,000	420	33,200	31,200	5,983,000	13,100	410,300

Source: WCD, May 2017

According to WCD estimates 71.9 % of the population is Jewish, 20.1% Muslim and 2.2% Christian. Around 4.9% are Atheists, Agnostics or New religionists. Israel is a melting pot of cultures and nationalities. According to the CIA World Fact book, 76.3% of all Jewish inhabitants were Israeli born, whereas 16.2% were born in Europe, America or Oceania. Those born in Africa comprise 4.8% and those born in Asia 2.7%<sup>13</sup>. The largest non-Jewish ethnic group is Arab.

## Notes on the current situation

- There was no significant change in the treatment of Christians during the WWL 2018 reporting period compared to the WWL 2017 reporting period.

<sup>12</sup> This category includes Atheists, Agnostics and New religionists.

<sup>13</sup> See: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/is.html>, last accessed 19 February 2018.



- The number of Christians is increasing slowly, particularly among Messianic congregations and among communities of Christians with a Muslim background, but on the whole the relative percentage of Christians is decreasing slightly. The reason for this is the low birth-rate in Christian families compared to Muslims and Jews.
- Christians face challenges coming from living as a minority among two major groups: Jews and Muslims. As a minority they face a dilemma: Especially among Arab Christian youth there is a yearning to belong, but they are unsure of where or how. If Arab nationalism fails because of the growth of radical Islam and Zionism cannot make room for them, they lack a sense of belonging which increases the desire to emigrate.

## WWL 2018: Short & Simple Persecution Profile

**Reporting period:** 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

### Where persecution comes from

Opposition and harassment can come from violent religious groups, such as Ultra-Orthodox Jewish (UOJ) organizations (e.g. Yad Le Achim) or individuals who consider Messianic (Jesus believing) Jews traitors and no longer Jews. Other potential sources of oppression are UOJ and Islamic leaders who occasionally speak out and incite violence specifically against Messianic Jews and converts from Islam to Christianity. Government officials and institutions can contribute to an environment that allows for discrimination or harassment, primarily of Messianic Jews, though they rarely get involved directly.

### How Christians are suffering

Generally, there is a relatively low level of specifically faith-related violence against Christians in Israel. Since 2012 Ultra-Orthodox Jews have vandalized Christian-owned property out of a mixture of political and religious motivation. These acts are condemned by the majority of the Jewish community. In some majority UOJ areas, demonstrations are held regularly in front of buildings where Messianic Jews gather for worship, sometimes leading to damage. The number of these attacks have decreased since 2016. Several Messianic Jews who want to immigrate to Israel have been refused residency permits, based on their faith in Jesus as Messiah. Many court cases have been fought (and won) to nullify these illegal measures. In some cases their citizenship was revoked after immigration. Many denominations, mostly non-traditional churches, are not officially recognized by the government as “religious communities”, giving them less basic rights in matters like marriage, burial and other religious issues. Also, for the last three years the Ministry of Education has cut financial support to Christian church-owned schools considerably. As a result, they report experiencing pressure to change their status to become state schools, so risking losing their independency and - as some fear - their identity as Christian schools.

## Examples

- An activist with the Ultra-Orthodox Chabad organization burned copies of the New Testament and pictures of prominent Israeli Messianic leaders Eitan Bar and Moti Vaknin in a traditional pre-Passover bonfire and posted pictures of this on his Facebook profile.
- There were four cases registered of vandalizing of churches or Christian cemeteries. Five cases of physical or mental abuse were registered. Orthodox Jewish protesters caused damage to the houses of a Messianic leader and a member of the congregation in May 2017, frightening the children inside the houses extremely. They later received trauma counselling<sup>1415</sup>.
- In June 2017, Orthodox Jews assaulted two participants in a Christian gathering in Jerusalem.<sup>16</sup>

## WWL 2018: Persecution Dynamics

**Reporting period:** 1 November 2016 - 31 October 2017

### Contents

Position on World Watch List (WWL).....	9
Persecution engines .....	10
Drivers of persecution.....	11
Context .....	12
Christian communities and how they are affected .....	13
Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence .....	14
Gender profile of persecution.....	16
Future outlook.....	16
Policy considerations.....	16

### Position on World Watch List (WWL)

Score and rank is not available. Opposition and harassment comes mostly from violent religious groups, such as Ultra-Orthodox Jewish (UOJ) organizations or individuals, UOJ and Islamic leaders who occasionally speak out and incite violence specifically against Messianic

<sup>14</sup> Middle East Concern Periodic Report January – April 2017

<sup>15</sup> Middle East Concern Periodic Report May – August 2017

<sup>16</sup> Middle East Concern Periodic Report May – August 2017

Jews and converts from Islam to Christianity. During WWL 2018, four churches or Christian cemeteries were vandalized and five cases of physical or mental abuse were registered.

## Persecution engines

Persecution engines in Israel <sup>17</sup>	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	Medium
Religious nationalism	Strong
Ethnic antagonism	Medium
Denominational protectionism	Weak
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Not at all
Secular intolerance	Weak
Dictatorial paranoia	Weak
Organized corruption and crime	Not at all

### Religious nationalism (Strong):

In the last few years, the government in Israel has been trying to emphasize the Jewish character of the state of Israel. According to Palestinian citizens of Israel, including Christians, this makes them feel like second class citizens. Orthodox Judaism has significant political strength in that it usually forms the balance of power between the competing larger secular parties. Within the coalition governments, UOJ political parties ask for control of the 'less important' ministries – i.e. not defense, foreign affairs, or finance – but rather the ministries for interior affairs or education; through these positions they can control much of population's daily lives. Apart from secular Israelis, this primarily affects Messianic Jews - Jews who believe in Jesus - ensuring they are not legally recognized as a community and where possible are harassed or discriminated against.

### Islamic oppression (Medium):

Some 20% of the Israeli population is Muslim; although the Islamic religious leaders are influential locally, they do not seem to have much discernable clout in society at large. Their influence is primarily felt amongst Christians in Arab towns and regions, and particularly in those localities - such as Nazareth - that had been predominantly Christian. Especially in Arab cities and villages where Muslims form a majority, they try to impose an Islamic culture. This might cause local Christians to send their children to Christian schools, which as private schools are more expensive than public schools or put them in schools outside their towns if such schools are not available.

### Ethnic antagonism (Medium):

Both in majority Arab and Orthodox Jewish areas of the country strong cultural or tribal norms can be found which affect the way people live and dress and what they eat or drink. This can have an influence on Christians living in the same area and mostly affects Christians with an Islamic or Orthodox Jewish background.

<sup>17</sup> The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines and Drivers in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong.

## Drivers of persecution

Drivers of persecution in Israel	Level of influence
Government officials at any level from local to national	Medium
Ethnic group leaders	Weak
Non-Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Medium
Christian religious leaders at any level from local to national	Weak
Violent religious groups	Medium
Ideological pressure groups	Not at all
Normal citizens (people from the general public), including mobs	Very weak
Own (extended) family	Weak
Political parties at any level from local to national	Weak
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Not at all
Organized crime cartels or networks	Not at all
Multilateral organizations (e.g. UN) and embassies	Not at all

### Government officials at any level from local to national

Although government officials and institutions are known to contribute to an environment that allows for harassment, primarily of Messianic Jews, they rarely get involved directly. This environment gives space for non-governmental organizations to operate, including Ultra-Orthodox Jewish organizations. Although this is one of the primary areas of harassment, there have been fewer reported cases of NGO-related violence in the past year.

Several Messianic Jews who want to make Aliya – a term referring to the immigration of Jews to Israel - have been refused residency permits due to their faith in Jesus the Messiah. Many court cases have been fought (and won) to nullify these illegal measures. In some cases their citizenship was revoked after immigration.

Many denominations, mostly non-traditional Protestant churches, are not officially recognized by the government as “religious communities”, giving them less basic rights in matters like marriage, burial and other religious issues. Also, for the last three years the Ministry of Education cut financial support to Christian church-owned schools considerably. As a result, the schools are now experiencing pressure to change their status to become state schools, so risking losing their independency as Christian schools.

### Non-Christian religious leaders

Orthodox Jewish leaders occasionally speak out and incite violence specifically against Messianic Jews. Islamic leaders have done the same against converts from Islam to Christianity.

### Violent religious groups

Generally, there is a relatively low level of specifically faith-related violence against Christians in Israel. Nevertheless, there have been acts of vandalism against Christian owned property since 2012. These attacks are called ‘Price Tags’ and concern a mixture of politically and

religiously-motivated vandalism. They are mostly carried out by Ultra-Orthodox Jews in protest against Arab terrorist attacks or the destruction of Jewish settlers' homes in the West Bank as part of Israeli government policies. These acts of vandalism are condemned by the majority of the Jewish community and some of the perpetrators have been arrested.

Examples of religious militancy can be seen in the activities of Ultra-Orthodox Jewish (UOJ) organizations (e.g. Yad Le Achim) or individuals who consider Messianic (Jesus believing) Jews traitors and no longer Jews. In some majority UOJ areas, demonstrations are held regularly in front of buildings where Messianic Jews gather for worship, sometimes leading to damage. Other forms of harassment are spreading libel, spitting at church leaders, painting of anti-Christian slogans on churches and monasteries. Although top Israeli political leaders have condemned these assaults and Israeli police have established a special unit to crack down on those responsible, this has led to little success in catching culprits so far. Nevertheless, the number of attacks have decreased since 2016 and there have been hardly any high profile incidents during the WWL 2018 reporting period.

## Context

The State of Israel was founded in 1948 to serve as a homeland for Jewish people, many of whom were survivors of the Holocaust (in Hebrew: *Shoah*, 'catastrophe'). The establishment of the world's only majority Jewish country was opposed by inhabitant Palestinians and neighboring Arab countries, leading to continued conflict and a series of regional wars. Tensions and conflicts continue to flare up between the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli government over land rights and managing the coexistence of Israel and the Palestinian Territories. Among the political and military challenges for the industrially developed country are the threat of war from Iran and constant danger from terrorists, within and outside of the country. A potentially positive economic development is the discovery of large oil and gas fields under the Mediterranean though this is also leading to political tensions over ownership with Lebanon.

In general there is a high level of freedom of religion in Israel, especially compared to other Middle Eastern countries. Most of the violations of religious freedom that do occur are caused by individuals or small groups of religious militants. A difficulty within the wider Church in Israel is the fact that it is itself in a context of intractable conflict. The historical narratives surrounding the formation of the State 'collide', causing a lot of tension between the Messianic community and the Arab Christian community. Religious minorities other than Christians who can face marginalization for reasons of faith are: Jehovah's Witnesses and progressive streams within Judaism like Reformed and Conservative Jews.<sup>18</sup> Both religious communities are not recognized by the government and therefore lack certain benefits including having separate courts for their religion's personal status law, but are free to practice their faith.

---

<sup>18</sup> Reformed and Conservative Judaism are non-Orthodox, progressive streams within the Jewish religion. The Chief Rabbinate strongly opposes these movements and accuses them of assimilation.

## Christian communities and how they are affected

### **Communities of expatriate Christians:**

Expatriate Christians have not been counted as a separate category in WWL analysis as they do not function as an involuntarily isolated group in Israel.

### **Historical Christian communities:**

Most of the Christians in Israel are Arabs and belong to the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. Their members face restrictions and hostilities such as cuts in Christian school funding, "Price Tag" attacks and also social and economic pressure from Muslims in certain areas. In villages where Christians live as a small minority, Christian businesses are facing an unofficial economic boycott by local Muslims. Some pressure and intermittent violence can also come from neighboring mosques - e.g. in Nazareth.

### **Communities of converts to Christianity:**

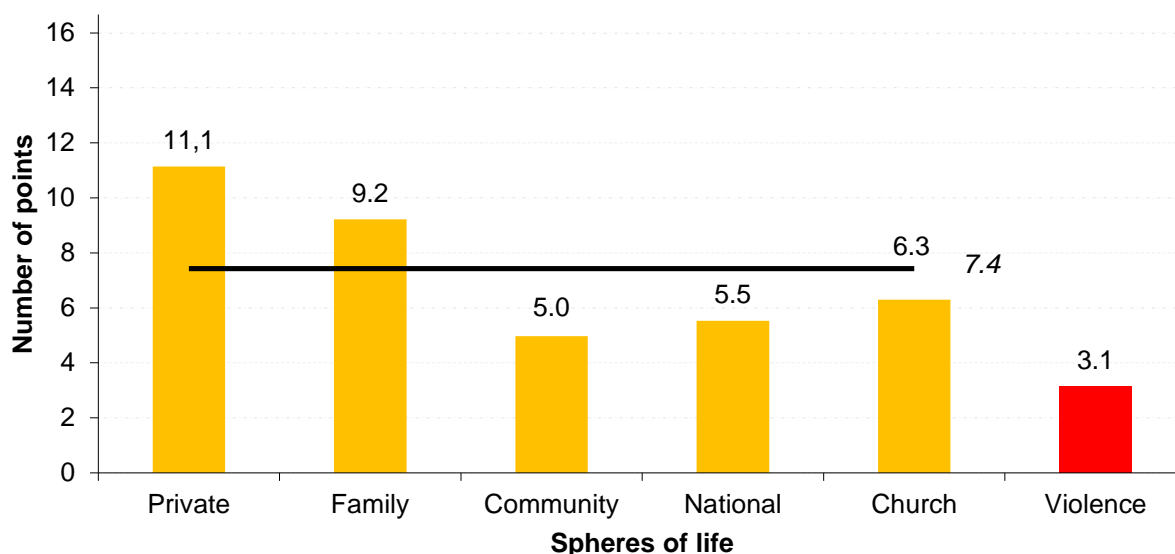
Christian converts can be from a Muslim, Druze, historical Christian or Ultra-Orthodox Jewish background. Most opposition comes from the convert's family and community. Converts with a Jewish background experience opposition mostly in a few majority Ultra-Orthodox Jewish areas, especially in terms of harassment and vandalism. Christians with a Muslim background face most problems in the north (Galilee) which is predominantly Islamic. It is worth noting that the opposition they experience is more moderate in these majority Islamic areas than in the rest of the Middle East. Israeli law provides legal means for prosecuting violators of religious freedom and this greatly influences the way people interact. There will be legal repercussions for religiously motivated violence or discrimination (e.g. honor killings as a result of conversion to other religions). Finally there is some opposition from Christians belonging to Historical Christian Communities if members 'convert' to non-traditional Christian denominations.

### **Non-traditional Christian communities:**

Non-traditional Protestant churches (such as Evangelicals and Pentecostals) are not officially recognized by the government as "religious communities", which makes it impossible for them to carry out marriages, burials and other religious rites. Non-traditional Christian groups are often known for their evangelistic activities. Though not illegal, these need to be done in a discrete way in Israel. It is legally prohibited for adults to evangelize youth younger than 18 years old. Also, in majority Jewish or Islamic areas, evangelism will not be accepted by its inhabitants. Foreign non-traditional Protestants have been refused entry into Israel because of involvement in missionary activities in the country.

## Pressure in the 5 spheres of life and violence

### WWL 2018 Persecution Pattern for Israel



(The maximum score for each block is 16.7)

The WWL 2018 Persecution pattern for Israel shows:

- The average pressure on Christians in the WWL 2018 reporting period is 7.4 points, comparable to WWL 2017.
- Pressure is strongest in the *Private* and *Family spheres of life*, which is characteristic for the persecution of converts (both from a Jewish or Muslim background).
- The score for violence is 3.1 and higher than in WWL 2017 due to two more cases of vandalism of churches and Christian cemeteries, five cases of physical and mental abuse and two cases of damage to the houses of a messianic congregation leader and member

#### Private sphere:

Converts in particular experience problems practicing their faith in their private lives (e.g. when sharing their faith). The level of resistance and opposition converts experience depends on their family's religious background. For example, a convert from Islam (or even a Catholic Arab converting to Evangelicalism) can experience various forms of violent persecution (even death); while an Orthodox Jew accepting Jesus as the Messiah can be disowned and shunned, and can be beaten or even receive death threats on rare occasions.

#### Family sphere:

An individual convert can face problems in his family situation, but a family of converts usually has quite some freedom, especially in terms of civil affairs, e.g. religious registration.

Due to family pressure, converts from Islam are forced to marry under Islamic rites. A convert from Islam and a Christian wanting to get married will experience difficulties, especially when the bride is a former Muslim. According to Islamic law, Muslim women are not allowed to

marry non-Muslims and a convert from Islam is often still considered to be a Muslim though it is possible in Israel to legally change religion.

Anyone with a Jewish background can marry within Judaism without any problem. However, if it is known that (one of) a couple belongs to a Messianic group, they cannot get married 'under the chuppa' – which is the way Jews get married. Interfaith marriages (e.g. between a Jew and someone belonging to another religion) cannot take place in Israel. Israel's marriage registration system is a heritage from the Ottoman Empire. Civil marriages are not possible, only religious authorities like the Orthodox-controlled Chief Rabbinate, mosques and churches have the power to issue marriage certificates. Marriages carried out by non-traditional denominations, such as Evangelical churches are not recognized. Where both husband and wife have a Muslim background, they often cannot openly raise their children as Christians due to possible negative reactions from family and community. In majority Islamic or Orthodox Jewish communities, children from convert families can be harassed because of their parents' Christian faith.

#### **Community sphere:**

The religious background of the communities determines the measure of hostility towards converts. Converts within Arab communities generally run a higher risk of violence than those within Orthodox Jewish communities. Both experience opposition, but these are two very different worlds with very different ways of exerting pressure. Opposition mostly comes in the form of discriminating against converts (both of Muslim and Jewish backgrounds), for instance in the work-place.

#### **National sphere:**

For converts, there is a relatively large measure of freedom when interacting with officials, e.g. registering a change in religious identity, child rearing etc.. The score is low in this *Sphere of life* since religious freedom is protected in Israeli basic law, which is comparable to the Constitution. However, visas for foreign Christian workers are limited in number and length of stay. Christians have been refused entrance to Israel or were forced to leave the country because of their involvement in missionary or political activities. Messianic Jews have experienced difficulties while applying for Aliya (immigration of Jews to Israel) after revealing their faith in Jesus Christ. As a result, several Messianic Jews have not been allowed to immigrate to Israel. In some cases their citizenship was revoked after immigration. There have been court cases against these decisions and in most cases they have turned out beneficially for the Messianic Jews involved.

#### **Church sphere:**

In the few majority UOJ areas in the south, especially Ashdod and Arad, there can be problems for Messianic Jews gathering for worship or other Christian activities (e.g. evangelizing). The same is true for meetings and activities of converts from Islam in majority Islamic areas, like in the north of Israel. Openly integrating converts (whether from Islam, Druze or Ultra-Orthodox Jewish background) can have repercussions for the pastors involved as they are considered responsible for the converts' change of faith. Finally, many denominations, mostly non-traditional Christian communities, are not officially recognized by the government as "religious



communities”, giving them less basic rights in matters like marriage, burial and other religious issues.

### **Violence:**

Generally, there is a relatively low level of specifically faith-related violence against Christians in Israel. Nevertheless, there have been acts of vandalism against Christian property since 2012 and these have continued in 2016 and 2017, though their numbers are low. Acts of vandalism took place in two Christian cemeteries, both in north Israel in December 2016 and July 2017<sup>19</sup>. Two churches were damaged, one in an arson attack through a burning tyre and the other through offensive graffiti in March and April 2017<sup>20</sup>. Five cases of physical and mental abuse were registered. Orthodox Jewish protesters broke windows and caused other damage to the houses of a Messianic congregation elder and a member of the congregation in May 2017. The children inside the houses were extremely frightened and later received trauma counselling<sup>21</sup>. Finally, in June 2017, Orthodox Jews assaulted two attendants of a Christian gathering in Jerusalem.<sup>22</sup>

## Gender profile of persecution

**Female / Male:** No data currently available.

## Future outlook

The Economist Intelligence Unit summarizes the main recent developments and its expectations for Israel as follows: “The right-wing religious coalition government of the prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, is facing policy and personality clashes and questions over Mr Netanyahu's conduct, which will lead to an early election prior to the 2019 date. Israeli-Palestinian tensions will persist in 2018-22. Israel-US ties will remain strong under a Trump presidency. Real GDP growth will stay high, helped by strong global demand and natural gas investments, dipping in 2020 as external demand slows, before picking up.”<sup>23</sup>

Also, tensions are on the increase between Israel on the one hand and Lebanon and Syria on the other due to Iranian influence and military activity in the latter two countries. Some analysts expect war is imminent, though all parties say they prefer to avoid this. These tensions affect the entire population, including Christians and can contribute to an increase of religious and ethnic divisions to which Christians, as a minority, are additionally vulnerable.

## Policy considerations

Currently under review.

<sup>19</sup> Middle East Concern, Case Listing 2016 and Middle East Concern Periodic Report January – April 2017

<sup>20</sup> Middle East Concern Periodic Report January – April 2017

<sup>21</sup> Middle East Concern Periodic Report May – August 2017

<sup>22</sup> Middle East Concern Periodic Report May – August 2017

<sup>23</sup> See: <http://country.eiu.com/Israel>, last accessed 19 February 2018.

## WWR in-depth reports

There are currently no in-depth reports on Israel available at:  
<http://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/> (password: freedom).

## Open Doors article(s) from the region

There are currently no Open Doors articles on Israel available at:  
<http://opendoorsanalytical.org/articles/> (password freedom).

## World Watch Monitor news articles

Up-to-date articles are available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/israel/>

- Jerusalem Patriarch says settlers are pushing Christians out of Old City  
4 May 2018  
The most senior Christian leader in the Holy Land has accused hardline Jewish settlers of trying to intimidate clergy in Jerusalem's Old City and acquire church-owned property in an attempt to weaken the Christians' presence there.
- Christians in Gaza fear the arrival of Islamic State  
11 April 2018  
Reports that militants of the self-proclaimed Islamic State have entered the Gaza Strip through Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula have created fear among local Christians.
- Palestinian father who lost daughter: 'Don't be pro-Palestinian or pro-Israel, be pro-justice'  
5 April 2018  
Saadeh studied aerospace engineering in the US and could have stayed there. His decision to return turned out to be costly. In March 2003, during another Palestinian uprising, the Second Intifada, Israeli soldiers opened fire on their car as they travelled to the supermarket.
- Israel: closure of Christianity's 'holiest site' an 'alarm signal'  
9 March 2018  
Last week's closure of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem – Christianity's 'holiest site' – was not just a protest over perceived government intervention; it was an "alarm signal" over the future of the city, according to a church spokesperson.

- [Israel: Christianity's 'holiest site' re-opens after tax dispute](#)  
28 February 2018  
The doors to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem were re-opened on 28 February (after three days of closure) after plans to tax church property in Jerusalem were suspended.
- [Jerusalem church leaders object to municipal tax levy](#)  
16 February 2018  
The Jerusalem municipality has announced that churches in the city need to start paying municipal taxes, but church leaders have objected, saying they already “invest billions”.
- [Do Christians really 'thrive' in Israel?](#)  
26 January 2018  
Protests in the southern Israeli town of Dimona have flared up again, two weeks after a meeting centre for Messianic Jews re-opened its doors. The centre was closed in May 2017 following violent protests by ultra-Orthodox Jews and attacks on the homes of church leaders.
- [A Middle Eastern Christian's view of Pence's agenda](#)  
22 January 2018  
A Jordanian Christian trauma counsellor has urged US Vice President Mike Pence to recognise Palestinian statehood to make good his pledge to help Christians in the Middle East.
- [Pence's plans to help Middle East Christians overshadowed by political storm](#)  
19 January 2018  
US Vice President Mike Pence's postponed trip to the Middle East goes ahead this weekend amid myriad tensions after protests erupted at US-President Donald Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.
- [Trump's Jerusalem move rejected by Arab Christian leaders, who fear backlash](#)  
11 December 2017  
A group of 13 Jerusalem-based leaders of Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican and Lutheran Churches wrote an open letter (dated 6 December 2017) to Trump, warning of “hatred, conflict, violence and suffering in Jerusalem and the Holy Land” if the US moved away from recognising the current international status of the city.
- [Israel: Messianic congregation reports abuse from Orthodox Jews](#)  
12 September 2017  
At the end of August the Messianic group, Hasdey Yeshua, were meeting in a warehouse when 20-30 members of the ultra-Orthodox group, Gur Hassadim, arrived and started swearing and shouting religious slogans.

- [Israel resettling Eritrean refugees in 3rd country](#)  
29 November 2016  
Eritreans seeking asylum in Israel are being given the option of resettling in a third country, often Uganda and Rwanda, says Al Jazeera. But both Uganda and Rwanda say they have not given refugee status to any refugees arriving from Israel.

## Recent country developments

Up-to-date articles are available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=ISRAEL> (password: freedom).

- [Israel/Palestinian Territories: Peace-process jeopardized?](#)  
22 February 2018  
As reported by CNN on 22 January 2018, US-Vice President Mike Pence was planning a trip to the Middle East before US-President Donald Trump made the official announcement on 6 December 2017 that the USA will recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.
- [Israel/West Bank: Catholic church vandalized for third time in four years](#)  
6 November 2017  
St. Stephen's Catholic Church, which is part of the Beit Jimal Monastery in Beit Shemesh near Jerusalem, has been vandalized for the third time in four years.
- [Israel/Palestinian Territories: Christians show understanding for al-Aqsa protests](#)  
21 August 2017  
Among a delegation of Palestinian church and community leaders who went to the al-Aqsa mosque to express their support for opposition to newly installed security measures were the Greek-Orthodox Archbishop Hanna Atallah, Roman Catholic priest Jamal Khader and Lutheran pastor Mitri Raheb.

[Return to top of document](#)