

Christians in the Middle East

Christians comprise a little more than two percent of the population of [Israel](#). Christians are free to practice their faith and have full and unfettered access to their holy sites. Christians, like Jews and [Muslims](#), also have their own bodies to decide matters of personal status, such as marriage and divorce, and control their religious shrines.

The treatment of Christians in the rest of the Middle East, however, is a completely different story.

During [Islamic rule](#) in the Middle East, non-Muslims usually had a choice between death and conversion, but Jews and Christians, who adhered to the Scriptures, were considered protected peoples — [dhimmis](#) — under Islamic law. This “protection” did little, however, to insure that Jews and Christians were treated well by the Muslims. On the contrary, the dhimmi, being an infidel, had to acknowledge the superiority of the true believer — the Muslim.

The inferior status of Christians was reinforced through a series of regulations that governed the behavior of the dhimmi. For example, dhimmis, on pain of death, were forbidden to mock or criticize the [Koran](#), [Islam](#) or [Muhammad](#), to proselytize among Muslims, or to touch a Muslim woman (though a Muslim man could take a non-Muslim as a wife).

By the twentieth century, the status of the dhimmi in Muslim lands had not significantly improved. A British diplomat observed in 1909: “The attitude of the Muslims toward the Christians and the Jews is that of a master towards slaves, whom he treats with a certain lordly tolerance so long as they keep their place. Any sign of pretension to equality is promptly repressed.”

Today, Israel is the only place in the Middle East where Christians face no restrictions on the practice of their faith. The only time in modern history that [Jerusalem](#) has been free and accessible to all has been since Israel assumed control in 1967.

During [Jordan’s occupation of Jerusalem](#) from 1948 to 1967, limited numbers of Israeli Christians were grudgingly permitted to briefly visit the [Old City](#) and [Bethlehem](#) at Christmas and Easter. Laws imposed strict government control on Christian schools, and the requirements that the Koran be taught. Because of these repressive policies, many Christians emigrated from Jerusalem. Their numbers declined from 25,000 in 1949 to less than 13,000 in June 1967.

Radical Islamists target not only Jews, but Christians, who they also view as impediments to their goal of reconstituting the Islamic empire. In [Saudi Arabia](#), for example, all citizens must be Muslims and it is illegal to import, print or own Christian religious materials.

The Palestinian territories have been especially inhospitable to Christians, and the community has steadily declined from 15 of the Arab population in 1950 to less than 2 percent today. [Bethlehem](#) and [Nazareth](#), which once had overwhelming Christian majorities, now are dominated by the Muslim population. Bethlehem Christians have complained of raids by a neighboring Muslim Bedouin tribe and the purchase of lands in their

neighborhoods by Muslim Hebronites that is liable to further marginalize them in their own enclave. They are particularly troubled by the Islamization of public life in the Bethlehem area and by the imposition of Muslim codes of conduct, especially regarding women.

Given present trends, few, if any, Christians may be living in these cities in another decade.

Palestinian authorities in the West Bank have assumed political supervision of the Church of the Nativity and other key Christian sites. Palestinian converts to Christianity have been harassed and Christian cemeteries desecrated. The *London Times* reported in 1997, long before the current wave of violence, that life in Bethlehem under Palestinian rule had become “insufferable for many members of the dwindling Christian minorities.”

The only Arab country that had a significant Christian presence in the last century was [Lebanon](#), where Christians once were a majority. A combination of civil war, Muslim oppression, and Syrian aggression has led to the deaths of thousands of Christians and the emigration of thousands more. Today, fewer than one million Christians live in Lebanon.

Roughly 6 percent of the population of [Egypt](#) is Christian, mostly from the Coptic Orthodox Church. Islam is the official state religion, however, and many laws and customs favor Muslims. It is nearly impossible to restore or build new churches, Christians are frequently ostracized, and Muslims are prohibited from converting to Christianity. Despite dozens of mob assaults and attacks on Christian homes, villages and towns in Egypt each year, no Muslim to date has been convicted for the crimes. One such incident in Naga Hamadi, on January 6, 2010, involved a drive-by shooting on a crowd of Christians leaving a Coptic Christmas service. The massacre killed seven and left 26 seriously wounded. During the Arab Spring Revolution from January 2011 through new years of 2012, the Coptic Christians came under brutal attacks by Muslims and whatever minor protection they had been afforded by the government was completely destroyed. Many churches were burned down and people assaulted.

In Iran, "the printing of Christian literature is illegal, converts from Islam are liable to be killed, and most evangelical churches must function underground." Christians are not allowed to testify in an Islamic court when a Muslim is involved and they are discriminated against in employment.