

Freedom of Worship in Israel

As a country in the Middle East committed to the free practice of religion for all, regardless of religious affiliation, Israel stands as an oasis of religious freedom in the Middle East.

The Israeli government supports religious services for communities of all faiths. That includes funding Korans and the operating costs for more than 100 mosques as well as the salaries of Muslim religious leaders; serving as a safe haven for minorities persecuted in surrounding countries; allowing citizens of any religion to hold political office; and paying for the upkeep of holy sites for all religions.

Israel's Declaration of Independence, issued in 1948, describes the country as a Jewish state but clearly extends religious freedoms to all of its inhabitants by stating that the State of Israel "will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions."

Since the reunification of the city of Jerusalem in 1967, Israel has granted access to holy sites of all faiths and has restored and rebuilt Christian, Jewish and Muslim holy sites.

Israeli law allows people of all faiths access to the country's myriad holy sites, regardless of religious affiliation, within Israel. Anyone who attempts to hinder this right is subject to criminal prosecution and imprisonment for as many as five years.

The Protection of Holy Places Law of 1967 also states that anyone who vandalizes a holy site could suffer legal consequences.

The law states: "Whoever does anything that is likely to violate the freedom of access of the members of the various religions to the places sacred to them is liable to imprisonment for a term of five years." Exceptions have been made during Jewish holidays and after terrorist attacks when the government is forced to impose restrictions because of security threats.

By contrast, between 1949 and 1967, when Jordan controlled the holy sites, all Israelis were forbidden from entering East Jerusalem, including the Old City under Jordanian rule, holy sites and Jewish cemeteries within East Jerusalem were desecrated.

Upon gaining control of all of Jerusalem in 1967, Israel immediately opened the area to people of all faiths so that they would be free to worship at their respective holy sites without threat of violence or persecution.

Jews in Israel

Israel is the only country in the world where the majority of the citizens are Jewish. The Jewish spectrum in Israel ranges from those who regard themselves as secular, or non-observant, to those who are ultra-Orthodox, or observant.

Jerusalem, the capital of the state of Israel, is the holiest city in Judaism and is home to many of the religion's sacred sites including the Western Wall, the Temple Mount and the Tomb of David.

Muslims in Israel

Israel's Muslim population consists primarily of about 1.4 million Sunni Arabs, who mostly live in northern Israel. Circassians and Bedouins are members of Israel's Muslim sector.

The Temple Mount in Jerusalem, which contains the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque, is Islam's third-holiest site.

Other notable sites include the El-Jazzar mosque in Acre and the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron in the West Bank, referred to historically as Judea and Samaria, which could become part of a future Palestinian state. Israel funds more than 100 mosques and pays the salaries of their imams (religious leaders). In addition, Israel purchases the Korans used in mosques. The Israeli government also funds Arab schools as well as numerous Islamic schools and colleges. Arab-operated schools teach Islamic studies and Arabic, in addition to the Israel Ministry of Education's general curriculum.

Christians in Israel

Israel is home to the holiest sites in Christianity, including the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, where Jesus was crucified and resurrected, the Basilica of Annunciation in the Galilee town of Nazareth, in northern Israel, the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, in the West Bank, the Room of the Last Supper and the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem, the Sea of Galilee in northern Israel, and the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, revered in Judaism, Islam and Christianity.

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Ministry of Foreign Affairs

www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFAArchive/2000_2009/2001/8/Freedom%20of%20Religion%20in%20Israel

Jerusalem Institute for Israel studies

www.jiis.org/.upload/freedom%20of%20religion%20in%20gerusalem.pdf

UN

www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,USDOS,,ISR,,4cf2d0905,0.html