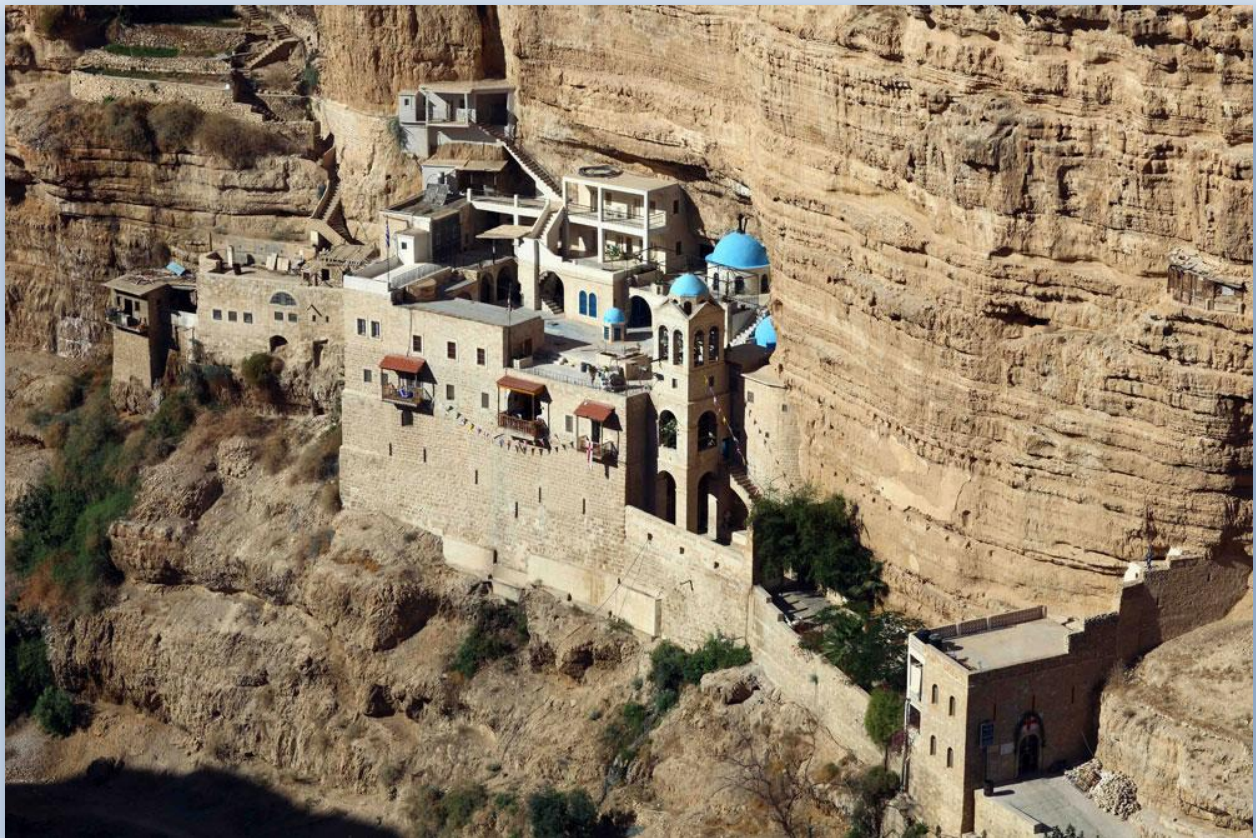




CHRISTMAS 2010



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About TIP

The Israel Project (TIP) is a non-profit educational organization that gets facts about Israel and the Middle East to press, public officials and the public. The Israel Project is not affiliated with any government.

Our team of trusted Middle East multi-lingual experts and former reporters provides journalists and leaders with fact sheets, backgrounders and sources. TIP regularly hosts press briefings featuring leading Israeli spokespeople and analysts that give journalists an opportunity to get information and answers to their questions face-to-face. By providing journalists with the facts, context and visuals they need, TIP causes hundreds of millions of people around the world to see a more positive public face of Israel. This helps protect Israel, reduce anti-Semitism and increase pride in Israel.

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The Israel Project's (TIP) Jerusalem Office is a non-governmental resource working with foreign journalists based in Israel. It provides reporters with needed facts and information before they file their stories. TIP's Jerusalem team features several Middle East experts and former journalists. TIP's Israel team, led by Marcus Sheff, includes experts who are fluent in English, Hebrew, Arabic, French, German, Farsi and Russian.

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Christians in the Middle East – A Shrinking Minority

There is no accurate figure for the number of Christians in the Middle East Census data is difficult to obtain; some countries simply do not conduct them, others are accused of issuing inaccurate statistics. However, there are many anecdotal reports that suggest the status of the Christian minority is not only in decline but its very existence is threatened.

In many Middle Eastern states they are the largest non-Muslim minority.¹ Reports compiled by government and charitable organizations alike,² suggest that while theoretically receiving religious freedom, they instead suffer persecution. Today, it seems more likely that 'Middle Eastern' Christians will be found seeking refuge in another country than in their native homeland.³

Hundreds have fled Iraq in recent weeks after terrorists targeted Christian communities in Baghdad, murdering 52 worshippers in one attack. The Christians of Iran, Somalia, Yemen and elsewhere report societal inequalities, legal discrimination and physical attacks.

“In the past two decades the Muslims of northern Sudan have murdered two million Christians in the south. Many of them were even crucified,” according to International Christian Embassy Jerusalem Executive Director, Malcolm Hedding.⁴

It is argued by some that the only growing Christian community in the Middle East is in Israel. From the point of view of persecution, Israel is seen by senior clerics as a safe haven ([see page 16](#)).

“The fact is that the only place in the Middle East that Christians are really safe is Israel,” Vicar of St George’s Church Baghdad Canon Andrew White told The Israel Project. White is also the president of the Foundation for Relief and Reconciliation in the Middle East.

¹ Naby, Eden and Choksy, Jamsheed K. “The End of Christianity in the Middle East?” *Foreign Policy* 2 November 2010

http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/11/02/the_end_of_christianity_in_the_middle_east?print=yes&hidecomments=yes&page=full Retrieved 02 December 2010

² U.S. State Department [and its Annual Report on International Freedom], U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom, OpenDoorUSA

³ Wooden, Cindy “Synod members discuss threats to Christian survival in Middle East” *Catholic News Service* 13 October 2010 <http://www.malankaraexarchate.com/?p=62> Retrieved 02 December 2010

⁴ Hedding, Malcolm, “The mote in the eye of Israel,” *Mail & Guardian*, Dec. 1, 2010, <http://www.mg.co.za/article/2010-12-01-letters-to-the-editor-november-26-2010>

Iraq's Christian Leaders Urge Community to Remain

The Christians of Iraq are beginning to flee after a series of terror attacks targeted churches in Baghdad. However, the Iraqi clergy is urging parishioners to stay. They fear that that a once strong and prosperous population will disappear for good.



Our Lady of Salvation Catholic Church just hours after 52 worshippers were killed on Oct. 31, 2010. The Islamic State of Iraq terror organization said it was behind the attack. (Mirza Dinnayi)

The Christian community of modern-day Iraq is one of the oldest in the world and has a long history of persecution. There have been many cases of mass migration in the area.

Over the last two decades, the Christian population has fallen by an estimated 39.5 percent. The Christian population numbered 1.4 million (seven percent of the total population), according to the census of 1987. During the war-torn years that followed, around half the population fled the country, with approximately 800,000 remaining before the American-led invasion in 2003. The Christians now comprise 1.61 percent of the total population.⁵

Today, the Christian population alleges it is persecuted by militant Islamist groups with connections to al-Qaeda.

*"All Christian centers, organizations and institutions, leaders and followers, are legitimate targets for the mujahedeen (holy warriors) wherever they can reach them,"*⁶ The Islamic State of Iraq said in a statement issued following the capture and subsequent slaughter of 52 worshippers, priests and guards of Our Lady of Salvation Catholic Church, Baghdad on Oct. 31, 2010.

Attacks on Iraqi Christians since 2003

- Nov. 2010 – Series of bomb and mortar attacks in Baghdad injures more than 30 people
- Oct. 2010 – Our Lady of Salvation Catholic Church attacked during mass, 52 people killed by The Islamic State of Iraq
- Feb. 2010 – At least eight Christians killed in two-week spate of attacks in Mosul
- Apr. 2008 – Assyrian Orthodox priest Fr. Adel Youssef shot dead by unknown assailants
- Feb. 2008 – Chaldean Catholic Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahh kidnapped, body found in shallow grave two weeks later
- Jan. 2008 – Bombs explode outside three Chaldean, Assyrian churches in Mosul, two churches in Kirkuk, four in Baghdad

⁵ US Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, "Iraq" in International Religious Freedom Report 2009

⁶ "Al-Qaeda declares Christians 'legitimate targets'", *Middle East Online*, 3 November 2010, <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=42316>, Retrieved 16 November 2010

- June 2007 – Fr. Ragheed Ganni along with three companions shot dead in his church
- Oct. 2006 – Orthodox priest Fr. Boulous Iskander kidnapped in Mosul, later found beheaded with limbs amputated despite payment of ransom
- Aug. 2004 – Five churches targeted in series of bombings, killing 11 people



Our Lady of Salvation Catholic Church. (Mirza Dinnayi)

Concern for Freedom in Egypt as Sectarian Violence Increases

The Copts of Egypt face discrimination, intimidation and fear of violence on a daily basis. There has been a recent surge in anti-Coptic sentiment and incitement in the streets following a campaign by leading Islamic figures.

There have been numerous accusations made against the Coptic Church, and in particular Pope Shenouda III, the leader of the Copts. He has been accused of “being a U.S. agent, an abductor and torturer of female Muslim converts from Christianity, of stockpiling weapons in monasteries and churches to carry out war against Muslims, and of plans to divide Egypt to create a Coptic state.”⁷

⁷ Ibrahim, Raymond “Islamists Accuse Egypt’s Christians of ... Radical Islam” *Free Copts*, 29 October 2010, http://english.freecopty.net/english//index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1111&Itemid=1, Retrieved 17 November 2010

Such statements have led to riots breaking out in major cities such as Alexandria, Cairo and others. In addition, there is an increasing trend of communal violence, particularly in southern Egypt.

There have been many instances of persecution in Egypt over the last 50 years. More than 30 massacres were recorded from 1981-2000.⁸ Key incidents in more recent years included:

- Nov. 2010 – Clashes over construction of new church in Giza. Official figures - two dead, 67 wounded, 170 Copts arrested. Coptic Youth Front says 300 people wounded, 1,000 detained
- Nov. 2010 – 22 homes, three stores, livestock, burned during rioting over rumor of affair between Coptic man and Muslim woman
- Aug. 2010 – During Friday prayer in village of Shimi, Sheikh Tobah calls for Jihad against Christians, inciting mob, which injures 11 people
- Jan. 2010 – As revenge for alleged rape of 12-year-old Muslim girl by Christian man, six are killed in drive-by shooting in Naga Hamady
- Apr. 2009 – Two Christians are shot in attack near village of Qena
- Apr. 2006 – Three churches in Alexandria are hit by knife attacks, resulting in death of one person, more than a dozen wounded
- Oct. 2005 – Mob of some 5,000 attack St. George's Church in Alexandria after alleged insult to Islam. Four killed, 90 injured. Seven other churches in Alexandria and one in Cairo also attacked
- Jan. 2004 – Pathos center for handicapped children is attacked by soldiers of Egyptian army unit, killing one, injuring three
- Jan. 2000 – 21 Christians are murdered in gun battle in village of El-Kosheh

In the November 2010 general election the dominant National Democratic Party fielded 10 Coptic candidates for the 508 available seats.

“Egypt’s minority Christian Coptic community know they are fighting a losing battle for political representation. In a best-case scenario following today’s run-offs they could end up with five seats, or one percent, in the incoming 508-seat parliament. In a worst-case scenario, they will end up with half that amount,” wrote the leading Egyptian newspaper Al-Ahram.⁹

There are many restrictions placed upon their religious freedom. One example is the right to construct new churches, or restore old ones. Current regulations require the government grant permission, an often hopeless bureaucratic exercise.¹⁰

⁸ Boles, Imad “Egypt – Persecution, Disappearing Christians of the Middle East” *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2001, pp23-29

⁹ El-Rahidi, Yasmine, “Egypt elections obliterate Coptic voice,” AhramOnline, Dec. 5, 2010, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/1209/Egypt/Politics-/Egypt-elections-obliterate-Coptic-voice.aspx>

¹⁰ US Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report 2010*, p232

Nov. 24, 2010 – Police officers allegedly throwing stones at Coptic Christians who were protesting the halt of construction work on a church in Giza, just outside Cairo.

Officials said two protesters were killed and 67 wounded, with 170 arrests.

The Coptic Youth Front says 300 people were wounded, and 1,000 detained.

(UK Coptic Association)



Perhaps the most severe infraction of the right to religious freedom is the case of conversion. No law explicitly bans conversion. However, there are a number of records on the persecution of converts from Islam to Christianity. Those attempting to leave Islam are often punished under Article 98(f) of the Penal Code, which criminalizes “insulting heavenly religions.”

“Many converts are forced to live a ‘double life’, concealing their true status,” UK Coptic Association President Helmy Giurguis told The Israel Project (TIP) on Nov. 25, 2010.

“Complaints fall on deaf ears when raised with European Union or U.S. officials, while (the converts) live in fear of constant danger,” he said.

Converts that are discovered are often abducted, beaten and tortured. There are many documented cases including:

- Martha Samuel, prevented from leaving country in 2008, detained, allegedly subjected to sexual assault
- Eman Muhammad el-Sayed, arrested in 2007 after attack over her conversion, claimed later subjected to severe torture in police custody
- Baha al-Aqqad, arrested in 2005, detained and transferred to Tora prison in Cairo
- Gaseer Mohamed Mahmoud, arrested in early 2005, said tortured by police

The official data available on Egypt’s Christian population puts their number at 7,892,000, or 10 percent of the population¹¹. Coptic organizations strongly contest the figures produced by the government.

“Pope Shenouba quotes on many an occasion that there are not less than 12 million Copts in Egypt,” according to Giurguis.

“The Egyptian press reports that followed the recent U.S. report (on International Religious Freedom) show that the Christians represent 8-12 percent of the population. I would put the actual number between 12 and 15 million,” he said.

¹¹ US Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report 2010*

The census of 1976 placed the number of Christians at only 6.31 percent, yet the Coptic organisations say the true figure was closer to 20 percent.¹²

Christians Disappearing from the West Bank and Gaza

Christians say their dwindling numbers are turning churches from places of worship into museums.¹³ Today there are around 50,000 Christians in the West Bank and just 1,000 in Gaza¹⁴, making up 2.2 percent of the total population in the Palestinian Authority (PA). There is a steady trickle of Christians leaving the areas of traditional heritage because of security concerns and economic factors.

Thirty-five percent of the Christian population in the West Bank migrated between 1967 and 1992 (45 percent to the United States), according to a survey conducted in 1992 by Bernard Sabella of Bethlehem University.¹⁵ After a brief halt because of hopes for a peace settlement following the Oslo Accords in 1993, large-scale emigration resumed in 1997.¹⁶



Bethlehem (The Israel Project)

There is no PA ratified constitution but the Basic Law on which it operates declares that Islam is the official religion. Principles of Shari'a are the main source of legislation, which "provides for freedom of belief and worship".¹⁷ However, there are many criticisms that the PA does not take sufficient action to prevent harassment, intimidation, and attacks against the Christian residents of those areas under its control.¹⁸

Many Christians in Bethlehem, and the nearby Christian towns of Beit Sahour and Beit Jalla, have repeatedly complained that Muslims have been seizing their lands either by force or through forged documents.¹⁹ During the second intifada in 2000, Beit Jalla was used as a base for attacks on the Jewish neighbourhood of Giló.²⁰

It is widely believed that Palestinian Christians are afraid to report abuses to the authorities.²¹ Terrorist incitement against Israel and the Christian West worsen the tension between the dwindling Christian

¹² Pennington, J.D. "The Copts in Modern Egypt" *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol 18, No. 2 (Apr 1982) pp. 158-179

¹³ Perry, Tom "In Holy Land, Christians a community in decline" *Reuters* 20 October 2010

<http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE69J3KK20101020> Retrieved 01 December 2010

¹⁴ U.S. State Department, Bureau of Public Affairs, Human Rights and Labor, *International Religious Freedom Report 2010*

¹⁵ Tsimhoni, Daphne "Israel and the Territories – Disappearing Christians of the Middle East" *Middle East Quarterly* Winter 2001 Vol VIII No. 1, pp. 31-42

¹⁶ Tsimhoni, Daphne "Israel and the Territories – Disappearing Christians of the Middle East" *Middle East Quarterly* Winter 2001 Vol VIII No. 1, pp. 31-42

¹⁷ U.S. State Department, Bureau of Public Affairs, Human Rights and Labor, *International Religious Freedom Report 2010*

¹⁸ U.S. State Department, Bureau of Public Affairs, Human Rights and Labor, *International Religious Freedom Report 2010*

¹⁹ Toameh, Khaled Abu "The Beleaguered Christians in Bethlehem" *Hudson New York* 12 May 2009

<http://www.hudson-ny.org/501/the-beleaguered-christians-in-bethlehem> Retrieved 01 December 2010

²⁰ *StandWithUs* 03 July 2003 <http://www.internationalwallofprayer.org/A-199-Crisis-Facing-the-Christian-Communities-in-Arab-Lands.html> Retrieved 01 December 2010

²¹ Ed. Marshall, Paul A. , *Palestinian Territories* in: "Religious Freedom in the World" (Center for Religious Freedom at the Hudson Institute : 2008)

minority of the West Bank and Gaza. Islamists threaten Christian organizations, such as the Palestinian Bible Society and the Young Men’s Christian Association, which operate in the West Bank and Gaza.

Timeline of Recent Attacks

- May 2009 – More than 70 Christian graves desecrated in village of Jiffra, near Ramallah²²
- May 2008 – Unknown assailants detonate bomb outside Christian Zahwa Rosary School, Gaza (following previous attack in June 2007)²³
- Feb. 2008 – Arsonists firebomb library operated by YMCA, destroying 10,000 books
- Oct. 2007 – Rami Khader Ayyad, prominent Christian figure in Gaza, abducted, later found stabbed to death after months of death threats from local Muslims²⁴
- June 2007 – Muslim extremists attack Rosary Sister’s School, Latin Church in Gaza City²⁵
- Apr. 2007 – Palestinian Bible Society center bombed²⁶
- Sep. 2006 – Five churches fire bombed and shot at in West Bank and Gaza²⁷
- Feb. 2006 – Palestinian Bible Society forced to temporarily close bookshop and center in Gaza following bomb threat. Two pipe bombs explode later, causing damage but no injuries
- Sep. 2005 – Houses, vehicles of Christians torched by hundreds of Muslim men in village in West Bank²⁸

²² *The Telegraph* “Christian graves desecrated in the West Bank” 25 May 2009 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/palestinianauthority/5380521/Christian-graves-desecrated-in-the-West-Bank.html> Retrieved 01 December 2010

²³ UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation “Education under Attack 2010 - Israel/the Palestinian Autonomous Territories” 10 February 2010 <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4b7aa9de1e.html> Retrieved 01 December 2010

²⁴ Young, Eric “Mourning, Condemnation Follow Murder of Prominent Christian in Gaza” *Christian Post* 08 October 2007 <http://www.christianpost.com/article/20071008/mourning-condemnation-follow-murder-of-prominent-christian-in-gaza/> Retrieved 01 December 2010

²⁵ AsiaNews “Gaza priest slams barbaric attack against Sisters of the Rosary” 19 June 2007 <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Gaza-priest-slams-barbaric-attack-against-Sisters-of-the-Rosary-9601.html> Retrieved 01 December 2010

²⁶ ABP Staff “Palestinian Bible Society building bombed in latest Gaza incident” *Associated Baptist Press News* 20 April 2007 http://www.abpnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2203&Itemid=120 Retrieved 01 December 2010

²⁷ Ed. Marshall, Paul A. , *Palestinian Territories* in: “Religious Freedom in the World” (Center for Religious Freedom at the Hudson Institute : 2008)

²⁸ U.S. State Department, Bureau of Public Affairs, Human Rights and Labor, *International Religious Freedom Report 2010*

With such attacks occurring, it is little wonder why the Christian presence in the West Bank and Gaza is shrinking. While the PA strives to project an idealised picture of Muslim-Christian solidarity, the Palestinian Christians would disagree.

“Never in Palestinian history did we feel endangered until now,” said Archimandrite Artemios, head priest of Greek Orthodox Church St. Porphyrius in Gaza.²⁹

A Hamas call for martyrs close to The Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem, in Nov. 2010. (The Israel Project)



Façade of Religious Freedom in Iran

Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 the Shi'ite theocracy has dominated the Islamic Republic of Iran. Although officially recognising the three 'religions of the book', and its native Zoroastrianism, there is much criticism of so called religious freedom today. Opposition is silenced, the media controlled.³⁰

The U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) stated in its 2010 report that, “high-level U.S. government officials should increase their calls for the release of members of religious minority communities currently in prison, particularly Baha’is, Christians, and Sufi Muslims, as well as dissident Shi’a Muslim clerics.”³¹

The 2010 document expands on earlier reports concerning the Iranian government’s poor religious freedom record.³² Iran finds itself constantly in the list of 10 worst countries for persecution of Christian minorities³³, while it strives to appear as though there is equality for all.

Examples of the varying degrees of oppression include the lack of a right to education, the exclusion from governmental positions and facing abuse and torture. There is an increase in the number of Christian converts being arrested and held in prison, charged with apostasy.

Churches face regular raids by the Iranian police and many Church leaders are targeted and accused of attempting to convert Muslims. In 2005, Hamid Pourmand, an Iranian pastor who converted to Christianity, was arrested and sentenced to three years in prison.³⁴ He was captured along with fellow

²⁹ Williams, Daniel “‘Endangered’ Gaza Christians Mull Flight Amid Deaths, Firebombs” 25 February 2008 <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=aC7P93EMyb1Q&refer=home> Retrieved 01 December 2010

³⁰ Sciutto, Jim & Roeber, Bruno, “Iranian Opposition Reeling Under Pressure of Crackdown,” ABC World News, June 21, 2010, <http://abcnews.go.com/WN/inside-iran-underground-opposition-year-deadly-protest/story?id=10953946>

³¹ U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report 2010*

³² U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report 2006*

³³ Open Doors USA, http://members.opendoorsusa.org/site/PageNavigator/World_Watch_List_2010

³⁴ Center for Religious Freedom “Iran: Free Christian Convert” *Hudson Institute* 18 February 2005 http://crf.hudson.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=publication_details&id=4581&pubType=CRF_PressReleases Retrieved 25 November 2010

church leaders during a conference of the Assemblies of God. They were later released while he was charged and held in prison.

Such activity is not unusual, and has led to many Christians reconsidering their position in the country. Many are fleeing abroad. The approximate figure for today's Christian population is 300,000, or around 0.3 percent.³⁵ However, because of the stigma of being a non-Shia Muslim in Iran, and the need to declare religion on census forms, the statistics for religious minorities are almost certainly understated.

Religious-Freedom Violations Unchecked in Saudi Arabia

Since 2005, Saudi Arabia has been ever present on the list of Countries of Particular Concern for its infringement of religious and civil rights.³⁶ Religious freedom does not exist. There are frequent allegations of torture and abuse by the police and police officials. Opponents of the regime are often held for indefinite periods, or are reportedly convicted by secret trials.

The theocratic monarchy rules the country according to a conservative branch of Sunni Islam, which is the official religion and basis of all law. No other religion is recognised, or even permitted to be practiced. The some 1.5 million Christians, who make up 5.5 percent³⁷ of the total population, are to be found largely amongst the migrant workers.

Most of the Sunnis in Saudi Arabia are followers of a school of thought founded by Mohammed Ibn Abd al-Wahhab. Wahhab, an 18th Century Sunni scholar, belonged to the Hanbali School that openly preached intolerance of alternative forms of Islam and of all other religions.

In official textbooks, which are used in Saudi schools and schools funded by the government throughout the world, there are many passages inciting hatred and violence.³⁸ Aimed at Jews, Christians, Baha'is and other religions, these texts have not been removed, despite many requests to do so.

*“Saudi Arabia has been on the State Department’s religious-freedom blacklist for engaging in egregious violations since 2004, yet the U.S. has invoked a national interest waiver on any actions (which would include sanctions) every year since then, in effect, giving Saudi Arabia a free pass,”*³⁹ according to Islamic Institute of Boston Founder Imam Talal Y. Eid.

The Mutawi'in, the 'religious police', strictly enforces Shari'a law, ensuring that citizens conform to Islamic rule. There is a long list of cases of arrest, abuse and torture of those who are guilty of being of a different religion. Over the last few years there has been an increase in such atrocities, documented each year in the International Religious Freedom Report, published by the U.S. State Department. The latest report details more than 30 instances from the last two years.⁴⁰

³⁵ US Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, “Iran” in International Religious Freedom Report 2009

³⁶ U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom “Rice required to act on Saudia Arabai, Eritrea and Vietnam by March 15” 7 February 2005 http://www.uscirf.gov/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=789 Retrieved 28 November 2010

³⁷ U.S. Department of State

³⁸ Ingram, Judith “Saudia Arabia: USCIRF Confirms Material Inciting Violence, Intolerance Remains in Textbooks Used at Saudi Government’s Islamic Saudi Academy” *USCIRF* 11 June 2008 http://www.uscirf.gov/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2206 Retrieved 28 November 2010

³⁹ Eid, Imam Talal and Shea, Nina “Saudi Government Extremism and the U.S. Response” *The Huffington Post* 26 January 2010 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/imam-talal-eid/saudi-government-extremis_b_436786.html Retrived 28 November 2010

⁴⁰ U.S. State Department, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor “International Religious Freedom Report 2010” 17 November 2010 <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148843.htm> Retrieved 28 November 2010

Secret Community of Somali Christians

The tiny numbers of ethnic Somali Christians have to practice their faith in secret as Islamic terrorist organizations prevent religious freedom. Out of a population of over eight million, there are just 1,000 practicing Christians in Somalia.⁴¹ There are no church buildings in the country, nor any legal provision for religious freedom.⁴²

Since January 1991, Somalia has had no functioning, central government. The country has been divided among militia groups hoping to take control.⁴³ In south-central Somalia, the armed Islamic organization Al-Shabaab has waged violent attacks against the Christian minority with reports of shootings, beheadings and the imposition of laws restricting faith-based practices.⁴⁴



The official Somali army attempts to keep the peace but has lost ground to the Al-Shabaab Islamists.

⁴¹ Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division (2009) (.PDF). *World Population Prospects, Table A.1*. 2008 revision. United Nations. http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/wpp2008/wpp2008_text_tables.pdf

⁴² "Almost expunged: Somalia's Embattled Christians". <http://www.anglicanplanet.net/international-news/2009/11/30/almost-expunged-somalias-embattled-christians.html>

⁴³ UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Submission by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights' Compilation Report - Universal Periodic Review: Somalia, November 2010, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4ccfe2752.html> [accessed 28 November 2010]

⁴⁴ International Religious Freedom Report 2005, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2005/51495.htm>

In 2004, the Transitional Federal Government Charter declared Islam to be the religion of Somalia. Until the Islamic Courts Union gained power in some southern areas after 2006, there was informal tolerance of small numbers of Somali Christians.⁴⁵ Since then, Christians have been considered infidels and are subject to Sharia death penalty provisions.

Al-Shabaab, an endorser of Sharia law, is an Islamic organization that controls much of southern Somalia, excluding the capital Mogashidu. The group's goal is to implement a strict interpretation of the law and target those who violate it by practicing other religious faiths such as Christianity.⁴⁶ Penalties for deterring Islamic law include amputation of limbs, execution by stoning or hanging, kidnappings⁴⁷ and enforcement of modest dress code for women.⁴⁸

Since 2007, the group has been seen as a proxy for the Islamic extremist group al-Qaeda in Somalia.⁴⁹ In February 2008, the U.S. designated the group a foreign terrorist organization under section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act.⁵⁰ The group has an estimated 3,000 hard-core fighters and 2,000 allied gunmen.⁵¹ It killed dozens of Christians in the country between March 2009 and early 2010, according to the Bartamaha Somali media outlet.⁵² In 2009, the group sought and killed at least 15 Christians, including women and children.⁵³

Most of Somalia's Christian missions left the country in 1991, following the government breakdown. Since 2004, Christians had hoped to return to Somalia and gain protection following the 2004 TFG charter that promised freedom of worship.⁵⁴ Despite this, persecution has continued.

Timeline since 2005

- Oct. 2010 - Christian Somali who refuses to wear veil killed by Suna Waljameca group for immodest dress⁵⁵
- Mar. 2010 – Execution of Christian convert in town of Afgoye, accused of *fitna* (religious discord) by Al-Shabaab⁵⁶

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ Max Miller, "Who are Al-Shabaab?", available at <http://bigthink.com/ideas/20895> [accessed 28 November 2010]

⁴⁷ Compass Direct News, "Family Laments Kidnapping of Christian Girl," available at <http://www.compassdirect.org/english/country/somalia/26696/> [accessed 28 November 2010]

⁴⁸ Martin Hill, No redress: Somalia's forgotten minorities, pg. 23, available at <http://allafrica.com/download/resource/main/main/idatcs/00020363:62a5d6e17583b76c32703ea41811b600.pdf> [accessed 28 November 2010]

⁴⁹ Stephanie Hanson, "Al-Shabaab", *Council on foreign relations*, available at <http://www.cfr.org/publication/18650/alshabaab.html> [accessed 28 November 2010]

⁵⁰ The national counterterrorism center, "Al-Shabaab" available at http://www.nctc.gov/site/groups/al_shabaab.html [accessed 28 November 2010]

⁵¹ NYT, "Al-Shabaab", available at <http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/s/al-shabab/index.html> [accessed 28 November 2010]

⁵² Martin Hill, No redress: Somalia's forgotten minorities pg. 23 <http://allafrica.com/download/resource/main/main/idatcs/00020363:62a5d6e17583b76c32703ea41811b600.pdf>

⁵³ Compass Direct News, "Al Shabaab Militants Execute Christian Leader" <http://www.compassdirect.org/english/country/somalia/18721/> [accessed 28 November 2010]

⁵⁴ Catholic World News, "Widespread desecration of Christian graves in Somalia" <http://www.catholicculture.org/news/features/index.cfm?recnum=34745> [accessed 28 November 2010]

⁵⁵ Compass Direct News, "Christian in Somalia who refused to wear veil is killed", <http://www.compassdirect.org/english/country/somalia/11061/> [accessed 28 November 2010]

⁵⁶ Bartamaha.com, "Muslim extremists execute a Somali Christian," <http://www.bartamaha.com/?p=26455> [accessed 28 November 2010]

- Jan. 2010 – Al Shabaab kills leader of underground church in Hodon, accused of converting from Islam. Group threatens to kill his wife, continue to monitor Somalis who have embraced Christianity⁵⁷
- Sep. 15, 2009 - 69-year old Omar Khalafe shot near Merca for being found in possession of bibles⁵⁸
- July 2009 – Two boys beheaded because their Christian father, Musa Mohammed Yusuf, refused to give Al-Shabaab information about underground church leader⁵⁹
- July 2008 – Convert from Islam to Christianity shot dead after actively sharing new-found faith with others⁶⁰
- July 2006 – At least three Christian men killed in Mogadishu as they return home from prayer meeting. “He who does not perform prayer will be considered as an infidel and our Sharia law orders that person to be killed,” says Sheikh Abdalla Ali, who runs Sharia court⁶¹
- Jan. 2005 – Some 700 Christian graves desecrated in Mogadishu. Since 2004 TFG charter promising freedom of worship, Christians hoped to return and gain protection.

Sudanese Christians Pray for Peace in the Region

War-torn Sudan struggles to maintain and provide a better future for its multi-ethnic population. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) ended the North-South civil war in January 2005, and laid out the framework for the establishment of an Interim National Constitution (INC).⁶² However, there seems to be little adherence in practice. Sudan is often criticised for its systematic violations of freedom of religion or belief, particularly in the predominantly government-controlled North, which adheres to a strict branch of Islam.

An unusual power-sharing arrangement governs the country. Ruling from Khartoum is the National Congress Party (NCP), which called for a jihad against the south, now led by the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). Tensions still remain high between the two conflicting parties, and a referendum is due to be held in January 2011 to determine whether the south will declare its self-determination as an independent state.

There is a strong Christian presence in Sudan, representing 15 percent of the total population (6,479,000).⁶³ During the civil war, many of these were relocated from their origins in the north and in the

⁵⁷ Compass Direct News, Islamic Militants Murder Christian Leader, <http://www.compassdirect.org/english/country/somalia/14479/>, [accessed 28 November 2010]

⁵⁸ Compass Direct News, Muslim Militants Slay Long-Time Christian in Somalia, <http://www.compassdirect.org/english/country/somalia/9494/> [accessed 28 November 2010]

⁵⁹ “Sons of Christian Beheaded”, <http://www.persecutionblog.com/2009/07/somalia-sons-of-christian-beheaded.html> [accessed 28 November 2010]

⁶⁰ <http://barnabasfund.org/US/Our-work/Our-current-projects/BF-Project-Countries/Somalia.html?> [accessed 28 November 2010]

⁶¹ BosNewsLife News Center, “Somalia Christian Men Killed, Children Kidnapped” <http://www.christianpersecution.info/news/somalia-christian-men-killed-children-kidnapped/> [accessed 28 November 2010]

⁶² U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report 2010*

⁶³ U.S. State Department, Bureau of Public Affairs, Human Rights and Labor, *International Religious Freedom Report 2010*

Nuba Mountains, and now reside in the southern region.⁶⁴ There is a stark contrast in the governing of the north and south. The demographic makeup of the South is predominantly Christian and followers of traditional African religions.

The INC is supposed to guarantee religious freedom protections, including freedom to worship and assembly, establish and maintain places of worships and so on. However, there are conflicts between national legislation and local observance. All those located in the northern regions are subject to Shari'a law, Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Corporal punishment is often applied to all, in particular for instances of "improper" dress, blasphemy, production or consumption of alcohol, proselytising etc.

Islamic proselytism is allowed, but proselytising by non-Muslims is prohibited. Conversion from Islam is a crime legally punishable by death. There are a number of allegations of forced conversion to Islam, mainly of internally displaced people and prison inmates.⁶⁵ Children that have been abandoned, or whose parentage is unknown, are considered Muslim, and therefore may not be adopted by non-Muslims.

Permission to build churches is difficult to obtain. They are often built without official permission, by owners who register land for personal rather than church use. Such churches, and those legally recognised, are vulnerable to seizure.

With the likely prospect of Southern Sudan declaring its self-determination, there is concern for those that will find themselves on the "wrong side" of what would become the international border. These fears stretch to both the Christians in the north, and the Arab-Muslims in the south.⁶⁶

Christians in Israel

Israel is considered by a majority of Christians to be a safe-haven for themselves and members of all faiths. Many Muslims, Jews, and Christians inhabit and visit Israel's many holy sites.



"The fact is that the only place in the Middle East that Christians are really safe is Israel," Reverend Canon Andrew White, the "Vicar of Baghdad¹," told TIP.

He is vicar of Iraq's sole Anglican Church in Iraq, St. George's, and chief executive of the Foundation for Relief and Reconciliation in the Middle East.

"Practically the only place in the region where the Christian population is growing is in Israel," reported *The New York Post* in December 2009.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Ed. Marshall, Paul A. , *Sudan in: "Religious Freedom in the World"* (Center for Religious Freedom at the Hudson Institute : 2008)

⁶⁵ Littman, David "The U.N. Finds Slavery in the Sudan" *Middle East Quaterly* Sep 1996, Vol. 3 No. 3

⁶⁶ U.S. State Department, Bureau of Public Affairs, Human Rights and Labor, *Annual Report 2010*

⁶⁷ Avni, Benny "Christians flee Muslim pressure" *NY Post*, 23 December 2009

http://www.nypost.com/p/news/opinion/opedcolumnists/bethlehem_exodus_jH6iVNuarsPLBceXPzHO6I Retrieved 05 December 2010

"Christians are a shrinking minority in most countries of the Middle East today. The exception is Israel where the Christian community has multiplied several times over since 1949," said Geoffrey Smith, former Director of the Christian Friends of Israel- UK⁶⁸.

"As Christians we share a common narrative with the Jewish people despite differences of theology. This Christmas celebrate the Jewishness of Jesus in the Land he loved," he added.

*"Two-thirds of native Arab Christians fled the Palestinian areas in the past six decades....Israel is the only country in the Middle East whose Christian population has grown in the past half-century,"*⁶⁹ according to England's *Mail & Guardian*.

Israel's Growing Christian Population

In addition to the thousands of Christians that make pilgrimages to Israel's holy sites each year, Arab Christians, biblical Christians⁷⁰ (associated with Evangelical Christians) and other Christian groups live in Israel.

Christians constitute about 2 percent of Israel's overall population, and their number is steadily growing. By the end of 2009, 151,700 Christians lived in Israel⁷¹—constituting a 0.6 percent increase from the previous year.

In 1995, Israel's Christian population was 120,300. Israel's Christian population has grown some 26 percent since then.

Most Christians in Israel are of Arab descent. Many others came from the former Soviet Union⁷² and immigrated to Israel with a Jewish relative. Ten percent of the Israeli Christians live in the Jerusalem district and 60 percent live in the north of the country.

Israel and Religious Freedom

Israel grants full social and political equality, regardless of religion.

Israel's Basic Law on Human Dignity and Liberty (Basic Law) provides freedom of religion. The Basic Law refers to the *"Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel, which explicitly provides for the protection of religious freedom,"*⁷³ according to the U.S. State Department's International Religious Freedom Report 2010.

"In addition, numerous Supreme Court rulings incorporate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, including their religious freedom provisions, into the country's body of law," it added.

⁶⁸ See Christian Friends of Israel <http://www.cfi.org.uk/index.php>

⁶⁹ Mail & Guardian, "Letters to the Editor: November 26 2010" Last updated 06 December 2010, <http://www.mg.co.za/article/2010-12-01-letters-to-the-editor-november-26-2010> Retrieved 06 December 2010

⁷⁰ See International Christian Embassy Jerusalem, <http://www.icejusa.org/site/PageServer>

⁷¹ Statistical Abstract of Israel 2010, *Central Bureau of Statistics*, http://www1.cbs.gov.il/reader/shnaton/templ_shnaton_e.html?num_tab=st02_06x&CYear=2010

⁷² Bassok, Moti "Central Bureau of Statistics: 2.1% of state's population is Christian" *HaAretz* 25 December 2007 <http://www.haaretz.com/news/central-bureau-of-statistics-2-1-of-state-s-population-is-christian-1.235862> Retrieved 05 December 2010

⁷³ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, "International Religious Freedom Report 2010" <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148825.htm> Retrieved 05 December 2010

Access to the holy sites is protected and guaranteed for all. Based on the U.N. General Assembly Resolution 194⁷⁴, which called for free access to all of Israel's holy places, Israel maintains openness with relation to minority rights and access to sacred holy sites.

Pope Benedict XVI Affirms his Warm Feelings for Israel



Pope Benedict XVI at Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulcher.
(Israel Government Press Office)

In stark contrast to the bishops who recently used a Vatican synod to blame Israel for oppression of Christians in the Middle East and suggest that the Jews have no claim to that land, Pope Benedict XVI has once again publicly affirmed his warm feelings for both the Jewish people and the State of Israel.

The much-anticipated book "Light of the World - the Pope, the Church and Signs of the Times" will be released this week, and is touted as the first ever "personal and direct interview" with a pope.

Conducted by German journalist Peter Seewald, the interview touches extensively on Israel and Catholic relations to the Jews.

The pope reiterates that since his earliest days of seminary he has recognized the "intrinsic unity of the Old and the New Testament," insisting that "we can read the New Testament only together with what preceded it, otherwise, we would completely fail to understand it."

But Benedict goes further than that, stressing that the Children of Israel, the Jews, remain the "fathers in faith" for all Christians. The pope said he stopped calling the Jews "our elder brothers" because in Jewish tradition the "elder brother" is traditionally the one rejected, such as in the story of Esau and Jacob.

The pope goes on to speak glowingly of his 2009 visit to Israel, where he was especially touched by the warm reception he received from Israeli President Shimon Peres, whose own father was brutally murdered in the Nazi Holocaust.

In the interview, Benedict does not shy away from admitting that mistakes have been made in many of the Vatican's dealings, including with Israel and the Jews, but that he is determined to set things straight. Many Israelis and Christian supporters of Israel are still hoping he will use the aforementioned assault on Israel during the recent synod of Middle East bishops to finally clarify the Catholic Church's position regarding the continued validity of Israel's divine birthright in the region.

This item regarding the pope was originally published by Israel Today.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ United Nations General Assembly, <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/3/ares3.htm>

⁷⁵ Jones, Ryan, "Pope Benedict XVI affirms his warm feelings for Israel," israel today Magazine, Nov. 28, 2010 <http://www.israeltoday.co.il/default.aspx?tabid=178&nid=22334>

Christmas Celebrations Round off Record Year for Israeli Tourism

Israel expects 3.3 million visitors will visit the country during 2010, making it the best ever year for tourism, eclipsing 2008 in which three million people arrived in the Holy Land.

While final figures will only be released next year, the country's Tourism Ministry is optimistic December will bring with it a bumper holiday season.



Israeli Tourism Minister Stas Misezhnikov welcomes the 3,000,001 visitor to the country in 2010, Pastor Ribamar Araujo Ladislau (Yossi Zamir)

"Data since the beginning of this year and even beyond, reflects the revolution that the Tourism Ministry, the tourism industry, Israel's tourism product and Israel's image as a tourism destination is going through in Israel and around the world," Tourism Minister Stas Misezhnikov said in a statement.

Israel launched a special fall marketing campaign aimed at potential Christian visitors on Oct. 18 that will run through to Christmas.⁷⁶ The promotion is labeled *Visit Israel – You'll Never Be the Same.*⁷⁷

"For Christian travelers to Israel, the single greatest comment heard is the spiritual change that they experience," Haim Gutin, Israel's Commissioner for Tourism, North and South America, said in a news release. Israel hopes the Yuletide visit by the Chilean miners who were trapped underground for 69 days will help push the message with the estimated 550 million Catholics of Latin America.

The recent move to attract Catholics to Israel began with Pope Benedict XVI's visit in 2009⁷⁸ and has had some support from the Church.⁷⁹

In recent weeks the holy sites have been packed with pilgrims.⁸⁰

"Surging crowds are sometimes so dense that Israel needs to introduce one-way streets for pedestrians," Father George Kraj told *The Guardian* on Nov. 12, 2010.

⁷⁶ Reynolds, Jeremy, "Israel Ministry of Tourism Initiates Fall Media Campaign for Christian Market, Continental News," Nov. 8, 2010, <http://continentalnews.net/church-of-god-news/israel-ministry-of-tourism-initiates-fall-media-campaign-for-christian-market-3172.html>

⁷⁷ "Visit Israel – You'll Never Be the Same" – video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Bf_ZycCZDQ

⁷⁸ Pope Benedict XVI to Visit Israel, West Bank May 11-15, The Israel Project, May 3, 2009, <http://www.theisraelproject.org/site/c.hsJPK0PIJpH/b.672631/apps/s/content.asp?ct=6966627>

⁷⁹ "Message from the Custos of the Holy Land," Holyland Pilgrimage, May 18, 2010, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tufoto8_u8

⁸⁰ Hamilton, Jill, "Pilgrims fill Jerusalem's streets," *The Guardian*, Nov. 12, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2010/nov/12/jerusalem-pilgrims>



Holy Sites

Bethlehem

The beauty of Israel for pilgrims is that its compact size makes all the holy sites accessible. It takes less than an hour from the Sea of Galilee to Nazareth and one can travel between Jerusalem and Bethlehem in minutes.

Bethlehem is the birthplace of Jesus, with The Church of the Nativity center stage. The church is built on the site traditionally said to be where Mary gave birth to Jesus. The complex includes the ornate Greek Orthodox Basilica of the Nativity. Alongside is the Catholic Church of St. Catherine. Several other smaller chapels complete the large house of worship.

The highlight of any visit to the site is the descent to the cave beneath the altar of the basilica to the reputed spot where Jesus was born.

Jerusalem

Just six miles north of Bethlehem is Jerusalem – the site of the crucifixion and resurrection.

Like The Church of the Nativity, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher includes several places of worship within the one compound. Many Christians believe it to be the site of the crucifixion, burial and resurrection of Jesus.



Copts outside the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. (Israel Wonders)

Located within the walls of Jerusalem's Old City, the current structure dates back 1,000 years, although the original church was constructed during the 4th Century.

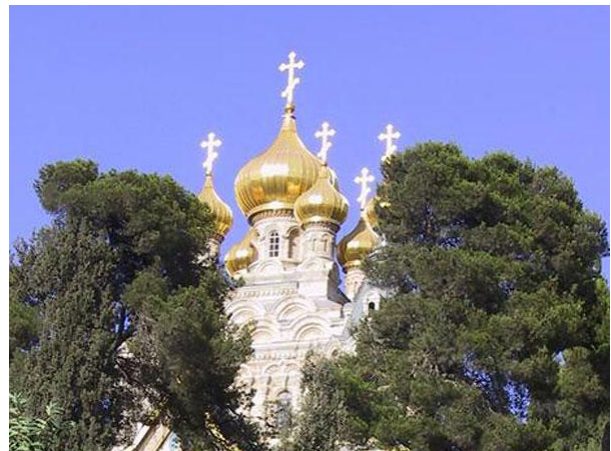
Outside the Old City, the Mount of Olives is interspersed with Christian sites dedicated to the last days of Jesus' life.

Jesus and his disciples prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane the night prior to his execution. Today the garden is one of the most peaceful corners of Israel's capital.

The plot sits alongside the Church of All Nation which is also known as the Basilica of the Agony. Here Jesus prayed before his arrest.

To the other side of Gethsemane is the magnificent exterior of the Church of Mary Magdalene. She was said to be the first person to see Jesus after his resurrection.

Constructed late in the 19th Century the building is topped by seven onion domes in the typical Russian Orthodox style.



Church of Mary Magdalene (Israel Wonders)



Monastery of St. George. (The Israel Project)

Monastery of St. George

In coordination with the Greek Orthodox Church, Israel unveiled a new road in November that grants easy access to the 5th Century St. George Monastery, which is carved into rock of the Judean Desert.

Located some 12 miles east of Jerusalem in Wadi Kelt the Byzantine monastery is one of the oldest in the country, with spectacular rock drawings from the fifth and sixth centuries, and is one of six working monasteries in the Holy Land.

Baptismal Sites

Qasr Al-Yahud lies in the Jordan Valley some 40 minutes away from Jerusalem, close to Jericho. The site is one of several claiming to be the location where John baptized Jesus. In addition to the River Jordan visitors can also visit the remains of several churches dating back to the 5th Century. Visiting hours should be checked either by emailing saark@npa.org.il or calling 972 (0) 2 650 4844.

The Yardenit baptismal site is located at the northern end of the River Jordan where the river exits the Sea of Galilee. This facility includes a visitor center.



Qasr Al-Yahud. (Israel Wonders)

Sea of Galilee

After driving northwards around the Sea of Galilee, also known as Lake Kinneret and Lake Tiberias (the east side is recommended as the more picturesque route), one reaches Capernaum, home of St. Peter. It was here that Jesus selected his first disciples and performed several miracles.

Nestled in the hills overlooking the village is the Byzantine church of the Mount of Beatitudes, on the spot where Jesus delivered his Sermon on the Mount.



Mount of Beatitudes. (Israel Wonders)



Church of Annunciation. (Israel Wonders)

Nazareth

Nazareth is where Jesus spent his formative years. The city's Church of the Annunciation is the largest church in the Middle East. Some believe it is where the Archangel Gabriel told Mary she would conceive.

Other important Christian sites in Nazareth include the Synagogue Church, Mensa Christi, Our Lady of the Fright, St. Gabriel's and St. Joseph's Carpentry.

USEFUL LINKS

Christian Information Center - <http://www.cicts.org/CICmainin.htm>

Israel Wonders - http://goisrael.com/tourism_eng

International Christian Embassy Jerusalem - <http://www.icej.org/>

The Knesset Christian Allies Caucus - <http://www.cac.org.il/>

Bethlehem Municipality - <http://www.bethlehem-city.org/index.php>

Focus on Israel - The Christian Communities of Israel - http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/facts_percent20about_percent20israel/people/focus_percent20on_percent20israel_percent20-_percent20the_percent20christian_percent20communities_percent20of_percent20isr

Religious Freedom in Israel: A Fundamental Guarantee - <http://www.theisraelproject.org/site/apps/nlnet/content2.aspx?c=hsJPK0PIJpH&b=5118555&ct=6957333>

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