

Topic: **Religion - Christians**

Updated: **June 2014**

## Demographic Characteristics

- Comment: The following section relates only to Arab Christians in Israel.
- Christian Arabs make up less than 8% of the total Arab population and about 1.6% of the total population in Israel.<sup>2</sup>
- Approximately 80.6% of the 155,000 Christians in Israel are Christian Arabs.<sup>3</sup>
- The percentage of Christians in Israel has decreased over the years, from 21% in the 1950s to 13% in the 1990s and 8.4% in 2008. Between 2008 and 2011, the percentage of Christians continued to decline from 8.4% of the total Arab population to less than 8%.
- According to projections by Evgenia Bystrov and Arnon Soffer of the University of Haifa, by 2030 the rate of Christians in the Arab population of Israel will drop to 7%.<sup>4</sup>
- One of the main factors causing this population decrease is the lower natural growth rate of Christian Arabs, which is more than half of that of the Muslims: 1.3% and 2.5% in 2011, respectively.<sup>5</sup>
- Approximately 71% of the Christian Arabs reside in the Northern District, 13% in the Haifa District, 9.5% in the Jerusalem District, and the remaining 6.5% elsewhere in Israel.<sup>6</sup>
- Nazareth has the largest Christian population, estimated at 22,400 at the end of 2011. Other cities

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<sup>1</sup> Compiled by Prof. Elie Rekhess, Associate Director, Crown Center for Jewish and Israel Studies, Northwestern University

<sup>2</sup> CBS, *Statistical Abstract of Israel*, 2009, table 2.2. See: [http://www1.cbs.gov.il/reader/shnaton/templ\\_shnaton\\_e.html?num\\_tab=st02\\_02&CYear=2012](http://www1.cbs.gov.il/reader/shnaton/templ_shnaton_e.html?num_tab=st02_02&CYear=2012).

<sup>3</sup> CBS, *Christmas 2012 – Christians in Israel*, 2012. See: [http://www1.cbs.gov.il/reader/newhodaot/hodaa\\_template.html?hodaa=201211349](http://www1.cbs.gov.il/reader/newhodaot/hodaa_template.html?hodaa=201211349).

<sup>4</sup> Evgenia Bystrov and Arnon Soffer, *Israel: Demography 2012-2013: On the Way to a Religious State*, 2012, University of Haifa, available at: [http://web.hevra.haifa.ac.il/~ch-strategy/images/publications/demography\\_2012-2030.pdf](http://web.hevra.haifa.ac.il/~ch-strategy/images/publications/demography_2012-2030.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> CBS, *Statistical Abstract of Israel*, 2009, table 2.10. See: [http://www1.cbs.gov.il/reader/newhodaot/hodaa\\_template.html?hodaa=201211349](http://www1.cbs.gov.il/reader/newhodaot/hodaa_template.html?hodaa=201211349) [Hebrew].

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

with large Christian Arab communities are Haifa (14,400) and Jerusalem (11,700).<sup>7</sup>

- In the Northern District, Christian Arabs live in predominantly Christian villages, such as Fassuta and Mi'ilya (almost 100% Christian), Eilabun (71%) and Jish (65%), as well as in villages such as Kafr Yasif (56%), Rama (51%), I'billin (44%), Shfar'am (26%), Peki'in (22%), Maghar (21%), Abu Snan (17%), Kafr Kanna (11%) and Hurfeish (4%), alongside Muslims and Druze.
- The demographic profile of Christian Arabs in Israel more closely resembles that of the Jewish population than the Muslim population in terms of growth rate and education.
- In 2011, the annual natural growth rate of Christian Arabs was the lowest of all religious sects in Israel: 1.3% (while the Christian non-Arab population grew at a rate of 0.2%), which is significantly lower than the Jewish (1.8%) and Muslim populations (2.5%).<sup>8</sup>
- According to a 2011 report from the Central Bureau of Statistics, 72% of the Muslim population was under the age 35, while 56.1% of the Christian Arabs, 65.5% of the Druze, and 54.8% of the Jewish population was under the age 35.<sup>9</sup>
- At the end of 2012, Christian women had an average fertility rate of approximately 2.1, a rate that is significantly lower than that of their Jewish (2.98), Muslim (3.5), and Druze (2.33) compatriots.<sup>10</sup>
- Christians in Israel are characterized by a high level of education. Arab Christian high school students have the highest rate of success in matriculation exams in Israel: 64%, significantly higher than the rates of matriculation of Jews (59%), Muslim (48), and Druze (55%) high school students.<sup>11</sup>
- Among the population of Christian students, over 79% studied for B.A., 18.4% for an M.A., while 2.6% studied for a PhD.<sup>12</sup> According to the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 60% of overall Israeli population was expected to study towards a B.A (2012).<sup>13</sup>

### **Religious Denomination**

- Out of the 20 Christian denominations active in Israel, 10 have received official state recognition: Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic (Melkite), the Latin, the Armenian Orthodox, the Armenian Catholic, the Syrian Orthodox, the Syrian Catholic, the Chaldean Catholic, the Maronite, and the Anglican.<sup>14</sup>
- The Greek Orthodox Church acknowledges the primacy of the Patriarch of Constantinople. Greek Orthodox parishes are predominantly Arabic-speaking.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> CBS, *Statistical Abstract of Israel*, 2009, table 3.13. See:

[http://www1.cbs.gov.il/reader/shnaton/templ\\_shnaton.html?num\\_tab=st03\\_13&CYear=2012](http://www1.cbs.gov.il/reader/shnaton/templ_shnaton.html?num_tab=st03_13&CYear=2012).

<sup>11</sup> CBS, *Christmas 2012 – Christians in Israel*, 2012. See:

[http://www1.cbs.gov.il/reader/newhodaot/hodaa\\_template.html?hodaa=201211349](http://www1.cbs.gov.il/reader/newhodaot/hodaa_template.html?hodaa=201211349)

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> CBS, "Higher Education in Israel – Selected Data", *Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, November 28 2012. See:

[http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/AboutIsrael/Education/Pages/Higher\\_Education\\_Israel-Data\\_Nov\\_2012.aspx](http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/AboutIsrael/Education/Pages/Higher_Education_Israel-Data_Nov_2012.aspx).

<sup>14</sup> Una McGahern's *Palestinian Christians in Israel: State Attitudes towards Non-Muslims in a Jewish State*.

- The Latin Catholic Church is headed by a Patriarch. The Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem dates back to the time of the Crusades (11th Century). The office was re-established in 1847.
- The Maronite Church, an Eastern Church, has accepted the authority of Rome since 1182.
- The Greek (Melkite) Catholic Church was established in the Galilee in 1752 following a schism in the Greek Orthodox Church. The Greek Catholic church of the Galilee is under the jurisdiction of the Melkite Patriarch of Antioch.
- The Greek Catholic and the Maronite Churches retain their respective language, rites and canon law.
- The Protestant denominations (Evangelicals, Baptist, Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed, Presbyterian and Pentecostal) are the smallest in terms of numbers and historically the youngest.<sup>15</sup>
- The Protestant communities in the Middle East date from the early 19th century and the Western missionary rediscovery of the Holy Land. The largest Protestant Church is the Episcopal Anglican Church which became an archbishopric in 1957.

**Arab Christians in Israel by denomination (estimates)<sup>16</sup>**

<b>Denomination</b>	<b>Percentages</b>
Greek or Melkite Catholic	53.0%
Greek Orthodox	27.0%
Catholic	10.0%
Maronite	7.5%
Other	2.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

<sup>15</sup> Lars Hansel's "Christians in Israel: A Complex Question of Identity", *Kas International Reports*, December 2012, available at: [http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas\\_21321-1522-2-30.pdf?101208143510](http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_21321-1522-2-30.pdf?101208143510).

<sup>16</sup> Recent figures were provided by the catholic website [www.catholim.com](http://www.catholim.com). Landau says that the Greek Catholics constitute 42% while the Greek Orthodox represents 32% of the Christian population. See: Jacob M. Landau, *The Arabs in Israel: A Political Study* (Tel Aviv, 1969), p.21.

Editor's note: no reliable and updated figures for the breakdown of Christian denominations are available.

### **Christian Arabs in Israeli Politics**

- Israeli, Christian Arabs have traditionally played a significant role in the Arab political life in Israel and were politically overrepresented in proportion to their population in the Arab society.<sup>17</sup>
- During the period from 1950s through the 1980s, Christian Arab leading figures, such as Emile Habibi (1921-1996), Emile Touma (1919-1985) and Tawfik Toubi (born 1922) came to the forefront through their political activity in the Israeli Communist Party. Today, however, the only Christian Arab Knesset member is Dr. Hanna Suweid of HADASH (DFPE, Democratic Front for Peace and Equality), former head of Eilabun local council.
- In recent years, Christian Arab intellectuals took part in the political discourse regarding Israel's nature as a "Jewish and Democratic" state. Among these were prominent Prof. Nadim Rouhana, founder of the Haifa based Mada al-Carmel Center for Applied Social Research, and Dr. Azmi Bishara, former leader of BALAD (NDA, National Democratic Alliance), an Arab party which since its inception in 1996 represents the secular-national trend in Israeli Arab politics.<sup>18</sup>
- In 2004, Christian Arab Salim Joubran became the first Arab to receive a permanent appointment to the Israeli Supreme Court.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Daphne Tsimhoni, "The Christians in the State of Israel: Between Religion and Politics." In: Elie Rekhes (editor) *The Arabs in Israeli Politics: Dilemmas of Identity* (Tel-Aviv University: The Moshe Dayan Center, 1998), pp. 63-72 [In Hebrew].

<sup>18</sup> Elie Rekhess, "The Arabs of Israel after Oslo: Localization of the National Struggle." *Israel Studies*, vol. 7, no. 3 (2002), pp. 1-44.

<sup>19</sup> University of Haifa, "Justice Salim Jourban, Israel", *The 41<sup>st</sup> Meeting of The Board of Governors, University of Haifa*. See: [http://bogcms.haifa.ac.il/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=52%3Ajudge-salim-jubran-israel&catid=9%3Ahonorary-doctorate-and-awards-&Itemid=23&lang=en](http://bogcms.haifa.ac.il/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=52%3Ajudge-salim-jubran-israel&catid=9%3Ahonorary-doctorate-and-awards-&Itemid=23&lang=en)