

June 2026

country report

Country Office Israel

**KONRAD
ADENAUER
STIFTUNG**



Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa and Abbot Nikodemus Schnabel on Pentecost Sunday at the Dormition Abbey in Jerusalem (Photo: Pascal Franz)

Christian Life in Israel Between Protection, Uncertainty, and Participation

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Pentecost is one of the most important moments in the Christian year; believers come together to celebrate the descent of the Holy Spirit and the beginning of the Church, as was the case recently on Pentecost Sunday in Jerusalem. Jerusalem is holy to three world religions. Jews, Muslims, and Christians look at the city from different perspectives and from all over the world, closely following what happens there. Above all, the sites sacred to the three religions symbolize the Middle East conflict and the still-unresolved question of whether and how Jews and Muslims, Israelis and Palestinians, can live together and side by side in lasting peace. In the meantime, however, another line of conflict has emerged, as Christians in Israel and East Jerusalem increasingly report attacks, repression, and violence. What is the situation regarding the lives of Christians in Israel?

Christians in Israel: An Active, Integrated Minority?

As of December 31, 2025, the country had 10.178 million inhabitants. Of these, 184,200 were Christians, about 1.8 percent of the total population.¹ Over 70 percent of them are Arab Christians. According to the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, most Christians live in northern Israel. The largest Christian communities are in Nazareth (18,900), Haifa (18,800), and Jerusalem, East and West (13,400).²

Statistical data show that 53 percent of Arab Christians complete twelve years of schooling. This makes Arab Christians the social group with the highest rate of high school graduation, higher than among the Arab and Jewish populations as a whole. They are overrepresented in universities, accounting for 2.2 percent of all Israeli students.³ Christians have risen to the top of the scientific community in Israel, such as Hossam Haick, who invented an artificial nose to filter pathogens from exhaled air.⁴ Salim Joubran and George Karra, Christians from Haifa and Jaffa, became Supreme Court justices. Christian lawmakers represent Israelis in the Knesset. Christian schools are institutionally established and a vital part of the Christian presence in the country. Even the smallest Christian communities receive support from Israel to preserve their identity. For over ten years, Israel has provided state funding to Christian communities in the north of the country that are working to preserve Aramaic, the language of Jesus Christ. Elementary school instruction is now offered there in Aramaic.⁵

This allows us to tell a story of Christians that focuses on integration, upward mobility, and a sense of belonging. A recent survey by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, in collaboration with Tel Aviv University, on developments in Arab-Israeli society shows that more than half of Christians feel connected to Israel.⁶ Studies show that nearly 90 percent of Christians in Israel have not experienced discrimination or attacks.⁷ This aligns with a September 2025 survey,⁸ according to which two percent of Christians in Haifa were victims of attacks. However, the impression that Christians are a well-integrated minority does not align with recent events, for example in the Old City of East Jerusalem.

Is anti-Christian sentiment growing in Israel?

On May 14, "Jerusalem Day," Israelis celebrated the reunification of the city of Jerusalem. During the Six-Day War in 1967, East Jerusalem—which had been under Jordanian control since 1949—was conquered by Israel. In 1980, Israel annexed East Jerusalem, though this is largely not recognized internationally, including by Germany. Between 1949 and 1967, Israelis had no access to Judaism's holiest site: the Western Wall of the Temple Mount, the so-called Wailing Wall. Therefore, the access regained in 1967 is a cause for great joy for many Jewish Israelis. Every year on this day, the city organizes concerts, children play in the streets, and vendors offer food and drinks, souvenirs, and special T-shirts at their stalls. In recent years, however, a group of radical Israelis has also formed who use the day to vandalize Arab shops in the Old City. Organizations such as *Tag Meir* and *Standing Together* formed human chains this year to escort Muslims and Christians through the Old City and protect them from radical Israelis.⁹ Images of Israelis in purple safety vests shielding passersby from radical Israeli demonstrators went viral around the world.

Unfortunately, this was not an isolated incident. Christians are increasingly reporting more and more severe attacks. A few days earlier, on May 3, a video was released showing a passerby in Jerusalem pushing a nun to the ground from behind and later kicking her.¹⁰ On April 20, the Israeli Defense Forces confirmed international reports that Israeli soldiers had

destroyed a statue of Jesus in Lebanon.¹¹ On Palm Sunday, March 29, Latin Patriarch Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa was denied entry to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre due to restrictions imposed during the war with Iran.¹² Even Israel's international allies, such as the U.S. Ambassador to Israel, Mike Huckabee,¹³ or Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni,¹⁴ have in the past urged Israel to do more to protect Christians.

Nikodemus Schnabel, abbot of the German-speaking Benedictine Abbey of Dormitio on Mount Zion in Jerusalem, is also regularly the target of attacks. Time and again, the outer walls of his abbey are spray-painted with anti-Christian graffiti; he himself is regularly subjected to spitting and verbal abuse in the Old City of East Jerusalem and on Mount Zion.¹⁵ Attacks on Christians have also occurred in the past. According to Schnabel, however, the number and severity of these attacks have risen significantly since the current Israeli government took office in December 2022. In his view, this increase is linked to the name of the current Minister of National Security, Itamar Ben-Gvir (Jewish Power party). He is normalizing hatred toward Christians and, through his rhetoric, lowering the threshold for verbal and physical attacks. Since he joined the cabinet, radical Israelis have been more willing to take active measures against Christians.¹⁶ Schnabel and Ben-Gvir are already acquainted. In June 2015, radical Israelis carried out an arson attack on the pilgrimage site of Tabgha on the Sea of Galilee.¹⁷ The perpetrators were later defended in court by Ben-Gvir. According to Schnabel, who recently spoke to the news magazine *Der Spiegel*, Ben-Gvir made his hostility toward Christians clear during the trial. To assess whether this means that Christian life in Israel is in danger, the situation must be examined more deeply and broadly.

How many attacks are recorded?

To identify meaningful trends and developments from various media reports and events, the Rossing Center for Education and Dialogue began systematically documenting attacks against Christians in Israel and East Jerusalem in 2023.

The Rossing Center, founded in 2006, aims to promote the coexistence of different religions in Jerusalem and Israel through education and interfaith dialogue. In addition to surveys and analyses, the Center has published the annual report *"Attacks on Christians in Israel and East Jerusalem"* since 2023, which presents data on Christians and incidents of violence. The statistics include physical attacks on Christians, verbal attacks, disruptions of worship services, damage to churches, and similar incidents. Victims can report an incident directly, as can other Christians who witnessed it. Media reports and Christian networks are also used to reconstruct and document each incident as accurately as possible.¹⁸ When comparing the three reports for 2023, 2024, and 2025 side by side, four key findings emerge.

First: The situation for Christians in Israel is becoming more precarious. In 2023, the Rossing Center recorded 89 confirmed incidents; in 2024, the number rose to 111; and in 2025, it reached 155. Particularly alarming: The number of physical attacks increased from 37 in 2023 to 61 in 2025.¹⁹ The figures do not allow for a complete assessment of the actual extent of anti-Christian incidents. The Rossing Center itself assumes there is a certain number of unreported cases, though it does not provide a precise estimate. However, they show that Christian institutions and clergy are increasingly exposed to attacks.

Second: The recorded attacks and assaults are primarily directed against Christians who are visibly recognizable as such, such as nuns and monks. People who are not recognizable as Christians, without a visible cross or other Christian symbols, rarely experience attacks.

Third: Attacks are increasing primarily in Jerusalem, and there especially in or near the Old City in East Jerusalem, such as the Jewish Quarter, as well as on Mount Zion in West Jerusalem, where the Dormition Abbey is also located.²⁰

Fourth: A study cited in the report reveals some details about the perpetrators. A large majority are adolescents or young adults who come from a fundamentalist Jewish background.²¹

This is consistent with other publications by the Rössing Center. The Center not only collects data on attacks but also conducts regular surveys. Most recently, in September 2025, the Center surveyed Jewish Israelis about their views on Christians.²² The results are clear: the younger and more religious the respondents are, the greater their rejection of Christianity. Furthermore, the more religious the respondents, the less contact and interaction they have with Christians or representatives of other religions. The data from the Rössing reports suggest that the area of West and East Jerusalem is one of the focal points of growing hostility toward Christians—that is, the very place that holds central significance for the three Abrahamic religions. At the same time, the report on attacks against Christians cites another study indicating that 3.7 percent of the Israelis surveyed supported spitting attacks on Christians, while 77 percent condemned them.²³

Overall, it is clear that Christians in Israel do not suffer from structural oppression, but rather from social unease caused by religious nationalism, focused primarily on Jerusalem and driven by a small, vocal minority. The vast majority in Israel views these developments critically and respects Christian life.

What is Israel (not yet) doing?

The state authorities certainly have the ability to act more decisively to protect Christians. It should also be noted that the Israeli police arrested the perpetrator who brutally attacked a nun in the area of the Mount of Zion on the very same day.²⁴ The soldier who damaged a statue of Jesus in Lebanon, as well as the soldier who photographed the act, are in military custody. Six other soldiers are under investigation for failing to intervene.²⁵ The senior police officer in the Old City of East Jerusalem, Dvir Tamim, publicly condemned attacks on churches in Jerusalem when he announced that the police had arrested eight youths who had spat on churches.²⁶

The Israeli Foreign Ministry has also taken note of these developments and has responded. The former Israeli ambassador to Azerbaijan, George Deek, an Arab Christian from Jaffa, was appointed on April 23, 2026, by Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar as Israel's first special envoy to the Christian world.²⁷ He is tasked with strengthening Israel's ties to the Christian world and promoting dialogue between the Jewish state and Christian communities worldwide.²⁸

This exchange is necessary. Since the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, and the ensuing wars, the political and social situation in Israel has undergone a lasting transformation. Security concerns have overshadowed all other political considerations. Since October 7, 2023, the number of international visitors and pilgrimages has declined sharply. This is affecting Christian communities in Israel. Christian organizations and monasteries report financial difficulties due to a lack of donations and pilgrims.²⁹ As a result, the Christian presence has generally diminished, and with it, interfaith contact. At the same time, Israeli

government officials and Jewish organizations must address growing anti-Christian sentiment and teach young people tolerance and openness. Even though Israel defines itself as a Jewish state, many cities in the country are home to multiple religions. Precisely because the number of pilgrims—and thus the Christian presence—in Israel and East Jerusalem has declined, Israeli policymakers and society should invest in dialogue programs to facilitate exchange between Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Israel. Educational projects in schools can also help break down prejudices and promote acceptance. This can foster coexistence and a positive perception of one another. Especially since Christian communities serve as an important bridge to Western countries.³⁰ The crucial question is therefore not whether Christians in Israel are coming under pressure. They already are. What matters is whether Israel is willing and able to consistently push back against religious extremism from a vocal minority.

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