



PRESS RELEASE

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Christmas 2005: Christians in Israel

- On the eve of Christmas 2005, there are 146 thousand Christians living in Israel, most of whom are Arab Christians.
- Most of the Christians (60%) live in the northern region. Of those, over 20% live in Nazareth. Large concentrations of Christians also live in Haifa (12%), Jerusalem (10%), and Shefaram (6%).
- The demographic characteristics of the Christian population are closer to those of the Jewish population than to those of the Moslem population.
- The rate of entitlement to a matriculation certificate among Christian pupils is the highest among students of Other religions.

On the eve of the Christmas holiday, 25 December 2005, the Christian population of Israel is estimated at 146 thousand¹, and constitutes 2.1% of the country's total population.

The majority of the Christian population is Arab (119 thousand persons). Approximately 27 thousand more persons are Christians who immigrated to Israel with their families under the Law of Return. Most of them arrived with the influx of immigrants from the Former Soviet Union and Ethiopia in the 1990s. About 5,000 arrived with the waves of immigration in the 1970s and 1980s, mainly from Romania and Poland. Even though most of the Christian population is Arab, its "demographic behavior" differs from that of the rest of the Arab population in Israel (which is mainly Moslem), and is closer to that of the Jewish population.

¹ The population estimates do not include the population of foreign workers who have been residing in Israel for over a year, who are counted among the permanent population of Israel.

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This press release also appears on the CBS website at the address: www.cbs.gov.il/hodaot2005/1_05_91.htm

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Historical Overview

The relative proportion of Arab Christians in the total population of Israel has been declining over the years. In 1949, one year after the establishment of the State of Israel, the Christian population was 34 thousand – 29% of the total population of Israel. In 1972, at the time of the population census, the Christian population numbered 73.8 thousand, but their relative proportion of the total population declined by 2.3%. Today, the Christian population numbers, as mentioned, about 146 thousand. Over the past 10 years, from the 1995 census to today, the proportion of the Christian population has remained stable at 2.1% of the total population of Israel.

The decline in the growth rate of the total Arab population in Israel has been continuing: in 2000 the rate was 2.5%, and in 2004 it was 2004, compared with a growth rate of about 5% during the 1990s. The declining growth rate can be attributed mainly to the decrease in the migration balance (a small proportion of Christians who arrive under the Law of Return), as well as a drop in natural increase (births minus deaths).

Geographical Distribution

The Christian population is primarily urban: 98% of the Christians in Israel live in urban localities (i.e., localities with at least 2,000 residents), compared with 91% of the Jewish population and 93% of the Moslem population.

The Christian population is concentrated in the northern region of Israel and in specific localities. 60% of the Christian population resides in the Northern district, compared with 39% of the Moslem population and 10% of the Jewish population. Approximately 15% of the Christian population resides in the Haifa District, and 11% resides in the Jerusalem District. A small proportion of the Christian population lives in the Southern District (3.5%, most of whom are non-Arab Christians), compared with 15% of the Jewish population and 13% of the Moslem population.

In 2004, more than half of the Christian population is concentrated in a few urban localities such as **Nazareth** (about 20 thousand Christians), **Haifa** (16.7 thousand), **Jerusalem** (14.7 thousand), **Shefaram** (8.6 thousand), **Tel Aviv-Yafo** (5.3 thousand), **Kefar Yasif** (4.6 thousand), and **I'billin** (4.6 thousand).

Table 1: Localities with at least 2,000 Christian Residents – end of 2003

Age

The Christian population is older than the rest of the Arab population of Israel. According to the data from 2004, 34% of all Christians in Israel were aged 0-19 – the same as the proportion of the Jewish population in this age group, and less than the proportion of the Moslem population (about 53%). 8.5 percent of the Christians were aged 65 and over – a proportion much higher than in the Moslem population (2.7%), but lower than in the Jewish population (about 12%).

Projection of the Christian Population, 2010-2020

According to the most recent population projection of the Central Bureau of Statistics, by the end of 2010 the Christian population of Israel will number about 163 thousand persons (thereof about 128 thousand Arab Christians), at an average annual growth rate of 1.9%. By the end of 2020, the Christian population of Israel is expected to increase to 187 thousand (thereof 144.5 thousand Arab Christians). The annual percentage of growth between 2010 and 2020 will decline to 1.4%.

The proportion of the Christian population among the total population of Israel will remain the same as today. In 2010 and 2020, Christians will comprise 2.1% of the total population, as in 2004.

Fertility and Marriage

Marriage patterns are different among the Christian population of Israel than among the populations Jews and Moslems: the age at first marriage of at least half of the Christian grooms (median age) in 2003 was 28.8 years, i.e., about a year-and-a-half older than that of Jewish grooms and about three years older than that of Moslem grooms. By contrast, the average age of Christian brides was 23.6, i.e., over one year younger than that of Jewish brides and about three years older than that of Moslem brides. Among the Christian population, the difference between the ages of grooms and brides who married for the first time was 5.2 years – similar to the age difference between Moslem grooms and brides, but twice as high as the difference among their Jewish counterparts.

In 2004, 2,455 babies were born to Christian women – 82% were born to Arab Christian women (2,025 babies), and 18% were born to other Christian women (430 babies). The fertility rate of Christian women has been declining over the years. Since the 1960s, the number of children that a Christian woman is expected to bear in her lifetime has declined by about 55% - from 4.6 births per woman in 1960 to 2.1 in 2004. The rate is lower than the fertility rate among Moslem women (4.4), Jewish women (2.7), and Druze women (2.6).

Households

In 2004, the number of households with Christian members was estimated at 54.2 thousand private households. The average household size was estimated at 3.5 persons, similar to that of Jewish households (3.1 persons) but much smaller than that of Moslem households (5.2 persons).

Since 1992, the average size of Christian households has declined from 4.2 to 3.5 persons. Some of this decline might be attributed to the relatively small household size among Christians who arrived in Israel from the Former Soviet Union in 1990 and after.

Forty-seven thousand of the Christian households (87%) are family households with at least one family, compared with 95% among the Moslem population and 79% among the Jewish population. The rest of the households consist of only one person or a group of people who do not have a family relationship.

Education

Longitudinal investigation reveals that Christian pupils (who usually constitute 10%-11% of all 12th grade pupils in the Arab education sector), have the highest rates of entitlement to matriculation certificates in Israel. In 2004, 66% of all Christian pupils were entitled to a matriculation certificate, compared with 46% of all Moslem and Druze pupils, and 56% of all pupils in the Hebrew education sector. Furthermore, findings revealed that 78% of all Christian pupils who were entitled to a matriculation certificate also met university entrance requirements, compared with 60% of the Moslem pupils, 54% of the Druze pupils, and 83% of the pupils in the Hebrew education sector who were entitled to a matriculation certificate.

Labour

In 2004, 48.3% of the Christians aged 15 and over belonged to the civilian labour force – a higher percentage than among Moslems (37.9%) and Druze (36.7%), but lower than among the Jewish population (57.7%). Among all men, the rates of participation in the labour force are: 65.6%, 59.9%, 51.7%, and 60.4%, respectively.