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Free to Worship: Religion in Israel

When Israel was established as a safe haven for the Jewish people in the aftermath of the Holocaust, the new state made it a priority to guarantee freedom of religion for all faiths. Indeed, Israel's Declaration of Independence explicitly guarantees the rights of religious minorities, and Israel's Knesset has reaffirmed these rights by statute. In most Middle East countries, minority religious suffer from persecution and discrimination. In Israel, each faith has its own religious council and courts, recognized by law and with jurisdiction over all religious affairs and matters of personal status.

- Israel is uniquely committed among Middle East countries to defending the right of all faiths to worship freely.
- Each religious community in Israel is free, by law and in practice, to exercise its faith, to observe its holidays and weekly day of rest and to administer its internal affairs.
- Since Israel's unification of Jerusalem in 1967, Israel has guaranteed movement between Israeli and Arab halves of the city and freedom of access to holy sites for all religions.
- Before 1967, Jews were completely barred from visiting holy places such as the Western Wall, and Christians living in Israel were allowed to visit churches and holy sites in East Jerusalem only once a year. Today, Jews and Christians are free to visit their holy sites at times of their choosing.
- Israel has also allowed Islamic religious authorities administrative control over the Temple Mount, and freedom of worship at their holy sites within the area.
- The Protection of Holy Places Law, enacted by the Knesset in 1967, prescribes penalties for those caught desecrating or impeding access to holy sites associated with any faith.
- Israel permits its Muslim citizens, by arranging for them to use Jordanian travel documents, to pass through countries that do not recognize the State of Israel, in order to fulfill their religious obligation of pilgrimage to Mecca.
- Israel consistently maintains a policy of allowing Christian leaders in Israel who may head small Christian communities in Arab countries to regularly travel to these communities.

- Israel's Ministry of Religious Affairs is responsible for providing religious services to the population of Israel, including those of the myriad of non-Jewish religious groups in the country.
- The Druze community in Israel is officially recognized as a separate religious entity with its own courts and spiritual leadership. Members of the Druze community have attained high-level positions in the political, public and military spheres.
- The Israeli cities of Akko and Haifa are home to the holiest sites in all of the Baha'i faith. The Baha'i religion, a monotheistic faith emphasizing the spiritual unity of all humankind, was founded in Persia in the mid-19th century and is harshly persecuted throughout the Middle East, especially in Iran. In Israel, however, the Baha'i faithful are free to worship and make pilgrimage to the religion's holiest places located throughout the country

Additional Resources:

Declaration of The Establishment of State of Israel

<http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Peace%20Process/Guide%20to%20the%20Peace%20Process/Declaration%20of%20Establishment%20of%20State%20of%20Israel>

The Embassy of Israel

<http://www.israemb.org/education/publications/Religious%20Diversity.pdf>

Israel's Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty

http://www.knesset.gov.il/laws/special/eng/basic3_eng.htm

Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs

<http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Facts+About+Israel/People/SOCIETY-+Religious+Freedom.htm>

The Protection of Holy Places Law

<http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Peace+Process/Guide+to+the+Peace+Process/Protection+of+Holy+Places+Law.htm>

The Druze in Israel

http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFAArchive/2000_2009/2002/12/Focus%20on%20Israel-%20The%20Druze%20in%20Israel

The Baha'i World Center

<http://www.bahai.org/dir/bwc>

The Jewish Virtual Library

http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Society_&_Culture/freedom.html