



AFEDJ

American Friends of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem

# Bearing Witness

A Journey with Holy Land Christians

GETTING TO KNOW THE HOLY LAND

# Israel and Nazareth

# ISRAEL and NAZARETH

*“Joy is part of our lives even when we are under attack. When we party, we really party. When we mourn, we really mourn. We have four seasons. We live four seasons every day.*

—The Ven. Samuel Barhoum of Christ Episcopal School in Nazareth on how Arab citizens of Israel approach daily life

Israel was established as a homeland for the Jewish people in 1948 and is often referred to as the Jewish state. About 75% of the population are Jews from a diversity of Jewish backgrounds. Arab citizens of Israel (mostly Palestinians) make up about 21% of the population. Most of the remaining 4% are non-Arab Christians and Druze. Hebrew is the primary language of the state and is spoken by most of the population. Arabic is spoken by the Arab minority, with Hebrew taught as a second language in Arab schools.

Nazareth is the capital of the North District of Israel and is often referred to as the “the Arab capital of Israel.” The city’s inhabitants are predominantly Arab citizens of Israel – 69% are Muslim and 40% Christian. As the largest Arab city in Israel, Nazareth today is a cultural, political, religious, economic, and commercial center of the Arab citizens of Israel.

During the 1948 Arab-Israeli War Nazareth was supposed to be cleared of its Palestinian population, just like other Palestinian cities in Israel. Ben Dunkelman, a Canadian Jew who was an Israeli army commander, disobeyed orders to expel Nazareth’s residents. Nazareth remained a totally Arab city and by the end of the war, Nazareth’s population saw a large influx of Arab refugees from major urban centers and rural villages in the Galilee.

## Geography

Israel	Nazareth
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A country in the Middle East located at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea, bounded to the north by Lebanon, to the northeast by Syria, to the east and southeast by the West Bank and Jordan, to the southwest by Egypt, and to the west by the Mediterranean Sea</li> <li>• It consists of a lengthy coastal plain, highlands in the north and central regions, and the Negev desert in the south.</li> <li>• 290 miles north-to-south and 85 miles east-to-west at its widest point</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The city is nestled in a hollow plateau (the Jezreel Valley) some 1,200 feet above sea level, surrounded by 1,600-foot-high hills that form the most southerly points of the Lebanon mountain range</li> <li>• About 15.5 miles from the Sea of Galilee</li> </ul>



Syria

Golan Heights

Sea of Galilee

Haifa

Nazareth

Jordan River

1994 Treaty Line

West Bank

Janin

Nablus

Ramallah  
Jericho

Amman

Jerusalem

East Jerusalem

Bethlehem

Dead Sea

Hebron

Gaza Strip

Gaza

Deir Al-Balah

Khan Yunis

Rafah

1950 Armistice Line

1949 Armistice Line

Israel

Egypt

Jordan

0 40 km  
0 40 mi

## Population

Israel	Nazareth
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 9,5000,000</li> <li>• 74% Jews</li> <li>• 21% Arabs (Muslims, Druze, and Christians)</li> <li>• 4% other</li> <li>• 90% of the people living in Israel live in or around urban areas, especially Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Haifa.</li> <li>• There are eight Jewish-Arab “mixed cities” in Israel. They include Jerusalem, Haifa, Lod, Ramle, and Jaffa. This is an official designation for cities with more than 10% of the population registered as “Arabs” and more than 10% registered as “Jews.” These are the main places in Israel where Jews and Arabs encounter each other. Very limited population mixing exists in Israel outside of these eight cities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 78,000</li> <li>• Virtually all residents are Palestinian Arabs</li> <li>• There is a significant Christian population (although this is decreasing), made up of various denominations. By far the largest is the Greek-Orthodox community.</li> </ul>

## Religions

Israel	Nazareth
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 74% Jewish</li> <li>• 18% Muslim (mostly Sunni)</li> <li>• 2% Christian</li> <li>• 1.6% Druze</li> <li>• 4.4% other</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 70% Muslim</li> <li>• 30% Christian (Greek Orthodox, Melkite Greek Catholic, Latin Catholic, Maronite, Armenian Orthodox, and Protestant)</li> </ul>

## Government and Politics

Israel is a parliamentary democracy with universal suffrage. Israel’s lawmaking body, the Knesset, is a single-chamber legislature with 120 members who are elected every four years (or more frequently if a Knesset vote of nonconfidence in the government results in an early election). Israel’s party system has traditionally been complex and volatile: splinter groups are commonly formed, and party alliances often change. Political parties are secular or religious. The Jewish secular parties are Zionist and range in orientation from left-wing socialist to capitalist, and the religious parties tend to have ethnic appeal. There are also several small parties that represent primarily Arab constituents. In the November 2022 election thirteen different political parties fielded candidates.

In 2018 the Israeli Parliament passed a Basic Law that characterizes the State of Israel as principally a “Nation State of the Jewish People,” and Hebrew as its official language. The bill ascribes “special status” to the Arabic language. The bill gives Jews a unique right to national self-determination and views the development of Jewish settlements as “a national interest,” empowering the government to “take steps to encourage, advance, and implement this interest.”

## Economy

Israel	Nazareth
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Israel is considered the most advanced country in Western Asia and the Middle East in economic and industrial development. The country's university education system and a motivated, educated populace have led to rapid economic development.</li> <li>• Israel is first in the world in expenditure on research and development as a percentage of GDP and has the second-largest number of startup companies in the world after the United States. Israel's development of cutting-edge technologies in software, communications, and the life sciences have evoked comparisons with the U.S.'s Silicon Valley.</li> <li>• Despite limited natural resources, intensive development of the agricultural and industrial sectors has made Israel largely self-sufficient in food production.</li> <li>• Israel is a world leader in solar energy technology. Over 90% of Israeli homes use solar energy for hot water, the highest percentage in the world.</li> <li>• Arab citizens of Israel often face discrimination in work opportunities, pay, and conditions, both because of the inadequate implementation of equal-opportunity legislation and because of entrenched structural barriers, including poor or non-existent public transportation, a lack of industrial zones, and a shortage of state-run daycare centers.</li> <li>• Few Arab citizens of Israel do military service so they are excluded from many benefits in housing, employment, and education that are guaranteed to Jewish citizens who complete service in the IDF (Israeli Defense Forces).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are over 20 Arab-owned high-tech companies in Nazareth, mostly in the field of software development.</li> <li>• Nazareth is a regional market and trade center for the Arabs in the Galilee region. Tourism and light manufacturing are also important.</li> <li>• The Christian communities in Nazareth tend to be wealthier and better educated compared to Arabs elsewhere in Israel, and Christians of Nazareth occupy most of the leading business positions.</li> </ul>

## Education

- About half of students in Nazareth attend 10 Christian schools, considered among the best schools in the country. Only 4% of Arab students in Israel attend Christian schools, yet 34% of Arab university students in Israel come from Christian schools.
- Arab Christian schools accommodate Christian and Muslim students from across the region.
- Christian schools receive considerably less subsidy from the government than Jewish schools.
- Palestinian-Arab schoolchildren make up about 25% of the student population in Israel government schools but their schools receive three times less funding from the Ministry of Education.
- The drop-out rate among Arab pupils is two times higher than among Jewish students.
- Only 30% of Arab students who take the national university matriculation exam (which is offered only in Hebrew) qualify, as compared to 75% of Jewish youth.
- Since 1948, Palestinian history as well as poetry and literature are not taught in government sponsored schools.

## Infrastructure

- Nazareth has three hospitals. They all are Christian-affiliated hospitals.
- While Israeli law provides that equitable, high-quality health services should be provided to all residents of Israel, various barriers—including the lack of clinics and hospitals in Arab towns and villages and limitations on mobility—mean that Palestinian citizens are frequently unable to exercise their right to the highest sustainable standard of health.

## Everyday Life and Challenges

Nazareth is the biggest Arab city in the Galilee region in northern Israel. In general, the city is poor, overcrowded, and underdeveloped. Thousands of tourists from around the world visit its Christian holy places every year. Most famous is The Church of the Annunciation, also referred to as the Basilica of the Annunciation. Nazareth lives in the shadow of Nof Hagalil, a Jewish city built nearby which is the administrative capital of the Galilee where important government offices such as the district court are located. Some young Arabs from Nazareth move to Nof Hagalil where there are more opportunities for work. About 93% of Israel's land is nationalized, and much of it is allocated explicitly for Jewish communities. While Arab citizens constitute 20% of the population, only about 3.5% of Israel's land is owned by them. To many Arab citizens of Israel, questions of identity, self-definition, and education lie at the heart of their perceived marginalization within a Jewish-dominated, Israeli state.



## Finding Nazareth and the Galilee Region in Scripture

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**Basilica of the Annunciation, Nazareth** (*Luke 1:26-38*)

**Mary's Well, Nazareth** (*Gospel of James – noncanonical*)

**Capernaum** (*teachings, calling disciples, healings – noted numerous times in all four gospels*)

**Tabgha** (*John 21:1-14*) *Feeding of the 5,000*

**Mount of Beatitudes** (*Matthew 5:1-12*)

**Cana** (*John 2:1-11*)

### Meet **Father Nael Rahmoun**

The Rev. Nael Abu Rahmoun, rector of Christ Church in Nazareth, was born in Reineh, a town between Nazareth and Cana in the Galilee region of northern Israel. Fr. Nael explains that his ministry is driven by his call to serve his people and his church. “The voice of the Lord in my heart continually inspires me,” he says. His focus at Christ Church, where he has served since 2013, is to welcome every member and encourage them to participate in its programs and activities and to support the faith journeys of members of all ages. In the Nazareth community, where Christians are in the minority, connection to a faith community is vital to a sense of identity and belonging. Fr. Nael says, “I am inspired by the commitment of older generations to the church, so my focus is on nurturing the faith and commitment of young couples and their families who are the future of our church.”



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American Friends of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem  
25 Old King’s Highway N. Suite 13  
Darien, CT 06820  
[www.afedj.org](http://www.afedj.org)

Authors: Sharon Ely Pearson, Heidi Shott, John Lent  
Design: Peg Golden Arrington  
Video: Five Pebbles Productions  
Images: AFEDJ and Shutterstock.