

# RELIGION & GOVERNMENT IN THE MIDDLE EAST

In this lesson, students will explore the Middle East's complex and diverse religious landscape and consider a variety of ways that religion and government are intertwined.

## Essential Questions

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- How should religion and government interact in a modern nation-state?
- How do religion and government shape each other?
- How does a nation's form of government impact the role of religion in that society?

## Learning Objectives

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Students will:

- Explore the challenges inherent in defining both “religion” and “government”;
- Develop an awareness of the diversity of both the religious makeup and government landscape of countries in the Middle East;
- Examine ways in which religion and government are intertwined in the foundational documents of four countries;
- Identify both the challenges and opportunities that the relationship between religion and government can pose in these particular national contexts.

## Materials Needed

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### PRIMARY & SUPPLEMENTARY RESOURCES

- DOCUMENT SET A: *The United States*
- FACT SHEET and DOCUMENT SET B: *Lebanon*
- FACT SHEET and DOCUMENT SET C: *Israel*
- FACT SHEET and DOCUMENT D: *Egypt*
- FACT SHEET and DOCUMENT E: *Iran*

### MULTIMEDIA

- *Google Slides deck—for instructor presentation*

## Timing and Flow

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This lesson can be completed in 1-2 class periods, depending on how much time you have available. If you have *only one class period*:

- Provide a set of guidelines for teaching controversial topics and go over them with your students (see Lesson Plan). 5-8 minutes.
- Consider working definitions of the terms “religion” and “government” (see **Google Slides deck**). 8-10 minutes.
- Focus on the **Primary & Supplementary Resources** so that students will be able to get a sense of how religion and government intersect in the foundational documents of the United States and four countries in the Middle East (Lebanon, Israel, Egypt, and Iran). 35-40 minutes.

If you have *two class periods*:

- Spend the first class period introducing the material (Teaching Controversial Topics, Background, and Defining the Terms).
- Use the second class period to focus on the constitutions/foundational documents of each of the countries, beginning with the United States.

## Lesson Plan

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### 1. INTRODUCTION: TEACHING CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS

Talking about either religion or government in the classroom can be controversial. One way to begin the conversation about religion and government in the Middle East is by asking: **What makes talking about religion or government (or both) hard, especially in a classroom setting?** You may want to have them do this first in pairs or in small groups and then as a class, with each pair or group sharing responses.

Then, ask the students to think about some ground rules that they might follow as they talk about religion and government throughout the lesson. Write these down so that you can refer to them throughout the class session(s).

The University of Michigan Center for Research on Teaching and Learning provides some suggestions for facilitating controversial conversations, which you may find useful:

- “Listen respectfully, without interrupting.
- Listen actively and with an ear to understanding others' views. (Don't just think about what you are going to say while someone else is talking.)
- Criticize ideas, not individuals.
- Commit to learning, not debating. Comment in order to share information, not to persuade.
- Avoid blame, speculation, and inflammatory language.
- Allow everyone the chance to speak.
- Avoid assumptions about any member of the class or generalizations about social groups. Do not ask individuals to speak for their (perceived) social group.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, University of Michigan. Guidelines for discussion of racial conflict and the language of hate, bias, and discrimination. <http://www.crlt.umich.edu/publinks/racialguidelines.php>. You may also find this resource to be helpful: *Ten Tips for Facilitating Classroom Discussions on Sensitive Topics*. Alicia Moore and Molly Deshaies. PBS. [www.goo.gl/oxymKV](http://www.goo.gl/oxymKV)

## 2. BACKGROUND: WHERE/WHAT IS THE MIDDLE EAST?

Before you move on to consider the topic of religion and government in the Middle East, you may want to consider reviewing some basic geographic and demographic information about the region. This is available in the **Google Slide deck**. If this option is not available to you, the following talking points may be used:

- Even though the term “Middle East” is used all of the time, there is no official listing of countries in the Middle East. Sometimes the term is used to refer to the 17 countries in this region, which have a population of over 400 million.
- At other times, however, the term Middle East is used more broadly to also include countries in North Africa from Morocco and Algeria to Sudan, bringing the number up to 22. When used this way, the region may be identified as MENA or the Middle East/North Africa.
- With its size and geographic spread, the Middle East is an incredibly diverse area—linguistically, ethnically, and religiously. The largest ethnic groups include the Turks, Persians, Arabs, Kurds, and Azeris (a Turkic ethnic group). There are also many smaller groups, including the Greeks, Berbers, Assyrians, Jews, Copts, and Druze, to name just a few.
- Arabic is the most commonly spoken language, and Persian is a close second, followed by Turkish, Kurdish, and Hebrew.
- Religiously, the Middle East is also varied. In addition to Muslims, who make up the majority of the population, there are also Christians, Jews, Hindus, Bahais, Sikhs, and Buddhists, along with many other smaller traditions. All of the Middle Eastern countries have majority Muslim populations except Israel which has a majority Jewish population.

## 3. DEFINING THE TERMS: RELIGION AND GOVERNMENT

As terms, both religion and government are difficult to define because they cover such a wide range of human activity. Draw on the prior knowledge and experience of your students by asking them how they would define each of these terms. Then, ask them to consider their answers in light of the definitions of religion and government outlined below. You will find slides with definitions in the **Google Slide deck**.

While there are no universally accepted definitions of either religion or government, there are “working” definitions that scholars in these fields have developed as a way to approach each area in an accessible and academically appropriate way. For this lesson, **religions** are considered systems of:

- BEHAVIOR, which includes practices and rituals that can range from prayer and dietary rules to engaging in charitable acts.
- BELIEF, which can be related to a deity or deities or it can be about truths that a community holds about human nature or the world in which they live.
- BELONGING, which is about community. Since ancient times, what we call religion has created a sense of communal identity and being part of something larger than oneself.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History added the *SUPPLEMENT: Religious Studies Companion Document for the C3 Framework* in 2017, pp. 92-27. <https://www.socialstudies.org/sites/default/files/2017/Jun/c3-framework-for-social-studies-rev0617.pdf>.

### Defining Religion and Government

The following definition of religion shows how the categories of behavior, belief, and belonging are related to each other:

*“Religion is the tie that binds a community together through various forms of belief and practice. It is an institution that contributes important ideas to society at large; it also connects with specific aspects of non-religious social life, like economics and politics”* (American Academy of Religion, 2004).

In this lesson, the term “government” is broadly understood as any system *“through which ordered rule is maintained, its central features being the ability to make collective decisions and the capacity to enforce them”* (Heywood, Andrew. *Politics*. 4th ed., 2014).

## 4. BEGIN AT HOME

Before moving to the Middle East, it may be helpful to begin at home, in the United States. For this exercise, each student should have a copy of **DOCUMENT SET A: The United States**. Here are two options for working through this set of excerpts, depending on the time that you have available:

- **Option 1:** Divide students into small groups or have them work in pairs to follow the directions on the exercise. Then have each pair or small group join another pair/group where they can share what they discovered. As a class, work through the questions at the end of the exercise.
- **Option 2:** Work through this exercise as a class and move through each section, with students taking turns reading the material out loud. After students read each section, ask the class to identify material that they think might relate to religion and whether it constitutes an attitude, perspective, or policy (rule or law). The students can work through the questions at the end in pairs/small groups and then share what they’ve **observed, learned, or wondered about** with the whole class.

## 5. MOVE TO THE MIDDLE EAST

In this lesson, students are going to focus on the intersection of religion and government in the constitutions and foundational documents of Lebanon, Israel, Egypt, and Iran. Before analyzing the primary sources, move through the slides the **Google Slide deck**, which provides a brief overview of each country so that students have a sense of the broader context.

### Primary Source Analysis

1. Divide the students into working groups of 4-5. **Each group should have the fact sheet and document collection of one country.** The fact sheets provide more detail about each country, including a brief description of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the country’s government. These details are particularly helpful in assisting students understand how power is distributed and how religion often plays a key role.

2. Each group should follow this set directions first (found at the beginning of each document collection):
  - a. Go through each excerpt and **underline/highlight the phrases or sentences** that you think might have something to do with religion.
  - b. Does the portion you've marked reflect a **religious attitude or perspective**? Or is it a **statement of policy** about the role of religion in society? Or maybe both? Explain in the right-hand column.
3. Then, the group should together **answer the questions at the end of the document collection**. These questions are designed to help them to identify patterns, make inferences, and draw preliminary conclusions.
4. Each group will **share with the class what they learned** about the country they analyzed.
5. Conclude group with with a discussion, asking students:
  - a. What kinds of questions do these documents raise for you?
  - b. What surprised you about these documents?
  - c. What did you find most interesting?
  - d. What did you learn from this experience?
6. Check for understanding through an exit ticket, asking students to use what they have learned to respond to one of the Essential Questions:
  - a. How should religion and government interact in a modern nation-state?
  - b. How do religion and government shape each other?
  - c. How does a nation's form of government impact the role of religion in that society?

## DOCUMENT SET A: The United States

### Directions:

1. Go through each excerpt and **underline/highlight the phrases or sentences** that you think might have something to do with religion.
2. Does the portion you've marked reflect a **religious attitude or perspective**? Or is it a **statement of policy** about the role of religion in society? Or maybe both? Explain in the right-hand column.

### EXCERPTS

#### **DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE (July 4, 1776)**

When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. ...

#### **THE CONSTITUTION OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

*The Constitution was ratified by the required number of states by June 21, 1788, and went into effect on March 4, 1789.*

#### **Preamble**

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

#### **Article 6: Debts, Supremacy, Oaths**

...The Senators and Representatives before mentioned, and the Members of the several State Legislatures, and all executive and judicial Officers, both of the United States and of the several States, shall be bound by Oath or Affirmation, to support this Constitution; but no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States...

**THE BILL OF RIGHTS**

*Amendment I: FREEDOM OF RELIGION, SPEECH, PRESS, ASSEMBLY, AND PETITION. Passed by Congress September 25, 1789. Ratified December 15, 1791.*

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

**THE PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE OF THE UNITED STATES**

*The pledge was written in the late 19th century. It was adopted by the U.S. Congress in 1942 and the words "under God" were adopted in 1954.*

I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

**THE SUPREME COURT**

*Associate Justice Tom Clark wrote in Abington Sch. Dist. v. Shempp, 374 U.S. 203 (1963):*

[I]t might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment.

**Questions:**

1. When you consider these documents together, what do you notice about the role of religion in the United States?
2. How does the United States deal with the issue of religious freedom?
3. Do you see points in these documents where religious interests and government interests might come into conflict or tension? Explain.

# Lebanon Fact Sheet

**Population:** 5,773,493 (2023 est.)



**Type of government:** parliamentary republic within a framework of **confessionalism**—a system in which political power is distributed proportionally among 18 recognized religious sects.

**Constitution:** adopted in 1926; amended several times, last in 2004

**Legal system:** mixed legal system of civil law based on the French civil code, Ottoman legal tradition, and religious laws covering personal status, marriage, divorce, and other family relations of the various religious communities

**Executive branch:** president, who is indirectly elected by the National Assembly, must be Christian (Maronite Catholic); prime minister must be Muslim (Sunni); speaker of the parliament must be Muslim (Shi'a)

**Legislative branch:** unicameral National Assembly (128 seats divided evenly between Muslim and Christian communities)

**Judicial branch:** highest courts are the Supreme Court and the Constitutional Council; a number of lower courts (including religious courts that deal largely with personal status issues such as marriage, divorce, etc.)

**Religion:** Muslim 54% (25% Sunni, 29% Shia), Christian 34.5% (includes 27% Catholic, 6% Orthodox, 1% other Christian), Druze 5%, very small numbers of Baha'is, Buddhists, and Hindus

**Ethnic Groups:** Arab 95%, Armenian 4%, other 1%

[Lebanon Country Overview](#). World Health Organization International, 2023.

[Lebanon National Profile](#). The Association of Religion Data Archives, 2025.

Map: *The World Factbook* 2018. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2018.

## HISTORICAL TIMELINE

(of foreign rule beginning with the Roman Empire)

### 64 BCE

Pompey the Great conquers the region for the Roman Empire. It had been part of the Hellenistic Empire.

### 636 CE

Muslim Arabs conquer the **Levant** (Eastern Mediterranean) which had been under Roman, then Byzantine control for almost 700 years; successive Muslim rulers and empires ruled the region during this period.

### 1099

The region was ruled by European Crusaders; many French European Christians established a presence in the area.

### 1291

Mamluk dynasty conquered the area, ruling from Cairo.

### 1516

Ottoman Empire controls the region, then part of what was called "Greater Syria" until the end of World War I. Between 1918-1920, the region was under Allied control.

### 1920

What is today Lebanon was assigned by the League of Nations to the French as one of the Mandates that was created in the Middle East in the aftermath of World War I.

### 1943

Lebanon gains independence from France.

### 1975-1990

Civil war which resulted in an estimated 120,000 fatalities and years of political and economic instability. **Sectarianism**—belief in the superiority of one's own religious or political group over others—was one of the major causes.

## DOCUMENT SET B: Lebanon

The Lebanese Constitution was adopted in 1926 but has been amended many times since, most recently in 2004.

### Directions:

1. Go through each excerpt and **underline/highlight the phrases or sentences** that you think might have something to do with religion.
2. Does the portion you've marked reflect a **religious attitude or perspective**? Or is it a **statement of policy** about the role of religion in society? Or maybe both? Explain in the right-hand column.

### EXCERPTS

#### CONSTITUTION OF LEBANON

##### Preamble

A. Lebanon is a sovereign, free, and independent homeland. An ultimate homeland for all its sons; unitary in terms of land, people, and institutions, within its boundaries; as provided in this Constitution, and as recognized internationally.

B. Lebanon has an Arab identity and belonging. ...

C. Lebanon is a democratic parliamentary republic based upon the respect of public freedoms, freedom of opinion and freedom of belief; and of social justice and equality in rights and duties among all citizens, without distinction or preference.

H. Eliminating political **sectarianism** is a basic national objective, to be achieved according to a transitional plan.

**sectarianism:** belief in the superiority of one's own religious or political group over others which can result in disagreement or conflict

##### Article 9

Freedom of conscience is absolute. In assuming the obligations of glorifying God, the Most High, the State respects all religions and **creeds** and safeguards the freedom of exercising the religious **rites** under its protection, without disturbing the public order. It also guarantees the respect of the **system of personal status** and religious interests of the people, regardless of their different creeds.

**creeds:** systems of religious belief

**rites:** religious ceremony or practice

**system of personal status:** this usually refers to a set of laws dealing with marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance; It may also include religious conversion

*Lebanon's Constitution (continued)*

**Article 10**

Education is free so long as it does not disturb the public order, does not violate the morals, and does not touch the dignity of any religion or creed. The rights of communities to establish their own private schools cannot be violated, provided that they comply with the general requirements laid down by the State with respect to public education.

**Article 24**

Until such time as the Chamber enacts new electoral laws on a **non-confessional basis**, the distribution of seats shall be according to the following principles:

- a. Equal representation between Christians and Muslims.
- b. Proportional representation among the confessional groups within each of the two religious communities.
- c. Proportional representation among geographic regions.

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**non-confessional basis:** in this case, non-religious

Retrieved from: [constituteproject.org](http://constituteproject.org)

**LEBANON'S NATIONAL PACT OF 1943** (description)

Based on the National Pact of 1943, an unwritten agreement reached between religious leaders at that time and which has held as much power as the written constitution, the top posts in the Lebanese government are assigned to specific religious communities. As a result of the pact, the president of the republic is a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of parliament a Shia Muslim.

**Questions:**

1. When you consider these sources, what do you notice about the role of religion in Lebanon?
  
2. What are some of the particular challenges that Lebanon faces when it comes to the relationship between government and religion? Explain.
  
3. Can you think of any alternatives, when it comes to the role of religion in government that might work in Lebanon? Describe.

# Israel Fact Sheet

**Population:** 10,224,000 (April 2026 est.)

**Government:** parliamentary democracy



**Constitution:** no formal constitution; many functions of a constitution are filled by the Declaration of Establishment (1948), 14 Basic Laws (11 of which have been amended), and the Law of Return

**Legal system:** mixed legal system based on the Ottoman legal tradition, English common law, British Mandate regulations, and Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religious laws

**Legislative branch:** unicameral Knesset

(parliament), 120 seats; members elected by nationwide vote in which voters vote for one party, not individuals; parties must receive a minimum of 3.25% of the nationwide vote to get seats in the Knesset

**Executive branch:** the prime minister is usually the head of the political party which receives the highest number of votes; the president is elected by the Knesset

**Judicial branch:** Supreme Court and a number of lower courts (including religious courts that deal largely with marriage, divorce, and conversion)

**Religion:** Jewish 77%, Muslim 16.5%, Christian 2%, Druze 1.6%, other 3% (2025 est.)

**Ethnic groups:** Jewish 77%, non-Jewish 23% (mostly Arab) (2025 est.)

[Israel National Profile](#). The Association of Religion Data Archives, 2025.

[Israel at 78: a statistical glimpse](#). Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026.

Map: *The World Factbook* 2018. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2018.

## HISTORICAL TIMELINE

(The ancient Israelite Kingdom was formed around 1,000 BCE and went through periods of foreign rule over the course of a millennium, this timeline begins when the region is under the control of the Roman Empire.)

### 70 CE

Jews in the region revolt against the Roman Empire, which conquered the region in 64 BCE. The Revolt was crushed and many Jews were expelled or fled. In the second century, Romans changed the name from Judea to Syria-Palaestina.

### 636

Muslim Arabs conquer the **Levant** (Eastern Mediterranean) which had been under Roman, then Byzantine control for almost 700 years; successive Muslim rulers and empires rule the region for over 450 years.

### 1099

The Kingdom of Jerusalem is established by European Crusaders in this region.

### 1291

The Mamluk dynasty conquer the area, ruling from Cairo and bringing an end to Crusader control.

### 1516

The Ottoman Empire conquers the region, then part of what was called "Greater Syria," controlling it until the end of World War I.

### 1920

The area that today constitutes Israel and Jordan is assigned to British control as the Mandate for Palestine.

### 1946

The independent Hashemite Kingdom of Transjordan (what is today Jordan) is established.

### 1948

The British withdraw from the region and the State of Israel is established.

## DOCUMENT SET C: Israel

Israel does not have a formal constitution; many functions of a constitution are filled by the Declaration of Establishment (1948), the Status Quo agreements, 14 Basic Laws (11 of which have been amended), and the Law of Return.

### Directions:

1. Go through each excerpt and **underline/highlight the phrases or sentences** that you think might have something to do with religion.
2. Does the portion you've marked reflect a **religious attitude or perspective**? Or is it a **statement of policy** about the role of religion in society? Or maybe both? Explain in the right-hand column.

### EXCERPTS

#### **DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE (1948)**

ERETZ-ISRAEL [the Land of Israel] was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped. Here they first attained to statehood, created cultural values of national and universal significance and gave to the world the eternal **Book of Books**.

After being forcibly **exiled** from their land, the people kept faith with it throughout their **Dispersion** and never ceased to pray and hope for their return to it and for the restoration in it of their political freedom.

Impelled by this historic and traditional attachment, Jews strove in every successive generation to re-establish themselves in their ancient homeland. ...

THE STATE OF ISRAEL will be open for Jewish immigration and for the **Ingathering of the Exiles**; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

**Book of Books:** the Hebrew Bible

**Dispersion:** creation of Jewish communities outside the land of Israel

**exiled:** expelled or banished

**Ingathering of the Exiles:** bringing together Jews who live outside Israel

Retrieved from:

<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-declaration-of-the-establishment-of-the-state-of-israel>

### **STATUS QUO AGREEMENTS** (summary of content)

"In the absence of a formal decision regarding the relationship between religion and state, the situation in Israel is governed by a mechanism that maintains existing arrangements, which date back to the pre-state period.

"...David Ben Gurion, then the chairman of the Jewish Agency, issued a letter known as the "status quo letter," in which he guaranteed that the Jewish state would take Jewish law (halakha) into account on four issues [in relation to Jews]: the Sabbath would be a weekly day of rest, the kosher laws would be observed in state institutions and in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), marriage and personal status would be determined by Jewish religious law, and the religious school system would have educational autonomy. The letter...had no legal force...but has always been perceived as binding."

Reprinted from Y.Z. Stern, "Religion, State, and the Jewish Identity..." (Brookings Institution, 2017)

### **THE LAW OF RETURN (1950)**

*Following the Holocaust, when Jews were stripped of their rights and denied entry to other countries, the State of Israel enacted the Law of Return, ensuring a safe haven for Jews.*

1. Every Jew has the right to come to this country as an **oleh**. ...

Amendment to Law of Return made in 1970:

4A. (a) The rights of a Jew under this Law and the rights of an *oleh* under the Nationality Law, as well as the rights of an *oleh* under any other enactment, are also vested in a child and a grandchild of a Jew, the spouse of a Jew, the spouse of a child of a Jew and the spouse of a grandchild of a Jew, except for a person who has been a Jew and has voluntarily changed his religion.

4 B. For the purposes of this Law, "Jew" means a person who was born of a Jewish mother or has become converted to Judaism and who is not a member of another religion.

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**oleh:** Hebrew term for any Jew immigrating into Israel

Retrieved from: <https://knesset.gov.il/laws/special/eng/return.htm>

**BASIC LAW: ISRAEL AS THE NATION-STATE OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE (2018)**

1. The State of Israel

- A. The land of Israel is the historical homeland of the Jewish people, in which the State of Israel was established.
- B. The State of Israel is the national home of the Jewish people, in which it fulfills its natural, cultural, religious and historical right to self-determination.
- C. The right to exercise national self-determination in the State of Israel is unique to the Jewish people.

6. The *Diaspora*

- B. The state shall act within the Diaspora to strengthen the affinity between the state and members of the Jewish people.
- C. The state shall act to preserve the cultural, historical and religious heritage of the Jewish people among Jews in the Diaspora.

10. The *Sabbath* and the festivals of Israel are the established days of rest in the state; Non-Jews have a right to maintain days of rest on their Sabbaths and festivals; Details of this issue will be determined by law.

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**Diaspora:** Jews living outside Israel

**Sabbath:** the seventh day of the week observed by Jews from Friday evening to Saturday evening as a day of rest and worship

Retrieved from:  
<https://www.timesofisrael.com/final-text-of-jewish-nation-state-bill-set-to-become-law/>. Translated from Hebrew.

**Questions:**

1. When you consider these documents together, what do you notice about the role of religion in Israel?
2. What are some factors that complicate the relationship between religion and government in Israel?
3. How does Israel try to both guarantee religious freedom and safeguard Jewish identity?

# Egypt Fact Sheet

**Population:** 114,535,772 (2023 est.)

**Type of government:** presidential republic



**Constitution:** several previous versions; latest approved by a constitutional committee in December 2013, approved by referendum and ratified by interim president in January 2014

**Legal system:** mixed legal system based on Napoleonic civil and penal law, Islamic religious law, and vestiges of colonial-era laws; judicial review of the constitutionality of laws by the Supreme Constitutional Court

**Executive branch:** president elected by absolute majority popular vote; prime minister appointed by the president, approved by the House of Representatives

**Legislative branch:** unicameral House of Representatives; 596 seats; 448 members directly elected by individual candidacy system, additional 120 members elected according to quotas for women, youth, Christians and workers, and 28 members appointed by the president

**Judicial branch:** Supreme Constitutional Court; Court of Cassation; Supreme Administrative Court; and lower courts including family courts)

**Religion:** Muslim (predominantly Sunni) 90%, Christian (majority Coptic Orthodox, other Christians include Armenian Apostolic, Catholic, Maronite, Orthodox, and Anglican) 10% (2015 est.)

**Ethnic groups:** Egyptian 99.7%, other 0.3

[Egypt Country Overview](#). World Health Organization International, 2023.

[Egypt National Profile](#). The Association of Religion Data Archives, 2025.

Map: *The World Factbook* 2018. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2018.

## HISTORICAL TIMELINE

(While the history of ancient Egypt extends back to the fourth millennium BCE, this timeline reflects that last 2,000 years, beginning when the region came under Roman control.)

### 30 BCE

Roman Empire conquers Egypt (which had been under the control of the Ptolemies, part of the Hellenistic Empire).

### 641 CE

Egypt comes under Islamic control as Islam spreads into North Africa; ruled by succession of Islamic caliphates and dynasties for 600 years.

### 1250

Mamluk dynasty conquers Egypt, ruling from Cairo.

### 1517

Ottoman Empire conquers Egypt.

### 1798-1801

The French briefly occupy the country; they are expelled in 1801.

### 1882

British forces occupy Egypt.

### 1914

Egypt becomes a British protectorate.

### 1922

The Kingdom of Egypt, a semi-independent state, is established although the British retains control of the military and foreign relations.

### 1953

Following the Egyptian Revolution in 1952, Egypt is declared a Republic.

### 2011-2014

During the Arab Spring, the military dissolved Parliament and suspended the Constitution. A new Constitution went into effect in January 2014.

## DOCUMENT D: Egyptian Constitution

During the Arab Spring, the military dissolved Parliament and suspended the Constitution. A new Constitution went into effect in January 2014.

### Directions:

1. Go through each excerpt and **underline/highlight the phrases or sentences** that you think might have something to do with religion.
2. Does the portion you've marked reflect a **religious attitude or perspective**? Or is it a **statement of policy** about the role of religion in society? Or maybe both? Explain in the right-hand column.

### EXCERPTS

#### PREAMBLE

In the Name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful

This is Our Constitution

Egypt is the gift of the Nile and the gift of Egyptians to humanity.

...In the beginning of history, the dawn of human conscience rose and shone forth in the hearts of our great ancestors, uniting their good intention to build the first central state that regulated and organized the life of Egyptians on the banks of the Nile. It is where they created the most amazing wonders of civilization, and where their hearts looked up to the heavens before earth knew the **three revealed religions**.

Egypt is the cradle of religions and the banner of glory of the revealed religions.

On its land, Moses grew up, the light of God appeared, and the message descended on Mount Sinai.

On its land, Egyptians welcomed Virgin Mary and her baby and offered up thousands of martyrs in defense of the Church of Jesus.

When the Seal of the Messengers Mohamed (Peace and Blessings Be Upon Him) was sent to all mankind to perfect the sublime morals, our hearts and minds were opened to the light of Islam. We were the best soldiers on Earth to fight for the cause of God, and we disseminated the message of truth and religious sciences across the world...

**revealed religions:** this refers to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

*Egypt's Constitution (continued)*

**Article 2: Islam, Principles of Islamic Sharia**

Islam is the religion of the state and Arabic is its official language. The principles of Islamic **Sharia** are the principle source of legislation.

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**Sharia:** law based on the Q'uran and the traditions of the prophet

**Article 3: Christian and Jewish religious affairs**

The principles of the laws of Egyptian Christians and Jews are the main source of laws regulating their **personal status**, religious affairs, and selection of spiritual leaders.

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**personal status:** this usually refers to a set of laws dealing with marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance.

**Article 24: Arabic language, religious education and national history**

The Arabic language, religious education, and national history in all its stages are core subjects of pre-university public and private education. Universities are committed to teaching human rights, and professional morals and ethics relating to various academic disciplines.

**Article 64: Freedom of belief**

Freedom of belief is absolute.

The freedom of practicing religious rituals and establishing places of worship for the followers of revealed religions is a right organized by law.

Retrieved from: [constituteproject.org](http://constituteproject.org)

**Questions:**

1. When you consider the Egyptian Constitution, what do you notice about the role of religion in Egypt?
2. Based on what you've read here, what is the role of Islam in the Egyptian system of government?
3. How does this constitution deal with the issue of religious freedom? What kind of religious freedom is permitted?

# Iran Fact Sheet

**Population:** 88,386,937 (2024 est.)

**Type of government:** theocratic (Islamic) republic



**Constitution:** previous 1906; latest was adopted and became effective in 1979; articles including Iran's political system, its religious basis, and its form of government cannot be amended as of 1989

**Legal system:** religious legal system based on secular and Islamic law

## Executive branch:

- **head of state:** supreme leader is the highest ranking political and religious authority in the country; appointed for life; must be an Islamic religious leader
- **head of government:** president directly elected by absolute majority popular vote
- **cabinet:** Council of Ministers selected by the president with legislative approval; the supreme leader has some control over appointments to several ministries

**Legislative branch:** unicameral Islamic Consultative Assembly (290 seats; 285 members directly elected and 1 seat each for Zoroastrians, Jews, Assyrian and Chaldean Christians, Armenians in the north of the country and Armenians in the South)

**Judicial branch:** Supreme Court and a number of lower courts

**Religion:** Muslim (official) 98.5% (Shia 90-95%, Sunni 5-10%), other (includes Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian, Baha'i) 1.5% (2020 est.)

**Ethnic groups:** Persian, Azeri, Kurd, Lur, Baloch, Arab, Turkmen and Turkic tribes

[Congress.gov](https://www.congress.gov). "Iran: Background and U.S. Policy." Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 2025.

Map: *The World Factbook* 2018. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2018.

## HISTORICAL TIMELINE

(While the Persian Empire extends back to the sixth century BCE, this timeline begins with the rise of Islam.)

### 633-654

Muslim conquest of Persia brings about the end of the Sasanian Empire and more than 1,000 years of Persian rule.

### 1502

Persian Safavid dynasty reunites Iran; under Safavids Shia Islam becomes the official religion.

### 1736

Afsharid dynasty founded and last Safavid ruler is deposed.

### 1794

Qajar dynasty comes into power.

### 1925

Pahlavi dynasty replaces the Qajar dynasty; new leader, Reza Shah, introduces a more autocratic, secular, and nationalist type of government.

### 1953

With support from the United States and Great Britain, Mohammed Mosaddegh, the democratically elected leader of Iran's nationalist party, is overthrown and imprisoned, and the pro-Western Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi takes power.

### 1979

Iranian revolution transforms Iran from an absolute monarchy to an Islamic republic. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini becomes the Supreme Leader of the country and a new constitution is adopted.

## DOCUMENT E: Iranian Constitution

The 1979 Iranian revolution transformed Iran from an absolute monarchy to an Islamic republic. The Ayatollah [title of Shiite religious leader] Khomeini became the Supreme Leader of the country and a new constitution was adopted in that year.

### Directions:

1. Go through each excerpt and **underline/highlight the phrases or sentences** that you think might have something to do with religion.
2. Does the portion you've marked reflect a **religious attitude or perspective**? Or is it a **statement of policy** about the role of religion in society? Or maybe both? Explain in the right-hand column.

### EXCERPTS

#### PREAMBLE

In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful

We sent aforetime Our apostles with clear signs, and sent down with them the **Book** and the Balance that men may uphold justice... (57:25)

The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran sets forth the cultural, social, political, and economic institutions of Iranian society on the basis of Islamic principles and norms, which represent the earnest aspiration of the Islamic **Ummah**. This basic aspiration was made explicit by the very nature of the great Islamic Revolution of Iran, as well as the course of the Muslim people's struggle, from its beginning until victory, as reflected in the decisive and forceful slogans raised by all segments of the populations. Now, at the threshold of this great victory, our nation, with all its being, seeks its fulfilment. ...

**Book:** the Qur'an; sacred text in Islam

**Ummah:** the Muslim community

#### Article 1

The form of government of Iran is that of an Islamic Republic, endorsed by the people of Iran on the basis of their longstanding belief in the sovereignty of truth and Qur'anic justice...

*Iran's Constitution (continued)***Article 2**

The Islamic Republic is a system based on belief in:

1. the One God (as stated in the phrase "There is no god except Allah"), His exclusive sovereignty and the right to legislate, and the necessity of submission to His commands;
2. Divine revelation and its fundamental role in setting forth the laws;
3. the return to God in the Hereafter, and the constructive role of this belief in the course of man's ascent towards God;
4. the justice of God in creation and legislation;
5. continuous leadership (imamah) and perpetual guidance, and its fundamental role in ensuring the uninterrupted process of the revolution of Islam;
6. the exalted dignity and value of man, and his freedom coupled with responsibility before God;

**Article 4**

All civil, penal, financial, economic, administrative, cultural, military, political, and other laws and regulations must be based on Islamic criteria. This principle applies absolutely and generally to all articles of the Constitution as well as to all other laws and regulations, and the *fuqaha' of the Guardian Council* are judges in this matter.

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***fuqaha' of the Guardian Council:*** Islamic legal experts

**Article 12**

The official religion of Iran is Islam and the *Twelver Ja'fari school*, and this principle will remain eternally immutable. Other Islamic schools, including the Hanafi, Shafi'i, Malik, Hanbali, and Zaydi, are to be accorded full respect, and their followers are free to act in accordance with their own jurisprudence in performing their religious rites. ...

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**Twelver Ja'fari school:** one of the approaches to the legal system within Shi'a Islam

*Iran's Constitution (continued)*

#### **Article 13**

Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Iranians are the only recognized religious minorities, who, within the limits of the law, are free to perform their religious rites and ceremonies, and to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education.

#### **Article 64**

There are to be two hundred seventy members of the Islamic Consultative Assembly which, keeping in view the human, political, geographic and other similar factors, may increase by not more than twenty for each ten-year period from the date of the national referendum of the year 1368 of the solar Islamic calendar.

The Zoroastrians and Jews will each elect one representative; Assyrian and Chaldean Christians will jointly elect one representative; and Armenian Christians in the north and those in the south of the country will each elect one representative.

The limits of the election constituencies and the number of representatives will be determined by law.

Retrieved from: [constituteproject.org](http://constituteproject.org)

#### **Questions:**

1. When you consider the Iranian Constitution, what do you notice about the role of religion in Iran?
2. Based on what you've read here, what is the role of Islam in the Iranian system of government?
3. How does this constitution deal with the issue of religious freedom? What kind of religious freedom is permitted?