

World Watch Research

Oman:

Background Information

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Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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sweden@od.org | 019-31 05 00 | www.open-doors.se

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Copyright and sources

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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Map of country



Oman: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
4,714,000	187,000	4.0

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Recent history

Located at the confluence of the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea, Oman was an influential sultanate during the medieval period. Arabic is the official language, and more than half of Oman's population is Arab. Having been occupied by the Portuguese, Ottomans and others, the sultanate became powerful in the 18th century and took control of the coastal region of present-day Iran and Pakistan, colonized Zanzibar and Kenyan seaports, brought back enslaved Africans and sent boats trading as far as the Malay Peninsula. The country was then subdued by British forces; treaties of friendship and cooperation with Great Britain were signed in 1798 allowing the country to maintain its independence.

The discovery of oil in the 1970s fundamentally changed the country. After overthrowing his father in 1970, late Sultan Qaboos used oil profits to develop his country, investing in programs on education, health and agriculture during his five decades in power. In 1971, Oman joined the League of Arab States and the United Nations and has since then developed a unique position in the international arena. Although not accepting any internal criticism or dissent, Qaboos developed Oman's status as an international mediator, always steering away from conflict and looking for peaceful solutions. This has made Oman an intermediary between very different and even hostile countries, having close contact with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), as well as with Egypt, Jordan, Iran, Pakistan, India, Turkey, the USA, UK and Israel ([BTI report 2024, pp.38-39](#)).

The GCC is a political and economic alliance of six Middle Eastern countries: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman. It was established in May 1981, but the cooperation suffered under the [Qatari crisis](#) and continuing disagreements among the member states (BBC News, 19 July 2017, [Al-Monitor, 5 February 2021](#)). While the UAE and Bahrain, two other GCC members, normalized ties with Israel in August 2020, Oman kept a neutral stance, stating that the nation "prefers initiatives that support the Palestinian people" ([Le Figaro, 27 May 2022](#)). In February 2023, Oman opened its airspace for Israeli commercial flights, but due to Israel's far right cabinet (formed in December 2022), no further steps towards normalization were likely in the short-term ([Arab Center Washington DC, 7 March 2023](#)). This prospect worsened even further following the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war in October 2023. Although usually keeping a neutral profile on the international stage, the strong support for the Palestinians among the Omani public made the government publicly rebuke the USA, a key security partner, for its outspoken support for Israel ([Arab Center Washington DC, 5 January 2024](#)).

Sultan Qaboos died in January 2020. It was feared that his death would lead to political turmoil as many Omani tribes had sworn allegiance to him, rather than to the Omani state and he had not appointed a successor. However, a quick succession process prevented any power vacuum and chaos. Rather than having a quarrel among themselves, the royal family council decided to follow Qaboos' suggestion to appoint his cousin Haitham bin Tariq as the new sultan ([BBC News, 11 January 2020](#)). Combining both continuity and change, Sultan Haitham announced his intention to follow in his predecessor's footsteps at the international level, but opted to reshuffle his cabinet, especially in financial and economic areas ([Atlantic Council, 19 August 2020](#)). In another major step, he delegated most of the powers previously held by Sultan Qaboos, including that of defense minister, foreign minister, finance minister and chairman of the Central Bank, to other officials, some of them outside the royal family ([Washington Institute, 19 August 2020](#)). Furthermore, using the COVID-19 crisis as an

excuse, Sultan Haitham implemented several reforms including the introduction of VAT as well as income tax ([ISPI, 16 April 2021](#)).

In addition, he accelerated 'Omanization', the replacement of expatriate workers with Omani citizens, in order to pursue a much needed reform of the public sector. Despite an initial drop during 2020 and 2021, mainly as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, the number of expatriates rebounded in 2022 and 2023. Statistics vary, but expatriates still make up more than 40% of the Omani population, indicating Oman's dependence on foreign workers ([Muscat Daily, 25 October 2023](#)). However, the number of skilled workers from abroad decreased: The number of expatriates working in the Omani government sector dropped by almost 20% in 2022 ([Muscat Daily, 20 July 2022](#)). Two reasons for this are: i) Many Western expatriates did not return after COVID, and ii) Obtaining a visa has become more difficult. It would seem therefore that foreign workers are increasingly being recruited for low-skilled labor only. In 2024, the Omani government announced that new targets were being set for 2025 for certain sectors, with 100% Omanization being the ultimate target ([Muscat Daily, 14 July 2024](#)). However, recent demographics do not show a decline in the percentage of foreign workers ([Connsect, 27 June 2024](#)).

Rare protests occurred in May 2021 following lay-offs, with protesters demanding jobs ([Al-Jazeera, 25 May 2021](#)). The country remains stable overall and rose four places on the 2024 Global Peace Index, ranking third in the MENA region, behind Qatar and Kuwait ([Institute for Economics & Peace, accessed 12 September 2024](#)). Further demonstrations occurred following the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war in October 2023, with the Sultan repeating Oman's official stance that there can be no peace without the establishment of a Palestinian state ([Asharq Al Awsat, 15 November 2023](#)).

The Dhofar region bordering Yemen has a long history of rebellion against the Omani state and, in June 2024, parts of the important Al-Mashani tribe in the Dhofar region decided to publicly follow a different calendar to celebrate Eid al-Adha, ignoring the official date set by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. As a result, the government took offence and arrested some members of the tribe without charging them. The response of the general public appeared to indicate that most Omani's prefer nationalism over regionalism or tribalism ([The Arab Weekly, 25 June 2024](#)).

On 15 July 2024, the Islamic State group conducted its first attack on Omani soil, targeting Shiite Muslims during the Ashura holiday. Six persons were killed, most of them expatriates ([Al-Monitor, 17 July 2024](#)) See also below: *Security situation*.

Political and legal landscape

The country is ruled by a monarchy with two advisory bodies (State Council and Consultative Council). Sultan Haitham bin Tariq succeeded long-time ruler Sultan Qaboos bin Said al-Said after his death in January 2020. Although delegating some of his powers, he seems to follow in the footsteps of his predecessor, with his government also being classified as authoritarian by the Economist Intelligence Unit ([EIU Democracy Index 2023](#)).

Sultan Qaboos has been credited with abolishing slavery, forging relations with the USA, bringing stability to the economy and election reforms. In 1997 women were granted the right to be elected to the country's consultative body, the Shura Council (Majlis al-Shura) and in 2003, the sultan extended voting rights to everyone over 21; previously, voters were selected from among the elite. However, the legislative powers of these bodies remain limited.

Other sources and reports

According to Middle East Concern ([MEC Oman profile](#), accessed 30 August 2024):

- "The Basic Law of Oman establishes Islam as the religion of the State and Islamic law as the basis of legislation. The Basic Law also affirms the principle of non-discrimination, including on the basis of religion, and asserts the right to practise recognised religious rites provided such practice does not disrupt public order or conflict with accepted standards of behaviour. More severe penal code sanctions were introduced in 2018 for offenses of blasphemy and insulting Abrahamic religions. Classical Ibadhi Islamic jurisprudence is applied in personal status matters. The Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs closely regulates and monitors religious activities, including Islamic activities. Religious leaders must be registered with the Ministry, and permission sought for visiting clergy. Only approved messages can be given within mosques. Prior permission is required for the distribution of religious materials, and for the publication or importing of religious materials. Non-Muslim worship is only permitted on premises officially designated for that purpose, on land donated by the Sultan."

Humanist International's [Freedom of Thought report](#) (updated 12 May 2023) describes the constitution and government as severely discriminating:

- "Oman imposes substantial restrictions on freedom of religion or belief and the freedoms of expression, assembly and association. Islam is state religion and Sharia is the basis of legislation (Article 2 of the Basic Statute of the State), however legislation is largely based on civil code. The principles of sharia inform the civil, commercial and criminal codes, but there are no sharia courts. The Basic Law prohibits discrimination based on religion (Article 17) and protects the right to practice religious rites on condition that doing so does not disrupt public order or contradict morals (Article 28). However, all religious groups are required to register and the law restricts collective worship of non-Muslims. ... The law prohibits public proselytizing by all religious groups, although religious groups are allowed to proselytize privately within legally registered houses of worship. The authorities monitor sermons at mosques [and] censor religious texts."

Gender perspective

Omani laws continue to discriminate against women with respect to marriage, divorce, inheritance, nationality and guardianship of children ([HRW Oman country profile](#), accessed 30 August 2024). Although Oman acceded to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 2006, it maintained a reservation to Article 16 ([UNDP, Oman: Gender Justice and the Law, 2019](#)) - which provides for the elimination of discrimination against women as they enter or exit a marriage - stating that no elements should contradict provisions of the Islamic Sharia. Whilst not deemed to be an endemic issue in Oman, the practice of child marriage still occurs, particularly in rural communities; 4% of girls in Oman are married before the age of 18 ([Girls Not Brides Oman](#), accessed 30 August 2024). Legislation also fails to adequately protect women from domestic violence, marital rape and violence against women. Only 2.3% of seats in national parliament were held by women in 2022 (World Bank, Gender Data Portal 2023). Escaping abusive marriages is problematic; under Sharia law a man has the right to divorce his wife by *talaq* (verbal repudiation), whereas a woman must file for divorce through the courts on specified grounds.

Religious landscape

Oman: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	187,000	4.0
Muslim	4,180,000	88.7
Hindu	254,000	5.4
Buddhist	36,500	0.8
Ethnic religionist	530	0.0
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	16,700	0.4
Atheist	240	0.0
Agnostic	7,200	0.2
Other	31,570	0.7
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

In the modern era, Christians have been present in Oman since the end of the 19th century following the establishment of the Arabian Mission in the capital, Muscat. However, the number of Christians in the country only really started growing after Oman's oil boom in the 1970s, followed by the increasing need for expatriate workers, who included many Christians.

According to WCD 2024 estimates, 88.7% of Oman’s inhabitants are Muslim. The next largest religion in the country is Hinduism with 5.4% of the total population.

Ibadism

Islam is the state religion. According to Islamic tradition, Oman was one of the countries reached by Islam within Muhammed's lifetime. Around 75% of Omanis practice a unique brand of Islam called Ibadism (also spelt Ibadhism), which is a majority sect only in Oman. Ibadism has been characterized as "moderate conservatism", with tenets that are a mixture of both austerity and tolerance. According to experts, the followers of the Ibadi sect are "the least fanatic and sectarian of all Muslims" (Hoffman J V, [Ibadi Islam](#), accessed 12 July 2023). They do not believe in the use of violence even towards those who leave Islam or who are not Muslims, but rather focus on “dissociation” which is usually an internal attitude of withholding “friendship” (*wilaya*). Thus, even though Islam dominates the lives of Omanis, there is also a tendency to tolerate Christians. What is even more noteworthy is the observation that in many Omani mosques Ibadi, Sunni, and even Shia practitioners worship together peacefully.

This tolerance was strengthened by Sultan Qaboos, who liked to present the country internationally as a model of tolerance and diplomacy, especially by attempting to mediate in international talks with some of the militant groups in the region. However, pressure on Omani converts from Islam to Christianity (and on expatriate Christians involved in proselytizing) still remains very high.

Middle East Concern states ([MEC Oman profile](#), accessed 30 August 2024):

- "Expatriate Christians enjoy considerable freedom in Oman, provided their activities are restricted to designated compounds and that they avoid interaction with Muslims that could be construed as proselytism. Church compounds are typically overcrowded on days of worship as they seek to accommodate multiple congregations of various nationalities and languages. Omani nationals or other Muslims who choose to leave Islam are likely to face strong family and societal pressure. In extreme cases those who leave Islam can face violent responses from family members. Those considered apostates could also face sanctions such as forcible divorce and removal of child custody under Ibadhi personal status laws overseen by Shari'a courts."

Economic landscape

According to the [World Factbook Oman](#) (accessed 30 August 2024):

- **Real GDP per capita (PPP):** \$40,000 (2023 est.)
- **Real GDP growth rate:** 1.3% (2023 est.)
- **Inflation rate (consumer prices):** 0.94% (2023 est.)
- **Unemployment:** 1.46% (2023 est.), with youth unemployment at 6.8% (2023 est.), indicating the need for economic opportunities for the young population.

According to the World Bank's [Macro Poverty Outlook Oman \(April 2024\)](#):

- **State of the economy:** "Oman's economy continues to perform well, supported by favorable oil prices and a commitment to the economic diversification program, in line with the country's Vision 2040. ... The government's commitment to keep the fiscal position under control and use the oil revenues to lower public debt signals a commitment to fiscal discipline and has prompted a credit rating upgrade."
- **Economic growth:** "Real GDP growth is estimated to have decelerated to 1.4 percent in 2023, down from 4.3 percent in the previous year, reflecting the oil output cuts to adjust to the OPEC+ quotas. ... Economic growth is expected to improve slightly in 2024, but downside risks to the outlook include oil market volatility, climate change risks, and potential indirect spillovers from the ongoing conflict in the Middle East."
- **Outlook:** "Oman's economic outlook remains favorable, with real growth expected to reach 1.5 percent in 2024, driven by increased gas production and diversification efforts. These include efforts to further improve the business environment, support the role of SMEs in the economy, and accelerate investments in renewable energy and green hydrogen."

'Omanization'

Oman is increasingly trying to replace expatriates in its workforce with Omani citizens, a process called "Omanization". Since introducing its 'Vision 2020' program in 1995, Oman has been trying to increase the number of Omani's working in the private sector instead of the government-funded public sector.

However, in 2020, the percentage was less than 20% instead of the targeted 75% ([Wafoman, 29 September 2020](#)). The Sultan wants continuous stability by providing jobs to the Omani citizens in exchange for their loyalty, legitimizing his regime. But the Omani workforce lacks the skillset needed to sustain the economy, while expecting the government to simply provide jobs at the same time. As long as the economy is dependent on skillful foreign workers and there seems little chance of reducing the high number of young Omani's looking for jobs. In addition, key decision makers, including cabinet members, have vested business interests, which hinders national reform efforts, including Omanization ([BTI report 2024, p. 40](#)).

Oil and gas wealth has eliminated much poverty in Oman, although poverty among expatriate workers is probably under-reported. Although possibly not primarily faith-related, Christian expatriates, especially domestic workers, do experience labor abuse, including low and non-paid salaries, confiscation of passports and other ways of unfair treatment, related to Oman's *kafala* system ([Council on Foreign Relations, 18 November 2022](#)). Omani converts from Islam to Christianity are very likely to be placed under economic pressure. There is high chance they will lose employment and economic benefits provided by the state.

Other sources and reports

- The World Bank's [World by Income and Region report](#) (accessed 23 July 2024) puts the Omani economy in the high income category.
- The Fragile State Index ([FSI 2024 Oman](#)) shows continuing improvement regarding the 'Human Flight and Brain Drain' indicator, which already was low. The 'Economy' indicator shows further improvement, following decline caused by the COVID-19 impact in 2020. However, the 'Economic Inequality' indicator has worsened slightly.
- The Economist Intelligence Unit ([EIU 2024 Oman](#)) writes: "Sultan Haitham bin Tariq al-Said will continue to command political authority in 2024-28, although this could be tested by popular protests later in the forecast period. The risk of unrest is driven by both by elevated socioeconomic pressures relative to Oman's Gulf peers, and the possible imposition of economic austerity measures. We expect politically painful fiscal reforms to be delayed until at least 2026, supported by dwindling fiscal surpluses. As the budget balance tips into deficit, the level of public debt rises again and austerity measures are implemented gradually owing to a further fall in hydrocarbons prices, economic growth will slow in in the later years of our forecast period."

Gender perspective

Women are among the most economically vulnerable in Oman, in part due to low participation in the workforce and patrilineal inheritance practices ([UNDP Human Development Report Oman](#), data updates as of 13 March 2024). Under Sharia rules of inheritance, daughters inherit half that of a son (Personal Status Law, Sec. 242). Oman also has one of the highest gender gaps as regards labor force participation with only 32% of women aged 15 and older engaged in the labor force compared to 86.5% of men ([World Bank, Gender Data Portal 2023](#)).

Social and cultural landscape

According to the [World Factbook Oman](#) (accessed 30 August 2024):

- **Main ethnic groups:** The majority of the Omani population are from Arab descent. Other ethnicities include Baluchi, South Asian (Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Bangladeshi) and African groups, among the wide variety of ethnicities that can be found within the expatriate community. Particularly noteworthy are the Omani citizens of Zanzibari descent, who were colonized and enslaved by Oman, but were granted citizenship by the late Sultan Qaboos. There is also a tribe of Irani (Persian) decent.
- **Main languages:** The official language is Arabic. Other languages include English, Baluchi, Swahili, Urdu and Indian dialects.
- **Urban population:** 87.0% of the population lived in urban areas (2021 est.), with an annual urbanization rate of 2.3%.
- **Literacy rate:** 95.7% of the population can read and write; with a difference between men (97.0%) and women (92.7%).
- **Population/age:** Non-Omanis make up almost 44.0% of the total population (2020 est.). The younger generation - up to 14 years of age - makes up 30.0% of the population, making it another country in the wider region with a young population in need of (economic) opportunities.
- **Life expectancy:** 76.6 years on average; women (78.7 years), men (74.7 years).
- **Education:** On average, Omanis are expected to have 15 years of schooling (15 for girls and 14 years for boys) (2020).

According to the [UNDP Human Development Report Oman](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **HDI score and ranking:** Oman ranks #59 out 193 countries. The combined ratio of life expectancy, education and per capita income gives a very high score of 0.819 on the Human Development Index (HDI).
- **Gender inequality:** with a GDI (Gender Development Index) score of 0.937, women are disadvantaged in comparison to men. The GDI measures the differences in life expectancy, years of education and GNI per capita per gender.
- **Labor Force Participation Rate:** 35.0% of women and 83.8% of men, indicating a significant gender gap, although the female participation rate has increased in recent years.

Oman is conservative, Muslim and tribal in nature. Education levels have improved considerably in the last decades. The younger generation is interested in new ideas - visible also in the clothing of younger people. Moreover, a cultural shift is taking place from agrarian nomadic to urban lifestyle. To tackle future unemployment - almost half the Omani population is under 24 - Oman is gradually replacing expatriates with nationals (see above: Economic landscape for further details). Due to this, the percentage of educated and skilled Omanis is growing. Female education has dramatically reduced illiteracy. Highly educated teachers and technicians from abroad are currently still in demand but ultimately 'Omanization' will lead to a decrease in the level of non-Muslim residents. Although the 'Omanization' process initially started with a series of speeches with little implementation, it has since been accelerated by the COVID-19 crisis and the challenging economic situation. The government has, for example, not renewed the contracts for more than 70% of its foreign consultants ([Al-Monitor](#), 29 May 2020).

Fragile State Index indicators show stagnation in social and cohesion indicators overall, but a rather high rating for "Factionalized Elites" is indicative for the tribal way in which the country is ruled ([FSI 2024 Oman](#)). At the same time, "Group Grievance" is on the rise, while "State Legitimacy" is also worsening, indicative of the political and economic demands the government needs to address.

Under the official kafala sponsorship system, domestic workers are bound by contract to their employers, who confiscate their passport and often force them to work excessive hours. This leaves them vulnerable to abuse. Although from January 2021 migrant workers are allowed to change jobs without having to seek permission from their employers, they remained vulnerable for abuse and insufficiently protected against exploitation. A new labor law introduced in July 2023 increased circumstances for private sector workers, but continued to exclude domestic workers ([Amnesty International, The State of the World's Human Rights, April 2024, p.292](#)). Although not primarily faith-related, many Christians in Oman also experience discrimination or abuse. Skin color and ethnic background play a significant role in determining vulnerability for abuse. Hence, Western (white) Christian expatriates are far less likely to experience harassment than African or Asian Christian expatriates. In addition, high-skilled expatriates will face less difficulties than low-skilled migrants. In short, a low-skilled Christian migrant from an African or Asian background will be most vulnerable in Oman.

Gender perspective

By law, men are recognized as the head of the household and must provide for their family, whilst women "owe obedience" to their husbands (Personal Status Law, Sec. 38). It is rare for women to assume positions in public office or senior legal positions. Women typically assume domestic responsibilities such as housekeeping and raising children. Domestic violence is considered a private matter, meaning that many victims choose not to report crimes against them. According to a 2019 study, 28.8% of surveyed women indicated that they had experienced domestic violence ([Kendi et al, 2021](#)). However, domestic violence is probably underreported as certain practices, including house arrest, 'light' physical abuse and withholding food, are culturally accepted and not considered to be abusive. While FGM is officially outlawed in Oman, studies suggest that rates are nevertheless the highest in the Arab Gulf states, with suggestions that the percentage of Omani women having undergone FGM is at least 78%, if not higher ([Equality Now, 2020](#)).

Technological landscape

According to [DataReportal Digital 2024: Oman](#) (23 February 2024) / Survey date - January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 97.8% penetration
- **Social media usage:** 84.8% of the total population. As of January 2024, 31.2% of Oman's social media users were female, while 68.8% were male.
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 150.8% of the total population

The advancement of communication technology and the increased use of social media has not led to an increased level of freedom of speech. According to [Freedom House's Global Freedom Index 2024 Oman](#):

- Oman is rated as "not free".

- "The media environment is constrained by legal limits on freedom of expression, including a ban on criticism of the sultan. There are private media outlets in addition to those run by the state, but they typically accept government subsidies, practice self-censorship, and face punishment if they cross political redlines. Media outlets were reportedly told to avoid covering demonstrations that were held in several cities in 2021."
- "The government has broad authority to close outlets, block websites, revoke licenses, and prosecute journalists for content violations, and it has used this authority on multiple occasions. The government's efforts to suppress critical news and commentary regularly include arrests and prosecutions of prominent individuals who are active on social media."
- "The authorities reportedly monitor personal communications, and the growing number of arrests, interrogations, and jail terms related to criticism of the government on social media has encouraged self-censorship among ordinary citizens in recent years."

According to Reporters without Borders ([World Press Freedom 2023 Oman](#)):

- Oman is ranked #137 out of 180 countries, up from #155 in 2023.
- "Self-censorship is the rule in this peaceful sultanate, where criticism of Sultan Haitham bin Tariq or his cousin and predecessor, Qabus ibn Said, are unacceptable. ... Any content judged 'insulting' to the royal family, the government, Islam, the country's economy, or, simply, tradition results in the conviction of the writer (a fine or prison sentence). ... Journalists and bloggers are frequently arrested, sometimes detained in secret and sentenced to prison on charges including insulting the head of state, or the country's culture or traditions, inciting illegal demonstrations, or disturbing public order. Advocating for environmental protection or the safeguarding of nature reserves is considered highly sensitive for journalists."

Just like all other Omanis and expatriates in the country, Christians and churches are well aware that their online activities are monitored and that they need to avoid discussing sensitive issues in public.

Security situation

Despite the ongoing war in neighboring Yemen since 2015, Oman has remained a stable and safe place in the region. While maintaining neutrality in the conflict and acting as diplomatic intermediary, it has offered help and support to Yemenis affected by the war and has kept the border with Yemen open ([Al-Monitor, 7 January 2020](#)). Due to its neutrality, the country has several times been able to act as an intermediary in the release of hostages held captive in Yemen ([The Arab Weekly, 25 April 2022](#)). Similarly, it played an important role in the release of several foreigners being held hostage in Iran in recent years ([Iran International, 26 May 2023](#), [The Arab Weekly, 8 October 2022](#)).

As mentioned above (in: *Recent History*), after the death of Sultan Qaboos in January 2020, political turmoil was feared, as many Omani tribes had sworn allegiance to him, rather than the Omani state ([Carnegie Endowment, January 2015](#)). However, a quick succession process prevented any power vacuum and chaos from developing.

Oman endorsed and welcomed the normalization of ties between the United Arab Emirates and Israel, as well as between Morocco and Israel. However, Oman's Grand Mufti Sheikh Ahmed Al-Khalili strongly denounced what he described as "wooing the enemy" ([The New Arab, 19 October 2020](#)). Hence, establishing full diplomatic ties with Israel themselves could potentially lead to unrest; although Oman

had already under the previous sultan warmed up relations with Israel without popular backlash. However, in line with its neutral position in all conflicts, in July 2021 Oman's foreign minister declared that the country would only normalize ties after a two-state solution with the Palestinians has been reached ([The New Arab, 10 July 2021](#)), a position repeated in May 2022 ([Le Figaro, 27 May 2022](#)) and November 2023 ([Asharq Al Awsat, 15 November 2023](#)). Although Oman decided to open its airspace for Israeli commercial airliners earlier in 2023, there were no further developments suggesting any change in stance (see also above: *Recent History*).

Despite the deadly IS attack in July 2024, Oman's security agencies remain strong and the risk of attacks by radical Islamic groups is low. It is unlikely that more attacks will take place in the short term. Since the country is quite stable and secure, expatriate Christians can live without fear as long as they abide by the laws and customs of the country's Islamic culture. On the other hand, both expatriate Christians as well as Omani converts from Islam to Christianity are well aware that the well-developed intelligence agencies are also used to monitor their activities.

Christian origins

Traditionally, Oman's earliest Christianity was the result of mission work carried out by Theophilus Indus from Karachi. He became a Christian in Rome and Emperor Constantine II (316-340 AD) sent him to Yemen. He erected two churches in Yemen and one in Sohar, Oman. In 424 AD, Bishop Yohannan from Sohar attended a Nestorian synod. The Azd tribe that migrated to Oman because of persecution by the Jewish rulers in Yemen (ca 380-522 AD), were probably Christians.

According to Islamic tradition, Islam reached Oman in 632 AD. However, Sohar's Bishop Stephanus attended a Church Council in 676 AD and so it is clear that Christianity had not at that point disappeared.

Oman has always been an important hub on the trading route between Iraq and India, and this must have created regular contact between Omanis and Christians. This became more intense when the Portuguese ruled over Muscat (1515-1650). In 1798, Oman and Great Britain signed a Treaty of Friendship. Under this treaty, Britain guaranteed the sultan's rule. In 1891, Oman and Muscat became a British Protectorate. This guaranteed much freedom for foreigners to live and work in Oman.

In 1893, Peter Zwemer and James Cantine of the Arabian Mission of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) started the Muscat Station for their mission. Because of endemic leprosy in Oman, a medical ministry was soon set up. The RCA opened a hospital in Muscat, which became the center of the nation's Christian presence for many years. This foundational work by the RCA has led to the formation of the Protestant Church of Oman, which includes Protestants of many denominational backgrounds and continues to be served by RCA staff. Its work is concentrated in Muscat and in the nearby communities of Ruwi and Ghala. The Sultan of Oman also granted parcels of land to the Protestant church in Salalah and Sohar.

The Roman Catholic Church re-established itself in the region in 1841 with an assignment of personnel to Aden (Yemen). That work grew successively into a prefecture (1854) and a vicariate (1888), and in 1889 it became the Vicariate of Arabia, now administered from Abu Dhabi (United Arab Emirates) and responsible for Catholics in Oman. The first Roman Catholic church in Oman was erected in 1977 in Muscat.

(Source: Melton J. & Baumann M., eds., *Religions of the World*, 2nd edition, 2010, p.2147.)

Church spectrum today

Oman: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	22,500	12.0
Catholic	122,000	65.2
Protestant	12,000	6.4
Independent	21,100	11.3
Unaffiliated	8,700	4.7
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
Total	186,300	99.6
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	6,300	3.4
Pentecostal-Charismatic	37,600	20.1

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

The vast majority of Christians in Oman are expatriates. Most of them are from the Philippines, India and from Western countries. They are concentrated in the country's urban areas in and around Muscat and Sohar in the north, and Salalah in the south. There are two church compounds in Muscat, with other church compounds being located in Sohar and Salalah. More than sixty different Christian groups, fellowships and assemblies are active in the capital city, Muscat, and church groups worship in a variety of languages including Arabic, Tamil, Hindi, Korean, Tagalog, Malayalam and English.

Middle East Concern states ([MEC Oman profile](#), accessed 30 August 2024):

- "Expatriate Christians enjoy considerable freedom in Oman, provided their activities are restricted to designated compounds and that they avoid interaction with Muslims that could be construed as proselytism. Church compounds are typically overcrowded on days of worship as they seek to accommodate multiple congregations of various nationalities and languages."

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Oman>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.

External Links

- Recent history: BTI report 2024, pp.38-39 - <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/OMN>
- Recent history: Qatari crisis - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-40173757>
- Recent history: Al-Monitor, 5 February 2021 - <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/02/gcc-reconciliation-saudi-arabia-summit-uae-egypt-qatar.html>
- Recent history: Le Figaro, 27 May 2022 - <https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/sayyid-badr-al-boussaidi-nous-ne-rejoindrons-pas-les-accords-d-abraham-de-normalisation-avec-israel-20220527>
- Recent history: Arab Center Washington DC, 7 March 2023 - <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/walking-a-tightrope-oman-and-normalization-with-israel/>
- Recent history: Arab Center Washington DC, 5 January 2024 - <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/oman-gaza-and-relations-with-the-united-states/>
- Recent history: BBC News, 11 January 2020 - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-50902476>
- Recent history: Atlantic Council, 19 August 2020 - <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-sultan-of-omans-new-cabinet-combines-continuity-and-change/>
- Recent history: Washington Institute, 19 August 2020 - <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/omans-sultan-devolves-some-his-powers-new-cabinet>
- Recent history: ISPI, 16 April 2021 - <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/respice-reform-sultan-haitham-stamps-his-mark-oman-30092>
- Recent history: Muscat Daily, 25 October 2023 - <https://www.muscatdaily.com/2023/10/25/omans-population-up-6-1-number-of-expats-rise-11-1>
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- Recent history: Connsect, 27 June 2024 - <https://connsect.com/news/demographic-shifts-in-omans-expat-workforce-rise-of-some-nationalities-decline-of-others/>
- Recent history: Al-Jazeera, 25 May 2021 - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/25/protest-in-oman-over-poor-economy-jobs-continue-for-third-day>
- Recent history: Institute for Economics & Peace, accessed 12 September 2024 - <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/GPI-2024-web.pdf>
- Recent history: Asharq Al Awsat, 15 November 2023 - <https://english.aawsat.com/gulf/4669116-sultan-oman-says-no-peace-region-without-establishment-palestinian-state>
- Recent history: The Arab Weekly, 25 June 2024 - <https://the arabweekly.com/eid-protest-oman>
- Recent history: Al-Monitor, 17 July 2024 - <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/07/whats-behind-islamic-states-first-attack-oman>
- Political and legal landscape: EIU Democracy Index 2023 - <https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/Democracy-Index-2023-Final-report.pdf>
- Political and legal landscape: MEC Oman profile - <https://www.meconcern.org/countries/oman/>
- Political and legal landscape: Freedom of Thought report - <https://fot.humanists.international/countries/asia-western-asia/oman/>
- Political and legal landscape: HRW Oman country profile - <https://www.hrw.org/middle-east/n-africa/oman>

- Political and legal landscape: UNDP, Oman: Gender Justice and the Law, 2019 - <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/arabstates/Oman.Summary.19.Eng.pdf>
- Political and legal landscape: Girls Not Brides Oman - <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/oman/>
- Political and legal landscape: 2.3% - <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/countries/oman>
- Religious landscape description: Ibadi Islam - <http://islam.uga.edu/ibadis.html>
- Religious landscape description: MEC Oman profile - <https://www.meconcern.org/countries/oman/>
- Economic landscape: World Factbook Oman - <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/oman/>
- Economic landscape: Macro Poverty Outlook Oman (April 2024) - <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/65cf93926fdb3ea23b72f277fc249a72-0500042021/related/mpo-omn.pdf>
- Economic landscape: Wafoman, 29 September 2020 - <https://wafoman.com/2020/09/29/omanis-represent-only-17-8-of-the-private-sector/>
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- Economic landscape: World by Income and Region report - <http://datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators/the-world-by-income-and-region.html>
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- Security situation: Asharq Al Awsat, 15 November 2023 - <https://english.aawsat.com/gulf/4669116-sultan-oman-says-no-peace-region-without-establishment-palestinian-state>
- Church spectrum today - additional information: MEC Oman profile - <https://www.meconcern.org/countries/oman/>