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RESPONSES TO INFORMATION REQUESTS (RIRs)

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The Board		15 July 2008
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Biographies		
Organization Chart	Israel: Situation of Christians; anti-missionary legislation and its use in practice; activities of Yad L'Achim in relation to Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses and Messianic Jews	
Employment		
Legal and Policy	Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa	
References		
Publications	Legislation	
Tribunal		
Refugee Protection Division	Israeli law guarantees freedom of worship and, according to the <i>International Religious Freedom Report 2007</i> , "government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion," although non-Jews "were subject to various forms of discrimination" (US 14 Sept. 2007, Intr.). Some Christian denominations are recognized by Israeli law and as such have jurisdiction over civil status matters such as marriage or divorce (Jewish Virtual Library n.d.; US 14 Sept. 2007, Sec. II). The government states that as of 2007 there were no religious groups awaiting formal recognition (ibid.).	
Immigration Division		
Immigration Appeal Division		
Decisions		
Forms		
Statistics	Some media sources indicate that proselytizing is illegal in Israel (AP 24 Sept. 2007; <i>Israel Faxx</i> 6 May 2008). However, according to several other sources, such as Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) and the <i>International Religious Freedom Report 2007</i> , Israeli legislation allows proselytizing as long as it is devoid of coercion in the form of economic incentives (US 14 Sept. 2007, Sec. II; <i>Courrier international</i> 29 Mar. 2007; AP 22 June 2008; HRWF 12 Feb. 2007) or emotional incentives (ibid.). Citing a lawyer from the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, an AP article notes that missionaries have a "'right according to freedom of religion to maintain their religious lifestyle and disseminate their beliefs, including through literature'" (AP 22 June 2008). An article that appeared in <i>Courrier international</i> , which names the Hebrew-language daily <i>Yedi'ot Aharonot</i> as its source, indicates that proselytizers who use coercion or incentives may face up to five years in prison or a fine (<i>Courrier international</i> 29 Mar. 2007). While conversions involving adults are legal, any person found encouraging or organizing the conversion of a minor faces up to six months' imprisonment (ibid.). In March 2007, Yakov Margi, a minister of the Knesset (MK) belonging to the Shas party, proposed a bill that would punish any missionary work with a six-month to one year period of imprisonment (ibid.; Yad L'Achim 7 Mar. 2007; ibid. 1 Apr. 2008). Further information on this bill could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.	
Research		
Research Program		
National Documentation Packages		
Issue Papers and Country Fact Sheets		
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Proactive Disclosure	Israelis who feel that their rights have been infringed upon by a government agency because of "any action [or omission or a delay in acting] taken contrary to law, without lawful authority, contrary to sound administration or that involves too	

inflexible an attitude or a flagrant injustice" may file an oral complaint with the Ombudsman's office at any of its five branches located throughout the country (Israel 26 Mar. 2002).

Societal attitudes

AP reports that, despite proselytizers' usual compliance with Israeli law, "Israeli authorities and Orthodox Jews frown on missionary activity aimed at Jews" (20 May 2008), and that "[p]roselytizing is strongly discouraged in Israel, a state that was established for a people that suffered centuries of persecution for not accepting Jesus and has little tolerance for missionary work" (AP 22 June 2008). The *International Religious Freedom Report 2007* similarly states that the societal perception of missionary work was largely "negative" (US 14 Sept. 2007, Sec. III). AP indicates that although Israel maintains close ties with a number of American evangelical groups, these groups "generally refrain from proselytizing inside Israel" (22 June 2008).

The Jerusalem Center for Jewish-Christian Relations (JCJCR), an organization that "is concerned with all aspects of the encounter of Jews and Christians in the Holy Land today," runs education programs and encounter groups, provides information services and conducts research on relations between members of the two faiths (JCJCR n.d.).

Christian community

According to Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), there were 152,000 Christians living in the country as of December 2007, representing 2.1 percent of the national population (*The Jerusalem Post* 26 Dec. 2007; US 14 Sept. 2007, Sec. I). Some four-fifths are Arab, while the remaining fifth is mostly comprised of the Christian relatives of immigrants from the former Soviet Union (*The Jerusalem Post* 26 Dec. 2007). While three-quarters live in Israel's northern Galilee region, approximately 11 percent live in Jerusalem (ibid.).

In March 2006, some local residents blamed an attack against a Nazareth Church, in which a Jewish man and his Christian wife threw firecrackers but did not cause any injuries, as anti-Christian extremism, although police stated that the attack was not due to anti-Christian motives (*The Miami Herald* 5 Mar. 2006; *Haaretz* 4 Mar. 2006). In response to the incident, President Moshe Katsav stated that "Israel pledges to unconditionally defend the holy sites of all religions" (ibid.) and in September 2006, the Nazareth District Court reportedly convicted the couple for their role in the attack (ibid. 13 Sept. 2006).

In June 2006, *Haaretz* reported that 100 residents of Mea She'arim began attacking 50 pro-Israel Christian tourists who were sporting t-shirts that read "Love your neighbor as yourself," as they entered the Haredi Jerusalem neighbourhood (28 June 2006). Police intervened but made no arrests, instead waiting for the tourists, three of whom were injured, to make formal complaints (*Haaretz* 28 June 2006).

The *International Religious Freedom Report 2007* noted that in October 2006, the leading rabbi in Rehovot's Ethiopian community threatened to bomb a Christian group's headquarters if it did not cease its missionary activities, which he alleged involved "tricking and bribing Ethiopian Jews into conversion" (US 14 Sept. 2007, Sec. III).

In September 2007, Israel's Chief Rabbinate counselled Jews to stay away from festivities in which thousands of Christians from around the world gather in Israel to celebrate the Jewish holiday of Sukkot, out of a fear that some participants had a proselytizing agenda (AP 24 Sept. 2007).

Media sources report that in May 2008, a group of Haredi Jewish students set fire to hundreds of copies of the New Testament in the mainly religious Tel Aviv

suburb of Or Yehuda, following complaints that missionaries were active in the area (AP 20 May 2008; *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* 8 June 2008). The town's deputy mayor has reportedly denied allegations that he had ordered the students to collect and burn the books (AP 22 June 2008).

Yad L'Achim

According to its website, Yad L'Achim is a politically unaffiliated, non-profit organization created in 1950 in order to assist new immigrants to Israel "find a suitable religious framework" (Yad L'Achim n.d.a). As part of its mandate, the organization runs anti-assimilation and counter missionary departments, the latter of which "fight[s] the missionaries in a variety of ways, some of which, due to their sensitive nature, can't be described in detail" but "all of which are legal" (ibid. n.d.b). Among the strategies employed by Yad L'Achim to influence Jewish individuals who respond favourably to missionaries are meeting with these individuals in person to "help them make their way back to the Jewish people," offering economic support and counselling for "families or people in distress," conducting religious classes to familiarize Russian immigrants with their Jewish heritage, and leading neighbourhood protests to raise community awareness (ibid.). Rabbi Alex Artovski, head of Yad L'Achim's anti-missionary department "stresses that he's not targeting believing, church-going Christians, but Jews who have been lured into cults" (Yad L'Achim n.d.c).

In June 2007, Yad L'Achim announced that it had thwarted plans by a missionary congregation to open an office in central Jerusalem (Yad L'Achim 24 June 2007).

According to the *International Religious Freedom Report 2007*, Jehovah's Witnesses and Messianic Jews accused Yad L'Achim "of harassing and occasionally assaulting its members" (US 14 Sept. 2007, Sec. III).

Jehovah's Witnesses

There are approximately 2,500 Jehovah's Witnesses residing in Israel; while they believe that Jesus is the Messiah, they reportedly do not consider themselves Christians (*Haaretz* 28 Mar. 2008).

Meir Cohen, the coordinator of Yad L'Achim's anti-missionary program, says his organization receives a dozen telephone calls a day from people complaining about the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses (*Haaretz* 28 Mar. 2008). Yad L'Achim contends that Jehovah's Witnesses "[target] society's weaker elements, including new immigrants, the poor and the handicapped" (ibid.). However, a representative of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Israel, David Namer, counters that "their movement cuts across ethnic and socioeconomic lines" (ibid.).

In February 2007, a Haifa district court ruled that Haifa's Convention Center should provide rental facilities to Jehovah's Witnesses, which would allow them to conduct religious lectures and provide information on their faith (HRWF 12 Feb. 2007). This prompted former justice minister Yaakov Neeman to state that such a decision "opened the way for missionary groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses to operate in Israel" (ibid.).

Messianic Jews

According to *Israel Faxx*, a weekly online newsletter, there are approximately 8,000 Jews in Israel who worship Jesus (also known as Jews for Jesus or Messianic Jews), and some 100 "missionary" churches in the country (6 May 2008). An Associated Press (AP) article in *Haaretz* cites a lawyer who represents Messianic Jews who estimates that their community numbers about 10,000 (20 May 2008). *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* cites members of the Messianic community in Israel as stating that their membership is growing and that "they are becoming bolder in

sharing their beliefs" (8 June 2008).

The *International Religious Freedom Report 2007* notes that on Christmas Eve 2005, a group of 200 Haredi Jews disrupted a Messianic religious service in Beersheva, vandalizing the property and assaulting the pastor (US 14 Sept. 2007, Sec. III). Police arrived to calm the mob, and the case was brought before the Beersheva District Court for trial (*ibid.*), but information on the outcome of this case could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

Since 2004, a group of Haredi Jews in the city of Arad have reportedly been protesting outside the homes of Christians and Messianic Jews (*ibid.*), although this could not be corroborated by the Research Directorate.

According to *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, since 2006, several Messianic Jewish sites have been attacked, including the burning of a chess club in Arad and the firebombing of a combined Messianic-evangelical church in Jerusalem (8 June 2008).

AP reports that there was some suspicion that "Jewish extremists" were behind an arson attack against a building used by Messianic Jews (20 May 2008). However, no one claimed responsibility for the attack (AP 20 May 2008), and further or corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

In March 2008, a teenager who belonged to a Messianic Jewish family was seriously injured when a bomb disguised as a Purim present exploded in his home (*The Jerusalem Post* 24 Mar. 2008; *Haaretz* 28 Mar. 2008). This prompted the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem, an evangelical organization, to issue a statement "call[ing] on local police to stop 'overlooking' cases of 'harassment, intimidation and even physical violence' against Messianic Jews" (*ibid.* 14 Apr. 2008). According to the injured teen's father, David Oritz, a Christian pastor, police suspected that Jewish anti-missionaries were responsible for the attack (*The Jerusalem Post* 24 Mar. 2008).

In May 2008, Yad L'Achim appealed to leading rabbis and the Education and Defence ministries (which run the International Bible Contest) to boycott the International Bible Quiz when it was discovered that a finalist was a Messianic Jew (*The Jerusalem Post* 1 May 2008), warning that "[t]he Bible Contest is intended for Jewish youngsters. Members of the Messianic Jews cult are not recognized as Jews, not even according to the High Court" (Yad L'Achim 1 May 2008), referring to a decision in which the Court ruled that practising Christians would not be considered Jews for the purposes of immigration to Israel, regardless of their ethnic origin (*Israel Faxx* 6 May 2008). However, the Education Ministry reportedly replied that the 11th grade finalist for the Bible quiz was listed as Jewish according to the Population Registry and was thus "not disqualified from participating" (*ibid.*; *The Jerusalem Post* 1 May 2008).

In a 22 June 2008 article, AP reports that some Messianic Jews "worship under the protection of an armed guard." AP cites a lawyer who has represented Messianic Jews as stating that most of his cases "involve authorities' attempts to close down houses of worship, revoke the citizenship of believers or refuse to register their children as Israelis," and that police often hesitate to charge offenders in cases involving violence (22 June 2008). Further or corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: The Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI) and the Jerusalem Center for Jewish-Christian Relations (JCJCR) could not respond to requests for information within the time constraints of this Response.

Internet sites, including: Amnesty International (AI), British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), *Christian Science Monitor* [Boston], Come and See: The Christian Website from Nazareth, *The Economist* [London], European Country of Origin Information Network (ecoi.net), Fédération internationale des ligues des droits de l'homme (FIDH), Hamoked, Human Rights Watch (HRW), International Christian Concern, Jerusalem Center for Jewish-Christian Relations (JCJCR), *The New York Times*.

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