

# Factsheet on Judaism, Radicalization and Polarization



Part of a Series of Factsheets on Religion and Radicalization  
within the context of the EDUC8 Project.

Produced by the Institute of Philosophy, KU Leuven.



Funded by the European Union

עֵשׂוֹ לִי מִקֹּדֶשׁ וּשְׁכֵנֹתַי בְּתוֹכָם

## Introduction

Judaism, with approximately 14 million members across the world, is both the oldest and smallest monotheistic religion. It joins Christianity and Islam as one of the Abrahamic religions. Today, people that self-identify as Jews can be found in almost every country, although Jews are relatively concentrated in certain areas. More than four-fifths of Jews live in either Israel or North America. The remaining Jews can mostly be found in Europe and Latin America-Caribbean, with a smaller section located in Asia and the Pacific and sub-Sahara Africa. Of course, these numbers do not differentiate between different denominations. In the United States, for example, a distinction is made between Orthodox, Reform, Reconstructionist, and Conservative Judaism. In the Middle East-North Africa, and elsewhere, they mostly distinguish between ultra-Orthodox Judaism, Modern Orthodox Judaism, and other, less tradition-orientated branches of Judaism.

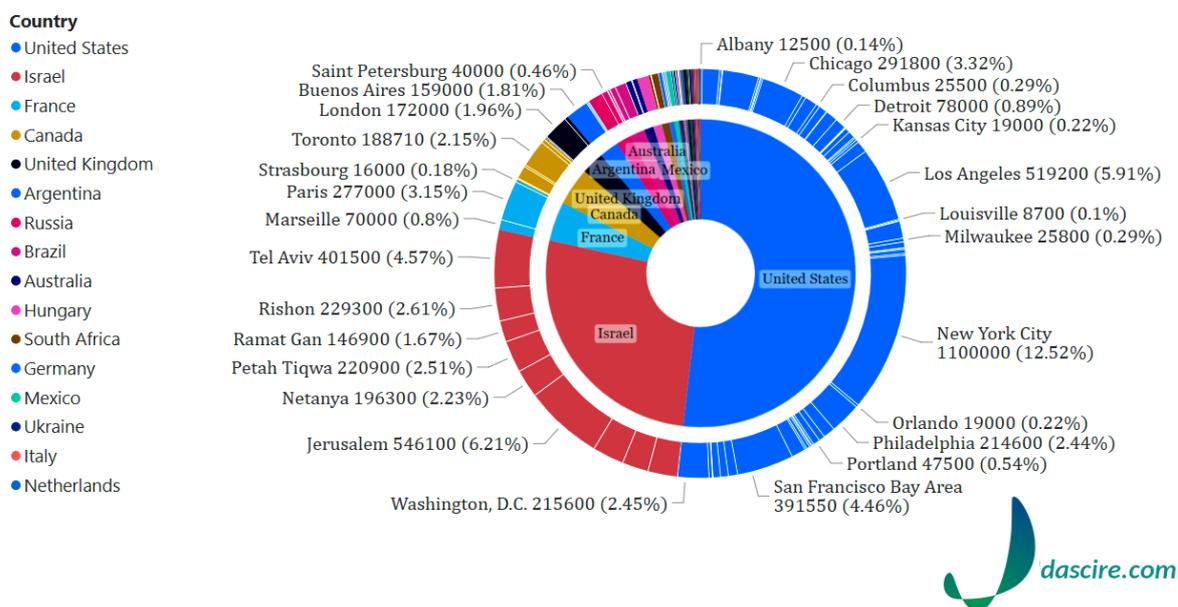


Figure 1: A map of the world's largest Jewish populations. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

## Structure

In ancient times there used to be a temple in Jerusalem, which was the center of the religious, cultural, and economic life of Jews. The Temple of Jerusalem got destroyed twice, the last time by the Romans in 70 A.D. Following this final destruction, Jews got dispersed across the earth, and became what is now known as the diaspora: the entirety of Jewish people living outside of the Land of Israel. In 1948, the State of Israel came into existence, which considers itself to be the national home of Jews. At present, there is no central or doctrinal authority that regulates the lives of all Jews. The existence of the diaspora leads to a multiplicity of different Jewish approaches to life. Every Jewish community is thus to a certain degree self-governed, with local rabbis that interpret and explain holy texts and laws differently. Judaism is thus highly decentralized, although some countries have appointed Chief Rabbis and the State of Israel fosters the ambition to centralize Jewish authority within its borders.

In Europe, two major ethnic groups of Jews can be discerned: Ashkenazi and Sephardi. Ashkenazi Jews originate from Jewish communities in Central and Eastern Europe. Their main language is Yiddish, a combination of Hebrew and the languages of Central Europe. Sephardi Jews descend from Jewish communities from the Iberian peninsula, and those that emigrated to other Mediterranean countries.

Their main language is Ladino, a combination of Hebrew and Spanish. Both ethnic groups coalesced in the Middle Ages in their respective regions, and heavily influenced the science and culture of their surroundings. Of course, many more Jewish groups exist. All of these diverse communities and their approaches establish what is known as Judaism.

## Contemporary issues

Judaism, as a consequence of its decentralized structure, offers no uniform approach for tackling contemporary and emerging issues. Whether it be environmental issues, issues of human rights and animal rights, gender equality, or issues of social justice, the Jewish response is as varied as there are Jewish communities. This is made specifically clear when looking at the divide between (Modern) Orthodox Jews, secular Jews, and Reform Jews. Orthodox Jews stick close to their tradition, while secular, or more liberal-minded Jews, accept changes and are more welcoming to progressive movements.

A central tenet of Judaism, however, is the importance of interpretation and discussion as cornerstones of religious education and experience. As such, both old laws and modern interpretations can be found which prohibit cruelty against animals, wasting resources or destroying nature, killing (innocent) people, and oppressing the poor and the stranger. Furthermore, questions of contemporary importance, like questions of feminism and social justice, are debated in responsa literature (written answers by rabbis to legal questions). Because of its dialogical, interpretative nature, Judaism is never closed off from contemporary life.



Figure 2: Martin Luther King (right) and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (left). Rabbi Heschel also joined Martin Luther King at the Selma to Montgomery march in 1963. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

## Radicalization

The Six Day War in 1967 saw the state of Israel gain a lot of new territory, including the West Bank. The result of the war was seen by Orthodox Zionists not just as a political victory, but also as a religious one, since the land of Israel now also encompassed holy sites that are of great importance in the Jewish history and tradition. Following the Six Day War, Israeli Jews started settling the West Bank unauthorized. This received international condemnation, but the number of settlers kept growing, and over the years the Israeli government became increasingly supportive of the settler movement. The Israeli government started allocating resources, granting building permits, and planning the institutional development of the West Bank as a part of Israel. The settler movement led to the displacement of many Palestinians, and tensions grew between the remaining Arab and new Jewish communities. As a result, there were violent Palestinian uprisings, which were violently met by the Israeli military. This dynamic, where a Palestinian protest is followed by a violent Israeli answer, continues to this day. On a smaller scale, there is an increase in everyday violence by Israeli settlers against Palestinian farmers and landowners.

While there are many factors behind this violent story, religious radicalization or extremism is a major one. The past and future are both important for this interpretation. Not only is the settler movement justified by taking recourse to the religious tradition, it is also seen as the advent of the messianic age in which the messiah comes to usher in an age of peace and harmony. Forming a 'complete' land of Israel is thus interpreted as a necessary step in light of the coming of the messiah. Much work must be done to find an interreligious solution to the violent conflicts and their religious roots. Violence, whether singular or collective, has been part of Jewish history since its inception. Nevertheless, Judaism broadly considers itself to be a peaceful religion. Both in old texts and in contemporary interpretations, clear denunciations of violence can be found. In general, Judaism upholds the pursuit of justice and the establishment of harmony between nations and people. The answer to religious violence might thus be found within the religion itself.

## Polarization

Polarization, both inter- and intrareligious, has also been a known feature of Judaism. Progressive branches of Judaism, like Reform or Reconstructionist Judaism, encourage interfaith dialogue the most, while Conservative or (Modern) Orthodox Judaism is more wary of such attempts. Intrareligious dialogue in general is strained by the plurality of denominations. Some ultra-Orthodox communities consider intrareligious dialogue to be a sin, and look at other denominations as *goyim*, or non-Jewish people. Much can be done to help bridge the divide between religions, and indeed, between the different branches of Judaism as well. Nevertheless, a central core principle of Judaism remains the belief in peace between all people.

Cover: Dohány Street Synagogue, Budapest. Source: © Tiff Ng / Pexels.

This factsheet was funded by the European Union's Internal Security Fund - Police. The content of this fact sheet represents the views of the authors only and is their sole responsibility. The European Commission does not accept any responsibility for use that may be made of the information it contains.

Copyright © EDUC8 2021. All rights reserved.

