



Hardly any accusation is more persistent than the claim that Israel is, at its core, waging a war against Islam. A look at the country's institutions paints a different picture: state-funded Sharia courts and protected Islamic holidays. How does this square with the accusation—and what does a comparison with neighboring Muslim-ruled states reveal?

By Mohamed Diwan 

On July 9, 2026, Israeli President Yitzhak Herzog posted a [message](#) on X that was viewed hundreds of thousands of times within a few hours. The photos show a scene from the presidential residence in Jerusalem: men in black judicial robes standing before Israeli flags, a hall filled with a festive crowd, family members filming with their cell phones—and in the center of the image, a woman in a white hijab and judicial robe holding her certificate of appointment up to the camera next to the smiling president. On that day, Herzog wrote, five new qadis—judges of Islamic law—were sworn in for Israel's Sharia courts; he was particularly moved by the swearing-in of Rula Masalha-Zahalka, only the second female qadi in the country's history.

The reactions were telling. Aside from the congratulations, the responses were dominated above all by astonishment. Sharia courts—in Israel? The president personally administering the oath of office? For many, especially outside Israel, this picture didn't fit with anything they thought they knew about the country.

The Fiction of Israel's Accusers

For years, particularly by the loudest voices in the Muslim world, a narrative has been perpetuated in which Israel is portrayed not as a state among states, but as the enemy of Islam par excellence.

In September 2024, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan told graduates of Islamic schools that only an alliance of Islamic countries could stop Israel's "state terrorism." In the same speech, he explicitly reframed the Gaza War: not as a war between Israel and the Palestinians, but as a struggle against Muslims. Iran's slain Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei goes even further. He celebrated the Hamas massacre of October 7, 2023—which the perpetrators programmatically dubbed the "Al-Aqsa Flood"—as a devastating blow against the Zionist enemy, whose downfall he has for years portrayed as a cause for the entire Islamic world.



This narrative has a strategic advantage—it does not require a look inside Israel. For anyone who looks there will not find the oppressed Islam described in the accusation, but rather one of the largest and most prosperous Muslim communities in the Middle East.

Nearly one in five Israelis is Muslim

According to the latest data from the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), published in May 2026 on the occasion of the Islamic festival of Eid al-Adha, there were approximately 1.849 million Muslims living in Israel at the end of 2025 —about 18.6 percent of the total population. The country's largest Muslim community is in Jerusalem, with about 395,200 people; Muslims make up more than one-third of the city's population there. The Muslim population continues to grow faster than the Jewish population, albeit at a declining rate. The education data is particularly revealing: among Muslim female high school graduates, over 42 percent now go on to pursue higher education, more than twice as many as among young men. Just under 50,000 Muslim students were enrolled at Israeli universities during the 2024-25 academic year.

Let's consider these figures for a moment in light of the claim that this is an Islamophobic state. A regime that sought to suppress a religion would hardly have a growing, increasingly academically educated Muslim population whose life expectancy—77.4 years for men, 83.1 for women—exceeds that of nearly all neighboring countries. Muslims in Israel are citizens in the full sense of the word: with the right to vote and a passport, with access to social security, the public health care system, and all courts.

Arab parties have been represented in the Knesset since the state's founding in 1948. Between 2021 and 2022, the conservative Islamic Ra'am Party, led by Mansour Abbas, became the first explicitly religious Muslim party to join an Israeli governing coalition. The mirror image of this is that there are no non-Muslim parties—let alone Jewish-religious parties—as coalition partners in Ankara, Tehran, or Riyadh. The very idea is unthinkable—precisely because these states drove their Jewish communities into exile in the 20th century.



Sharia courts are part of Israel's judicial system

The System of Religious Communities

Israel's religious constitution is a legacy of two empires. The Ottoman Empire organized its religious minorities under the so-called millet system: Each recognized religious community governed its own family law—from marriage and divorce to inheritance—according to its own religious law in its own courts. The British Mandate authorities adopted this system after 1917, and the State of Israel explicitly recognized it upon its founding in 1948.

Islam is thus far more than a tolerated private matter in Israel. It is a state-recognized religious community with its own jurisdiction, which is integrated into the Israeli judicial system. The Qadis Law of 1961 governs the appointment, status, and remuneration of Muslim judges. Muslim holidays are considered statutory days off for Muslim employees; the state pays imams and maintains numerous mosques. Hundreds of places of worship are scattered across the country, from the Al-Jassir Mosque in Acre through Jaffa, Haifa, and Nazareth to the Bedouin towns of the Negev. The call to prayer rings out daily in Israeli cities.

Sharia in Israel

But the strongest counterargument to the claim of an “Islamophobic Jewish state” is precisely this network of Sharia courts. Israel maintains nine regional Sharia courts—including in Jerusalem, Jaffa, Haifa, Acre, Nazareth, Taibe, and Be'er Sheva—as well as a Sharia Court of Appeals. Anyone who thinks of these as private arbitration bodies is mistaken: these courts are part of the state judiciary. A state selection committee, which includes members of the Knesset, appoints the qadis; their salaries come from the state budget, and they take their oath of office before the president.

In May 2022, Khaled Kabub, born in Jaffa in 1958, was also appointed as the first Muslim to a permanent seat on Israel's Supreme Court—the country's highest court, which also rules on the government and regularly overturns its decisions. Kabub, formerly vice president of the Tel Aviv District Court and an expert in white-collar crime, was also sworn in at the President's Residence in the presence of President Herzog, Chief Justice Esther Hayut, and Justice Minister Gideon Sa'ar.

Kabub is not an isolated case. This is evidenced by Muslim members of the Knesset,



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Muslim diplomats in the Israeli Foreign Service, a significant proportion of Arab doctors and nurses in the healthcare system, university professors, mayors—and officers, primarily Bedouins, who serve voluntarily, since Muslims are generally exempt from military service. At the same time, there is a significant number of volunteer soldiers from the Arab-Muslim population—particularly among Bedouins, but also among other Arab Muslims—who serve in combat units, border patrol, and other branches of the armed forces.

Religious Freedom in Israel - Hardly Any Under Muslim Rule

One could dismiss all of this as a matter of course and as a state patting itself on the back. The real test, therefore, lies in a comparison with those countries on whose behalf the accusation of Israeli Islamophobia is being made.

In its 2026 report, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) lists as many as eighteen countries as “Countries of Particular Concern”—that is, countries with particularly severe, systematic violations of religious freedom. A striking number of these are Muslim-majority countries: Saudi Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan, Libya, Pakistan, Syria, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. The Special Watch List includes, among others, Algeria, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Malaysia, Qatar, Turkey, and Uzbekistan—also predominantly Muslim countries. Israel does not appear on either list. Apostasy from Islam is a criminal offense in several of these countries and, in extreme cases, is punishable by death.

In Israel, on the other hand, all religions are legal. The Baha'is, whose world center is located in the northern Israeli port city of Haifa, practice their faith there just as freely as Christians and Druze. Israel does not appear in the USCIRF's sanction categories. The bottom line is this: An Iranian Sunni, a Saudi Shia, a Turkish Alevi, and a Pakistani Ahmadi enjoy less religious freedom in their own Muslim-ruled home countries than any of them would have in Israel if they lived there.

Islam as part of the state, not as a religion practiced in secret

It is understandable that government-funded Sharia courts would cause

astonishment even among Israel's friends: How can Israel of all countries—a state that is threatened with hatred and annihilation in the name of a Sharia interpreted in an anti-Semitic manner—maintain such courts itself?

The answer lies in control. Israel does not leave the interpretation of Islamic law to its own devices, but rather integrates it into its state system: The state appoints the qadis, pays their salaries, and subjects their rulings to Israeli law and the Supreme Court. Radical interpretations that run counter to the legal system thus find no institutional foothold.

Behind this lies an insight that the German-Egyptian author Hamed Abdel-Samad captured in a metaphor: He compared the Quran to a “large supermarket” in which compassion and hatred, peace and violence, tolerance and intolerance coexist side by side. But when both interpretations are inherent in the text, it is not the text alone but the context that determines which interpretation prevails.

Just how flexible this framework is became evident following the Abraham Accords of 2020: In countries such as Morocco and the United Arab Emirates, which for decades had justified their hostility toward the Jewish state on religious grounds, the rapprochement was suddenly justified on religious grounds.

In the United Kingdom, by contrast, estimates suggest that dozens of Sharia councils operate largely behind closed doors. Not even their exact number can be reliably determined; the Council of Europe has criticized the complete lack of transparency. The result is a gray area that is entirely beyond government control. Herein lies the crucial difference: the United Kingdom has left Islam to its own devices, while Israel subjects it to its laws and has its judges sworn in by the state. European countries where Islam is playing an increasingly significant role would do well to follow this example.

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