



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Covering 8,522 square miles (22,072 square kilometers), Israel is about the same size as New Jersey. This area does not include the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza. Despite Israel's small size, the terrain varies substantially by region, from fertile valleys and hills to deserts and the Dead Sea, the lowest point on earth at 1,339 feet (408 meters) below sea level. In the south, the arid Negev Desert is home to craters, mountains, and oases.

On the coastal plain, summers are humid and winters mild. The hills of the interior offer more comfortable summers but colder winters. Jerusalem's temperatures average around 85°F (29°C) in the summer and 50°F (10°C) in the winter. An efficient irrigation system makes agricultural land arable all year.

History

The Holy Land, from which the present state of Israel emerged, claims a long history of rule by different powers. A Hebrew kingdom was established from the 12 tribes of Israel that came out of Egypt with Moses. King David ruled this kingdom some three thousand years ago. After his son Solomon's reign, it split into two states—Israel and Judah—that were later destroyed by Assyria and Babylonia in the eighth and sixth centuries BC. The populations were dispersed or taken captive, although many Israelites remained in the area. After the Persian conquest of the Middle East, many Jews were allowed to return to the Holy Land to

establish a nation and build a temple. The land later fell to the Greeks and then to the Romans. Heavily persecuted, the Jewish population declined sharply during the Byzantine era (AD 313–636). In the 600s, the area (named Palestine by the Romans) was conquered by Muslims, who ruled for nearly one thousand years.

The Ottoman Turks controlled Palestine from the 16th century until World War I. In the 1890s, a Hungarian named Theodor Herzl founded Zionism as an international movement to restore Palestine to the Jews. After World War I, the area came under British control. Various plans for partitioning the area were put forth but never implemented. Spurred by the genocide and suffering of the Holocaust during World War II, Jews immigrated to Israel in large numbers. The British first tried to halt the process but were unable to stop Jews from seeking a new life in what they considered to be their land of inheritance.

In 1947, the United Nations voted to divide the area into two states—one Arab and one Jewish. In May 1948, Israel proclaimed an independent state and the British withdrew. Neighboring Arab nations, opposed to an independent Jewish state, declared war and attacked. Subsequent wars were fought in 1956, 1967, and 1973. Israel occupied territories conquered in the 1967 War: the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip from Egypt, the Golan Heights from Syria, and the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan. Israel and Egypt signed a peace treaty that allowed the return of Sinai to Egypt in 1979.

Negotiations between Israel and Palestinian Arabs repeatedly broke down in the 1980s. From 1987 to 1993, Palestinians rebelled in an uprising known as the *intifada*,

which led to clashes between Israeli forces and residents of the West Bank and Gaza. It also resulted in peaceful demonstrations and other forms of resistance. In 1988, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which had launched attacks against Israel, renounced terrorism and declared an independent Palestinian state. Israel rejected the declaration but agreed, in 1991, to discuss peace with its Arab neighbors and the Palestinians.

In a landmark 1993 treaty, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin granted the Palestinians limited autonomy in some occupied areas. A 1994 treaty ended hostilities with Jordan. Progress was limited on other issues, but Rabin and President Yasser Arafat of the PLO agreed in 1995 to gradually extend self-rule to most of the West Bank (but not to Jerusalem). Opposition to this and other aspects of the peace plan intensified among both right-wing Israelis and militant Palestinians. Militants belonging to the Palestinian group Hamas carried out attacks to undermine negotiations. Then a right-wing Jewish student assassinated Rabin in November 1995. Shimon Peres replaced Rabin and struggled to implement signed peace agreements and forge ahead with other negotiations.

The peace process had become so divisive among Israelis that Likud Party leader Benjamin Netanyahu defeated Peres by fewer than 25,000 votes in 1996 elections for prime minister. In 1997, the peace process came to a halt following the expansion of Jewish settlements in East Jerusalem and a series of Palestinian suicide bombings. Labor Party leader Ehud Barak defeated Netanyahu in 1999 elections. Barak ceded more land in the West Bank to Palestinian control and withdrew Israeli forces from southern Lebanon in 2000, ending an 18-year occupation. However, peace talks with Syria broke down over Israel's refusal to return all of the Golan Heights. Talks with the Palestinians foundered over the status of Jerusalem.

A visit by Likud's Ariel Sharon to the Temple Mount, a place holy to Jews and Muslims, sparked a second *intifada* in 2000. The violence included suicide bombings by extremist Palestinians and offensives in the West Bank by Israeli forces. As the conflict escalated, Barak resigned in 2001, and Sharon was elected prime minister. In 2005, he oversaw the dismantling of all Israeli settlements in Gaza. After Sharon was incapacitated by a stroke, Ehud Olmert of the newly formed Kadima Party won 2006 elections. In 2008, Olmert resigned amid corruption allegations. He continued to serve as acting prime minister until a new government was formed.

When pro-Palestinian militant group Hezbollah captured two Israeli soldiers and fired on cities in northern Israel, Israel responded in June 2006 by launching a massive air assault on southern Lebanon. A cease-fire between Israel and Hezbollah took effect in August 2006, but periodic violence between Israel and Hamas continued. Hamas gained complete control of the Gaza Strip in 2007; this weakened the legitimacy of Israel's negotiations with Palestinian group Fatah, which only retained control of the West Bank. A war in Gaza began when a cease-fire lapsed in December of 2008, rocket fire into Israel increased, and Israel launched a three-week air and ground assault in Gaza, resulting in the death of more than 1,000 Palestinian civilians. In 2009, Binyamin Netanyahu,

leader of the right-wing Likud party, again became Israel's prime minister. The election of Netanyahu, perceived as a hard-liner on issues related to Palestine, brought doubts on Israel's ability to compromise with the Palestinians. Israel was criticized by many in the international community after its navy fired on a Turkish flotilla attempting to bring humanitarian aid to the blockaded Gaza Strip in 2010.

Despite years of negotiations, major obstacles stand in the way of a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Among the most contentious issues are the status of Jerusalem, the construction of a barrier between Israeli and Palestinian territory, the fate of Palestinian refugees, and the future of Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Israel has a population of nearly 7.4 million. This figure includes nearly 500,000 Israeli settlers in the West Bank, the Golan Heights, and East Jerusalem. Israelis refer to the West Bank as Judaea and Samaria, the biblical names for the region, and do not consider East Jerusalem an occupied territory, but an integral part of Jerusalem. About 92 percent of Israelis live in cities. The annual population growth rate, currently 1.6 percent, fluctuates with immigration. Waves of immigration challenge Israel's ability to provide housing and jobs, but society is generally able to absorb the newcomers. By law, all Jews in the world have the right to immigrate to Israel, as long as they can prove their Jewish heritage (inherited from the mother's side) or are recognized converts.

Twenty-four percent of Israel's citizens are Palestinian Arabs or members of the Druze and Circassian ethnic groups. The rest of the population (76 percent) is Jewish. The word *Jewish* does not describe an ethnic group or population—it is a religion, a culture, and a nation. There are three identities in Israel: religion, citizenship, and nationality. Someone could be Christian by religion, Israeli by citizenship, and Arab by nationality. A Jew is Jewish by religion and nationality, but Israeli by citizenship.

Because Jews come from around the world, their ethnic makeup is mixed. Historically, Israeli society was marked by two main ethnic divisions: the Sephardic Jews, from the Middle East and North Africa, and the Ashkenazi Jews, who have roots in Europe. The Ashkenazim generally have dominated society, but the Sephardim are becoming more prominent; social and educational opportunities are reducing the distinction between the groups. Immigrants from the former Soviet Union retain a distinctive identity.

Language

Hebrew is Israel's official language. Arabic has official status, is spoken by the Arab minority, and is taught from the fifth grade on in school. English, frequently used in commerce, is spoken by most Israelis and is also taught from the fifth grade on. Nearly all Israelis speak at least two languages, often because they or their parents emigrated after 1948. Many immigrants attend government-sponsored *ulpan* classes to learn Hebrew, although proficiency in the language is no

longer considered crucial. Immigrants increasingly are retaining their first language; Russian, for example, is widely used and appears on food labels and ads.

Religion

The city of Jerusalem and surrounding areas have played an important role in the development of several of the world's major religions, including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Jerusalem is holy to all three religions and is a source of conflict among them. Judaism (which 76 percent of Israelis follow) focuses on a unique relationship and responsibility between the Creator and the Jewish nation, as particularly outlined in the Bible's first five books of Moses. Once expressed primarily through temple rites, worship patterns now concentrate on personal action. Orthodox or observant Jews strictly adhere to certain behavioral imperatives, such as honoring the Jewish Sabbath, from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday, and following dietary codes. Reform and Conservative Judaism have small followings. Most Jews are nonobservant (secular) but are sensitive to and accepting of Jewish values.

About 16 percent of the population is Muslim (mostly Sunni) and nearly 2 percent is Druze, a religion that is said to have started as an offshoot of Islam. The remaining 2 percent is Christian, about half of which is Greek Orthodox. The city of Haifa is also the center of the Baha'i Faith, which emphasizes the unity of religions and the oneness of humanity.

General Attitudes

Israel is a land of informality, as evidenced in people's casual dress habits and the custom of addressing each other by first name. Respect is shown in other ways—through courtesy and neighborly help, for instance. Israelis are civic-minded and involved in the community. In a large apartment complex, every family knows the others by name and knows at least a little about each family member.

Israelis are inquisitive; they are avid readers and enjoy travel. They value determination, hard work, frankness, and humor. The group, especially the family, is more important than its individual members, and Israelis enjoy sharing life with their family and friends. Most Israelis want a home and comfortable life, but material possessions are less important than a strong family.

Israelis are devoted to their culture and state. Israel's very existence is greatly valued. Part of the people's pride for the nation comes with mandatory military service. Women serve two years and men serve three. Arab-Israeli men may volunteer for military service, but they are not drafted. Jewish immigration is encouraged as part of the Zionist movement, the ongoing effort to establish and maintain a Jewish homeland.

Personal Appearance

Most Israelis wear casual Western-style clothing. Men wear suits and ties only on formal occasions, otherwise preferring open-necked shirts and jeans. Women wear slacks and dresses. Youth like European and U.S. fashions. Both men and women wear shorts and sandals in the summer. Orthodox

Jews dress more conservatively (long sleeves for men, longer skirts for women). Men might cover their heads with an embroidered *kippah* cap, or *yarmulke*. Among ultra-Orthodox Jews, men wear black pants and jackets over white buttoned-up shirts with black hats; women do not wear pants, and they cover their heads with a scarf. Muslims wear Western or traditional clothing.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Informality governs most greetings. *Shalom* (Peace) is the usual greeting and parting phrase. It may be followed by *Ma Nishma?* (What's up?), *Ma Ha 'inyanim?* (What's happening?), or the more formal *Ma Shlomcha?* (How are you?). For women, this last phrase is *Ma Shlomech?* Handshakes are common. Additional touching (hugging, kissing) depends largely on one's ethnic origin and the relationship between the greeters. People from Eastern cultures tend to touch more than Westerners do: women might hug and kiss once or twice on the cheek. Close male friends may pat each other on the back or shoulder. Among the very religious, men and women do not touch in public. Israelis most often address others by first name once they have been introduced. This custom extends to most facets of life, including the military. Even schoolchildren call their teachers by first name.

Gestures

Hands are used often in conversation and make discussions seem very lively. The most common gesture is to bring thumb and fingertips together, palm facing up, and move the hand up and down; this means "wait a minute" or "hold on." One expresses exasperation by shrugging the shoulders, sometimes also holding open palms up. Respect for elders is extremely important. For instance, one always gives up a bus seat to an older person.

Visiting

Israelis love to visit friends and relatives. They might drop by unannounced for a short visit or call ahead to arrange something. Invitations to dinner, especially on Friday evening or Saturday afternoon, are common. Invited guests usually take a gift, such as flowers, chocolates, or wine. Hosts always offer visitors refreshments. These include coffee, tea, or a cold drink, as well as cake, cookies, or snacks (nuts and sunflower seeds). In addition to visiting in the home, Israelis enjoy meeting at cafés for an evening of conversation.

Eating

On average, Israelis eat three meals a day. Breakfast is light. The main meal traditionally is in the early afternoon (except on Friday evening), and supper usually is light. Families are often too busy to eat all together, but they will at least gather for the Friday evening and Saturday afternoon meals. Conversation and a casual atmosphere accompany most meals. It is polite for guests to accept offers of additional food.

LIFESTYLE

Family

The family is central to Israeli life, and children are given a great deal of care and attention. Ties remain very strong, even as children become adults. Parents feel a deep responsibility to prepare and provide for a child's future. Married children often live near parents or other relatives. They expect to care for elderly parents. Families come together on holidays, especially Passover, and for big celebrations. The father traditionally is the head of the family, but women have great influence in all decisions. Women comprise 35 percent of the labor force. A small number of families live in either a *kibbutz* or a *moshav*. In a *kibbutz*, families share the land, work, food, and dining hall equally, concentrating on agriculture. A *moshav* is a small village where families (fewer than one hundred) live separately but cooperate in providing for the needs of the community and in marketing the village's products.

Housing

Between 1948 and 1970, the government oversaw the construction of most new housing. Today, almost all homes are constructed by the private sector. Homes are built with the climate in mind. A typical home has solar panels, large windows to allow plentiful light, and a *merpeset* (balcony or patio), on which people often relax in the late afternoon and evening. The coastal zone from Tel Aviv to Haifa has one of the world's highest population densities. Most people there own or rent apartments in low-rise buildings. Houses are generally covered with ceramic tiles or plastered and painted white or a pastel color. By law (dating back to Ottoman rule), the front of all buildings in Jerusalem must be made of white, cream, or rose-pink limestone.

Dating and Marriage

Dating is common. Young people enjoy dancing, eating out, and going to movies. Among Muslims and Orthodox Jews, dating may be supervised or restricted. In recent years, young people have chosen to marry later (on average, age 27 for men, 25 for women), preferring to finish their education and establish careers first.

There are no civil marriages in Israel. All weddings must be performed by a religious authority. A rabbi performs Jewish ceremonies and a *qadi* performs Muslim weddings. Christians go to members of their clergy. Israelis wanting a civil marriage must travel abroad. Divorce and other family issues are handled by religious courts. Each religion has the right to adjudicate family matters according to its own customs.

Wedding traditions vary depending on cultural background, but most weddings tend to be traditional, with the bride and groom married and blessed by a rabbi under a canopy in front of dozens of friends and family. A wedding is a great social event, often including a large dinner party, where singing and dancing last well into the night.

Life Cycle

The vast majority of Israelis observe Jewish rituals and traditions. Girls are generally named three days after birth. Boys are named after eight days, at the time of circumcision. The *brit milah* (circumcision ritual) can be performed in the home or at the synagogue. A girl celebrates her *Bat Mitzvah* (literally, "daughter of the commandments") at age 12. For boys, a *Bar Mitzvah* ("son of the commandments") takes place at age 13. Both ceremonies are festive affairs attended by many extended family members and friends.

Jewish law does not permit cremation. When Israeli Jews die, their bodies are ritually purified, dressed in simple cotton shrouds, and buried, generally within hours of death. In Jerusalem, a custom of not allowing the dead to remain unburied overnight occasionally leads to late-night funerals. For seven days after the burial, close relatives sit *shiva*, meaning they remain at home to accept condolence visits from friends. The family erects a grave marker and holds a short service 30 days after the burial. Anniversaries of a close relative's death are marked by lighting a candle, attending daily religious services, and saying *kaddish* (a short Aramaic prayer).

Diet

Israel has adopted foods from a variety of cultures. While there has been increased interest in healthy eating, Israelis love to snack and eat out. Foods such as pizza, open sandwiches, and hamburgers are popular. Regional dishes include *kebab* (meat and vegetables on a skewer), *falafel* (pita bread filled with fried chickpea batter and salad), *shawarma* (spit-roasted meat and salad inside pita bread), *burékas* (pastries filled with cheese and spinach), chicken soup, and Russian *borscht* (beet soup). Meals on the Sabbath often are substantial and may include soup, fish, and *cholent* (a hearty stew). Sephardim like hot, spicy baked fish, while Ashkenazim prefer *gefilte*, a cold dish of baked or stewed ground fish. Vegetable salad, often mixed with olive oil, lemon juice, or spices, is a staple and usually eaten daily. Poultry and fish are eaten more frequently than beef. Fruits and vegetables are plentiful, and fruit juices are often part of lunch or dinner. Milk products such as yogurt and cheese are eaten with breakfast or dinner. Many people, even the nonreligious, observe Jewish dietary laws (*kashrut*), which prohibit the consumption of milk and meat products at the same meal.

Recreation

Israelis like to go to movies and concerts. Soccer and basketball are the favorite sports, followed by swimming, tennis, gymnastics, hiking, and camping. In their leisure time, people read, watch television, or visit friends. People like to take day trips to various places in Israel. Beaches are a favorite destination for many.

The Arts

As an immigrant country, Israel blends the arts of Ashkenazim, Sephardim, and African Jews. Hebrew prose and poetry help create and define Israeli national identity, while modern theater, orchestra, and dance follow

international trends. Distinctive Israeli folk dancing has developed only in the last 60 years and has a strong eastern European influence.

Israelis differentiate between songs written in Hebrew and “Hebrew songs”—songs with Slavic or other melodies that communicate shared values and feelings. Group singing is popular in private homes, in *kibbutz* dining rooms, and in many community centers. Israel has a rich tradition of classical music.

Holidays

In most of Israel's cities, businesses close and public transportation stops during holidays and festivals. The Jewish calendar is based on the lunar standard. The month of *Tishrei* (September–October) begins with *Rosh Hashanah* (New Year), followed by *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement) on the 10th. The weeklong festival of *Succot* (Tabernacles) begins on the 15th. *Hanukkah* (Festival of Lights) is in December. *Pesach* (Passover) takes place in the spring, six months after *Succot*, and Holocaust Day is commemorated 13 days later. Other important days include Memorial Day (20 days after Passover), Independence Day (21 days after Passover), and *Shavu'ot*, or Pentecost (50 days after Passover). The Jewish day begins at sunset, not midnight. That is why *Shabbat* (Sabbath) begins Friday evening and ends Saturday evening.

SOCIETY

Government

Israel does not have a written constitution. The president (currently Shimon Peres) performs ceremonial duties, but the prime minister (currently Binyamin Netanyahu) is head of government. All governments have been coalitions because no one party has been able to gain a majority of votes in the *Knesset* (Parliament). Its 120 members are elected by popular vote to four-year terms; voters cast ballots for parties, not for individual candidates. The voting age is 18.

Economy

Israel's economy is well developed and modern despite a paucity of natural resources. It provides most people with a high standard of living. Agriculture employs only 2 percent of the labor force, yet produces food for consumption and export. Chief products include fruit, vegetables, beef, dairy, and poultry. The strong industrial sector includes high technology, cut diamonds, and machinery. Tourism is a vital but variable sector in the economy. Growth, unemployment, and inflation fluctuate with immigration and the peace process, as well as global market trends. In 2008, the global economic downturn caused a sharp decline in demand for exports while the credit market tightened, slowing the economy's growth. Taxes run high. The currency is the *new Israeli shekel* (ILS).

Transportation and Communications

Air, bus, rail, and road systems are all well developed in Israel. *Sherut* are taxis that provide convenient transportation between cities; they travel fixed routes with as many as seven

passengers at a time. In all cities except Haifa, buses and trains do not run on the Jewish Sabbath and holy days. Taxis and private cars are plentiful.

Israel has a highly developed communications system with a good domestic phone service. There are several television and radio stations and daily newspapers. Cable and satellite television are widely viewed. Most Israelis own computers and have access to the internet.

Education

The government of Israel provides both religious and secular school systems, and people are free to choose either. Citizens can also choose between schools taught in Hebrew or Arabic. School is free and compulsory through the 10th grade. Elementary school runs through sixth grade, junior high through ninth, and high school through twelfth. The high school diploma is necessary for college entrance and important for getting a job. Special private schools admit those who dropped out of school but later decided to finish. Most schools and universities hold classes six days a week.

Health

All Israelis are covered by a state-run health plan financed by salary deduction. It was introduced in 1995 to replace the system in which most care was provided at public facilities. The plan now dispenses payment for care provided by the private sector. Facilities are modern, and the quality of care is high.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

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POPULATION & AREA

Population	7,353,985 (rank=96)
Area, sq. mi.	8,522 (rank=150)
Area, sq. km.	22,072

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	15 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	28 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$28,600
Adult literacy rate	99% (male); 96% (female)
Infant mortality rate	4 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	79 (male); 83 (female)

*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

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