



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate. Covering 8,020 square miles (20,770 square kilometers), Israel is about the same size as New Jersey. This does not include the occupied territory (called the Administered Area) of the West Bank. Despite the country's size, the land and climate vary substantially by region. The terrain ranges from fertile valleys and flower-covered hills to unique deserts and the Dead Sea, which is the lowest point on earth (1,312 feet, or 400 meters, below sea level). The hot Negev Desert is home to the Mahktesh Crater, mountains, and oases. Eilat, a resort town, borders the Red Sea. On the west coastal plain, summers are humid and winters mild. The hills offer more comfortable summers but colder winters, and the Jordan Rift Valley has a relatively pleasant climate. Jerusalem's temperatures average around 85°F (29°C) in the summer and 50°F (10°C) in the winter. The rainy season is from October to April. Some snow falls in the mountains; Mount Hermon receives enough to support skiing. 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 B.C. 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 (A.D. 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. In 1979, Egypt and Israel signed a peace treaty; Egypt was the first Arab nation to recognize Israel's right to exist. Israel's occupation of territories conquered in the 1967 War led to terrorism and border wars with Lebanon.

Peace negotiations between Israel and Palestinian Arabs during the 1980s broke down several times. The Palestinians rebelled in 1987 in an uprising known as the *intifada*, which was to last until 1993. The *intifada* led to violent clashes between Israeli military forces and residents of the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza. It also resulted in peaceful demonstrations, civil disobedience, and other forms of resistance. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), after years of waging a terrorist campaign, renounced terrorism but

declared an independent Palestinian state in the occupied territories. Israel rejected the declaration but agreed in 1991 to discuss peace with its Arab neighbors and the Palestinians.

Former war hero Yitzhak Rabin became prime minister in 1992 and gave vital support to fledgling negotiations. In 1993, Israel agreed to grant the Palestinians limited autonomy in some occupied areas. A 1994 peace treaty with Jordan ended hostilities and opened the way for cooperation on regional issues. Progress was limited on other issues, such as the status of the Golan Heights, occupied by Israel but once belonging to Syria. Still, Rabin and President Yasser Arafat of the PLO agreed in September 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. The Islamic militant group *Hamas* sponsored violent attacks to undermine negotiations. Then a right-wing Jewish student murdered Prime Minister Rabin after a peace rally in November 1995. Shimon Peres replaced Rabin in office and struggled to implement signed peace agreements and forge ahead with other negotiations.

The peace process had become so divisive among Israelis that the 1996 election for prime minister was decided on fewer than 25,000 votes. Conservative (Likud Party) leader Benjamin Netanyahu defeated Peres to become the country's first directly elected prime minister. The peace process came to a halt in 1997 following the expansion of Jewish settlements in East Jerusalem in March and a series of Palestinian suicide bombings in September.

Labor Party leader Ehud Barak defeated Netanyahu in May 1999 elections. Seeking peace, he ceded more land in the West Bank to Palestinian control and unilaterally withdrew Israeli soldiers from southern Lebanon in May 2000, ending a troubled 22-year occupation. However, peace talks with Syria, started in December 1999, broke down in January 2000 over Israel's refusal to return all of the Golan Heights. Talks with the Palestinians foundered over the status of Jerusalem.

Following a controversial visit by Likud's Ariel Sharon in September 2000 to the Temple Mount, a place holy to Jews and Muslims, a second Palestinian *intifada* began. Amid the escalating Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Barak resigned, elections were called, and Sharon was elected prime minister in February 2001. Violence continued, with suicide bombings by extremist Palestinians and offensives in the West Bank by Israeli forces. The election of Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas in January 2005 opened the way for a cease-fire agreement between Abbas and Sharon. In August 2005, Sharon carried out a plan to dismantle all Israeli settlements in Gaza, but his policies led to a split in the Likud Party. Sharon was incapacitated by a stroke in January 2006, forcing new elections.

THE PEOPLE

Population. Israel's population of 6.3 million is growing by 1.2 percent annually. This includes roughly 384,000 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. Israelis do not consider East Jerusalem an occupied territory, but an integral part of Jerusalem. More than 90 percent of Israelis live in cities. The population growth rate fluctuates with immigration. In 1992, it was 4 percent because 350,000 people emigrated from the former Soviet Union. Many also arrived from Ethiopia. Such immigration waves 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.

Seventeen percent of Israel's citizens are Palestinian Arabs and members of the Druze and Circassian ethnic groups. The rest of the population (82 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: Sephardic Jews, who trace their heritage to the Middle East and North Africa, and Ashkenazi Jews, who have roots in Europe. The Ashkenazim generally have dominated in 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 cultural and political 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 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 13 percent of the population is Muslim (mostly Sunni) and nearly 2 percent is Druze. The remaining 2 to 3 percent is Christian, about half of which is Greek Orthodox. Haifa is also the world 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. Many women work outside the home; women comprise 35 percent of the labor force. Some families (7–8 percent) live in either a *kibbutz* or a *moshav*. In a *kibbutz*, families share the land, work, food, and dining hall equally. They concentrate 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.

Dating and Marriage. Dating is common in Israel, and young people enjoy dancing, eating out, and going to movies. Among Muslims and Orthodox Jews, dating may be supervised or restricted. A wedding is a great social event in Israel, often including a large dinner party, where singing and dancing last well into the night. Of course, traditions vary depending on cultural background. Parents are usually heavily involved in planning weddings and paying for the festivities.

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

Diet. Israel has adopted foods from a variety of cultures. While there has been increased interest in eating healthful foods, 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* (pita bread filled with spiced meat and salad), *tshulnt* (bean stew), *burékas* (pastry 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 *gefилte*, 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. Salads usually do not contain lettuce. Poultry and fish are eaten more frequently than beef. Fruits and vegetables are plentiful, and fruit juices are often part of lunch or dinner. A variety of 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. To a greater or lesser degree, hotels and restaurants follow these dietary laws.

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

Israel

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. Several world-class music events include the International Harp Contest and the Arthur Rubinstein Piano Competition. In early August thousands of solo and group performers attend the Hebrew Song Festival in Arad.

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 at sundown on Friday and ends just after sundown on Saturday.

Commerce. State law requires that all workers have one day of rest each week, which is usually taken on Fridays by Muslims, Saturdays by Jews, and Sundays by Christians. Most workers belong to a labor union. General business hours extend from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 4 to 7 p.m., Sunday through Thursday. Many shops are open all day. On Friday, businesses close around 2 p.m.

SOCIETY

Government. Israel does not have a written constitution. The president (currently Moshe Katzav) performs ceremonial duties, but the prime minister (currently Ehud Olmert) 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.

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 3 percent of the labor force, yet produces food for consumption and export. Chief products include citrus and other fruits, 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. Taxes run high. The United States provides Israel with substantial financial and military aid. Oil, raw materials, military hardware, and household products are imported. 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

POPULATION & AREA

Population	6,276,883 (rank=100)
Area, sq. mi.	8,020 (rank=147)
Area, sq. km.	20,770

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	23 of 177 countries
Adjusted for women	23 of 140 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$20,033
Adult literacy rate	98% (male); 96% (female)
Infant mortality rate	5 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	78 (male); 82 (female)

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.

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. The Open University offers correspondence and radio courses to adults. Literacy among Arabs is somewhat lower than among Jews.

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

Events and Trends.

- Ariel Sharon experienced heavy opposition from within his Likud Party as he sought support for his plan to withdraw Israeli settlers from Gaza. The measure passed only with the support of opposition parties. The rift within Likud prompted Sharon to form a new centrist party, Kadima, in November 2005. After Sharon suffered a stroke in January 2006, Ehud Olmert led Kadima to victory in March 2006 parliamentary elections.
- As Sharon’s Gaza disengagement plan was carried out in August 2005, thousands of Israelis entered Gaza to protest the withdrawal. Israeli security forces made numerous arrests. Ultimately, however, all Israeli settlements in Gaza were dismantled and roughly 8,000 settlers were relocated.

Contact Information. Embassy of Israel, 3514 International Drive NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 364-5500; web site www.israeemb.org. Israel Ministry of Tourism, 800 Second Avenue, New York, NY 10017; phone (888) 77ISRAEL; web site www.goisrael.com.

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