FACTS ABOUT ISRAEL

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A young society with ancient roots, Israel is home to a widely diverse population of over 8 million citizens from many ethnic, religious, cultural and social backgrounds - a mosaic of people living together and contributing to its vibrant democracy.

Israelis embrace many lifestyles: from modern to traditional, from urban to rural and from communal to individual

With an energetic can-do spirit and remarkable social mobility, the inclusiveness of Israeli society celebrates the right to be different and empowers this broad range of people to coexist in harmony.

While the majority of Israelis adopt a secular lifestyle, both amongst Jews and Arabs, freedom of faith and worship is a cornerstone of Israeli democracy. The land of Israel has a special meaning for all three main monotheistic religions, and Israel is home to a variety of thriving religious communities. These include different streams of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, as well as the Baha’i, Druze and Samaritan faiths.

The fusion of different approaches and views within Israeli society, coupled with its economic resourcefulness and cultural creativity, drive the momentum of Israel’s dynamic growth.
Diverse Language Skills

Hebrew and Arabic are the two official languages in Israel. Additionally, over 80% of the Israeli population is proficient in English, which is the common business language.

Israel is essentially a melting-pot culture and many Israelis are also proficient in Russian, French, Spanish, Amharic and other languages. As a result, most visitors will find themselves able to communicate comfortably.

Diverse Origins

77.6% of Israelis are “Sabras”, the nickname given to persons born in Israel. The other 22.4% of Israelis immigrated from all regions of the world:

Did You Know?

In its first years, Israel absorbed, among others, more than 800,000 Jewish immigrants originating from Arab and Muslim countries throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

Diverse Communities

What is a Sabra?
The sabra is a prickly pear indigenous to Israel - it thrives in harsh conditions and is rough on the outside but soft and sweet on the inside. It is said that the character of many Israelis tends to be similar.
Personal liberty and equality are the basis of Israeli society, upheld in practice by both state and civil infrastructure. The Israeli Declaration of Independence emphasizes complete social and political equality for all citizens, irrespective of religion, race or gender.

Women’s rights, for example, have been at the forefront of Israeli culture since its founding: Israeli women stand out as leaders in politics, law, business, the arts and sciences, sports and more, comprising about half of Israel’s academic and judiciary bodies. An emphasis on children’s rights can be seen, inter alia, by the Pupil’s Rights Law. At the other end of the age spectrum, senior citizens enjoy not only legal protection but also government sponsored enrichment projects. Members of the LGBT community make the most of their rights as well; Tel Aviv is one of the most gay-friendly cities in the world.

Furthermore, Israel protects both the dignity and the freedom of persons with disabilities; they are integrated in all areas of society including education, private workplaces and government administration. Ultimately, all Israeli inhabitants enjoy both the theoretical ideal and practical application of equality and freedom.

Outstanding Israeli Women

Hannah Szenes
Poet, volunteered as a paratrooper in the British Army during WWII

Golda Meir
Prime Minister, 1969-1974

Ada Yonath
Nobel Prize Laureate in Chemistry, 2009

Miriam Naor
Current President of the Supreme Court

Rakefet Russak - Aminoach
President and CEO of Bank Leumi Le-israel, Among Fortune’s 100 Most Powerful Women
Special Care

In Israel, 60% of children with special needs are members of the mainstream public education system. Furthermore, companies with more than 100 employees are required to employ workers with disabilities totaling at least 3% of their workforce. Israel views people with both mental and physical disabilities as an important part of society and is committed to their full integration.

Did You Know?
With its gay-friendly atmosphere and cosmopolitan vibe, Tel Aviv has become one of the world’s top destinations for gay tourism, hosting 50,000 LGBT visitors every year.

Yael Arad
Judoka, First Israeli Olympic medalist, 1992

Ester Rada
Singer-songwriter combining a mix of cultural and musical influences

Bar Refaeli
Supermodel

Adi Altschuler
Social entrepreneur and community developer, Selected among TIME Magazine’s Next Generation Leaders

Kira Radinsky
Computer scientist, develops artificial intelligence algorithms to predict future events, Selected among MIT Technology Review’s 35 Innovators Under 35
The term “Jew” originates from the biblical Israelite tribe of Judah, whose direct descendants are today’s Jews

The ancient Judean kingdom and its capital Jerusalem were destroyed by the Roman Empire in 70 CE and most of the Jews were expelled. The remaining population consolidated around several cities, which remained centers of Jewish culture throughout history.

The Jews dispersed all over the world, adapting themselves to local cultures while preserving their distinctive identity. Throughout the ages, faith in “the ingathering of the exiles” inspired Jews to return to their ancestral homeland, a trend which increased from the 19th century. Each community returned with its special customs – the Sephardi Jews expelled from Iberia at the end of the 15th century, the Ashkenazi Jews of Central and Eastern Europe, the Mizrahi Jews of the Middle East and North Africa, and smaller groups, such as the Ethiopian Jews and the Cochini Jews of southern India. All integrated into modern Israel’s melting-pot society, contributing to its vibrant, inclusive culture.

A majority of Israel’s 6.25 million Jews (75% of the total population) adopt a secular lifestyle. Those who choose religious observance, range from Orthodox, through traditional, to Conservative, Reform and Progressive Judaism.
The Jews of Ethiopia

According to most experts, Israelites settled in Ethiopia in biblical times (10th century BCE). The community gradually lost contact with the Jewish world, until it was ‘rediscovered’ in 1867. Despite periods of persecution, Ethiopia’s Jews maintained their traditions, and were eventually allowed to leave. Many were air-lifted to Israel in special operations, becoming an integral part of Israeli society. Today there are about 135,000 Israelis of Ethiopian descent.

Hebrew, the language of the Jewish People

Did you know?

Jewish values and culture are common denominators that feature in the lives of most Jews, secular and religious alike. Cultural aspects comprise festivals, traditions, quintessential cuisine and a strong emphasis on family and community life. Jewish values include a passion for learning and intellectual debate, care for one’s fellow man and an aspiration to contribute to humankind. Many see faith in God as an integral part of their Jewish character, while others do not.
2.1 million Israelis identify themselves as not Jewish, representing 25% of the population. Their choices of lifestyle vary widely.

Arab Sunni Muslims constitute the largest minority (some 1.5 million), including approximately 300,000 formerly nomadic Bedouins. Two additional Muslim groups are the Circassian community of the Galilee (about 4000 members) and the Ahmedi community in the city of Haifa (about 1000 members).

The Christian communities number about 162,000. While the majority of Israeli Christians are Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic and Roman Catholic, dozens of Christian denominations find representation in Israel, as befits the cradle of Christianity.

Additionally, several lesser-known monotheistic religions flourish in Israel – the Druze faith, with over 130,000 followers living in the north of the country, the Baha’i faith, whose global center is in Haifa, and the ancient communities of Karaites (about 40,000) and Samaritans (about 800), which evolved in parallel with Judaism.

Israel’s minorities, like all Israeli citizens, enjoy full equality and liberty

The minorities also enjoy collective community rights, such as regulating their own rules about marriage and divorce and running the Arab, Druze and Christian school systems. Israel remains committed to ensuring civil and political rights among its diverse population.

Who are the Druze?

The first followers of the Druze faith settled in areas of modern-day Israel, Lebanon and Syria during the 11th century. Israel’s Druze community, over 130,000 strong, populates 22 villages in the north of the country, maintaining its distinct religious, cultural, and social community life. Among the religion’s core values is complete loyalty by its members to the country in which they reside. As a result, the Druze often attain top positions in the Israeli public service and military.

The Christian Communities

While some of the local churches trace their origins to the earliest days of Christianity, today, Israel is almost unique in the Middle-East as a country where the Christian population is growing and prospering.
Islam arrived in the region with the Arabian conquest of the 7th century. Jerusalem’s Museum of Islamic Art, inaugurated in 1974, hosts one of the world’s foremost collections showcasing Islam’s unique artistic influences, both historical and contemporary.
COEXISTENCE & RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

A visit to Israel reveals a diverse population mix, evident in all social settings. Israelis of all backgrounds enjoy a high degree of interaction, living, working and relaxing alongside each other.

While urban life offers integration of the various streams in Israeli society, rural Israel features many villages with a distinct ethnic identity - Jewish, Arab, Druze, Bedouin or Circassian. These villages play a crucial role in sustaining the heritage of each community.

For Israelis and visitors who choose religious practice of any faith or denomination, freedom of worship is assured as one of Israel’s basic tenets. Those who prefer freedom from religion are equally protected. All Israeli citizens enjoy the full civil, legal and political rights guaranteed by a democratic society. Some examples include the right to elect and to be elected, the right to free education, the freedom of expression and association, and many more.

Did You Know?
The Israeli Declaration of Independence states “The State of Israel will be based on freedom, justice and peace; ... it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture.”
Outstanding Israeli Arabs

Salim Joubran
Supreme Court Justice

Dr. Massad Barhum
General Director of the Galilee Medical Center, the largest public hospital in the Galilee

Lucy Aharish
Television news reporter and anchor

Sayed Kashua
Author, screenwriter and columnist

Imad Younis
Founder and CEO of Alpha Omega, specializing in groundbreaking neurosurgery products

Mariam Abo-Rkeek
Founder of the first Bedouin cosmetic label in the world

Beram Kayal
Footballer, Israel national football team

Rana Raslan
Miss Israel, 1999

A Multi-Cultural Celebration

Haifa, Israel’s northern metropolis, annually hosts the Holiday of Holidays Festival which honors Hanukkah, Christmas and Ramadan (or another Muslim festivity) and celebrates the good neighborly relations enjoyed by the city’s diverse population. The event attracts 200,000 people annually. Haifa has been a multi-cultural city for centuries, with Jews, Muslims (Sunni and Ahmedi), Christians and Baha’i leading a respectful and inclusive way of life.
Israelis value hard work, and take their leisure time equally seriously. Over 90% of Israelis live in urban areas, and Israel’s business centers are buzzing with the creativity of world-leading hi-tech companies, from the largest multi-nationals to tomorrow’s start-up wiz-kids.

**Urban Israeli culture is lively, cosmopolitan and decidedly outdoors**

An exuberant street culture is thriving in every city, featuring bustling pedestrian districts, open-air restaurants, colorful markets and a live music scene, alongside the numerous institutions of fine world-class culture.

The year-round mild weather and the vibrant culture support the popularity of outdoor physical activities including running, cycling and walking the many promenades, parks and beaches. Kite surfing and windsurfing have also gained exceptional popularity as Israel has produced a number of windsurfing Olympic medalists.

In addition, Israelis share a love and respect for quality coffee, apparent in the overwhelming number of coffee shops of every shape, style and size.

**A Beach Culture**

With nearly 300 km (180 miles) of coastline, the beach is an essential part of the urban Israeli lifestyle, from Naharia in the north to Eilat in the south. Beach-front cities host a promenade featuring cafes, bars, nightclubs, and an eclectic mix of restaurants, from basic eateries to sophisticated chef cuisines. Watching the sun set into the Mediterranean Sea is a popular way to end a busy day and start a relaxing evening.
Party Time

Tel Aviv’s reputation for partying, and its wide array of all-night clubs, bars and restaurants, have gained it international recognition as one of the top cities worldwide for nightlife, as ranked by Forbes, Lonely Planet and others.

Did You Know?

Israel’s cities offer a rich array of fine culture, with numerous art museums and galleries, as well as world renowned theater, music and dance productions, such as the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra and the Batsheva Dance Company.
Due to Israel’s size, it is possible to live in a rural environment, enjoying small community life, while remaining close to the urban centers, with their employment opportunities and cultural offerings.

The foundation of modern Israel comprised an agriculturally based pioneer movement which successfully overcame harsh environmental conditions by hard work and sheer ingenuity. To make the most of meagre water resources, the pioneers established a culturally embedded cooperation between farmers in the fields and scientists in the laboratories, implementing revolutionary approaches such as drip irrigation and waste water recycling for agricultural use. Israelis made the desert bloom and continue to do so, becoming international agro-technology leaders and helping developing countries learn from their experience.

Rural Israel is still true to its pioneering roots. The Kibbutz way of life, founded on socialist ideals more than 100 years ago, continues to maintain its unique communities, where means of production are collectively owned and shared. Families are financially independent in other forms of rural communities – the Moshav and Kfar/village – but the Moshav pools some means of production and marketing. The Yishuv Kehilati is a non-agricultural community, where the level of participation in community life is very high.
Did You Know?
While winemaking in Israel can be traced back thousands of years, recent decades have witnessed small, family-owned vineyards establishing themselves among the top award-winning boutique wineries in the world.

The Kibbutz Way of Life
The kibbutz movement, unique to Israel, was established in 1909 on the basis of socialist egalitarian ideals. Its agricultural origins were gradually combined with industrial production. For many years, life in the kibbutz was completely communal, with property collectively owned, members dining together and children growing up in their own separate accommodation and not with their parents. In recent decades, most kibbutzim made a transition to a less collective and more family-based system, while maintaining mutual solidarity and community life.

Kibbutzim are also famous for hosting volunteers from around the world, who visit for two to six months, contribute to the community and enjoy a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

The Rural Population
- 305,900 people living in a Moshav
- 236,600 people living in a Kibbutz
- 157,500 people living in other rural localities

700,000 people live in rural Israel
Life in Israel is anything but static. The rate of socio-economic mobility, at over 70%, is among the highest in the world.

As citizens of a young, dynamic country, Israelis select their own destinies, regardless of their background, often altering their career, location and lifestyle choices more than once. Some Israelis celebrate their individuality, pursuing personal goals in all walks of life; others emphasize their communal identity.

Challenges and socio-economic inequalities exist, as in any other country. However, education, social, business and income opportunities are readily available, and it is common to see people making massive socio-economic leaps, providing each individual with a sense of empowerment. In Israel, no matter who you are or where you come from – success or social status is within your reach. Since Israel is a nation of ingenuity and mobility, each person can take his or her dreams and abilities to their fullest potential.

Choosing a Destiny

Dr. Rania Okby is the first female Bedouin physician in the world. A Ben Gurion University graduate, Dr. Okby represents the convergence of two worlds: ancient Bedouin tradition and modern Israeli society. Throughout her studies, she attended university during the day and returned to her village in the evenings, fulfilling a traditional Bedouin female caretaking role. Today, as an expert in maternal-fetal medicine and high-risk pregnancy, she can educate and counsel her community, using examples from Bedouin traditions, and has become a role model for Bedouin women’s empowerment.
A Market as a Microcosm

Jerusalem’s colorful Mahane Yehudah open air market, the largest in Israel, reflects the city’s fascinating human mosaic. Meandering among the stalls and alleyways, you will find all types: old-timers and young students, professionals and homemakers. People of all backgrounds – Arabs and Jews, the religious and the secular – mingle together, strolling and shopping, sharing a cup of premium coffee while animatedly discussing everything from politics to fashion and agriculture. The market offers mouthwatering fresh food and restaurants to suit every palate, as well as upscale boutiques and galleries. At night, Mahane Yehuda transforms into a hip bar and restaurant scene, beckoning Jerusalemites and visitors to revel in its unique atmosphere.

Happy People

Israel ranks 11th out of 158 countries surveyed in the World Happiness Report 2015

A Variety of Diplomats

Elazar Cohen
Born in Syria, immigrated to Israel at age 3

Belaynesh Zevadia
Ambassador of Israel to Ethiopia, Rwanda and Burundi.
Born in Ethiopia, immigrated to Israel at age 17

Dr. Reda Mansour
Former Ambassador of Israel to Brazil.
From Isfiya, a Druze village in the Carmel region

Hagit Ben-Yaakov
Former Ambassador to Latvia and Lithuania.
From the city of Be’er-Sheba in the Negev desert

Hadas Meitzad
Counsellor, Permanent Mission of Israel to the UN, New York.
From the town of Arad, near the Dead Sea

Hassan Kaabia
Former Consul-General of Israel in Alexandria (Egypt).
From Kaabia, a Bedouin village in the lower Galilee

Efrat Perri
Spokesperson, Embassy of Israel to China.
From Kibbutz Ein HaMifratz, an agricultural community near the Mediterranean coast

George Deek
Former Deputy Chief of Mission, Embassy of Israel to Norway.
From the Arab Christian Orthodox community in the old port town of Jaffa
FACTS ABOUT ISRAEL

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