

Israel



Diversity

Democracy

Israel is a dynamic, modern democratic nation in which citizens of all political beliefs are represented.

- Israel's Knesset is composed of 12 separate parliamentary groups, including both secular and religious parties from all sides of the political spectrum.
- With dozens of newspapers in many languages, Israel has a free, open and privately owned press.
- The Supreme Court of Israel is an independent and equal branch of government and serves as the final court of appeals.
- Israel's prime minister is the head of government, selected from a party that holds the largest number of parliament seats. Israel's head of state is the president, selected by the Knesset to perform a largely ceremonial role.
- In each election to date, between 65 and 90 percent of all registered voters have cast their ballots, expressing the great interest taken by most Israelis in their national and local politics.



Enthusiastic crowd awaiting election results



Knesset members



Variety of Jewish Life

Established as the national homeland for the Jewish people, Israel's population includes Jews of every geographic, ethnic, and religious identity.

- Over 75 percent of Israelis are Jewish-affiliated. They come from widely diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds and from all branches of Judaism.
- Israel's Jewish society is made up of observant and non-observant Jews, with 20% striving to fulfill all religious precepts, 20% essentially non-observant, while the rest follow religious principles to a varying degree.
- Sixty thousand Jews of Ethiopian descent call Israel home.
- The majority of Israeli Jews are the descendants of immigrants from Arab countries.
- At the end of a long struggle for the right to emigrate, over 1 million Jews from the former Soviet Union moved to Israel in the 1990s.

Inclusion of the Arab Minority

Arab-Israelis are the largest minority group in Israel and are active in all facets of Israeli life.

- Arab-Israelis have won as many as 12 of the 120 Knesset seats in a single election.
- Israel's first Muslim consul-general served in Atlanta from 1987-1990, its first Muslim ambassador was appointed to Finland in 1995 and its first Druze ambassador was appointed to Vietnam in 1999.
- In 1992, Emile Habibi, author and former Knesset member, was awarded the Israel prize for Arabic literature.
- In 1999, an Arab woman, 21-year-old Rana Raslan, was named Miss Israel.
- In 2004, Bnei Sakhnin became the first Arab-Israeli soccer team to win the State Cup.
- In January 2008, Israel honored 96-year-old Sheik Abu Muamar with a lifetime achievement award for his commitment to Israel, his military service, and his leadership in the Bedouin community, in which he was called the "sheik of all sheiks."





Religious Minorities

Israel is home to many religious minorities and guarantees each their right to practice freely and oversee their community life.

- There are 1.8 million non-Jews in Israel—making up about 24 percent of Israel's population.
- Israel officially recognizes 15 distinct religious groups. Each religious community regulates its own rules about marriage, divorce and wills.
- Christians in Israel make up 2.1 percent of the population and increased from 34,000 in 1948 to 154,000 in 2009. Israel is the only Middle Eastern country in which the Christian population has grown in the last half century.
- The Israeli city of Haifa is home to the Baha'i world headquarters. The Baha'i faith is an independent religion that arose in Persia in the mid-19th century.

Ethnic Makeup

As a refuge from discrimination, Israel remains committed to ensuring equality among its diverse populations.

- People from over 70 countries have made Israel their home since its founding in 1948.
- Over 15 percent of Israelis are Arab Muslims, and approximately 7 percent are Christians, Druze, and Bedouin.
- About 250,000 Bedouins, an Arab nomadic people, reside in Israel. With the educational opportunities offered in Israel, illiteracy rates among Bedouins have fallen a remarkable 70 percent within a generation.
- Israel is home to 4,000 Circassians, an ancient people from the Caucasus with their own unique culture.





IDF Soldier



Golda Meir



*Justice Dorit Beinisch
President of the Supreme Court*

Advancement of Women

Since the founding of Israel in 1948, women have played a vital role in governing, developing, and protecting the nation.

- In 1969, Golda Meir became Israel's first female prime minister, the third elected female leader in the world.
- Israeli women remain active at all levels of government, as evidenced by women who have served as foreign minister, speaker of the Knesset and Supreme Court president.
- Israeli women serve in all branches of the Israel Defense Forces, are eligible for conscription, and serve alongside men.
- Women represent 45 percent of Israel's labor force, the same percentage as in the United States.
- Women comprise 50% of all judges and 43% of all lawyers in Israel.



Pride Parade in Jerusalem—2006



Dana International



Diverse Lifestyles

Israel continues to lead the way in protection and acceptance of diverse lifestyles.

- Israel is at the forefront of gay rights issues, prohibiting workplace discrimination in 1992, allowing openly homosexual soldiers to serve in the IDF in 1993, and granting spousal benefits to same-sex couples in 1994.
- In 2006, gay marriages abroad were recognized in Israel.
- Uzi Even, a chemistry professor and nuclear expert, was Israel's first openly homosexual Knesset member.
- Israel's most famous drag queen, Dana International, took the country by storm in 1993 and won the Eurovision song competition in 1998.
- LGBT organizations and community centers are active throughout Israel, continuing to advocate for LGBT rights.

Cultural Achievements

A vibrant music and art scene reflects Israel's diverse culture.

- From the Israel Philharmonic (founded in 1936 by professional musicians escaping the rise of fascism in Europe), to the Mizrahi music created by immigrant Jews from the Arab world, to Israel's first successful rock band, The Churchills, love of music has been a unifying factor for Israelis of every background.
- Israel's first art school, the Bezalel Academy of Art in Jerusalem, was founded in 1906. Today, Israel has more museums per capita than any other country in the world.
- Israel has ten film schools and seven international film festivals, while more than 2.5 million people every year enjoy Israeli-made films.
- More than a dozen major professional dance companies perform a varied repertoire throughout the country and abroad.
- Israel has one of the highest theater-going rates in the world.



Israel Philharmonic



The Churchills—1960s



Mizrahi music performance



Leisure and Recreation

An energetic and cosmopolitan people, Israelis enjoy a wide variety of entertainment activities.

- With Israel's long and beautiful coastline, beach activities and water sports are popular Israeli diversions. Israel has the highest number of qualified scuba divers per capita in the world.
- From its nightclubs featuring internationally renowned DJs to its around-the-clock cafés, the city of Tel Aviv has earned its nickname, "the city that never stops."
- Sports enthusiasts have many popular teams to celebrate. One of the most successful, Maccabi Tel Aviv, boasts five European basketball championships.
- Israelis love to spend time outdoors, hiking and biking in the country's many protected national parks and nature reserves. In northern Israel, winter skiing is a popular pastime.
- Israel - an ethnic melting pot of cultures, religions and immigrants - has an extraordinarily diverse food scene. A variety of coffee shops and restaurants offer endless opportunities to try new tastes or indulge in old favorites.

Kibbutzim

Israel's modern way of life balances the early Jewish pioneers' dedication to communal living and respect for the land with a love of entrepreneurship and cutting-edge innovations.

- The kibbutz began as a communal farm, attracting Jewish pioneers with an interest in “making the desert bloom” through labor. Kibbutzim practice democracy and traditionally hold all property in common. There are around 270 such collectives still operating in Israel today. About 8 percent of Israelis live on kibbutzim or moshav-style collectives.

Entrepreneurship:

- Israel has approximately 125 Israeli companies listed on the U.S. NASDAQ stock exchange, more than any other foreign country.
- Israel has the highest number of startup companies of any country except the U.S.
- Israel attracts as much venture capital as France and Germany combined.





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