



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Israel is about one-quarter the size of neighboring Jordan and about the same size as the U.S. state of New Jersey. This area does not include the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza but does include the Golan Heights (annexed by Israel in 1981). Religious and more right-wing Israelis refer to the West Bank as Judaea and Samaria, the biblical names for the region, while secular and more left-wing Israelis call it the West Bank (as it is the western bank of the River Jordan).

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 the surface of the earth, at more than 1,400 feet (more than 427 meters) below sea level. In the south, the arid Negev Desert is home to craters, mountains, and oases. Most of Israel's territory is classified as arid or semi-arid.

Israel's water sources are scarce. The main water source is the Sea of Galilee (Kineret), fed by the River Jordan. The country's water conservation efforts focus on improvements in efficiency, resource management, repair, control, and monitoring of municipal water systems. Ongoing projects for utilizing new water sources include cloud seeding, sewage water recycling, and seawater desalination. Efficient irrigation systems make agricultural land arable all year. Israel and Jordan cooperate on various water projects, such as the Red Sea–Dead Sea Water Conveyance project, which was designed to provide potable water to Israel, Jordan, and the West Bank and Gaza, as well as water to stabilize the Dead

Sea.

Hundreds of nature reserves and national parks have been established throughout the country, most of them in northern Israel. However, the largest national park—the Ramon Reserve—is located in the Negev Desert, in the south. The country is also home to diverse plant and animal life, including pistachio, date, and olive trees; pink and white cyclamen (Israel's national flower); the Nubian ibex; and agama lizards. Over five hundred species of birds can be found in Israel, and bird-watching is a popular activity—especially because Israel falls along a major Africa–Europe bird migration route. Hundreds of millions of migrating birds pass through Israel's Hula Valley each year.

On the coastal plain, summers are humid and winters mild. The hills of the interior offer more comfortable summers but colder and wetter winters. Jerusalem's temperatures average around 85°F (29°C) in the summer and 50°F (10°C) in the winter. Rain falls primarily between November and May. Snow falls annually on Mount Hermon in the northern Golan Heights, while Eilat, located in the south along the Red Sea, is a perennial beach resort.

History

Early Kingdoms and Conquerors

The area where the current state of Israel stands has been home to many peoples, with early records referring to the area as Palestine. According to the Hebrew Bible, groups such as the Canaanites, Moabites, Ammonites, Philistines, and Phoenicians established kingdoms in this region. About three thousand years ago, the 12 tribes of Israel, led by Moses, fled Egypt and also settled in the area. Around 1000 BC, King

David united the people of these tribes, known as the Israelites, and ruled a strong kingdom from the capital, Jerusalem. After his son Solomon's reign, the kingdom split into two parts: the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Israel was later destroyed by Assyria in the eighth century BC. In the sixth century BC, Judah was conquered by Babylon. As a result, the populations of these kingdoms were exiled or taken captive, although many Israelites (Jews) remained in the area.

After the Persian conquest of the Middle East by Cyrus the Great, many Jews were allowed to return to Palestine to establish a nation. During the Byzantine era (AD 313–636), the Jewish population declined sharply amid persecution. In the 600s, the area was conquered by the Muslims, who ruled until the Crusades (religious wars) in the late 11th century. Christian Crusaders ruled for about two hundred years before being displaced by the Muslim Mamluks, who reigned from 1291 to 1516.

The Ottoman Empire controlled Palestine from the 16th century until the end of World War I. During this period, the vast majority of the inhabitants of the region were Arabs (Muslim and Christian), with a small community of Jews living in harmony with their Arab neighbors, mainly in the cities of Jerusalem, Hebron, Tiberias, and Safed.

Zionism and the State of Israel

Facing increasing persecution in Europe and prompted by the Jewish nationalist movement known as Zionism, European Jews immigrated to Palestine in large numbers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Zionist cause, which supported the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, continued to gain popular support internationally. After World War I, Palestine came under British control in an era known as the British Mandate period. During this time, Great Britain was tasked by the League of Nations with helping to establish a national home for the Jewish people in the region.

Waves of Jewish immigration continued and spiked following World War II, as many survivors of the Holocaust and other Jews sought refuge in Israel. As the Jewish population of Palestine grew, so did the demands of Zionist leaders, who called for a Jewish state. Meanwhile, Arabs, who were also determined to establish an independent Arab state of their own, opposed Jewish immigration. In an effort to maintain stability in the region, the British tried to slow the immigration process but were unable to stop Zionist 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 independent states—one Arab and one Jewish—with Jerusalem defined as an international zone. Zionists quickly agreed to the plan, but Arab groups opposed the deal, arguing it did not provide enough territory for the larger Arab population. Disagreements over the partition plan sparked civil conflict between Jews and Arabs. In May 1948, a day before the British Mandate was due to expire, Israel proclaimed itself an independent state.

Arab–Israeli Conflicts

After Israel declared independence, the civil conflict escalated into a larger war when Arab armies from Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan (then known as Transjordan) invaded

the lands claimed by Israel in support of Palestinian Arab forces. This period also marked a significant Palestinian Arab displacement, resulting in thousands of refugees fleeing to neighboring countries. Israel signed an armistice agreement with Jordan, Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon in 1949. This deal gave control of the West Bank (an area west of the Jordan River) to Jordan, and the Gaza Strip became part of Egypt.

Subsequent wars between Israel and its Arab neighbors were fought in 1956, 1967, 1973, 1982, and 2006. After the 1967 War, Israel took over control of 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. In 2005, Israeli troops withdrew from the Gaza Strip, but Israel still controls the area's airspace and port. Israel also maintains administrative control over the Golan Heights and parts of the West Bank.

Peace Talks and Uprisings

Negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Arabs in the 1980s turned toward discussion of a separate Palestinian state but repeatedly broke down as the conflict continued. From 1987 to 1993, the Palestinians protested against Israel in an uprising known as the First Intifada, which led to clashes between Israeli forces and residents of the West Bank and Gaza. It also included 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 in 1991, amid increasing pressure from the United States, agreed to discuss peace with the Palestinians and its Arab neighbors.

In a landmark 1993 treaty known as the Oslo Accords, Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin granted the Palestinians limited autonomy in some of the areas occupied by Israeli forces in exchange for official Palestinian recognition of the State of Israel. The following year, Israel ended hostilities with Jordan. Progress was limited on other issues, but Rabin and PLO president Yasser Arafat agreed in 1995 to gradually extend self-rule to most of the West Bank (but not to Jerusalem).

Opposition to a two-state solution and other aspects of the peace plan intensified among right-wing Israelis and militant Palestinians. Militants belonging to the Palestinian group Hamas (which had formed during the First Intifada) 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. Failure to form an agreement on the status of Jerusalem, security issues, and the borders of the potential Palestinian state sparked frustrations that eventually led to the Second Intifada (uprising) in the early 2000s.

Despite years of negotiations, major obstacles stand in the way of a resolution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. For Israelis, the biggest issues are access to Jewish religious sites in Palestinian areas, security, the status of Jerusalem, and the refusal by Palestinian leaders and other Arab states to recognize Israel as a state. For Palestinians, some of the most contentious issues include the status of Jerusalem, the barrier

wall between Israeli and Palestinian territories, the fate of Palestinian refugees, and the future of Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

Conflicts with Hezbollah and Hamas

Since the 1980s, tensions between Israel and Iran have intensified as sporadic conflicts have broken out between Israel and Iran's proxy forces: the Sunni-Palestinian Hamas and the Shi'i-Lebanese Hezbollah. In 2006, Hamas militants captured an Israeli soldier, setting off major fighting with Israel. Meanwhile, hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah escalated into a month-long war after the group captured two Israeli soldiers and fired on cities in northern Israel. Although both sides agreed to a cease-fire, periodic violence between Israel and Hezbollah has continued.

Following Hamas's violent seizure of the Gaza strip in 2007, Israel imposed a land, air, and sea blockade. The following year, a war with Hamas in Gaza began after Israel assassinated several Hamas leaders and Hamas fired hundreds of rockets into Israel. Israel launched a three-week air and ground assault in Gaza, resulting in the deaths of more than one thousand Palestinians. Bombings and rocket attacks occurred again in 2012; in 2014, a seven-week conflict between Israel and Gaza resulted in the deaths of over two thousand Palestinians (most of whom were civilians) and dozens of Israeli soldiers. Since 2013, Hamas has strengthened its ties with Iran, which provides financial support to the group, a relationship that has only escalated tensions with Israel.

Israel Today

Israel has been plagued by political instability and deadlock in recent years. After three elections and failures to form a government in one year, Benjamin Netanyahu formed a unity government with Benny Gantz in 2020. Amid lockdowns put in place to curb the spread of COVID-19 in 2020, thousands of Israelis protested in Jerusalem, calling for Netanyahu's resignation. In 2021, Israel's parliament approved a new government, ending Netanyahu's 12-year tenure as prime minister. Many Israelis are concerned about high unemployment rates and income inequality and want the government to prioritize these economic issues. In efforts to increase the country's security from regional threats such as Iran, Israel has continued to strengthen its diplomatic alliances with the United States and Arab neighbors such as Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Israel's population is about 74 percent Jewish and 21 percent Arab (most identify as Palestinian), with some Druze and Circassian ethnic groups. The word *Jewish* does not only describe a religious group—it describes members of a larger ethnic group, a culture, and a nation. There are three identities in Israel: religion, nationality, and ethnicity. Someone could be Christian by religion, Israeli by citizenship, and Palestinian by ethnicity. A Jew in Israel might be Jewish by religion and nationality but Israeli by citizenship. She or he would also be considered Jewish and Israeli even if not religious. Currently,

almost half of all Jews in Israel describe themselves as secular: they are ethnically Jewish but not religious.

Because Jews come from around the world, their ethnic makeup is mixed. Historically, modern 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. Russian and Ethiopian Jews, two of the most recent immigrant groups, retain a distinctive identity. Today, the majority of the Jewish population in Israel was born in Israel.

Constant waves of immigration challenge Israel's ability to provide housing and jobs, but society is generally able to absorb the newcomers. By Israeli law, all Jews in the world have the right to citizenship in Israel, as long as they can prove their Jewish heritage (i.e., at least one grandparent is Jewish) or are recognized converts.

Israel claims Jerusalem as its capital, although most governments worldwide do not recognize this claim due to the disputed nature of Jerusalem (Palestinians also desire Jerusalem as the capital of their future state), choosing to locate their embassies in the coastal city of Tel Aviv, which is Israel's largest city.

Language

Hebrew is Israel's official language. Streets signs are in Hebrew, Arabic, and English. The revival of spoken Hebrew began in the late 19th century by Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, who created a comprehensive Hebrew dictionary. Modern Hebrew was adopted as one of the official languages during the British Mandate of Palestine, as many Jewish communities had begun to speak and teach Hebrew in schools. Arabic is spoken mainly by the Palestinian Arab minority. Arabic and English are usually taught in school to Hebrew-speaking children beginning in third grade; Hebrew and English are taught to Arabic-speaking children.

Many Israelis speak at least two languages, often because they or their parents immigrated to Israel. Private and government-sponsored *ulpan* classes are available for adult immigrants to learn Hebrew. Immigrants increasingly are retaining their first language; Russian, for example, is widely used and appears on food labels and ads.

Religion

The land of Israel is holy to the world's major Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) and has played an important role in their development. A hill in Jerusalem known as the Temple Mount (to Jews and Christians) or al-Haram ash-Sharif (to Muslims) contains major religious holy sites, like the Kotel (also known as the Western Wall, or Wailing Wall—a remnant of the Jewish Second Temple) and the Dome of the Rock. The Temple Mount is revered as the holiest site in Judaism. However, it is a contested area, as it also contains al-Aqsa Mosque—the third-holiest site in Sunni Islam. Jews believe that a future Third Temple will be built on the Temple Mount, adding to the tensions surrounding the holy site. In addition to these major religious sites, the

Christian Church of the Holy Sepulcher draws millions of religious pilgrims every year.

Over 18 percent of Israel's population is Muslim (mostly Sunni) and nearly 2 percent is Druze, a religion that started as an offshoot of Shi'i Islam. Around 2 percent is Christian, about half of which is Greek Orthodox, and 4 percent belong to other religions.

The majority of Israelis, about 74 percent, are Jewish. Judaism focuses on a unique relationship and responsibility between the Creator and the Jewish people, as particularly outlined in the Hebrew Bible's first five books of Moses (referred to as the Torah). Once expressed primarily through temple rites, worship patterns now concentrate on personal action. Each city or governorate has a religious council (headed by a rabbi) whose various departments regulate the Jewish practices of *kashrut* (dietary law), marriage, and divorce (in coordination with the national government). Many Jews in Israel are nonobservant (secular) but may periodically attend the synagogue and observe religious holidays and events. Three of the largest Jewish denominations practicing in Israel are Orthodox, Reform, and Conservative Judaism.

Orthodox (or observant) Jews—such as the ultra-Orthodox (*Haredi*) and Modern Orthodox (*Dati Leumi*)—strictly adhere to Torah law and certain behavioral imperatives, such as honoring the Jewish Sabbath, from sundown Friday to Saturday after dark, and following dietary codes. Modern Orthodox Jews are generally more open to and involved in modern (secular) society than ultra-Orthodox Jews, and this is reflected in their lifestyle, dress, and education.

Reform Judaism affirms the central tenets of Judaism and believes the Torah is divinely inspired but maintains a more permissive and inclusive attitude than more observant streams of Judaism. In reaction to the liberal religious positions of Reform Judaism, the Conservative—or *Masorti* (the Hebrew word for "traditional")—movement seeks to conserve and integrate Jewish tradition with modern Western culture rather than reform it. Reform and Conservative Judaism have small followings.

Israel's religious environment depends in large part on location. In most large urban areas, there are separate neighborhoods of ultra-Orthodox Jews, Modern Orthodox Jews, secular Jews, Muslims, and Christians. Cities like Tel Aviv, Haifa, or Be'er Sheva are largely secular. The city of Haifa is also the center of the Baha'i faith, which emphasizes the unity of religions and the oneness of humanity. Christian and Muslim populations are more prevalent in East Jerusalem and Nazareth.

General Attitudes

Except for the very orthodox adherents of any given religion, Israelis tend to be informal. This informal atmosphere is evidenced in people's casual dress habits, direct manner of speech, 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 commonly civic-minded and involved in the community. In a large apartment complex, each family usually knows the others by name and knows at least a little about each resident. Bus and taxi drivers are quick to start a conversation with passengers,

often delving into personal matters.

Israelis tend to be inquisitive; many 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. This group orientation is also expressed as generosity—people share things freely and are quick to offer help to a stranger on the street. Israelis also tend to be highly critical, especially of politicians and those in senior positions.

Most Israelis want a home and comfortable life, but material possessions are less important than a strong family. Children are generally pampered; parents want to give their children everything, even after they have left home. At the same time, Israeli children tend to be independent: the average school-age child walks to school unaccompanied by a parent, and urban children use public transportation to get around on their own from as early as eight or nine years old.

Israelis are generally 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. Male Palestinian citizens of Israel are not drafted into military service, though they may volunteer or serve in the police force. Military exemptions are granted to some religious students (both females and males) and those who are married. Religious women may serve in hospitals or schools as a form of *Sherut Leumi* (national service), in place of serving in the military.

Jewish immigration is encouraged as part of the Zionist movement, the ongoing effort to establish and maintain a Jewish homeland. The sense of camaraderie is strong, despite many differences of opinion; Israelis feel each other's losses keenly and take pride in any major Israeli achievements.

Personal Appearance

Western fashions are popular among Palestinian Arabs and among secular Jews, who account for a large part of the population. Secular Jewish men wear suits and ties only on formal occasions, otherwise preferring open-neck shirts and jeans; most secular men and women dress simply (e.g., shorts and sandals) in the summer.

Among ultra-Orthodox Jews, men wear black pants and jackets over white button-up shirts (some Hasidic sects wear other colors) with black hats. Orthodox men and boys over the age of three wear a *tzitzit*, or fringed garment worn under the shirt. Some men may tuck in the *tzitzit* as well as their *payot* (side curls), while others allow them to hang out. Married Hasidic Jewish men wear a *streimel*, or fur hat. Other Jewish men might cover their heads with only a *kippah* cap, or *yarmulke*. Palestinian men may wear a *keffiyah* (a traditional Arab scarf that is often worn as a headdress). Some older Muslim men wear a long robe, or *jalabiya*. Some Muslim and Druze men grow large mustaches and sometimes beards.

Among the religious communities, female modesty in dress is adhered to in varying degrees. Ultra-Orthodox women tend to wear high-collared, loose-fitting tops, long skirts (all in very dark colors or shades of gray and white),

thick stockings, and closed-toe shoes. Modern Orthodox women and girls are encouraged to avoid tight-fitting clothing, low necklines, and short skirts, and most do not wear pants.

Married Orthodox women fully cover their hair with a *sheitel* (wig) or a tight-fitting cloth cap or scarf at home and outside, while unmarried girls keep their hair tightly tied up. Generally, women consider wigs more attractive than scarves, but some rabbis suggest that wigs are not modest enough. Most Muslim women wear a *hijab* (Islamic head covering). Druze women may cover their heads with a sheer white headscarf called a *mandeel*. A small group of conservative Muslim women cover their whole body and face with a *burqa* (a head-to-toe covering).

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Informality governs most greetings. *Shalom* (Peace) is a formal Hebrew greeting and parting phrase that is often replaced with the English *Hi* and *Bye*. It may be followed by *Ma nishma?* (What's up?), *Ma 'inyanim?* (What's happening?), or the more formal *Ma shlomcha?* (How are you?). For women, this last phrase is *Ma shlomech?* The Arabic greetings *Salam* (Peace), *Ahlan* (Hello/Welcome), and the parting phrase *Yalla, bye* (Good-bye) are common among the Palestinian Arab population.

Handshakes are common among men and in business settings. 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 high-five or pat each other on the back or shoulder; Palestinian men commonly hold hands. Among the very religious, men and women do not touch unless they are married, and then rarely 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 often used in conversation and make discussions seem very lively. One of the most common gestures is to bring the thumb and fingertips together, palm facing up, and move the hand up and down; this means "wait a minute" or "hold on." Israelis signal for the check at a restaurant by "signing" in mid-air. One expresses exasperation by shrugging the shoulders, sometimes also holding open palms up and/or shaking the head. Respect for elders is extremely important. For instance, younger individuals may give up a bus seat to an older person, though this practice has become less common.

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, cake, or wine. Hosts almost always offer visitors refreshments. These include coffee, tea, or a cold drink, as well as cake, cookies, or snacks (e.g., chips, nuts, or sunflower, pumpkin, or watermelon seeds). In good weather, friends may sit out on the balcony together, sharing Turkish coffee and nuts or seeds.

Eating

On average, Israelis eat three meals a day. Breakfast often includes fresh vegetables (such as a tomato and cucumber salad), cheeses, eggs, and *hummus* (a chickpea spread). *Hummus* is often served in combination with other spreads, such as *hatsilim* (an eggplant spread), *muhamarra* (a paste of red pepper and walnut), and *labene* (a yogurt-based cheese). Schoolchildren usually eat a sandwich for a midmorning snack called *aruchat esser*, literally "ten-o'clock meal." The main meal traditionally is in the early afternoon (except on Fridays, when it is in the evening), and supper usually is light. Those who are employed or attend school may not follow this tradition, eating their main meal in the evening. Conversation and a casual atmosphere accompany most meals. It is polite for guests to accept offers of additional food. Many Israelis, especially those who have immigrated from Arab countries, often drink Turkish coffee or mint tea with their meals.

Families are often too busy to eat all together, but they will at least gather for *Shabbat* (Sabbath) dinners, consisting of three meals eaten between Friday night and Saturday before sunset. *Shabbat* dinner involves religious customs throughout the meal. Orthodox Jews follow these traditions for all meals throughout the week. A ritual blessing on the wine (*Kiddush*) precedes both dinner and lunch. Then follows a ritual washing of the hands for bread (*Netilat Yadayim*) and a blessing made on two loaves of bread (*Lechem Mishneh*); each of the *Shabbat* meals should consist of at least these two loaves. In religious homes, these meals are often interspersed with traditional *Shabbat* songs and words from the Torah (Jewish scripture), and every meal—whether during the week or on *Shabbat*—is followed by a prayer known as *Birkat HaMazon*, in which people thank the Creator for the food on the table.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Structure

The family is central to Israeli life. The number of children per couple varies widely depending on the family's level of religiosity, among other factors. Secular Jews often have around two children, Modern Orthodox Jews have around four to seven children, and ultra-Orthodox Jews may have as many children as come to them naturally, sometimes eight to twelve children. Most extended family members live separately but close by. Grandparents, aunts, and uncles are often involved in raising the children.

Parents and Children

Raising a healthy and respectable family is one of the greatest ideals in Judaism, expressed in the Hebrew Bible's instruction to "be fruitful and multiply," and most Israeli couples desire

to have children. Parents focus a large part of their lives on rearing their children, with children receiving a great deal of care and attention. Most feel a deep responsibility to provide for their children's futures. In religious homes, children are taught to obey the Ten Commandments, including the commandment to honor and respect their parents.

Parents are often very busy during the week and expect their children to help around the house more as they grow older. Younger children help by clearing the table after meals, while older children may assist parents in cleaning the house, taking out the garbage, helping prepare meals, and babysitting younger siblings. Ultra-Orthodox parents expect their children to take on more responsibility.

Family ties usually remain very strong, even as children become adults. After graduating high school, most young men and women leave home to perform their mandatory army service. Some children may return home and live with parents while attending university. Most single Israelis in their mid-to late twenties move out of their parents' home but live near parents or other relatives. Adult children are expected to care for their aging parents. Some elderly may move in with their children.

Gender Roles

The father traditionally is the head of the family, but this is slowly changing as responsibilities are becoming more equally divided between the father and the mother. Among older generations, men are the main breadwinners and women are the homemakers. Younger families are more egalitarian, with parenting and housekeeping tasks performed by both parents. In ultra-Orthodox families, women are typically responsible for financially providing for the family because their husbands may earn only modest stipends while studying in a *kollel*, *yeshiva*, or other institute for learning the Talmud, Torah, and other Jewish texts in depth.

Both the husband and wife work in most families. The rising cost of living has also caused many ultra-Orthodox men to enter the workforce. For the most part, Israeli women are career-oriented and comprise a large percentage of the labor force. Women may work in any field. Many women serve in government, managerial, educational, and religious positions. Though women are guaranteed equal rights to men by law, women are often discriminated against in the workplace, facing salary inequality and promotion discrimination. Women also deal with inequality in the domestic sphere.

Housing

Urban

The majority of urban residents live in low-rise apartment buildings, typically between four and eight storeys high. Most apartments are moderately sized and have two to four bedrooms. An average apartment is between 700 and 1,080 square feet (between 65 and 100 square meters). The main living area is typically one big space with a kitchen, a dining area with a table, and a living room with one or two couches. Most apartments have balconies.

In larger cities, such as Tel Aviv, apartments are often smaller and buildings are taller (with as many as 50 floors) because space is expensive. In Jerusalem, building height is tightly controlled in order to preserve the city's skyline. Due

in part to high rates of immigration, along with the country's small size, more and more farmland and natural areas are being urbanized each year to create residential complexes.

Rural

Outside of the city, more people live in individual or duplex houses than apartments. Though still relatively small, rural houses tend to be more spacious than apartments, usually over 1,300 square feet (120 square meters) in size.

A small number of families (roughly 2 percent) live in either a *kibbutz* (an agricultural village with collective community living) or a *moshav* (a small village), which can both be found all over the country. In a *kibbutz* or *moshav*, each member is actively involved in building up the community and its assets. *Kibbutz* families may live separately or together, but they share land, work, food, dining halls, and child care equally, concentrating on agriculture and industrial manufacturing. *Moshav* families live separately but cooperate in providing for the needs of the community and in marketing the village's products.

Exteriors

A typical home has large windows, with *trisin* (shutters) that serve as both black-out blinds and shrapnel protection during attacks. Most homes also have a *mirpeset* (balcony or patio), on which people often relax in the late afternoon and evening, and rooftop solar panels and water tanks. Houses and apartment buildings are usually constructed out of wood, steel, cement, plaster, and stone. In Jerusalem, a law dating back to Ottoman rule requires the fronts of all buildings to be made of white, cream, or rose-pink limestone, known as "Jerusalem stone." Homes in other parts of Israel also have stone facades or are finished in plain white plaster. Many homes and apartment buildings have herb and flower gardens, bushes, and trees.

Interiors

Israelis often fill their homes with books, secondhand furniture, and paintings. Other home interiors may be more minimalistic and modern. Floors are almost always tiled, as wood is expensive and tile helps to keep a structure cool in hot weather. Modern conveniences like a heating system, air conditioner, television with cable, computer, and washing machine can be found in most homes. Because of limited space, a hot climate, and the cost of electricity, most homes do not have dishwashers or clothes dryers; those who have these appliances often use them sparingly because of the expense. Many buildings lack proper insulation, making houses cold in the winter, since many cannot afford to keep them constantly heated. In most homes, water is heated by solar panels, but some use a gas or electric heater.

Ownership

Between 1948 and 1970, the government oversaw the construction of most new housing. Today, almost all homes are constructed by the private sector. However, most of Israel's land is government owned, with citizens receiving a lease on a given property from the state. When an apartment or house is sold, the lease is transferred to the new owners. Achieving home ownership in Israel is a difficult task. While home ownership is highly valued, few can afford the required mortgage payments. Young renters often move for work or school, while young families may start with a small apartment

and then move somewhere larger as their family grows. When Israelis purchase a home, most tend to stay there for the rest of their lives.

Dating and Marriage

Dating and Courtship

In Israel, dating is common, though among Muslims and ultra-Orthodox Jews, dating may be supervised or restricted. Couples often meet at school, at parties, through family members, during military service, or on the internet. Secular Israelis, whose parents allow their children to socialize in mixed-gender groups, start dating as early as age 14 or 15. Conservative and some Modern Orthodox Jews also socialize in mixed groups; the latter may start dating at age 16. Ultra-Orthodox Jews keep their young men and women separate and encourage them to meet only through official setups.

Matchmaking is still a very common practice and may be arranged through a relative, a family friend, or a professional service. During the matchmaking process, the couple's families research one another, and the man and woman date to see if they like each other. In some Hasidic circles, matchmaking begins as early as 17. Ultra-Orthodox Jews usually see a matchmaker as soon as they are ready to start dating, often around age 18 or 19. Modern Orthodox Jews may try meeting people by other means before resorting to a matchmaker. Less observant Jews do not often go to a matchmaker, but older singles may try it.

Engagements

Proposals for marriage are similar to Western proposals. After the couple talks about whether they want to marry, the man asks the woman to marry him, usually in a more intimate and private setting and often with a ring. Engagements in Israel may last from a few weeks to no more than a year.

Marriage in Society

Marriage is an important institution, respected by nearly all Israelis. Almost all Israelis expect and hope to marry. In recent years, young people have chosen to marry in their mid- to late twenties, preferring to first complete their military service, finish their education, and establish careers.

Only religious marriage ceremonies are legal in Israel, meaning both people must be of the same religion. Israeli couples who want to be married civilly—such as interreligious or same-sex couples—must travel abroad, usually to Cyprus. While interreligious and same-sex marriages cannot be performed in Israel, the government recognizes such marriages performed in other countries.

A common-law spouse status is available for couples who either cannot wed legally according to Israeli law or who choose to live together without getting married. People living as common-law spouses have some rights but fewer than married couples.

Weddings

Most weddings tend to be traditional, depending on one's religious and cultural background. A rabbi performs Jewish ceremonies, and a *qadi* (judge) performs Muslim weddings. Christians are married by members of their clergy.

The Jewish ceremony takes place under a white, four-cornered canopy called a *chuppah*. Witnesses

representing the bride and groom sign a legal document called a *ketubah* before the ceremony. The *ketubah* is a marriage contract between the bride and groom outlining the rights of the woman in the marriage and the duties of the man; it is written in Aramaic, the legal language of Talmudic law (Jewish civil and ceremonial law). Blessings are given to the new couple over wine, and then the groom puts a ring on the bride. Sometimes, the bride puts a ring on the groom. At the end of the ceremony, the groom recites a verse from the Hebrew Bible (referred to as the *Tanakh*) that encourages the couple to never forget Jerusalem. The groom then completes the wedding ceremony by stomping on a glass, symbolizing the destruction of the two temples in Jerusalem.

A Jewish wedding is a major social event, often including a large festive dinner party and dancing held after the *chuppah* ceremony. Guests often dress up, act out short skits, or perform tricks for the bride and groom. At weddings for religiously observant Jews, the dancing is usually separated by gender—men together and women together. Traditional Jewish music is played, and people dance in circles. Dancing is typically rigorous and is used to show one's happiness for the newly married couple. Weddings of less-observant Jews often feature mixed-gender dancing with contemporary Israeli and international music, following the traditional gender-separated dances. Singing and dancing continues well into the night.

Divorce

Divorce is becoming more prevalent, mostly among secular Jews. Divorce and other family issues are handled by religious courts, and each religion has the right to adjudicate family matters according to its own customs. Most courts grant mothers custody of the children, and fathers are required to pay alimony and child support. Some members of Israeli society consider divorce a couple's failure to make their marriage work. As divorce becomes more common, more people have come to accept that it may be the only choice for some couples. Many who divorce remarry, though some do not.

Life Cycle

Birth

Pregnancy is a public event in Israeli culture, and strangers often offer blessings or may even touch a pregnant woman's stomach. Some consider it bad luck to know the sex of the baby and plan too much for a healthy birth when the birth itself is still full of unknowns. Women are usually cared for by their mothers after childbirth. The baby's father may also assist the new mother during her recovery time. The family's community often organizes a week's worth of meals to be sent to the family.

Employed women receive 15 weeks of paid maternity leave and may take another 11 weeks of unpaid maternity leave. Fathers now receive some parental leave and may choose to take the place of their spouse during part of the mother's maternity leave. Israeli law states that an employer cannot terminate a woman's position while she is pregnant or on maternity leave.

In many religious homes, baby girls are named at the synagogue during a short prayer recited after reading the

day's Torah (Jewish scripture), and services may be followed by refreshments provided by the baby's parents. Families may also organize small parties where the mother recites a short prayer or reads verses from the Torah, called *Simchat Bat*, to celebrate the arrival of a daughter a few weeks to a month after the birth.

On the Friday night after the birth of a baby boy, a small celebration called a *Shalom Zachor* (Welcome to the Male) is held at the home of the family. The naming of baby boys takes place at the *Brit Mila* (circumcision ritual), eight days after the birth. Fathers traditionally performed this ceremony, but today most families hire a *mohel*, or professional circumciser. After the circumcision, the father gives the baby's name as part of a short prayer.

Milestones

Legally, people become adults at age 18. According to Jewish tradition, boys (age 13) and girls (age 12) enter into adulthood through a religious ceremony called a *bar mitzvah* (a son of commandments) or a *bat mitzvah* (a daughter of commandments). Even if the ceremonies are not performed, children are still considered adults and are responsible for their own actions, such as observing as many of the hundreds of commandments mentioned in the Hebrew Bible as possible.

About one month before a boy's 13th birthday, he begins to perform the *mitzvah* (commandment) of wearing *tefillin*, or phylacteries (small leather boxes containing scriptures that are strapped to the forehead or arm), usually during the daily morning prayers. The first time a boy puts on *tefillin* is a very joyous event that often takes place at the Kotel (the Western Wall), in the Old City of Jerusalem. In the weeks leading up to the *bar mitzvah* celebration, a young man usually studies the portion of the Torah he will read in the synagogue at his *bar mitzvah*.

A *bat mitzvah* is a celebration held for girls that includes family, friends, a festive meal, dancing, and speeches. Sometimes a girl will do something meaningful like raise money for a charity of her choice or volunteer somewhere. In some Conservative and Reform communities, the young woman reads portions of the Torah from the week of her birth at a religious service in the synagogue.

Death

When Israeli Jews die, their bodies are ritually purified, dressed in simple cotton shrouds by members of the *Chevreh Kadisha* (holy society), and buried, preferably within 24 hours of death, but this may be postponed if family members from abroad have not arrived. Muslims follow similar body preparations, including washing, wrapping the body in white cloths, and burying the body within the first 24 hours after death. Jewish custom also dictates that bodies of the dead must be treated with the utmost respect, kept covered as much as possible, and not left unattended. Caring for and burying the deceased is considered a great honor and the ultimate act of kindness. Jewish law does not permit cremation, and coffins are only used if the death was unnatural.

Following the burial, relatives of the deceased sit *Shiva* (a seven-day mourning period), during which mourners sit on low chairs and refrain from changing their clothes, shaving or cutting their hair, and looking in the mirror. Close members

of the family also tear each other's clothes. Throughout the mourning period of *Shiva*, the home's door is left open for most hours of the day while people visit and talk about the deceased. Food is provided by family, friends, and neighbors. On the morning that ends the *Shiva*, mourners take walks outside and some visit the new grave.

People often visit the gravesite on *Yartzeit* (the annual anniversary of the passing of someone close). During *Yartzeit*, most Jews light a 24-hour candle in their home for their loved one. Every day for a year at synagogue, men perform an ancient Aramaic prayer called *kaddish* for the soul of the deceased. During the extended mourning period, people do not attend happy occasions, they socialize less, and they may abstain from listening to music. Depending on the relationship to the deceased, some may mourn for one week, one month, or one year.

Diet

Israel has adopted foods from a variety of cultures. Regional dishes include *hummus* (chickpea spread), *kebab* (meat and vegetables on a skewer), *falafel* (fried balls of crushed chickpeas, oil, and spices), *shawarma* (spit-roasted meat and salad inside pita bread), *burékas* (savory pastries with fillings such as potato, cheese, or spinach), *ptitim* (an Israeli toasted pasta shaped like rice or little balls), and Russian *borscht* (beet soup). While interest in healthy eating has increased, Israelis love to snack and eat out. Foods such as pizza and hamburgers are popular.

Sephardim (Jews with Middle Eastern or North African heritage) tend to eat spicier food and regional seasonings such as cumin, turmeric, and coriander. Ashkenazim (Jews with European heritage) usually eat milder or sweeter foods, lightly seasoned. Meals on the Jewish Sabbath are often substantial and may include fish, *kugel* (a baked or fried casserole, typically made of potato or noodles), and chicken. *Cholent* (a hearty stew) is cooked on Friday before the Sabbath begins and kept heated until lunchtime.

Vegetable salad, often mixed with olive oil and lemon juice, is a staple and usually eaten daily. Milk products such as yogurt, *labneh* (strained yogurt), and cheese are eaten with breakfast or dinner. Poultry and fish are eaten more frequently than beef. Fruits and vegetables are plentiful, and fruit juices are often part of lunch or dinner. Fruit shakes and iced coffee are popular summer refreshments. *Krembo* is a chocolate-covered creamy marshmallow with a cookie base that is popular in winter but virtually impossible to find in summer.

Jews and Muslims follow strict dietary codes. Many Jews, even the nonreligious, observe *kashrut*, or the Jewish dietary law (kosher law), which prohibits the consumption of milk and meat products at the same meal, unclean animals (pigs, shellfish, insects), and animals not killed in accordance with *shechita* (a ritual killing that shows respect and compassion to the animals). Muslims do not eat pork, and all animals must be slaughtered humanely by a butcher who has said a prayer.

Recreation

Sports

Soccer, basketball, and volleyball are the most popular

spectator and participatory sports, and all have local, school, and professional leagues. Most major cities have their own stadiums and basketball courts. Other popular sports include handball, boxing, wrestling, weightlifting, judo, karate, tennis, swimming, and a form of self-defense called *Krav Maga*, used by the Israeli Defense Forces. *Matkot* (paddleball), a cross between tennis and table tennis, is a favorite beach sport.

Israelis enjoy running, jogging, and bike riding. Classes in yoga and dance are available throughout the country. Every four years since 1932, Israel has hosted the Maccabiah Games, which is one of only seven worldwide competitions recognized by the International Olympic Committee.

Leisure

Many Israelis consider leisure time an important part of daily life, as it provides an escape from the stressful financial and security issues of the country. Israelis enjoy going to movies, concerts, and the theater. They may also go to cafés, restaurants, bars, and clubs. Hiking and camping are popular activities during the spring and summer.

The weekend is Friday and Saturday. The Jewish Sabbath begins at sunset on Friday and ends at sunset on Saturday. Most business and shops are open on Friday morning, but as sunset approaches, the country gradually closes down. In Jerusalem, military air-raid sirens announce the time to light the Sabbath candles. Religious families then attend synagogue and return home for a family meal. On the weekends, many people host friends at their homes or go to the beach.

The elderly enjoy playing games such as cards, *shesh besh* (backgammon), and *shach mat* (chess). Some ultra-Orthodox Jews abstain from watching television and films, reading secular newspapers, and using the internet, although some use the internet with filters that block certain content.

Vacation

During the holidays, families travel around the country, either on day trips or longer trips. Popular vacation spots include the Galilee region, Tel Aviv beaches, the Golan Heights, Jerusalem, and Eilat. Wealthy families may travel to Europe for a few days or weeks; Turkey, Cyprus, and Greece are more affordable and popular destinations. Depending on the weather, family vacations usually include hiking, swimming at a pool, or playing at the beach. Governmental and private organizations maintain eco-tourism centers throughout the country that facilitate hikes and nature excursions, which are a central part of Israeli culture.

The Arts

As an immigrant country, Israel blends the arts of Ashkenazim (Jews with European heritage), Sephardim (Jews with Middle Eastern or North African heritage), and African Jews. Hebrew prose and poetry help create and define Israeli national identity, while modern art, theater, music, and dance follow international trends. Israeli art reflects the country's natural landscape, political ideologies, and cultures.

Museums and galleries can be found in most cities. Many professional and amateur theater companies perform plays of various styles, ranging from classical to contemporary. Israeli film often focuses on daily life and regional conflict. Dance plays an important role in the religious and communal life of

people in Israel. Israeli folk dancing is a constantly developing art form that incorporates modern elements with traditional dance styles from the country's diverse ethnic groups.

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* (a village with collective community living) dining rooms, and in many community centers. Israel has a rich tradition of classical music, and many Israelis enjoy attending performances by a number of the country's premiere operas and orchestras. Modern Israeli music is influenced by many different genres, including pop, hip-hop, and techno. During the summer months, international musicians perform at popular venues such as the Park Hayarkon and the Caesarea Amphitheatre.

Holidays

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 of *Tishrei*; the weeklong festival of *Sukkot* (Feast of Tabernacles) begins on the 15th. *Chanukah* (Festival of Lights) is celebrated around December. The holiday of *Purim* is in the Jewish month of *Adar* (at the end of the winter). *Pesach* (Passover) takes place in the spring, six months after *Sukkot*, and Holocaust Day is commemorated 13 days later. Other important days include Memorial Day (between 14 April and 14 May), Independence Day (between 15 April and 15 May), and *Shavu'ot*, or Pentecost (between 15 May and 14 June). Israel observes four fasting holidays, during which people abstain from eating, drinking, wearing leather or jewelry, and having sexual relations. *Tisha B'Av* (the ninth of the month of *Av*), which falls in summer (between July and August) is the most widely observed fasting holiday.

The Jewish day begins at sunset, not midnight. That is why *Shabbat* (Sabbath) begins Friday evening and ends Saturday evening. In Jerusalem, businesses close and public transportation stops during *Shabbat*, holidays, and festivals. Traditions for holidays may vary slightly among the Ashkenazi (of European heritage) and Sephardic (of Middle Eastern or North African heritage) Jews. Christians and Muslims also observe their holidays throughout the year.

Rosh Hashanah

Rosh Hashanah is a two-day holiday that ushers in the Jewish New Year. The New Year is a time for self-reflection and repentance. Many people spend time thinking about what they want from the upcoming year and how they can achieve their goals. Religious Jews attend long prayers performed at the synagogue, listen to the blowing of the *shofar* (ram's horn), and eat. Many families eat traditional challah bread and apples with honey to symbolize hope for a sweet year, as well as other symbolic foods.

Yom Kippur

Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) is the most widely observed holiday in Israel and is celebrated on the 10th of *Tishrei*—10 days after *Rosh Hashanah*. *Yom Kippur* is a time when Jews believe God forgives them and gives them another chance to

improve. During *Yom Kippur*, most people fast, attend synagogue services, and pray for all to have a good year. Jews believe the fast enables people to rise above their current habits and become better people. A *shofar* is blown, signaling the end of the holiest day of the Jewish calendar. After that, everyone breaks their fast either at the synagogue or at home. Due to the wide observance of *Yom Kippur*, highways and city roads are usually empty, which allows many people to walk or ride bikes with their children. On *Yom Kippur*, all radio and television stations close down for 24 hours, and businesses (including transportation) are prohibited from operating.

Sukkot

Sukkot (Feast of Tabernacles) is a seven-day (eight outside of Israel) holiday during which Jews live and eat in a *sukkah* (booth, or tabernacle), symbolizing the tents that the ancient Israelites lived in for 40 years in the desert after the exodus from Egypt. *Sukkot* is celebrated five days after *Yom Kippur*, around September or October, when the weather in Israel is still hot. Most Jews decorate the *sukkah* with their children's handmade decorations, tinsel, cardboard, or other materials. On the first day of *Sukkot*, families attend the synagogue. Families travel around the country, hiking, going on tours, and spending time with relatives and friends. Festive dishes like stuffed cabbage rolls are prepared and eaten inside the *sukkah*.

Chanukah

Chanukah (Festival of Lights) is an eight-day holiday celebrating the rededication of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem over two thousand years ago. Every night, after sunset, Jews light one candle on the *chanukiya* (menorah, or candelabra) until all are lit. The *chanukiya* is lit using a *shamash*, a candle used for lighting the other candles; candles in the *chanukiya* may not be used to light other candles. The *chanukiya* is placed on a windowsill or in a glass case outside in order to publicly commemorate the miracles performed by God.

Many families eat foods cooked in oil like *latkes* (fried potato patties), *sufganiot* (doughnuts filled with jelly or cream), and *sfenj* (a Moroccan doughnut) to commemorate the miracle of the oil that lasted for eight days in the temple. Children play *dreidel*, a game in which a top is spun and fake money (usually chocolate coins or nuts) is gambled with. The *dreidel* (in Yiddish), or *sevivon* (in Hebrew), has four sides, each side with one letter. The letter on which the *dreidel* lands determines whether the player puts money into the pile or wins money.

Pesach

Pesach (Passover, also called the holiday of freedom) is a week-long holiday celebrating the exodus of the ancient Israelites from Egypt after a few hundred years of slavery; Jews also spend time reflecting on their personal freedoms. In the weeks leading up to *Pesach*, families cleanse their homes of *chametz* (leavened bread). During *Pesach*, meals are prepared with matzo meal, potato starch, or unleavened ingredients. Dishes like chicken soup with matzo balls, matzo stir fries, and matzo lasagnas are common. Since *Pesach* falls during spring break, families are able to spend this time traveling and doing family activities.

On the first and last nights of *Pesach*, families and friends

gather together and hold a 15-step *seder* (order) dinner, where families tell stories, discuss ideas, and explain traditions based on the exodus. The *seder* is centered on the children and is a time for them to ask questions, participate in the ceremonies, and sing.

Children often perform plays about the exodus. Throughout the *seder*, people are required to drink four glasses of wine or non-alcoholic pure grape juice and lean to the left while eating and drinking in order to symbolize freedom. Jews also eat matzo with bitter herbs (such as horseradish) and *charoset* (a traditional sweet spread that looks like mortar) in remembrance of the Israelites' slavery in Egypt. After the meal, people sing songs together until late into the night.

SOCIETY

Government

Structure

Israel is a parliamentary democracy and is governed by basic laws instead of a constitution. The 120-seat Knesset is the country's parliament. Knesset members are elected by proportional representation to four-year terms. The prime minister is head of government and is nearly always selected from the largest party in parliament. The prime minister is charged with forming a new government 28 days after election; this time may be extended by 14 days. The government must have the support of a minimum of 61 members (a majority) of the Knesset. All governments in Israel have been coalitions because no one party has been able to gain a majority of seats in the Knesset on its own. At any time, if support for the government falls below 61 seats, new elections are called. The government almost never serves a full four-year term, as calls for early elections are common.

The president is directly elected by members of the Knesset to serve a seven-year term and mostly performs ceremonial duties. The judicial branch is independent and includes the Supreme Court, religious courts, magistrates' courts, and district courts. Judges are appointed by a Judicial Selection Committee and can serve up to mandatory retirement at age 70.

Political Landscape

Israel has a competitive multiparty system. The center-right Likud party and the center-left Labor Party have alternated power for decades. The government has long promoted a strong security agenda, but more recently domestic issues like reducing the cost of living (by providing affordable housing, for instance), stabilizing the economy, and sharing the responsibility of military service with ultra-Orthodox Jews have also become important. Israel's security and foreign challenges include creating a lasting peace with the Palestinians and ensuring that the nuclear agreement with Iran is effective.

Government and the People

Citizens enjoy freedoms of expression, assembly, speech, religion, and education. Most Israelis believe the government is responsible for the country's security, health care, education, welfare, economy, infrastructure, and housing.

Local governments answer to the central government and are responsible for administering services in education, sanitation, health care, and tax collection. Israelis generally feel that their needs are met by the government.

Israel is a small country with many political parties, providing Israelis with the opportunity to be politically involved on a local and national level. Israel defines itself as a Jewish and democratic state. However, there is debate among Israelis surrounding the identity of Israel as a Jewish or a secular state. Some Israelis hope for a secular government that nonetheless retains its Jewish identity; others desire a religious state. Modern Orthodox Jews are often very Zionist and usually part of Israel's political right wing. While the ultra-Orthodox acknowledge Israel as a holy land for the Jewish people, most object to the existence of a secular government in the land or to the establishment of a Jewish state in Israel before the time of the final revelation, or the coming of the Messiah (*Moshiach*).

Israel's civil society is active and free. Although Palestinian citizens of Israel are granted equal political rights and may vote in municipal elections as well as in Palestinian Authority elections, discrimination against them as well as against minority Jews (such as Ethiopians) and non-Jews is an ongoing problem Israel is working to address.

Usually around 70 percent of registered voters participate in elections. Past elections have been considered free and fair. The voting age is 18.

Economy

Israel's economy is well developed and modern despite a scarcity of natural resources. Natural gas fields discovered off Israel's coast in recent years are expected to bring further economic growth. Most Israelis are employed in the service industry. Agriculture employs only about 1 percent of the labor force yet produces food for both consumption and export. Chief products include fruits, vegetables, cotton, dairy, and poultry. Israel has a highly qualified labor force, scientific institutes, and research and development centers. The strong industrial sector includes medical electronics, agro-technology, telecommunications, fine chemicals, and computer hardware and software, as well as diamond cutting and polishing. Tourism is a vital but variable sector of the economy.

Growth, unemployment, and inflation fluctuate with immigration and the peace process, as well as with global market trends. Taxes run high, sometimes as much as one-third of a household's average income. The currency is the *new Israeli sheqel* (ILS).

Transportation and Communications

Air, rail, and road systems are all well developed in Israel. Buses are the most common mode of transportation. In Jerusalem, buses and trains do not run on the Jewish Sabbath or holy days, and airports are closed. Taxis, private cars, and motorbikes are plentiful. *Sherut* are taxis that provide convenient transportation between cities; they travel fixed routes with as many as seven passengers at a time. A unified payment system called Rav-Kav allows people to transfer

between buses, trains, and light rail by electronic card. In the flatter coastal region, particularly Tel Aviv, bicycles are considered cheap and environmentally friendly modes of intra-city transportation. Jerusalem has a light rail system, and a light rail network is under construction in Tel Aviv, set to open in 2023.

Israel has a highly developed communications system with a good domestic phone service. Most Israelis own computers and cellular phones; smartphones are very popular. Internet access and use is widespread, and many Israelis enjoy using social media and streaming videos. Keeping informed of events in Israel, the Middle East, and the world in general is very important to many Israelis. Listening to hourly radio bulletins, viewing television news, and reading at least one daily newspaper are part of most Israelis' daily routine.

Press freedoms are generally respected, though some international journalists may face censorship by the military and travel restrictions in some areas. Most of Israel's dozens of newspapers are published in Hebrew. The Israeli Public Broadcasting Company is the state broadcaster. Israel has two free national commercial networks. Cable and satellite television are widely viewed. Cable channels offer programming in a variety of languages, including English, French, Arabic, and Russian. Government-owned radio stations broadcast mostly in Hebrew. In areas with large Palestinian Arab populations, several privately owned stations are available in Arabic.

Education

Structure

Education is compulsory for fifteen years. Primary school begins at age six and lasts six years. At age twelve, students begin intermediate school, which lasts three years. Next is secondary school, which also lasts three years. Students graduate secondary school around age eighteen. Israel's educational system accommodates the country's multicultural society. Accordingly, schools are divided into four groups: state schools, attended by the majority of pupils; state religious schools, which emphasize Jewish studies, tradition, and observance; Arab and Druze schools, with instruction in Arabic and special focus on Arab and Druze history, religion, and culture; and private schools, which operate under various religious and international auspices.

Ultra-Orthodox children attend their own religious schools. The boys attend *Talmud Torah* (Jewish school that focuses on studying the Torah; also known as *cheder*) from age three or four through thirteen. They then attend *yeshiva* (Jewish school for Torah studies), which is further divided into *yeshiva ktana* (roughly equivalent to junior high school) and *yeshiva gdola* (roughly equivalent to high school). Ultra-Orthodox girls attend private primary schools until age fourteen, followed by four years of *seminar* (a post-high school program). Modern Orthodox boys and girls are often taught in separate classes starting in fourth grade or junior high school.

Access

Israelis value education; families often choose homes based on the quality of nearby schools. Citizens can choose to

attend schools taught in Hebrew or Arabic. Though education is free, public schools charge fees for books, uniforms, school trips, and cultural events. Despite the Pupils' Rights Law, which prohibits discrimination, some Palestinian Arabs claim that schools in their communities do not receive an equal share of the budget and lack certain basic services. They further claim that the curriculum does not sufficiently promote Palestinian culture. Most children graduate from high school.

School Life

Classes are held six days a week, Sunday through Friday, with relatively short school days that start around 8 a.m. and finish between 1 and 2 p.m. Religious public schools and private schools end later. Students are taught a wide range of subjects, including math, English, science, history, Judaism, and art. Children begin learning English and Arabic in third grade and continue throughout the rest of the levels. Hebrew and English are taught to Arabic-speaking children. In ultra-Orthodox schools, Jewish religious studies are emphasized over secular subjects, though sometimes trades are taught so students will have a profession by the time they graduate.

Lessons were traditionally lecture based but have now come to incorporate methods that encourage active learning. Grades are determined by class participation, tests, and projects. After school, students spend a significant amount of time studying, working on homework, and preparing for tests and often receive help from parents. Starting in eleventh grade, students may take a series of tests (*bagruyot*) to achieve a high school diploma, or *te'udat bagrut* (matriculation certificate), which is necessary for college entrance and important for getting a job.

Attempts at cheating are common, though teachers watch their students closely during exams. Students usually address teachers as *HaMoreh* (male teachers) or *HaMorah* (female teachers), followed by a first name. Rabbis are usually called *Rabbi* or *HaRav*.

Teachers often organize class trips to help students learn about the land of Israel. To celebrate special occasions like elementary and high school graduations, students put on a program for their parents at school. Class *bar* and *bat mitzvah* parties are also common among the twelve- and thirteen-year-olds. Some schools hold proms at the end of high school for students.

Higher Education

After finishing the *te'udat bagrut*, young Israelis may start a *mechina* (a preparatory program) to improve test scores or take prerequisite classes for their university majors before enlisting in the military or before starting university. After military service, most Israelis attend university, usually in Israel, and pay for schooling with the help of their parents or by working while attending school. Some engineering, medical, or science students may have their tuition covered by the military because they use their education during their service. In Israel, students apply for their desired majors when applying for university. There are eight major universities in Israel; some of the most prominent are the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and Rehovot, Tel Aviv University, and the University of Haifa. There are over fifty other colleges across

the country, located in both urban and rural areas.

Health

All Israelis are covered by a *kupat cholim*, 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. The basic plan may be supplemented by purchasing additional coverage from one's *kupat cholim* or from a private insurance company. Public hospitals are funded by the government and the health funds, while private hospitals are run as a private business but may work with the health funds in order to partially cover specific treatments. Treatment in private hospitals is generally more expensive, but these hospitals may offer more-expert physicians and specialists, and they generally offer a more comfortable experience. The unemployed and pensioners receive substantial discounts for any treatment and medical supplies.

Israel also runs a system of maternal and child health stations, called *Tipat Chalav*, which are located throughout the country. Some are operated by the state, some by the *kupat cholim*, and some by local authorities. These stations provide assistance in family planning, health care for mothers before and during pregnancy, and monitoring of babies from birth to age six. Children receive free dental health services.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

Embassy of Israel, 3514 International Drive NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 364-5500; web site www.israelemb.org Israel Ministry of Tourism, phone (212) 499-5660; web site www.goisrael.com.

Country and Development Data	
Capital	Jerusalem
Population	8,787,045 (rank=97)
Area (sq. mi.)	8,470 (rank=148)
Area (sq. km.)	21,937
Human Development Index	22 of 189 countries
Gender Inequality Index	24 of 162 countries
GDP (PPP) per capita	\$38,300
Adult Literacy	NA
Infant Mortality	4 per 1,000 births
Life Expectancy	81 (male); 85 (female)
Currency	Israeli New Shekel

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