AFCLC

EXPEDITIONARY CULTURE

FIELD GUIDE

Israel

U.S. AIR FORCE

About this Guide

This guide is designed to prepare you to deploy to culturally complex environments and achieve mission objectives. The fundamental information contained within will help you understand the cultural dimension of your assigned location and gain skills necessary for success.

The guide consists of two parts:

Part 1 is the "Culture General" section, which provides the foundational knowledge you need to operate effectively in any global environment with a focus on the Levant.

Part 2 is the "Culture Specific" section, which describes unique cultural features of Israeli society. It applies culture-general concepts to help increase your knowledge of your assigned deployment location. This section is designed to complement other pre-deployment training.

For further information, contact the AFCLC Region Team at AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil or visit the AFCLC website at https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/.

PART 1 – CULTURE GENERAL

What is Culture?

Fundamental to all aspects of human existence, culture shapes the way humans view life and functions as a tool we use to adapt to our social and physical environments. A culture is the sum of all of the beliefs, values, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning for a society. All human beings have culture, and individuals within a culture share a general set of beliefs and values.

Members of a culture also usually assign the same meanings to the symbols in that culture. A symbol is when one thing – an image, word, object, idea, or story – represents another thing. For example, the American flag is a physical and visual symbol of a core American value – freedom. At the same time, the story of George Washington admitting to having chopped down a cherry tree is also symbolic because it represents the premium Americans place on personal honesty and leadership integrity.

Force Multiplier

The military services have learned through experience the importance of understanding other cultures. Unlike the 20th-century bipolar world order that dominated US strategy for nearly half a century, today the US military is operating in what we classify as asymmetric or irregular conflict zones, where the notion of cross-cultural interactions is on the leading edge of our engagement strategies.

We have come to view the people themselves, rather than the political system or physical environment, as the decisive feature in conflict areas. Our primary objective hinges on influencing constructive change through peaceful means where possible. We achieve this endeavor by encouraging local nationals to

focus on developing stable political, social, and economic institutions that reflect their cultural beliefs and traditions.

Therefore, understanding the basic concepts of culture serves as a force multiplier. Achieving an awareness and respect of a society's values and beliefs enables deploying forces to build relationships with people from other cultures, positively influence their actions, and ultimately achieve mission success.

Cultural Domains

Culture is not just represented by the beliefs we carry internally, but also by our behaviors and by the systems members of a culture create to organize their lives. These systems, such as political or educational institutions, help us to live in a manner that is appropriate to our culture and encourages us to perpetuate that culture into the future.

We can organize behaviors and systems into categories – what the Air Force refers to as "cultural domains" – in order to better understand the primary values and characteristics of a society. A cross-culturally competent military member can use these domains – which include kinship, language and communication, and social and political systems and others (see chart on next page) – as tools for understanding and adapting to any culture. For example, by understanding the way a culture defines family and kinship, a US military member operating overseas can more effectively interact with members of that culture.

Social Behaviors across Cultures

While humankind shares basic behaviors, various groups enact or even group those behaviors differently across cultural boundaries. For example, all societies obtain food for survival, although agrarian societies generally produce their own food for limited consumption using very basic techniques.

Conversely, industrialized nations have more complex market economies, producing foodstuffs for universal consumption. Likewise, all cultures value history and tradition, although they represent these concepts through a variety of unique forms of symbolism. While the dominant world religions share the belief in one God, their worship practices vary with their traditional historical development. Similarly, in many kin-based cultures where familial bonds are foundational to social identity, it is customary for family or friends to serve as godparents, while for other societies this practice is nearly non-existent.

Worldview

One of our most basic human behaviors is the tendency to classify others as similar or different based on our cultural standards. As depicted in the chart below, we can apply the 12 cultural domains to help us compare similarities and differences across cultures. We evaluate others' behavior to determine if they are "people like me" or "people not like me." Usually, we assume that those in the "like me" category share our perspectives and values.

This collective perspective forms our worldview—how we see the world and understand our place in it. Your worldview functions as a lens through which you see and understand the world. It

helps you to interpret your experiences and the values and behaviors of other people that you encounter. Consider your worldview as a way of framing behavior, providing an accountability standard for actions and a logical explanation of why we individually or collectively act in a certain manner.

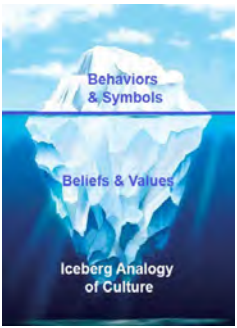
Cultural Belief System

An important component of a worldview is our belief system. A community's belief system assigns meaning, sets its universal standards of what is good and bad, defines right and wrong behavior, and assigns a value of meaningful or meaningless. Our beliefs form the fundamental values we hold to be true – regardless of whether there is evidence to support these ideas. Beliefs are a central aspect of human culture. They are shared views about world order and how the universe was physically and socially constructed.

While all people have beliefs, their specific components tend to vary depending upon respective world views. What people classify as good or bad, right or wrong depends on our deeply-held beliefs we started developing early in life that have helped shape our characters. Likewise, these values are ingrained in our personalities and shape our behavior patterns and our self-identities. Because cultural beliefs are intensely held, they are difficult, though not impossible, to change.

Core Beliefs

Core beliefs shape and influence certain behaviors and also serve to rationalize those behaviors. Therefore, knowledge of individual or group beliefs can be useful in comprehending or making sense of their activities. We will use the iceberg model for classifying culture to illustrate two levels of meaning, as depicted. Beliefs and values, portrayed by the deeper and greater level of the submerged iceberg, are seldom visible, but are indicated / hinted at / referenced by our behaviors and symbols (top level). It is important to recognize, though, that the parts of culture that are not visible (under the waterline) are informing and shaping what is being made visible (above the waterline).



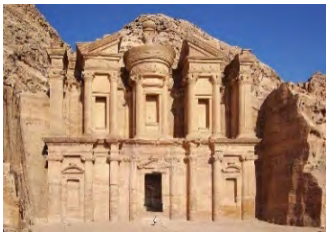
In many cases, different worldviews may present behaviors that are contrary to our own beliefs, particularly in many regions where US forces deploy. Your ability to suspend judgment in order to understand another perspective is essential to establishing relationships with your host-nation counterparts. The ability to withhold your opinion and strive to understand a culture from a member of that culture's perspective is known as cultural relativism. It often involves taking an alternate perspective when interpreting others' behaviors and is critical to your ability to achieve mission success.

As you travel through the Levant, you will encounter cultural patterns of meaning that are common across the region. What follows is a general description of 12 cultural domains which are used to frame those commonalities.

CULTURAL DOMAINS

1. History and Myth

History and myth are related concepts. History is a record of the past that is based on verifiable facts and events. Myth can act as a type of historical record, although it is usually a story which members of a culture use to explain community origins or important events that are not verifiable, or which occurred prior to written language.



The Levant comprises Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the Palestinian Territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Archaeological finds suggest humans inhabited the region as early as 194,000 years ago. Around 9000 BC, inhabitants began domesticating animals, cultivating crops, and producing pottery. The region is home to some of the world's earliest continuous settlements, notably Jericho in the present-day West Bank and Byblos (modern-day Jbeil) in present-day Lebanon. These and other early settlements played an important role in the development of regional trade and culture.

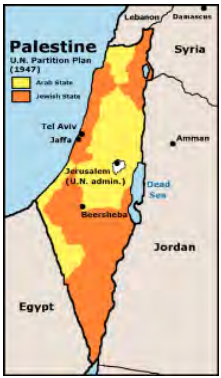
The Levant came under the influence of several powerful empires in subsequent centuries, notably the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, and Greeks. Beginning in the 1st century BC, the region was incorporated into the Roman Empire, and following the split between the Western Roman and Eastern (Byzantine) Empires, was ruled by the Byzantines from their capital at Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul).

By 640, Muslim warriors from the Arabian Peninsula were expanding into the region. Islamic dynasties then controlled the Levant until the Roman Catholic Church pursued a series of religious crusades to capture territories in the region. However, the Crusaders were soon evicted, and Islamic dynasties from Egypt governed the Levant by the 13th century. In the 16th

century, the region fell to the Ottoman Empire based in present-day Turkey, which ruled the Levant, with some interruptions for the next 400 years.

Following the Ottomans' defeat in World War I, European powers took control of the former Ottoman territories in the Levant, with France occupying Syria and Lebanon and Britain occupying Jordan and Palestine. Concurrently, the British committed to establishing a "Jewish homeland" in Palestine. In the 1940s, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria gained independence (though Syria would briefly unite with Egypt to form the United Arab Republic from 1958-61). During World War II, British Palestine's Jewish population grew as many European Jews fled persecution.

In 1947, the United Nations (UN) voted to partition British Palestine into Arab and Jewish states, prompting conflict between Zionists (advocate development and protection of a Jewish nation in Palestine) and Palestinian Arabs. When Britain withdrew from the area and Israel declared independence as a Jewish state in 1948, further violence erupted with Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, and Iraq declaring war against Israel. At the conflict's end in mid-1949, Israel had gained territory beyond the 1947 UN plan, and Jordan occupied the West Bank and Egypt the Gaza Strip. Both of these territories had been allocated to the unrealized Palestinian Arab state. Further, the fighting caused some 700,000 Palestinians to flee Israel. Forbidden from returning, most settled in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Jordan.



After the 1967 war with Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, Israel gained control over additional territories, including the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and the Syrian Golan Heights. Conflict continued through the 1970s, despite various peace talks and attempts to establish a self-governing authority for the Palestinians, who still sought their own state. In 1970, civil

war erupted in Jordan between the Jordanian army and Palestinian guerillas supported by Syria. Between 1975-90, Lebanon also endured a devastating civil war in which Palestinian groups, Syria, and Israel played a large role. In 1988, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO – an umbrella organization of the various Palestinian activist groups) proclaimed the founding of the State of Palestine in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, though many countries refused to recognize it, and Israel continued to build settlements in territories claimed by the PLO. In the 1990s, a series of agreements transferred authority over some areas of the West Bank and Gaza Strip from Israel to the newly-created Palestinian Authority (PA), though Israel continued to promote settlement in disputed areas.

In 2006, a 34-day war erupted between the Lebanese militia Hezbollah and Israel. A year later, Hamas, a militant Islamist group, forcibly took control of the Gaza Strip, intensifying tensions between the PA and Israel. In 2011, civil war erupted in Syria, triggering violence throughout the Levant. As of mid-2023, the Levant continues to face civil war, territorial disputes, and the destabilizing activities of non-state actors.

2. Political and Social Relations

Political relations are the ways in which members of a community organize leadership, power, and authority. Social relations are all of the ways in which individuals are linked to others in their community.

Jordan is a parliamentary constitutional monarchy with its King holding ultimate executive, judicial, and legislative powers. Lebanon is a parliamentary republic with a unique “confessional” structure which divides political power among 18 Christian and Muslim sects. A presidential republic, Syria has been ruled by the al-Assad family for over 50 years. The PA governs the

Palestinian Territories through an elected President (presently, also chairman of the PLO) and legislative council and is housed in the West Bank. While Israel lacks a formal constitution, a set of “Basic Laws” defines it as a parliamentary democracy.

Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria are among 140 countries that now recognize the State of Palestine, though the US and Israel do not. Palestine is not a member of the UN but holds observer status. As of mid-2023, the Gaza Strip remains contested, with the Palestinian militant group Hamas presently controlling it. Neither Lebanon nor Syria formally recognizes Israel. Instead, they consider themselves in a state of war with Israel, which occupies parts of their territories. In mid-2020, the PA announced it would end all security, economic, and political ties with Israel.

Regional security threats and mutual distrust motivate significant military posturing in the Levant. The ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict, heightened by Hamas’ occupation of the Gaza Strip, and the Syrian Civil War have also significantly increased tensions. Israel and Jordan are key US allies, but the PA has cut most diplomatic contact with the US since 2017.

While the citizens of Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the Palestinian Territories are predominantly Arabs, other groups, notably Armenians and Kurds, are present. Some three-fourths of Israelis are Jews of a variety of ethnicities. The Levantine territories host large numbers of refugees and displaced persons. As of 2023, Lebanon and Jordan together host almost 1.5 million refugees from Syria, while as of 2020, over 5.7 million Palestinians live in refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank.

3. Religion and Spirituality

Religion is a cultural belief system that provides meaning to members of a community. Religious and spiritual beliefs help

preserve the social order by defining proper behavior. They also create social unity by defining shared identity, offer individuals peace of mind, and explain the causes of events in a society.

The Levant is the birthplace of both Judaism and Christianity. Today, Jews, Christians, and Muslims consider many Levantine sites sacred. For example, the Temple Mount located in Jerusalem's Old City, is Judaism's holiest and Islam's third holiest site, while also holding significance for Christians.

Since its arrival in the 7th century, Islam has been a defining factor in shaping regional cultures and societies. Today, Syrians, Jordanians, and Palestinians are predominantly Muslim, though some are Christian. While Lebanon has a majority Muslim population, some one-third are Christian. As the self-proclaimed "Nation State of the Jewish People," Israel has a predominantly Jewish population.

Religious affiliation continues to be an important marker of identity in the region. While the Levantine governments generally recognize religious freedom, discrimination and intolerance persist, especially towards converts from Islam and atheists. Across the region, religious identity and political affiliation tend to be linked, so religious discrimination often has political underpinnings.

4. Family and Kinship

The domain of family and kinship refers to groups of people related through blood ties, marriage, or through strong emotional bonds that influence them to treat each other like family members (often called "fictive kin").

Family life and relationships are fundamental elements of Levantine society. Regional inhabitants maintain strong connections with both immediate and extended family members, supporting them emotionally and financially, while providing

physical care for elderly or ailing kin if needed. While residence patterns differ somewhat across the region, multiple generations often reside together in one household or live in close proximity.

The urbanization of Levantine society has changed family life in recent years. As of 2023, over three-fourths of inhabitants of Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinian Territories live in urban areas compared to around 57% in Syria. As both men and women take advantage of the enhanced educational and employment opportunities available in urban areas, family structures have become more diverse. Moreover, traditional family dynamics have been disrupted in recent years by regional conflicts, especially in Syria.

Historically, marriage was an arranged union intended to bring both families social and economic advantages. Although arranged marriages are still common across the region, many regional residents now choose their own spouses, particularly in urban areas. None of the Levantine governments performs civil marriages, relying instead on religious authorities to officiate ceremonies. While divorce was traditionally uncommon, rates have generally increased in recent years. Polygyny, the practice of a man having multiple wives, is legal for some Muslim inhabitants of the Levant.

5. Sex and Gender

Sex refers to the biological/reproductive differences between males and females, while gender is a more flexible concept that refers to a culture's categorizing of masculine and feminine behaviors, symbols, and social roles.

The Levant's cultures and religions traditionally privilege the male's role as leader and provider. For example, Islamic law favors men over women in inheritance and other family matters. While most of the region's inhabitants continue to adhere to traditional gender roles – men as breadwinners and guardians and women as mothers and wives – recent decades have seen

some changes. In Syria, for example, gender roles have somewhat shifted since the start of the civil war.

While literacy rates for women have increased in recent decades, female participation in education varies. In 2015, 50% of Israeli women aged 25 and older had completed a postsecondary degree compared to just 26% in the Palestinian Territories. Generally, Levantine women face challenges to attaining education and are often encouraged to pursue traditional “female” disciplines such as education and healthcare.

While women are involved in politics across the region, they are generally less likely to participate than men, and overall, the number of women serving in elected offices remains relatively low. While Israel elected Golda Meir as its first female Prime Minister in 1969, and a few women serve as ministers across the Levant’s Arab states, Hamas authorities in the Gaza Strip typically exclude women from formal leadership positions.

Historically, Levantine women rarely worked outside the home, and female workforce participation varies across the region today. While some 60% of Israeli women worked outside the home in 2022, just 17% of Syrian and 15% of Jordanian women did – some of the world’s lowest rates. Working women in the region often face a pay gap and discrimination. Some Levantine women experience other barriers to their full participation in society. For example, Jordan’s traditional male guardianship system significantly limits women’s freedoms, and Syrian law permits certain male relatives to place travel bans on female family members.

Same-sex relations in Lebanon, Syria, and the Gaza Strip are criminalized. Discrimination against LGBTQ individuals is widespread throughout the region, even where same-sex activities are technically legal, namely Jordan, Israel, and the West Bank.

6. Language and Communication

Language is a system for sharing information symbolically, whereby words are used to represent ideas. Communication is defined as the cultural practice of sharing meaning in interaction, both verbally and non-verbally.

Arabic is the official language of Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the Palestinian Territories and the Levant's most widely spoken language. Most residents regularly use two Arabic varieties – Modern Standard Arabic in school, the media, and in official government proceedings and Levantine Arabic for everyday communication. Some Levantine residents speak other languages and dialects. For example, inhabitants of northeastern Syria tend to speak Kurdish, and Syrians in other regions speak other Arabic dialects, such as Mesopotamian, Najdi, and Bewadi Arabic. Hebrew is the predominant and official language of Israel, with Arabic holding "special" status after losing its official status in 2018. Across the region, English and French also are spoken widely.

Generally, the region's residents demonstrate respect, generosity, and candor in their communication practices. In most of the Levant, communications reflect high levels of emotion and engagement, though some residents refrain from displaying emotions around strangers or in public. Residents tend to share information about themselves and often expect foreign nationals to do the same. Gestures are common when speaking, particularly if the speaker is interested in the topic.

7. Learning and Knowledge

All cultures require that the older generation transmit important information to the younger generation. This information can be strictly factual (for example, how to fulfill subsistence and health requirements) and culturally traditional (the beliefs, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning to the community). This

knowledge transfer may occur through structured, formalized systems such as schools or through informal learning by watching adults or peers.

Prior to the early 20th century, religious affiliation largely dictated educational opportunities, with Muslim, Christian, and Jewish communities operating their own schools during the Ottoman period. Following World War I, the British and French imposed European-style education throughout the region, emphasizing French and English language instruction but largely neglecting the development of the educational system as a whole.

After their independence, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Israel developed their own educational structures and curricula at different rates. In 1946, Lebanese reforms replaced French with Arabic as the primary language of instruction in public schools. Meanwhile, the Jewish community in British Palestine created its own Hebrew educational system, and after its 1948 independence, Israel expanded upon this framework. In 1957, Syria and Jordan replaced European curricula with their own educational programs. The Palestinian Territories relied on foreign curricula until the 1990s, when the authorities began developing their own learning materials.

While the adult literacy rate in Syria was just 86% in 2015, the rate is over 95% throughout the rest of the Levant. As of 2019, enrollment rates at the primary and secondary levels were near universal in Israel. By contrast, just half to two-thirds of children enrolled at those levels in Jordan and Lebanon. Public investment in education varies across the region, ranging from 7% of GDP in 2020 in Israel to 5% in the Palestinian Territories and 2% in Lebanon. Due to years of conflict, education in Syria has been severely disrupted with some two million children out of school and one-third of schools destroyed or occupied. International organizations operate schools for displaced and refugee children across the Levant.

8. Time and Space

In every society, people occupy space and time in ways that are not directly linked to physical survival. In most Western cultures, people tend to be preoccupied with strict time management, devoting less effort to relationship-building. By contrast, in the Levant, establishing and maintaining relationships often takes precedence over meeting deadlines, punctuality, or accomplishing a task in the most efficient manner. While regional residents typically agree in advance on scheduled start times, meetings frequently begin late. An exception is Israel, where inhabitants typically prefer to work quickly and efficiently.

Some Levantines interact with each other in different ways than Americans are used to. For example, in many Muslim and Orthodox Jewish communities, unrelated women and men seldom interact, and when they do, it is typically in group settings. Concepts of personal space also differ from those in the US. For example, many Levantine residents of the same sex commonly sit and stand closer to each other and tend to touch more often during conversations than Westerners.

The region's communities use a variety of calendars, notably Islamic, Western (Gregorian), Julian, and Hebrew ones. Because Friday is considered a holy day in Islam, most of the region observes a Saturday- or Sunday-Thursday workweek. Israelis also observe a Sunday-Thursday workweek, as Saturday is considered a holy day in Judaism. By contrast, in Lebanon, the workweek generally runs Monday-Friday.

9. Aesthetics and Recreation

Every culture has its own forms of creative expression that are guided by aesthetic principles of imagination, beauty, skill and style. Levantine art, architecture, dance, music, poetry, and theater reflect the region's rich history and modern global trends.

Across the Levant, and particularly in urban areas, Western-style clothing is common, though some Levantines prefer long, loose-fitting garments and other traditional attire. Some religious groups have their own traditional clothing and headgear.

Levantine music and dance styles express topics like nature, rural life, love, history, and current events. Both traditional and modern forms of music are popular, ranging from Arab folk songs accompanied by the ***oud*** (a stringed, pear-shaped instrument) to contemporary, upbeat Lebanese and Israeli pop. A popular traditional dance found throughout the Levant is the ***dabke*** (a folk dance performed in circles or lines, with different versions defined by the speed and rhythm of the steps).

Many Levantine artists historically favored geometric designs and patterns to depict plants, flowers, and animals on buildings, jewelry, and household items. Regional inhabitants today create various traditional handicrafts and pieces of folk art that reflect the region's rich heritage and often incorporate religious motifs. Common handicrafts include pottery, embroidery, ceramics, and calligraphy. Soccer is the most widely followed sport in the region. Other popular sports include basketball, weightlifting, handball, and swimming.

10. Sustenance and Health

Societies have different methods of transforming natural resources into food. These methods can shape residence patterns, family structures and economics. Theories of disease and healing practices exist in all cultures and serve as adaptive responses to disease and illness.

While cuisine varies across the region, residents tend to rely on many of the same staple ingredients such as chickpeas and other beans, lemons, onions, and garlic. Common dishes include mutton and chicken prepared with a variety of spice

mixtures such as ***za'atar*** (made of sumac, oregano, thyme, and sesame seeds) and ***bokharat*** (a seven-spice powder). Fruits, yogurt, various salads, bread, and rice are common accompaniments to meals. Popular drinks include tea, often sweetened and flavored with mint or sage, and a variety of fruit juices. Neither observant Muslims nor Jews in the Levant consume pork. Observant Muslims also refrain from consuming alcohol and prepare food using halal guidelines – allowed by Islamic law.

Health in most of the region has improved in recent decades as evidenced by decreased infant mortality rates and longer life expectancies. Most residents of the Levant have access to quality healthcare that is generally subsidized by governments. Nevertheless, years of conflict have created significant challenges to the delivery of healthcare in some areas. For example, around half of Syrian hospitals have closed, and two-thirds of Syrian medical personnel have fled since the civil war began in 2011. Consequently, specialized physical and psychological care is unavailable. Meanwhile, Jordan and Lebanon struggle with rising healthcare costs generated by the influx of Syrian refugees.

Healthcare systems face several other challenges such as long wait times at health facilities and increasing out-of-pocket expenses. Further, the quality of care tends to vary between urban and rural areas, where clinics are often understaffed and equipped with outdated equipment. Noncommunicable diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, cancer, and chronic respiratory disease now cause more than three-fourths of all deaths in the Levant, except in Syria, where injuries cause some 50% of deaths.

11. Economics and Resources

This domain refers to beliefs regarding appropriate ways for a society to produce, distribute, and consume goods and services. It details how countries allocate their resources by sector, trade

with other countries, give or receive aid, and pay for goods and services within their borders.

Prior to the 20th century, the Levantine territories maintained largely agrarian and trade-based economies. Even after most of the region declared independence, conflict and political instability largely hampered significant economic development. The territories subsequently followed different strategies to stimulate economic growth. For example, in the 1960s, Syria implemented socialist economic policies with extensive government involvement, while Lebanon prioritized the growth of its private sector. In the 1980s-90s, Israel implemented market-oriented reforms and its economy began expanding significantly, while the other Levantine economies experienced less impressive growth.

Today, the region's economies are predominantly services oriented. As of 2021, Israel's GDP per capita, the Levant's highest, is more than 14 times that of the Palestinian Territories. Israel, a technologically advanced economy, controls much of the Palestinian Territories' economy, limiting the movement of people and goods. Unemployment rates vary widely, ranging from 26% in the Palestinian Territories to 18% in Jordan, 10% in Syria, 13% in Lebanon, and 4% in Israel as of 2022. As many residents work informal jobs, the formal unemployment rate is often much higher. In both Jordan and Lebanon, public dissatisfaction with worsening economic conditions has repeatedly led to anti-government protests. Meanwhile, Syria's economy virtually collapsed after the 2011 start of the civil war, shrinking by about 80% between 2011-16. As of 2023, experts predict a less than 2.8% growth in the region's GDP, less than that of 2021-22 and due in part to the ongoing effects of the coronavirus pandemic.

The region maintains trade relationships with other Middle Eastern countries, several Asian nations, and the US. For example, Syria depends largely on imports from Lebanon, Iraq,

Jordan, and China, while Jordan primarily relies on imports from China, Saudi Arabia, and the US.

12. Technology and Material

Societies use technology to transform their physical world, and culture heavily influences the development and use of technology.

Israel has a modern and robust transportation network, while Jordan, the Palestinian Territories, and Lebanon lack transport infrastructure and public transportation systems. In 2017, the Lebanese government estimated that only 15% of the country's main roads were in good condition. While Syria once had an advanced transportation network, the civil war has caused extensive damage, destroying or damaging some 44% of roads in Aleppo. By contrast, the Jordanian government invested some $1.7 billion between 2014-19 in transportation projects.

Information technology is spreading rapidly throughout the Levant. Between 2000-21, Internet usage grew from 0.1-21% of population to 75-90%. An exception is Syria, where just 36% of population were Internet users in 2021. Cell phones are popular – the Levant reports 65-140 mobile phone subscriptions per 100 people as of 2021. While Israel places few restrictions on press freedoms, journalists and social media users in Syria, Jordan, and the Palestinian Territories tend to face significant restrictions.

Most of the region faces significant challenges in meeting growing energy needs. With limited resources of their own, Lebanon, Jordan, and the Palestinian Territories import most of their required energy. Syria, once a net oil exporter, has imported much of its required oil since 2011. By contrast, Israel has recently become a natural gas exporter.

Now that we have introduced general concepts that characterize Levantine society at large, we will focus on specific features of society in Israel.

PART 2 – CULTURE SPECIFIC

1. HISTORY AND MYTH

Overview

Israel is located along the eastern Mediterranean in an area that has been at the crossroads of cultures, peoples, languages, and religions for millennia. Powerful empires have sought to control the territory for its significant religious sites and trade routes. In 1948, Israel was established to provide a national home for persecuted Jewish minorities worldwide. However, Israel's displacement of local communities has sparked conflicts with Arab inhabitants and countries throughout the Middle East, creating persistent security challenges in the region.

Early History

Archeological evidence indicates that early humans inhabited land in parts of present-day Israel at least 180,000 years ago, with settlements proliferating around 3000 BC. The members of the region's pastoral tribes became known as the Canaanites after the Biblical name for the region, Canaan. The Canaanites shared the region with nomadic Israelite tribes, which scholars believe were also natives of the Levant (the region comprising present-day Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the Palestinian Territories).

The region's proximity to large empires based in Egypt, Babylon (in present-day Iraq), and Asia Minor (in present-day Turkey) made it vulnerable to attack. By about 1500 BC, Canaan had become the target of military campaigns by Egyptians to the southwest and the Mitanni and Hittite kingdoms to the north. Around 1100, groups of settlers from the Aegean region called the Philistines also arrived in Canaan and founded Philistia, the name for the region that Greeks later called Palestine.

Kingdom of Israel

Around 1021 BC, Israelite tribes, faced with external threats and bound by the shared religion of Judaism (see p. 2 of *Religion and Spirituality*), unified under the leadership of King Saul as the Kingdom of Israel. Saul's successor, King David, consolidated the bonds between the Israelite tribes and mounted military campaigns that defeated the Philistines around 990.

David's son Solomon succeeded him as King. Biblical sources attribute notable military victories to Solomon and highlight the increased wealth and stability that the Israelites accrued under his rule. Scholars credit Solomon with largescale construction projects, particularly in the capital city of Jerusalem (present-day Israel's capital – see p. 1 of *Political and Social Relations*), where he oversaw construction of a vital center of worship, later known as the First Temple.

Israelite Rivalries: Solomon's favoritism towards the Judah tribe led to political fragmentation of the kingdom after his death. Around 922, northern Israelite tribes broke away and established a capital in the city of Samaria, leaving Judah to form its own kingdom centered around Jerusalem.

Eastern Invasions

Despite their shared culture and religion, the two kingdoms were often at odds during the next 2 centuries. These disputes ended in 722, when the Assyrians (based in present-day Iraq and Turkey) conquered much of the Levant, besieging Samaria and dispersing its population throughout the Middle East. Meanwhile, Judah became a vassal (secondary to a dominant state) kingdom to the Assyrian Empire.

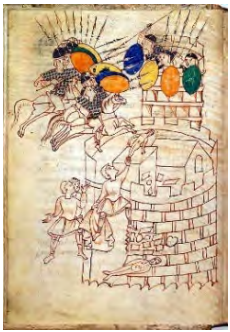
Nevertheless, in 597, Babylonian forces seeking to destroy the Assyrians mounted a conquest of the region, Judah included. In 586, they destroyed Jerusalem, including the First Temple, and deported the region's inhabitants to Babylon. However, the Persian Achaemenids soon conquered Babylon, allowing the

Jewish community to return to Judah around 516, after which they constructed the Second Temple in Jerusalem.

Greek Invasions

As Persian rulers lost effective control of their vast territory, Alexander the Great of Macedonia expanded eastward, taking the Levant in 333 BC. Following his 323 death, Alexander's generals divided his empire, with the southern Levant eventually going to the Seleucids, a Greek dynasty based in present-day Syria and Turkey. Over time, Greek language and culture began to spread in the region, particularly among the educated elite.

The Seleucids ruled the Levant with a heavy hand. They enacted harsh taxes, desecrated the Second Temple, and forbade primary Jewish rites (see p. 3 of *Family and Kinship*). These conditions sparked a rebellion in 167 known as the Maccabean Revolt that resisted Greek influence on Jewish life. Revolt leader Judah Maccabee and his followers captured the Temple in Jerusalem, which had become a pagan shrine, before cleansing it and rededicating it. The Jewish holiday ***Hanukkah*** celebrates this event (see p. 2 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Nevertheless, while largely effective against the Seleucids, the following period of relative Jewish self-rule under the Hasmonean dynasty was short-lived.



Roman Rule

The Romans, who had begun to build their empire in central Italy around 500 BC, quickly expanded past the Italian Peninsula starting in 264. In 67 BC, the Romans took advantage of Seleucid weakness, conquering the Levant and reorganizing the territory into Judea to the south and Samaria and Galilee to the north. The Roman Empire largely ruled these regions through loyal local rulers. One of the most notable was Herod I (the Great) of Judea, who began his rule in 37 BC and erected fortresses, aqueducts, and significantly renovated the Second Temple. Christianity also originated in Roman Judea around this time (see p. 3 of *Religion and Spirituality*).

By 66 AD, tension between hostile Roman leaders, Greek elites, and the Jewish community had evolved into the First Jewish Revolt. Although it took several years for the Roman army to suppress the uprising, they severely punished the Jews for their disloyalty. When Roman troops recaptured Jerusalem in 70, they looted and destroyed the Second Temple.

Roman plans to build a colony in Jerusalem and the prohibition of Jewish rites led to the Second Jewish Revolt in 132. The Romans likewise crushed this uprising, massacring entire communities in Judea. Further, the Romans enacted a ban that forbade Jews from entering Jerusalem, which remained in place until the late 4th century.

In 285, the Roman Emperor reorganized his holdings into western and eastern divisions, and in 380, adopted Christianity as the empire's official religion. Some 15 years later, the split between the western Roman and Eastern (Byzantine) empires became permanent, with the Byzantines ruling the region from their capital at Constantinople (present-day Istanbul, Turkey's capital). The following 300 years were marked by conflict with the Persians, who weakened the Byzantines' hold on the region.

Arab Rule

Meanwhile, a new religion, Islam, was gaining converts in the Arabian Peninsula (see p. 4 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Muslim Arab warriors sought expansion into the eastern Mediterranean, defeating the Byzantines in the decisive Battle of Yarmouk in 636 and capturing Jerusalem 2 years later. In subsequent centuries, as Islam became prevalent in the region, many Jews either converted to Islam or fled, becoming part of the worldwide Jewish ***diaspora*** (see p. 2 of *Religion and Spirituality*).

Ruling from Damascus (present-day Syria's capital), the Sunni Umayyad dynasty took control in 661. In their territory, Umayyad ***caliphs*** (rulers) undertook large building projects, such as the al-Aqsa Mosque on Jerusalem's Temple Mount, the former site

of the First and Second temples and holiest site in Judaism. However, internal conflict and economic decline soon weakened them. In 750, the Sunni Abbasid dynasty, which ruled from Baghdad (present-day Iraq's capital), overthrew the Umayyads. Over time, Arab culture and language began to supplant Greek and other cultures in villages across the Levant.

As the Abbasids began to weaken in the 860s, the Shi'i Fatimid dynasty based in Cairo (present-day Egypt's capital) expanded and gained control over the Levant by the late 10th century. By the 11th century, a new power, the Sunni Seljuk Turks, first expanded into Fatimid territory, then won a notable battle against the Byzantines in 1071, marking their prominence in the eastern Mediterranean.

The Crusader States

The Seljuk Turks' success and Muslim control of Jerusalem concerned the Christian Byzantines and their brethren in Rome. In 1095, the Pope, leader of the Roman Catholic Church, declared a series of religious crusades to capture territories in the Levant. European Crusaders succeeded in capturing large swaths of coastal territories caused over a million deaths, and founded a series of kingdoms in the region, the most powerful of which was the Kingdom of Jerusalem, established in 1100.

Soon after, internal divisions and the Seljuks' repeated efforts to reclaim the territory rapidly halted European expansion in the region. The Seljuks founded the Ayyubid dynasty in Cairo and then unified Egypt and the interior of the Levant against the Crusaders. Muslim forces overran Jerusalem in 1244, beginning a slow collapse of Crusader power during the ensuing century.

Egyptian Mamluk Rule

In 1250, the Ayyubids fell to a rebellion that led to the establishment of the Mamluk dynasty in Egypt. In 1260, the Mamluks repelled the Mongols, who were seeking to expand westward from Central Asia. This victory gave the Mamluks

capacity to conquer the last European strongholds. They succeeded after invading the city of Acre (also known as Akko) in 1291. Their victories granted the Mamluks credibility as defenders of Islam, and they consolidated control of the Levant.

Some 225 years of Mamluk rule brought commercial growth, as the Egyptian rulers established schools, renovated mosques, and encouraged pilgrimages to the Levant. Political infighting and repeated Mongol attacks severely impacted Mamluk control of the region, which had become weakened by the 15th century.

Ottoman Rule

Meanwhile, to the north, the Byzantine Empire had been steadily weakening and losing territory. By the mid-14th century, the Ottoman Turks were the region's rising power, and in 1453, they captured the Byzantine capital of Constantinople, ending the Byzantine Empire. In 1516, the Ottomans defeated the Mamluks and incorporated the Levant into their empire. Subsequently, the region of present-day Israel would remain under Ottoman control for some 400 years.

The Levant initially benefitted from its incorporation into the Ottoman Empire. Increased trade in the 16th century brought significant wealth to the region. However, the Ottomans' hold over the Levant weakened in the 17th and 18th centuries, as Turkish civil servants served as ***mutasarrif*** (governors), often without Arabic knowledge or much familiarity with the region or its people.

Early Nationalist Movements

In the late 19th century, Zionism, a political movement that advocated for a Jewish homeland, began to gain traction among some intellectuals in Europe. In 1896, Austrian author Theodor Herzl published *The Jewish State*, a pamphlet that advocated for the creation of a Jewish country in Ottoman territory. In 1897, Herzl helped establish the World Zionist Organization, which lobbied for Europeans to settle Jews in the region.

World War I (WWI)

In 1914, WWI broke out between the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire) and the Allies (the US, Britain, France, and Russia, among others). During the war, the British made conflicting diplomatic offers to potential allies with interests in the rapidly disintegrating Ottoman Empire. When speaking with some Arab leaders, the British alluded to promoting the establishment of sovereign Arab states in the Levant if local populations opposed their Ottoman rulers. In 1917, the British also issued what became known as the Balfour Declaration, which announced support for an independent Jewish state in Palestine. By 1917, the British had captured Jerusalem before proceeding to invade the rest of the southern Levant by the war's end in 1918.

The British Mandate for Palestine

Concluded before the war's end, the 1916 British-French Sykes-Picot Agreement anticipated the Ottomans' defeat and divided Ottoman territories between the two powers, with the southern Levant assigned to Britain. In 1920, the British appointed a pro-Zionist high commissioner of the region and promoted Jewish immigration there. This act enflamed tensions between the new settlers and some Arab locals, resulting in riots that grew after the League of Nations (an international organization which was the precursor to the United Nations, or UN) recognized the British Mandate for Palestine in 1922.

The growing Jewish community in the Mandate organized an assembly, schools, courts, a taxation system, trade unions, and militias in the 1920s and 1930s. A political group called the Labor Zionists had gained the most control and organized institutions around generally left-leaning collectivist principles. A splinter group of more radical activists, the Revisionist Zionists, also formed during this time. This group and its affiliated militia, the ***Irgun*** ("organization" – see p. 6 of *Political and Social Relations*),

advocated for violence against British officials and Arab communities to establish a Jewish homeland.

World War II (WWII): The Palestinian Mandate remained under British rule during WWII, fought between the Axis powers (Nazi Germany, Italy, and Japan) and the Allies (Britain, France, the US, and the Soviet Union, among others). As the British did not want to antagonize Arab communities, it limited Jewish migration to the region just as anti-Semitic violence was reaching an apex in territories under Axis control. In response, the *Irgun,* led by Menachem Begin and another radical splinter group, ***Lehi***, an acronym for ***Lohamei Herut Israel*** ("Fighters for the Freedom of Israel"), began a terror bombing campaign against the British.

As the Allies drew closer to victory in 1945, the full scope of Nazi violence against European Jews came into view during the Holocaust. This event is remembered for the largescale deportation of Europe's Jews to death, labor, and concentration camps and the murder of around 6 million Jews under Nazi rule, which gave added impetus for the need to create an autonomous Jewish homeland. Large quotas of Jewish refugees, many of whom were survivors of Nazi violence, began migrating to and settling in the British Mandate.

Independence

Faced with pressure to admit more Jews into the Mandate, while seeking to avoid antagonizing Arab communities, Britain submitted the issue of the Mandate's future to the UN. In 1947, the UN voted to partition the territory into separate Jewish and Arab states – Israel and the Palestinian Territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with Jerusalem governed by an international regime. Soon after, armed skirmishes engulfed the region, as Palestinian Arab forces fought Zionist militias. Violence, particularly by the *Irgun*, surged against Arab civilians. With little political will to stay in the region, the last British High Commissioner left the Mandate on May 14, 1948. The same day, David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister (PM), proclaimed the foundation of the State of Israel.

The Arab-Israeli War

Upon the declaration of Israeli independence, members of the Arab League (Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Iraq) attacked Israel. Israeli troops, many of whom had fought under British command or as members of Zionist militias, outmaneuvered their enemies. Over several months, Israel brokered ceasefires with its neighbors and secured territory originally designated for the Palestinian state. Despite the quick Israeli victory, the war caused about 6,000 casualties. Political scientists and historians refer to the *de facto* border that resulted from this conflict as the "Green Line" of 1949 (see p. 2 of *Political and Social Relations*).

The war profoundly affected the new country. Israel's defeated neighbors rapidly enacted an economic embargo against it. Meanwhile, some 600-750,000 Palestinians fled their homes, often by force, in territory that had fallen to Israeli control. The event became known to Palestinians as the ***nakba*** (catastrophe) and created a largescale refugee crisis in the region. Israel's refusal to allow many of these communities, which accounted for some 80% of Palestinians, to live on their land, had far-reaching implications that persist today. Many Palestinians still live in UN-administered refugee camps first created during this period.

State Consolidation

Faced with hostile neighbors and tasked with consolidating authority over a diverse populace, PM Ben-Gurion of the ***Mapai*** (Labor Party), set out to create the foundation for a new state. He folded the *Irgun* militias into the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) and positioned himself as a centrist to maintain a large coalition. Likewise, the PM reached out to the Orthodox Jewish community (see p. 6-7 of *Religion and Spirituality)*, which supported his defense policies in exchange for control of Jewish religious courts (see p. 5 of *Political and Social Relations.*

In 1950, the Israeli ***Knesset*** (parliament – see p. 4 of *Political and Social Relations*) passed the Law of Return, which granted

Jews the right to settle in Israel, opening the doors to immigrants. Thousands of ***Ashkenazim*** (Jews from central and eastern Europe), and many ***Sephardim*** (Jews expelled from the Iberian Peninsula, who settled in the Middle East and North Africa) and ***Mizrahim*** (Jews who remained in the Middle East and North Africa) settled in Israel (see p. 6 of *Religion and Spirituality*).

Regional Conflicts

The decades after Israel's independence were marked by repeated confrontations with Egypt and Syria in particular.

Suez Crisis: In 1956, Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized the strategic Suez Canal southwest of Israel, which angered the British and French, who had been controlling the waterway. The Europeans coordinated with Israel to launch a preemptive attack on Egypt, capturing the canal and swaths of the Sinai Desert. The move angered the US and Soviet Union, which forced the invading troops to retreat in favor of UN peacekeepers. The incident improved Israeli relations with France, which became a major source of weaponry for the IDF and helped establish the country's nuclear program, the existence of which the Israeli government has never confirmed.

Six-Day War: In May 1967, Egypt, Syria, and Jordan launched another offensive, which resulted in a quick and decisive Israeli win. The IDF occupied Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, Gaza, and Syria's Golan Heights (see p. 2 of *Political and Social Relations*), along with the West Bank and East Jerusalem, which were formerly under Jordanian control. While to Israel the reunification of Jerusalem was a national triumph, this occupation drew scorn from the UN, which passed a resolution calling for its withdrawal from the occupied territories. However, Israel's military success helped it strengthen bonds with the US (see p. 10 of *Political and Social Relations*), which became a critical arms supplier to the IDF after France imposed an arms embargo on Israel.

Yom Kippur War: In 1973, Egypt and Syria launched another coordinated attack on Israel. Repeated military conflicts had overextended the IDF, which required US military assistance to win the war. In response to the US-Israeli collaboration, several petroleum-producing Arab countries imposed an oil embargo on the US and Israel, hurting both nations' economies. While the US negotiated a ceasefire, the conflict left Israel weakened and heavily indebted to the US from large arms purchases.

Political and Regional Shifts

Some 30 years of repeated military confrontations coincided with a steady erosion of public support for the *Mapai*. In the 1977 elections, the nationalist ***Likud*** (Consolidation Party – see p. 6 of *Political and Social Relations*) won the most seats in the *Knesset*. Menachem Begin, former *Irgun* chief, became Israel's new PM and introduced a series of policy changes. Notably, the government encouraged Israelis to settle illegally in the West Bank and Gaza to strengthen Israel's territorial claims and hamper the development of a consolidated Palestinian entity.

Conflict also emerged in Lebanon, north of Israel. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO – a political group led by Yasser Arafat that claimed to represent the Palestinian people), which Jordan expelled in the early 1970s, largely resettled in southern Lebanon and became a central player in that country's civil war. By 1976, Syria had invaded a significant portion of Lebanon, while the PLO used its stronghold there to launch attacks into Israel. In response, Israel invaded southern Lebanon in 1978.

Meanwhile, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat had begun exploring the possibility of establishing diplomatic relations with Israel, and in 1977, became the first Arab leader to undertake an official visit there. In 1979, US President Jimmy Carter helped finalize the Camp David Accords, which officially normalized relations between Israel and Egypt.

Difficulties on Many Fronts

At the turn of the decade, Israel faced difficulties on several fronts. In October 1981, radical Islamist Egyptian soldiers assassinated Sadat, jeopardizing the improved Egyptian-Israeli relations. Likewise, the IDF defied Begin's orders to limit military action in Lebanon, advancing deep into the country to dislodge the PLO, engaging with the Syrian Air Force, and shelling Beirut (Lebanon's capital) in 1982. In response, massive protests broke out in Israel, causing Begin to resign in 1983.

Meanwhile, Israel's economy was plagued by hyperinflation and low growth. The unsteady economy, combined with the situation in Lebanon, required the creation of a unity government between *Likud* and *Mapai*. For 25 months, *Mapai*'s Shimon Peres led the joint government and largely withdrew from Lebanon, except for a security region mostly controlled by pro-Israel militias. *Likud*'s Yitzhak Shamir then became PM and sustained the policies to stabilize the economy (see p. 3 of *Economics and Resources*).

However, Shamir continued supporting illegal settlements in the West Bank, which angered Palestinians. In 1987, Palestinians revolted in an ***intifada*** ("shaking off" or popular uprising), with confrontations rapidly growing in violence and intensity. Though what is known as the first *intifada* has no official end date, most casualties occurred between 1988-94. A human rights group estimates some 1,400 Palestinians and 270 Israelis died in the conflict.

Peace Talks

In 1992, after *Mapai* won control of the government, the new PM Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres, then Foreign Affairs Minister, began secret negotiations with the PLO, which denounced terrorism and agreed to recognize Israel's right to exist. With the help of Norwegian and US diplomats, both parties signed a framework for talks in 1993. This agreement and later negotiations were known as the Oslo I Accords, which also formed the Palestinian Authority (see p. 13 of *Political and Social Relations*).

While some Israelis welcomed the negotiations, many members of *Likud,* Israeli settlers in the West Bank and Gaza, and ***Hamas***, a militant Islamist group founded during the *intifada* that had gained popularity in Palestine, were skeptical.

Despite an economic boom, Rabin was politically weak when he won the Nobel Peace Prize with Peres and Arafat in 1994. At a 1995 rally to bolster support for a second round of agreements known as Oslo II, a Jewish extremist assassinated Rabin. Peres, his successor, sought to boost support for the accords and withdrew the IDF from most Palestinian cities. Nevertheless, Arafat's inability to control ongoing *Hamas* attacks led to a breakdown in relations. Hopes of implementing the Oslo Accords collapsed when a final round of talks failed in 2000. Soon afterwards, *Likud* leader Ariel Sharon visited the Temple Mount to bolster claims of Israeli control of the holy site, sparking a second *intifada*.

Renewed Conflict

Sharon won the election amidst the *intifada* to become PM. Israel reoccupied many areas that the IDF had ceded to the PLO and sent tanks to confine Arafat to house arrest. The violence abated somewhat after Arafat died in 2004 and the withdrawal of Israeli troops along with some 8,600 illegal settlers from Gaza in 2005. However, rocket fire from Gaza did not cease as agreed. In response to the uprising, Sharon began to wall-off the West Bank. Estimates suggest some 1,000 Israelis and 4,700 Palestinians died in the *intifada*.

In 2006, Sharon's successor, Ehud Olmert, promised to withdraw from much of the West Bank. However, these plans were complicated when *Hamas* fighters occupied Gaza in 2007. In response, Israel enacted sanctions on Gaza, which intensified in 2008, when Israel sealed its borders with the territory. This blockade, which human rights groups claim violates the Geneva Convention, has remained in place. In late 2008, to halt *Hamas* rocket attacks, the IDF launched Operation Cast Lead, which lasted a month and largely destroyed Gaza's infrastructure.

Additionally, Israel and Lebanon had renewed hostilities in 2006, after ***Hezbollah*** (a radical Shi'i militia group based in Lebanon and backed by Iran) kidnapped two IDF soldiers and launched rockets into the country. In response, the IDF initiated a bombing campaign of southern Lebanon. In total, a human rights group estimates that about 55 Israelis and some 1,100 Lebanese died in the conflict. Israel's bombing campaign, which displaced an estimated 1 million people, drew international condemnation.

The Netanyahu Era

In 2009, *Likud* leader Benjamin "Bibi" Netanyahu was elected PM. In addition to the recurring conflict with *Hamas*, Netanyahu's coalition of right-wing parties faced significant domestic issues. Rising living costs and income inequality had led to widespread discontent, which emerged into a series of largescale protests in 2011 (see p. 3 of *Economics and Resources*). Likewise, controversial policies, such as the proposed drafting of ***Haredim*** (ultra-Orthodox Jews – see p. 7 of *Religion and Spirituality*) into the IDF, complicated the PM's relationship with a few of Israel's religious parties.

In 2011, with US funding and support, the IDF developed the "Iron Dome" air defense system, largely neutralizing the threat of projectiles fired from Gaza. However, repeated military clashes occurred during successive Netanyahu governments in 2012, 2014, and 2018. The 2014 conflict was the most violent, claiming an estimated 70 Israeli and 2,100 Palestinian lives.

By November 2016, Netanyahu had become the longest-serving PM in Israeli history. Despite his popularity among *Likud* members, Israeli police recommended filing corruption charges against him in 2018. Nevertheless, in 2019 Netanyahu won a fifth term before Israel's prosecutor general announced his intent to charge him with several crimes. Consequently, the PM was unable to form a governing coalition, and repeated failures to

establish a government brought Israelis to the polls three times between September 2019-March 2021.

Bibi Ousted: In May 2021, tensions due to the Israeli expulsion of Palestinian families from their homes in Jerusalem devolved into open conflict, causing the deaths of some 240 Palestinians and 12 Israelis. Faced with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic (see p. 6 of *Sustenance and Health*) and a spate of violence, a broad coalition of parties united to oust Netanyahu in June 2021. Yair Lapid became acting PM in July 2022 and served until Netanyahu was again elected as PM in November 2022.

Myth Overview

In contrast to history, which is supposed to be an objective record of the past based on verifiable facts, myths embody a culture's values and often explain the origins of humans and the natural world. Myths are important because they provide a sense of unique heritage and identity. Israelis have adapted myths and folklore from religious texts, as well as from the multiple regions where the Jewish *diaspora* communities lived prior to their arrival in Israel.

The Story of *Hanukkah*: The festival of *Hanukkah* (see p. 2 of *Religion and Spirituality*) dates to the Seleucid era. After the Greek invaders desecrated the Second Temple in Jerusalem, the local population joined the Maccabean Revolt in 167 BC. When the Jews reclaimed the Temple, they purified the holy place and rededicated its altar. However, there was only enough oil to burn in the Temple's ***menorah*** (branched candelabra) for a single night. Religious texts attribute a miracle to the event, claiming the oil burned for 8 nights, long enough to procure more consecrated oil. Today, Israeli Jews celebrate *Hanukkah* in late November or December, depending on the Jewish calendar (see p. 2 of *Time and Space*), by lighting candles and consuming fried food.

2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

Official Name
State of Israel
Medinat Yisra'el
מְדִינַת יִשְׂרָאֵל (Hebrew)

Political Borders
Lebanon: 50 mi
Syria: 52 mi
Jordan: 203 mi
West Bank: 205 mi
Egypt: 129 mi
Gaza Strip: 37 mi
Coastline: 170 mi

Capital
Jerusalem (limited recognition)

Demographics
As of 2023, Israel's population of nearly 9.1 million is growing at a rate of about 1.43% per year. Population density is highest in western, coastal, and central regions. The southern desert region remains sparsely populated, except in Eilat, Israel's southernmost city.

Flag
Adopted in 1948, the flag consists of a centered white and blue hexagram (six-pointed star) known as the ***Magen David*** (Star of David) and two horizontal blue bands of equal width near the top and bottom edges. The design and colors represent the ***tallit*** (Jewish prayer shawl). Notably, the *Magen David* is a Jewish symbol dating back to medieval times.

Geography
Located in a region of Western Asia called the Levant, Israel borders Lebanon to the north, Syria, the West Bank, and Jordan

to the east, the Red Sea to the south, Egypt to the southwest, and Gaza and the Mediterranean Sea to the west. Israel's total land area is about 8,300 sq mi, slightly larger than the size of New Jersey.

During the Six-Day War in 1967 (see p. 10 of *History and Myth*), Israel occupied the Golan Heights and East Jerusalem from Syria and Jordan, respectively. Israel later annexed these areas, which it and the US recognize as Israeli, an act the United Nations (UN) and most other countries condemn. The only universally recognized Israeli borders are with Egypt and Jordan, following peace agreements in 1979 and 1994, respectively. Israel has no official border with neighboring Gaza, the West Bank, Syria, and Lebanon. Today, Israel occupies East Jerusalem, part of the West Bank (see p. 10 of *History and Myth*), and the Golan Heights, while continuing to build settlements there. Observers consider the settlements illegal and in violation of an internationally recognized armistice agreement known as the Green Line of 1949 or pre-1967 border (see p. 9 of *History and Myth*).

Israel is geographically diverse, with a long coastal plain, hill regions in northern and central areas, the Negev Desert in the South, and the Jordan Rift Valley that runs the length of Israel along its eastern border. Israel's largest freshwater lake is the Sea of Galilee, also known as Lake Tiberias, in the Northeast. Israel shares the world's second saltiest body of water, the Dead Sea (which is Israel's lowest point at 1,414 ft below sea level) with Jordan and the West Bank. The Jordan River runs along Israel's borders with Syria, Jordan, and the West Bank, and is its longest river at 156 mi. The highest point is ***Mitzpe Shlagim*** ("Snow Lookout") at Mt. Hermon (7,297 ft) in the Golan Heights.

Climate

Located in the Mediterranean climatic zone that stretches westward toward the Atlantic Ocean, most of Israel experiences two seasons, typically hot and dry summers and mild winters. Average temperatures in the coastal areas range from 84°F in

the summer to 61°F in winter. Eilat, located along the Red Sea coast, has a similar climate to the Negev Desert with a high of 114°F in the summer and low of 70°F in the winter. Mountainous areas in the North experience on average 44 in of rain per year, usually in the winter. The 'Arava Valley south of the Dead Sea, is the country's driest region, with average annual rainfall of just 1 in.

Natural Hazards

Israel is vulnerable to periodic earthquakes, sinkholes, and droughts. ***Sharav*** (large dust storms) sometimes occur in spring and summer. Droughts cause damage to Israel's water supply and agriculture. In 2022, two earthquakes occurred in northern Israel and damaged about 60 homes.

Environmental Issues

Limited natural freshwater resources and arable land, desertification, air pollution from industrial and vehicle emissions, groundwater pollution from industrial and domestic waste, chemical fertilizers, and pesticides cause significant environmental damage. The Israeli government has addressed many of these issues. In 2008, it passed the Clear Air Act, which regulated air pollution by monitoring Israeli companies, resulting in a reduction of emissions. Water scarcity is still a leading issue, though Israel operates desalinization plants to convert sea water into drinking water and recycles nearly 90% of wastewater. Additionally, the Dead Sea is shrinking at an alarming rate, partly due to natural evaporation and a lack of freshwater sources.

Government

Israel is a parliamentary democracy. The country divides into the 6 districts (***mehoz***) of Central, Haifa, Jerusalem, Northern, Southern, and Tel Aviv, and 15 subdistricts. Local government consists of municipalities, local councils for smaller settlements, and regional rural councils. Israel holds local elections every 5 years. The Ministry of Interior approves bylaws and budgets.

Israel does not have a written constitution. Instead, the Israeli government was founded on "basic laws" that hold constitutional status and define state principles. Today, Israel's 14 basic laws

cover the values of the state, define systems of government such as the electoral system, and outline power divisions between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches.

Executive Branch

The President is head-of-state, mainly serving in a ceremonial function, and has no veto power. The President's primary responsibility is selecting an elected parliamentary member to form a new government and subsequently serve as Prime Minister (PM). Elected by ***Knesset*** (Parliament) majority vote, the President serves a single 7-year term. In 2021, Yitzak Herzog was elected President of Israel.

Once appointed by the President, the PM must form a coalition of cabinet ministers (mainly consisting of *Knesset* members) within 28 days. If the PM fails to form a coalition, the President can extend the deadline by 14 days (see "Political Climate" below). The *Knesset* must then approve the coalition by a simple majority vote to officially form the government. The cabinet is responsible for administering internal and external affairs, such as security and foreign policy. Israel's current PM, Benjamin Netanyahu, took office in December 2022 and serves as head-of-government.

Nominated by the Defense Minister and approved by the cabinet for a 3-year term, the Chief of the General Staff serves as commander-in-chief of the Israel Defense Forces. The current Chief of the General Staff, Herzi Halevi, took office in 2023.

Legislative Branch

The *Knesset* is a single-chamber legislature with 120 members, who are elected for 4-year terms and operate through fixed meetings and 15 standing committees. The committees discuss and prepare bills and formulate recommendations on issues. Examples of committees include Economic Affairs, Foreign Affairs and Defense, Status Women and Gender Equality, and Immigration, Absorption and Diaspora Affairs. The public does

not directly elect *Knesset* members. Instead, political parties produce a list of general election candidates, who are elected by proportional representation.

Judicial Branch

Israel's judiciary consists of the Supreme Court, District Courts, and the Magistrates' Courts. Special national and regional labor, family, juvenile, military, and religious courts (see p. 4 of *Religion and Spirituality*) typically hear personal status cases like marriage and divorce disputes (see p. 3-4 of *Family and Kinship*).

The Supreme Court is the highest court of appeal and deals with matters of *Knesset* elections, disciplinary rulings of the Israel Bar Association, prisoners' petitions of District Courts, administrative detentions, and Civil Service Commission rulings. The Supreme Court also serves as the High Court of Justice, which handles judicial review of the other government branches. It has the authority to release persons wrongly detained or imprisoned, instruct the government and local authorities, and give orders to lower courts.

As of 2023, the Supreme Court has 15 justices, including the Court President (also known as the Chief Justice) and Deputy President, as well as two registrars. The Chief Justice appoints judges recommended by the Judicial Selection Committee, a special nine-member nominations committee comprising ministers, judges, lawyers, and *Knesset* members. Justices and committee members typically serve until the compulsory retirement age of 70-years-old.

The State Comptroller, elected by the *Knesset* in a secret ballot for a 7-year term, is responsible for implementing functions, notably auditing the property and finances of government ministries and local authorities. The State Comptroller also serves as the Ombudsman, a state official, who investigates complaints against government ministries, local authorities, and other public bodies subject by law to State Comptroller audits.

Political Climate

The Israeli political system is complex and volatile, partly due to its coalition system. If the President's first PM is unsuccessful in forming a government, he or she must appoint another. Forming a coalition often results in compromises among fragmented and diverse parties covering a wide range of religious, political, and ethnic identities. In 2021, setting term limits for the PM was a key element in the negotiations that formed the governing coalition, proposed in response to PM Benjamin Netanyahu's 15 years of service as PM, but the PM term limits bill failed to pass in 2023. Today, he is on trial for corruption (see p. 15 of *History and Myth*). All resident Israeli citizens ages 18 years or older can vote.

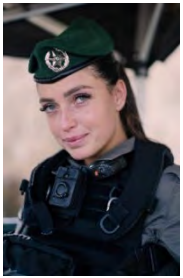
Today, three parties tend to dominate Israeli politics. The right-wing ***Likud*** ("Consolidation") Party has the most seats (23%), followed by the secular, centrist ***Yesh Atid*** ("There is a Future") Party (18%), and ***Shas***, a religious party representing the interests of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews (8%) (see p. 6 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Former PM Naftali Bennett lead the ***Yamina*** ("Rightwards") Party that supports establishing Israeli settlements and sovereignty in the West Bank. Many religious parties garner support based on ethnic group identities (see "Ethnic Groups" below). Several small parties, such as ***Ra'am*** (United Arab List) and Joint List, represent mostly Arab constituents.

Other notable parties across the religious, political, and ethnic spectrum include Blue and White, ***Mapai*** (Labor), United Torah Judaism, ***Yisrael Beiteinu*** ("Israel Our Home"), Religious Zionist, New Hope, and ***Meretz*** ("Vigor").

Defense

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) is a unified military force consisting of the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Paramilitary. It has a combined strength of 169,500 active-duty, 465,000 reserve, and 8,000 paramilitary troops. Upon turning 18, most Jewish

Israeli men and women serve 48 and 24 months, respectively. Despite some public and political criticism, Orthodox Jewish Israelis are exempt from service. While Druze men (see p. 7 of *Religion and Spirituality*) are required to serve, other Israeli Arabs have the option to volunteer. Israelis remain in the reserves until 40-years-old for men (longer for some specialists) and 38-years-old for women, or until they marry or get pregnant.



Israel is a major regional military power that exerts significant military influence over various allies and proxies. Military operations focus on maintaining domestic stability, territorial integrity, missile-defense and precision-strike capabilities, and improving capabilities in other areas such as cybersecurity.

Army: The Israeli Army, consisting of some 126,000 active-duty troops, organizes into 12 headquarters, a special forces brigade, 15 maneuver brigades and battalions (including armored, mechanized, reconnaissance, light, air maneuver, and other), and 10 combat support groups.

Navy: Comprising about 9,500 active-duty troops, the Navy includes 2 patrol squadrons, 3 flotillas, a naval control unit, and a special-forces unit.

Air Force: Consisting of 34,000 active-duty personnel, the Air Force consists of 14 fighter and fighter/ground attack squadrons in addition to an anti-submarine warfare, an electronic warfare, an airborne early warning and control, 3 tanker/transport, 3 training, 2 attack helicopter, 5 transport helicopter, and 5 UAV squadrons, 19 air defense batteries, 3 surface-to-surface missile squadrons, and a special forces wing commander.

Paramilitary: The Israeli Paramilitary primarily consists of some 8,000 border police.

Iron Dome: In 2011, Israel and the US developed the Iron Dome air defense system (see p. 14 of *History and Myth*) that intercepts about 90% of incoming short-range rockets, mostly from militant groups in Gaza (see “Security Issues” below).

Israeli Air Force Rank Insignia

Lieutenant General

Major General

Brigadier General

Colonel

Lieutenant Colonel

Major

Captain

First Lieutenant

Second Lieutenant

Brevet Captain

Brevet First Lieutenant

Chief Warrant Officer

Command Sergeant Major

Sergeant Major

Master Sergeant

Sergeant First Class

Regular Rank

Special Combat Rank

Staff Sergeant

Regular Rank

Special Combat Rank

Sergeant

Regular Rank

Special Combat Rank

Corporal

Foreign Relations

Historically, Israel has primarily aligned itself with the US and European Union (EU) countries. It has been a UN member since 1949 and partner of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a political and military alliance of 30 nations that promotes its members' security through collective defense for over 20 years. Israel cooperates with the US, EU, and NATO in areas of shared interest such as defense and climate change, and is an active participant in NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue.

Israel focuses on defending its existence as a Jewish state and asserts its self-proclaimed borders, often in violation of international law. Israel disregarded the Green Line when constructing the Separation Wall in 2002, citing terrorism during the height of the second ***intifada*** ("shaking off" or popular uprising–see p. 13 of *History and Myth*). About 85% of the Wall is in the West Bank.

While the wall has reduced deaths from suicide and terror attacks, Israel has evicted families, destroyed their houses, and occupied disputed UN-designated Palestinian land since 1967. Today, it still builds settlements in disputed land over the Green Line in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, adversely affecting relations with many countries. As of 2022, Israel had approved plans for some 3,500 new housing units in settlements in East Jerusalem, which is illegal under the International Criminal Court's Rome Statute. The UN estimates about 700,000 Israeli settlers live in illegal settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank.

Since before declaring independence in 1948 (see p. 8 of *History and Myth*), Israel has been surrounded by countries that do not recognize its legitimacy. Today, six Arab countries have diplomatic relations with Israel. In 2020, Israel signed the Abraham Accords, formally establishing diplomatic relations with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco.

Although most countries in the Middle East do not formally recognize Israel, some, such as Oman, have unofficial trade agreements with the country. Today, Israel pursues a somewhat interventionist foreign policy in regional conflicts. For example, Israel is an active participant in the Syrian Civil War, fighting alongside US forces in opposition to Syria's Bashar al-Assad regime and its allies (see "Relations with Iran" below).

Relations with the US: In 1948, the US was the first country to recognize Israel. Today, the US maintains close diplomatic ties and interest in protecting Israeli security. While the US has historically been involved in negotiations between Israel and Palestine (see p. 11 of *History and Myth*), it has not hosted direct talks for several years. Most recently, the US sponsored the Abraham Accords between Israel and Arab countries.

In 2017, US President Donald Trump recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital, although 128 UN members voted in favor of adopting a resolution asking states not to recognize it. In response, the US relocated part of its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in 2018 and canceled funding for the UN agency that provides Palestinian refugees aid, sparking protests in Israel, Palestine, and abroad. The US also released a "Peace to Prosperity" plan in 2020, supporting the future annexation of settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. However, US President Joseph Biden has opposed the expansion of these settlements and has not implemented the plan. In 2021, President Biden and then-PM Bennett met, confirming shared regional interests, notably ensuring Iran never develops a nuclear weapon.

The US provides financial support for Israeli security and missile defense (see p. 6 of *Economics and Resources*). Israel and the US participate in joint military exercises, research, weapons development, and counterterrorism dialogues. They also share strong economic and commercial ties, notably bilateral treaties

and agreements such as the 1985 US-Israel Free Trade Agreement that has helped make the US Israel's largest trading partner.

Relations with Turkey: In 1949, Turkey was the first Muslim-majority country to form diplomatic relations with Israel. However, Israel-Turkey relations have deteriorated recently due to Turkey's condemnation of Israel's policies toward Palestinians, notably the illegal settlements and occupation of East Jerusalem. Also, Israel objects to Turkey giving passports to members of ***Hamas*** (a militant Palestinian nationalist and Islamist movement, which the US has considered a terrorist group since 1997). Despite tense diplomatic relations, Israel and Turkey share extensive commercial ties.

Relations with Iran: Following its 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran severed ties with Israel. Today, Iran and Israel describe each other as strategic threats. Ongoing hostility is partially due to Iran's political, financial, and military support of Islamist groups like ***Hezbollah*** (a radical Shi'i militia group based in Lebanon and backed by Iran), Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and *Hamas*, which aim to destroy Israel. In 2023, these terrorist groups were responsible for deadly attacks against Israel originating in Gaza and the West Bank and against Israeli civilians in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula.

Israel and Iran mostly fight in proxy wars – conflicts between countries that provide weapons, finances, and training support with minimal direct fighting – notably, the Syrian Civil War. While Iran supports Syria's Bashar al-Assad regime with forces and assisting pro-government militias, Israel has sent fighter jets to target Iran's military sites in Syria. Israel persistently threatens airstrikes on Iran's nuclear facilities. In 2021, Israel's Defense Minister warned he was prepared to strike Iran after it executed a fatal drone strike on an oil tanker managed by an Israeli firm.

Israel and Iran also engage in cyberattacks. In 2020, Israel retaliated against Iran's failed cyberattack on an Israeli water facility and disrupted operations at Bandar Abbas port on the Strait of Hormuz. In late 2021, Israel attacked Iran's fuel distribution system, and Iran attacked a major Israeli medical facility and a popular LGBTQ dating site. While many Iranians temporarily lost access to fuel, some Israelis had intimate data stolen and uploaded onto social media.

Security Issues

Relations with *Hamas*: In 2007, *Hamas* took control of Gaza, one of the two Palestinian Territories, between Israel and Egypt that Egypt once controlled (see p. 13 of *History and Myth*). In response, Israel declared Gaza a hostile entity and proceeded to approve sanctions, such as power cuts, border closures, and heavily restricted imports, on the territory. After an unsuccessful truce in 2008, fighting escalated as *Hamas* fired rockets into Israel (see p. 14 of *History and Myth*), which responded by mounting air and ground strikes against Gaza. After about 3 weeks of hostilities, Israel and *Hamas* declared a cease-fire. Nevertheless, tensions between Israel and *Hamas* persist. While Israel strikes *Hamas* targets, causing damage to infrastructure and displacing and killing civilians, *Hamas* launches rocket attacks into Israeli territory.

In 2021, tensions in East Jerusalem escalated when Palestinian protests flared after several Palestinian families in Sheikh Jarrah, a Palestinian-majority area, filed an appeal against their forced displacement. Clashes heightened as Israeli police stormed al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem's Old City (see p. 15 of *History and Myth*). *Hamas* launched hundreds of rockets into Jerusalem and southern and central Israel. Israel promptly bombarded Gaza with air strikes against infrastructure, *Hamas* rocket launchers and tunnels, residential buildings, media headquarters, and refugee facilities. In October 2023, Hamas again attacked Israel killing at least 1,200. Israel, then declared war.

Relations with the Palestinian Authority (PA): Since the Oslo I Accords led to its founding (see p. 12 of *History and Myth*), the PA, the West Bank's governing body, has largely replaced the Palestine Liberation Organization (see p. 11 of *History and Myth*), as Palestine's administration. Although most peace efforts have failed because conflicts have resulted in heightened periods of political and social tension, informal talks between Israel and the PA have resulted in some low-level agreements.

In late 2021, PA President Mahmoud Abbas attended his first formal meeting with Israeli representatives since 2010. He met Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz to discuss security and civil matters like easing the entry of Palestinian businesspeople into Israel. Despite some agreement, then-PM Bennett was opposed to renewed peace negotiations and refused to meet with President Abbas.

Ethnic Groups

As of 2020, about 74% of Israel's population identifies as Jewish, 21% Arab, and 5% other. Although official data does not distinguish between Israel's various Jewish communities, cultural and ethnic groups from Jewish diasporas, such as the ***Ashkenazim***, ***Sephardim***, ***Mizrahim***, and Ethiopian Jews maintain unique cultures and traditions (see p. 5-6 of *Religion and Spirituality*).

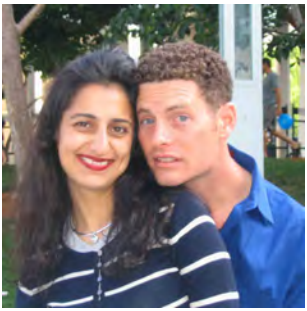
Israeli Arabs are primarily Palestinians, who remained in Israel after wars in 1948 and 1967 (see p. 9-10 of *History and Myth*). Most Israeli Arabs are Sunni Muslims (see p. 7 of *Religion and Spirituality*), though some are Shi'i Muslims or Christians. Israeli Arab communities concentrate in northern Israel, near the Galilee Sea, the coastal city of Haifa, and in Jerusalem.

Druze (see p. 7 of *Religion and Spirituality*), an Arabic speaking minority with their own culture and religious community, primarily live in the North. Bedouin, traditionally nomadic people, who belong to some 30 different tribes, live in desert communities primarily in the South (see p. 1 of *Family and Kinship*).

Social Relations

Israeli society divides along religious-secular, male-female, and rich-poor lines. Israel's economic inequalities create deep social cleavages (see p. 4 of *Economics and Resources*), which often correlate with divisions along ethnic and religious lines.

Historically, Ashkenazi Jews were the dominant ethnic group, which had greater access to resources, political power, and socioeconomic opportunities compared to Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews. Although social integration continues to improve among Israel's Jewish communities, Ethiopian Jews typically face the most discrimination. In 2015, thousands of Israelis protested the unprovoked police beating of an Ethiopian Jewish soldier and its generally disproportionate harassment of Ethiopian Israelis. Further, about half of Ethiopian Jews live below the poverty line.



Despite these divisions, IDF service and the resultant friendships build a nationwide social bond among many Israeli youth. In addition, social networks developed during service often create social and economic opportunities. Favoritism in business, government, and social enterprises sometimes results from IDF service. Veterans are eligible for benefits such as discounted building permits and financial assistance for education. Most Israeli Arabs who do not serve, as well as Druze, and to a lesser extent, Jewish Israeli women, do not benefit from the same fraternal social networks that many Jewish Israeli men develop, which contributes to economic and social inequalities.

Like in the US, wealth in Israel tends to concentrate in the top 1% of the population. Poverty has grown in recent years, particularly among Israeli Arabs and ultra-Orthodox Jews (see p. 7 of *Religion and Spirituality*), partly due to their relative lack of social integration. As of 2021, about 49% of the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community lives below the poverty line.

Israeli Arabs typically have limited access to education, services, and jobs and are underrepresented in politics. For decades, Israel banned or sidelined Arab political parties, while permitting representation only by the Arab-Jewish Communist Party. Today, four Arab parties comprise the Joint List, which holds five *Knesset* seats as of late2022. Some Israeli leaders, like former PM Netanyahu, have portrayed Israeli Arab citizens as a security threat and instigated civil unrest, exacerbating discrimination against and high crime rates among the Israeli Arab population. In 2018, Israel passed the nation-state law declaring it the nation-state of the Jewish people and removing Arabic as an official language (see p. 2 of *Language and Communication*), further alienating Israeli Arabs from society.

Following Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem during the Six-Day War, Israel offered Palestinians there Israeli citizenship. Most declined and were instead given permanent resident status. Today, some 90% of the 330,000 Palestinians living in East Jerusalem hold permanent resident status, allowing them to access Israeli health and social services, and live, work, and travel in Israel. However, they cannot vote in national elections and can lose their residency if the Ministry of Interior deems the city no longer their primary residence. Recently, a surge of interest among Arab residents in applying for Israeli citizenship has developed, reaching some 20,000 applications in 2020.

Despite growing Arab residents' interest in Israeli citizenship and other developments like Israeli Arab participation in the technology subsector and higher education (see p. 4-5 of *Economics and Resources* and p. 5 of *Learning and Knowledge*), prominent human rights groups have recently called Israel an apartheid state. These groups highlight social stigmas and Israeli discrimination against Arabs in Israel and Palestine. The IDF often conducts overnight raids in the West Bank, arresting suspected Palestinians of planning attacks on Israel, sometimes holding them in detention without a charge or trial for months. In early 2022, Israel arrested 20 individuals in this way.

3. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

Overview

In 2022, Israel's population was 74% Jewish, 18% Muslim, 2% Christian, 2% Druze, and 4% other religious minorities. Israel's Jews divide into numerous groups based on both their ethnic ancestry (Ashkenazi, Sephardic, Mizrahi, and Ethiopian) and religiosity (Hiloni, Masorti, Dati, and Haredi) (see "Heritage" and "Secularity" below). Because Israel is constitutionally a Jewish state, Judaism is highly influential in government, politics, society, and culture. Historically, Israel is known as "the Holy Land" because of its central role in the founding of Judaism and Christianity and location of many Islamic holy sites.

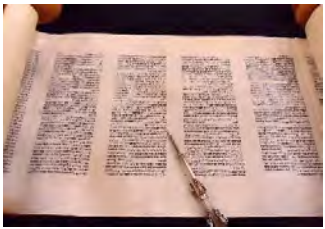
Early Religion

The land of present-day Israel was home to some of the world's oldest recorded human cultures (see p. 1 of *History and Myth*). As early as 9000 BC, regional inhabitants demonstrated religious beliefs through the ritualistic burial of their dead with their personal belongings in cemeteries. These practices became more advanced between 4000-2000 BC and eventually incorporated more complex rituals that made use of copper and ivory talismans.

Judaism

Biblical sources state that Judaism began in ancient Israel, then known as Canaan (see p. 1 of *History and Myth*), with the arrival of Abraham from Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq) in the 2nd millennia BC. Abraham and his descendants, who became the Israelites, practiced monotheistic worship of ***Yahweh*** (God). According to the Bible, the Israelites then traveled to Egypt and were enslaved before eventually being freed and returning to Canaan under the leadership of Moses (an event that the Jewish holiday Passover commemorates – see p. 2 of *Time and Space*). They later established the Biblical kingdom of the Israelites.

Though historians and archeologists debate the factuality of the Biblical narrative, there is a consensus that Judaism emerged in Canaan in the 12th century BC during the formation of Israelite tribes, who displaced the native Canaanites (see p. 2 of *History and Myth*). In 1020 BC, King Saul founded the Kingdom of Israel, where Judaism was the state religion. During this time, Judaism's primary text, the ***Torah***, was written. The *Torah* comprises the first five books of the Bible's Old Testament and is the foundation of the Jewish faith and laws. In Jewish tradition, the *Torah* reveals God's teachings to mankind.



Under the Kingdom of Israel, Judaism flourished, and the Israelites built the First Temple (see p. 2 of *History and Myth*). In 722 BC, the Assyrians (see p. 2 of *History and Myth*) captured the Kingdom, taking many Jews prisoner, as others fled the region. These events marked the beginning of the ***diaspora***, or scattering and migration of Jews worldwide. In 587, the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem, and the Jews dispersed or were taken to Babylon (present-day Iraq), reinforcing the *diaspora*. Despite these hardships, many Jews kept their beliefs. In 538, the Persian Achaemenids beat the Babylonians and let the Jews return to their homeland, where they built the Second Temple (see p. 3 of *History and Myth*).

Though the region was under the control or influence of different empires over the next 400 years, ***kohanim*** (Jewish priests) largely controlled local affairs and governed according to Jewish laws. This era was not always peaceful, and in the 2nd century BC, Jews effectively revolted against the Seleucid Greeks and retook the rebuilt Second Temple, an event Jews celebrate as ***Hanukkah*** (see p. 3 of *History and Myth*). The Romans ruled the region in the 1st century BC. When the Jews revolted, the Romans defeated and banished them from Jerusalem. Many Jews fled or were taken prisoner and sent across the empire.

Between the 3rd-6th centuries AD, ***rabbis*** (Jewish scholars or teachers) compiled the ***Talmud***, the text comprising laws based

on interpretations of the *Torah*. However, as Islam rapidly gained converts in the region, Arab warriors captured Jerusalem in 638 (see p. 4 of *History and Myth*). Over the next 1,500 years, Jews eventually became a minority in the region.

In the 1880s, European Jews linked with the Zionist movement fled persecution in Europe and established settlements in the Ottoman province of Palestine (see p. 6 of *History and Myth*) in an era known as New ***Yishuv*** (settlement). These settlements grew quickly through the early 1900s and further after World War II and the establishment of Israel as a home for Jews in 1948 (see p. 8 of *History and Myth*). Concurrently, thousands of Jewish immigrants arrived from Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. In Israel, Jews re-established various Jewish institutions, and Judaism quickly became both the dominant religion and largest influence in Israeli society.

Christianity

Christianity originated in Roman Judea after Jesus Christ was born. Christians believe Jesus is the son of God and the ***Messiah***, the savior foretold in earlier Jewish prophesies. Jesus lived and preached in Jerusalem, gathering a large following of disciples before his arrest and crucifixion by the Romans around 30 AD. Christians believe Jesus was then resurrected and rose to heaven. The life events and teachings of Jesus and his disciples form the Bible's New Testament. Although the Romans outlawed Christianity, it slowly spread in the region over subsequent centuries. In 313, Christianity gained legal status, and Roman converts built many churches in Judea. In 380, Christianity became the Roman Empire's state religion and was the dominant one in Judea until the mid-7th century arrival of Islam. The Muslim empires that conquered the region harshly persecuted Christians and destroyed or converted many churches to mosques.

Beginning around 1091, Christians regained control of the region during the Crusades (see p. 5 of *History and Myth*), retook

Jerusalem by 1100, and established the Kingdom of Jerusalem as a Christian state. Muslim and Christian forces fought for nearly 200 years before the Muslims finally ousted the last Christian strongholds in 1291. During the subsequent 600 years, Christians became a minority, though many still practiced their faith freely. During the 19th-century rise of Zionism, some Christians opposed Jewish migration to the region. While Jewish Israelis displaced some Palestinian Christians during the establishment of Israel in 1948, many remained in Israel.

Islam

After Islam spread to the region in the early 7th century, Jerusalem grew into a holy city of Islam, as Muslims believe the Prophet Muhammad rose to heaven there. In 661, the region became a province of the Umayyad dynasty, which promoted Islam (see p. 4 of *History and Myth*). The Umayyads built numerous mosques, notably the Dome of the Rock, and persecuted many non-Muslims. Many inhabitants converted to Islam or fled, though small Christian and Jewish communities persisted. Islamic thought and culture flourished, and Islam remained the dominate religion in the southern Levant until the establishment of Israel, when many Muslims fled or were forced out by Jewish Israelis (see p. 9 of *History and Myth*).

Religion Today

Although Israeli basic laws guarantee religious freedom and equal rights to adherents of all religions, Jewish laws and customs heavily influence government and society (see p. 6 of *Political and Social Relations*). Judaism's elevated status is most visible in the religious court system. Each Jewish ethnic group, Christians, and Muslims have separate courts with jurisdiction over marriage, burial, and other religious matters (see p. 5 of *Political and Social Relations* and p. 3-4 of *Family and Kinship*).

Israeli law places distinct requirements upon different religious groups. The Israeli military requires Jewish and Druze Israelis to serve but not Muslims or Christians (see p. 7 of *Political and*

Social Relations). In addition, any Jew may become an Israeli citizen under the 1950 Law of Return. In practice, anyone who has at least one Jewish grandparent or who converts to Judaism under the supervision of a Jewish court is entitled to Israeli citizenship and can settle in the country.

Israeli public services also operate according to Jewish law. For example, public transportation shuts down during ***Shabbat***, also known as the Sabbath, the Jewish period of rest and prayer that lasts from sunset Friday-sunset Saturday (see p. 1 of *Time and Space*). In addition, Jewish holidays, many of which are national holidays, are widely celebrated (see p. 2 of *Time and Space*).

Judaism

Heritage: As of 2023, some 6.9 million Jews live in Israel. Most Jewish Israelis descend from immigrants who arrived after 1948, bringing differing religious customs from their home regions and divide into four main groups.

Ashkenazi Jews (***Ashkenazim***) descend from Jews who settled in the German Rhineland before most migrated to Central and Eastern Europe (see p. 13-14 of *Political and Social Relations*). They are distinguished by their use of chanting and liturgy during worship, Hebrew pronunciation, and use of Yiddish. This language, which combines Hebrew and Medieval German, developed from the belief that Jews should reserve Hebrew for religious purposes (see p. 2 of *Language and Communication*). Today, few Ashkenazi Jews speak Yiddish in daily life.

Sephardic Jews (***Sephardim***) are the descendants of the Jews expelled from the Iberian Peninsula in 1492 and settled in North Africa and the Middle East. Some Sephardic Jews speak Ladino, an endangered language that combines Hebrew and Spanish. They are distinguished by their differing holiday rituals, culinary customs, and prayers. Sephardic Jews tend to be conservative and observant of Jewish religious laws.

Mizrahi Jews (***Mizrahim***) descend from the Jews whose ancestors remained in the Middle East and North Africa. Although Mizrahi and Sephardic customs are similar, they have differing prayer traditions and music during services.

Israel is home to around 160,000 Ethiopian Jews, ***Beta Israel*** ("House of Israel") or ***Falashas*** ("landless" or "wanderers," a term considered derogatory and no longer preferred), most of whom immigrated to Israel in the 1980s. Many also came in 1991 through Israeli and US operations that evacuated Jews from Ethiopia and refugee camps in Sudan. Ethiopian Jews are distinguished by their oral traditions, distinct texts, leadership structures, and most do not follow the *Talmud*.

Secularity: Most Jewish Israelis identify with one of four groups separated by their level of devoutness and observance of Jewish religious practices. Broadly, these groups divide into Orthodox Jews, who remain observant of Jewish laws in daily life, and secular Jews, who do not. The tension between groups over the role of Jewish laws in Israeli society is a major divisive political and social issue (see p. 15 of *Political and Social Relations*).

The largest group is Hiloni Jews (***Hilonim***), or secular Jews, who comprise about 49% of the Jewish population as of 2016. While many *Hilonim* observe some Jewish holidays like *Hanukkah* and Passover, many view their observance more as cultural custom than religious worship. Most *Hilonim* favor separation of religion and state and view "Jewishness" as a matter of ancestry, not religion. As of 2016, some 40% of *Hilonim* did not believe in God.

Masorti Jews (***Masortim***) represent the diverse middle ground between secular and Orthodox Jews and comprise some 29% of Jewish Israelis. *Masortim* are considered "traditional" Jews, who remain religiously observant, yet are less devout than Orthodox Jews. They are divided on the role of Jewish law in daily life and tend to be split on issues such as the operation of public transport on *Shabbat* (see p. 3 of *Time and Space*).

Dati Jews (***Datiim***), also known as modern Orthodox Jews, comprise about 13% of Jewish Israelis. *Datiim* follow many tenets of Jewish law, such as observation of *Shabbat*, in their daily life, though they still integrate in Israeli society. *Datiim* are politically active, tend to support conservative policies, and are far more likely to serve in the military than other Orthodox Jews.

Haredi Jews (***Haredim***), or "ultra-Orthodox" Jews, are the most devout and account for some 9% of Jews in Israel. *Haredim* closely follow aspects of Jewish law, including strict observation of *Shabbat*, dietary restrictions, and conservative dress such as head coverings for men and women (see p. 1-2 of *Aesthetics and Recreation*). *Haredim* tend to stay within their close-knit societies and attend religious centers for extensive *Torah* learning called ***yeshivot***. They are exempt from obligatory military service, though this pardon has proven controversial in recent years (see p. 7 of *Political and Social Relations*).

Islam: As of 2022, about 1.7 million Muslims live in Israel, mostly in Galilee and Haifa, though many also live in Jerusalem and southern Israel. Most Muslim Israelis are of Sunni Arab heritage and members of the Shafi'i school that generally adheres to a strict interpretation of ***sharia*** (Islamic) law. Many Muslim Israelis attend secular or private Christian schools, where Arabic is an instruction language (see p. 4 of *Learning and Knowledge*).

Christianity: As of 2022, Israel's 190,000 Christians tend to live in cities and towns in the North. Most Christian Israelis are Arabs and belong to either the Greek Orthodox or Greek Catholic churches. Many Russian Orthodox Christians also live in Israel.

Druze: About 190,000 Israelis identify as ***Muwahhidun*** (Druze to outsiders), who primarily live in the North around Galilee, the Golan Heights, and Mt. Carmel. The community does not permit conversion or marriage outside the faith. Knowledge beliefs and practices are reserved for ***uqqal*** ("the wise"), a minority of men and women followers, who are initiated into the faith.

4. FAMILY AND KINSHIP

Overview

The family is the foundation of Israeli society, whereby members rely on each other for emotional, economic, and social support. Israelis typically maintain close relationships with extended family members and involve them in many important life events.

Residence

Israel is one of the world's most urbanized countries, and as of 2023, some 93% of the population lives in cities. In recent decades, Israel has experienced significant immigration and urbanization (see p. 1 of *Political and Social Relations*), especially in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Haifa.

Urban: Israelis tend to live in apartments comprising a kitchen, living room, and one or more bedrooms. Most buildings are made of concrete and/or stone with tiled floors and flat roofs that include solar water heating systems. While low-income families typically have small apartments or homes with children sharing a bedroom, many upper to upper-middle class Israelis reside in large houses or luxurious apartments with amenities like rooftop patios and pools. In suburban neighborhoods, villas (private houses) and cottages (two-story town houses) are common.

Rural: Israel's rural communities divide into unique cooperative frameworks. ***Kibbutzim*** are agricultural or industrial collective settlements, where members communally own or share the means of production. Today, *kibbutzim* tend to engage more in industry than agriculture. ***Moshavim*** are farming communities, where families maintain private farms that grow most of Israel's produce (see p. 5-6 of *Economics and Resources*). While most houses in *kibbutzim, moshavim,* and Arab villages are made of concrete and/or stone, many rural Bedouin families (see p. 13 of *Political and Social Relations*) live in tents or shacks.

Family Structure

Family relations sustain Israeli daily life and social organization. While many Israelis live as nuclear families (two parents and their children), other households include more relatives. Although most women work outside the home, they typically remain responsible for domestic tasks and childcare. Traditionally, the father is the primary breadwinner, and in many young, secular families, men and women share domestic tasks and support the household financially. Israelis highly respect their elders, especially grandparents, who sometimes help care for their grandchildren.

Children

The number of children in a family typically depends on its religious and ethnic background (see p. 5-7 of *Religion and Spirituality*). While ***hiloni*** (secular) Jewish families often have one-three children, ***masorti*** (traditional) and ***dati*** (modern Orthodox) couples tend to have three-six. Many ***haredim*** (ultra-Orthodox Jews) have seven or more. Although relatives often help raise children, mothers are largely responsible for childcare. Many families seek to indulge and not strictly discipline their children.

Birth: Traditionally, Israelis considered superstitions that tend to draw attention to a newborn bad luck. Many Jewish couples did not have baby showers, discuss names, or buy baby items until birth. Today, baby showers are increasingly common.

Following a birth, the father traditionally reads from the ***Torah*** (Jewish holy book) in synagogue (see p. 2 of *Religion and Spirituality*) and recites a blessing for the health of the mother and child. If the baby is a girl, the father publicly announces her name (see p. 4 of *Language and Communication*).

Circumcision: As of 2016, some 92% of Israeli males are circumcised. Most Jewish newborn males are circumcised 8 days after birth at a ***brit milah*** or ***bris*** (religious ceremony), when fathers also name their sons.

Rites of Passage

Many Israelis observe Jewish rites of passage, such as ***bar mitzvah*** for 13-year-old boys and ***bat mitzvah*** for 12-year-old girls, which celebrate their transition into adulthood. Children study to prepare for the ceremonies that include reading from the *Torah* before the congregation, followed by a party with food and dancing.

Marriage

Religious courts hold marriage authority (see p. 5 of *Political and Social Relations*). Under Israel's Chief Rabbinate, the highest council of rabbis which adheres to Orthodox Judaism (see p. 7 of *Religion and Spirituality*), only heterosexual Jewish couples can marry. However, because Israel recognizes civil marriages performed abroad, many secular, same-sex, and interfaith couples marry in overseas civil ceremonies. In 2010, Israel passed a law that allows civil unions for couples with no religious affiliation or who belong to a religious community that Israel does not recognize. Muslims, Christians, Druze, and other religious adherents (see p. 7 of *Religion and Spirituality*) have separate religious courts that hear personal status cases, often about marriage and divorce.

Bridewealth: Traditionally, the engaged couple, two witnesses, and a rabbi sign a ***ketubah*** (marriage contract) that outlines the groom's responsibilities such as the ***mohar*** (bridewealth, in Hebrew, which the groom or his father pays the bride's father). The *mohar* symbolizes the bride's financial independence and provides security in the event of divorce or death. Today, the *mohar* is less common among Jewish Israelis. Among many Muslims, the groom traditionally pays the ***mahr*** (bridewealth, in Arabic) to the bride, which becomes her sole property.

Weddings: Most Israeli marriage festivities tend to be similar, with some variation by religious affiliation. Some Jewish events segregate by sex. Traditionally, Jewish couples participate in various ceremonies and customs with family and friends. Some

women participate in a ***mikvah*** (purifying bathing ritual) within 4 days of the wedding. Many Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewish couples have a henna party before the wedding to celebrate and decorate the couple's hands and feet with intricate henna tattoos. Most weddings end with a celebratory feast and party with dancing into the early morning.

Similarly, some Muslim brides attend a ***Leilat el Henna*** (henna party), where they receive henna tattoos with friends and family before the wedding. Muslim marriage events sometimes segregate by sex, and many traditional weddings include signing the ***nikah*** (official marriage contract). After the ceremony, family and friends usually gather to feast and dance.

Divorce

As of 2011, some 27% of marriages end in divorce. Wives may not dissolve a marriage under Orthodox law. If a husband does not grant his wife a ***get*** (writ of divorce), she becomes an ***agunah*** (chained woman), who may not remarry. Same-sex and secular couples can divorce in family court.

Death

Funeral traditions also vary by religious affiliation. Traditionally, Jews bury their deceased within 1 day after death. Following the funeral, some Jews observe ***shivah***, a process of mourning that lasts 7 days after the burial of a close family member. Friends and relatives visit and bring food to the family of the deceased. Religious Jews practice traditional observances, like wearing only black and praying. To mark the ***yahrzeit*** (anniversary of the death), many Jews light a candle and recite the ***Kaddish*** (a hymn) in synagogue, and males read the *Torah* publicly.

According to Islamic tradition, Muslims bury their deceased as soon as possible after death, usually within 24 hours. The body is bathed, dried, and wrapped in a shroud or clean white cloth. Relatives then transport the deceased to a mosque, where family and friends visit to mourn and pay their respects.

5. SEX AND GENDER

Overview

Although the Israeli social system is patriarchal, meaning men hold most power and authority, women's equality has progressed since Israel's establishment in 1948 (see p. 8 of *History and Myth*). In a 2022 study, Israel ranked 60 of 156 countries in gender equality.

Gender Roles and Work

Domestic Work: Women traditionally hold responsibility for childcare, cooking, and cleaning, and typically retain those responsibilities, even if they work outside the home. However, men in some households increasingly assist with domestic chores.

Labor Force: As of 2022, some 60% of Israeli women worked outside the home, similar to the US (56%) and higher than neighboring Lebanon (29%) and Jordan (15%). Women often work in retail, clerical, and food service jobs. Although the law guarantees equal pay, women earn about 33% less than their male counterparts for similar work and are underrepresented in leadership roles. Nevertheless, in 2023, some 24% of women in Israel held managerial positions, higher than the Middle East and North Africa (7%) and global (18%) averages.

Gender and the Law

Israel's Declaration of Independence grants all Israelis social and political rights regardless of religion, race, or gender. The Women's Equal Rights Law of 1951 protects Israeli women from gender discrimination and abuse, as well as their rights to equality in work, education, health, and social welfare. While in many cases Israeli courts interpret these laws to secure gender equality, religious courts often impose patriarchal values on family life in personal status matters, particularly regarding marriage and divorce (see p. 3-4 of *Family and Kinship*). The law grants equal rights to education. However, women are less likely

than men to find work upon graduation (see p. 5 of *Learning and Knowledge*). The law prohibits sexual harassment and sex- and gender-based discrimination, though officials do not always enforce the law.

Women are entitled to maternity leave and pay, protection against dismissal during pregnancy, and affordable childcare. Maternity leave and pay depend on time spent working for an employer and months of national insurance tax payments. For example, a woman is entitled to 26 weeks of maternity leave after working at least 1 year and 15 weeks of maternity pay if she paid 10 of 14 months of national insurance taxes before giving birth. The Israeli National Insurance Institute (NII) is responsible for maternity leave payments. Spouses may take parental leave during the first 5 days after delivery without their employer's consent. After that, the spouse must exchange additional leave, which the NII also pays, for the mother's maternity leave.

Gender and Politics

While women in Israel gained the right to vote in 1948, their political participation remains low. Although Golda Meir was the first woman to serve as Prime Minister (PM) in 1969, no woman has been PM since. As of 2022, women hold 24% of parliament seats, slightly lower than the US (29%) and substantially higher than Lebanon (6%) and Jordan (12%). As of 2021, women hold some 30% of ministerial posts, Israel's highest-ever female representation rate.

Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

GBV is widespread and has become more prevalent due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions (see p. 6 of *Sustenance and Health*). Israeli law criminalizes domestic violence, assault, sexual harassment, and rape, particularly marital rape and assault against children and men. Nevertheless, prosecution rates for GBV cases are low. Between 2016-19, some 77% of domestic violence cases were closed before trial or indictment.

Israel has various services that assist GBV survivors, like 24-hour hotlines and shelters for women and children. The Israeli police has a Victim Support Unit that monitors the needs of GBV survivors and children. Hospitals and medical centers also have social workers to provide support to GBV survivors.

Sex and Procreation

Between 1960-2023, Israel's birthrate declined slightly from 3.9 births per woman to 2.5, higher than the US (1.8) and Lebanon (1.7) but lower than Jordan (2.9). This high birthrate is partially due to the Jewish traditional values system. ***Haredim*** (ultra-Orthodox Jews) have about 7 births per woman, compared to just 2.3 births for secular and moderately religious Jewish women. In 2011, the Muslim fertility rate was the highest of any religious group (3.5), compared to Jews (3), Druze (2.3), and Christians (2.2) (see p. 7 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Israel has policies like reduced working hours after maternity leave and leave to care for sick children to help women balance work and family responsibilities.

Abortion is legal under many circumstances and requires the consent of a "termination of pregnancy committee," comprising a physician, medical specialist, and social worker. The committee assesses case eligibility, such as a pregnancy that may endanger the woman's life or cause her physical or emotional damage.

LGBTQ Issues

Israeli law prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation. Since marriage in Israel is subject to religious laws that do not recognize same-sex marriage (see p. 3 of *Family and Kinship*), LGBTQ couples cannot marry in Israel. However, since 2006, the government recognizes same-sex marriages performed abroad, circumventing the religious courts. In 2008, Israel legalized adoption by same-sex couples. In 2016, Christian Israeli Arab Ta'alin Abu Hanna was crowned the first Miss Trans Israel in a pageant for Israeli transgender people. The Tel Aviv Gay Pride Parade in 2003 is one of Asia's largest, with some 170,000 people attending in 2022.

6. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

Language Overview

Hebrew is the official language of Israel and primary language of government, business, education, and the media. Of Israel's 38 spoken languages, most are members of either the Afro-Asiatic or Indo-European language families.

Hebrew

This Semitic language belongs to the Afro-Asiatic family that originated in the Levant (the region comprising present-day Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the Palestinian Territories) in the 2nd millennia BC. The Bible provides the earliest surviving example of written Hebrew (see p. 1 of *Religion and Spirituality*). By about 200 AD, Hebrew was reserved exclusively for Jewish religious texts and liturgy and no longer actively spoken. Over time, it absorbed many Greek and Arabic words, yet continued to decline in use between the 6th-19th centuries.

In the 1880s, the Zionist movement (see p. 6 of *History and Myth*) encouraged the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language for use in daily life. This new version of the language, called Modern Hebrew, modifies Biblical Hebrew for modern needs. Modern Hebrew uses Sephardic, distinct from Ashkenazi, pronunciation (see p. 5 of *Religion and Spirituality*), which uses different vowels and syllable emphases. Hebrew has been an official language of Israel since its founding in 1948 (see p. 8 of *History and Myth*). Written horizontally from right to left, Hebrew uses the North Semitic script that has a 22-letter alphabet.

Today, some 8.3 million Israelis speak Hebrew, which most of the population understands. The government requires all Israeli schools, including those that primarily teach in Arabic, to teach Hebrew (see p. 4-5 of *Learning and Knowledge*).

Arabic

Some 2.2 million Israelis, mostly of Arab heritage (see p. 13 of *Political and Social Relations*), speak Arabic. Like Hebrew, Arabic is a Semitic language. Most Israeli Arabic speakers use the Levantine dialect, also spoken across Jordan, Lebanon, and Palestine. Likewise, most use the South Levantine variant also spoken in Jordan, though some speak North Levantine, which is spoken primarily in Syria and Lebanon. Arabic was an official language of Israel until 2018, when parliament downgraded it to an ambiguous "special status" (see p. 15 of *Political and Social Relations*). Some traditionally Arab areas, mostly in the North and in major cities like Jerusalem and Haifa, use Arabic as a language of instruction in schools (see p. 4 of *Learning and Knowledge*). Arabic is written right to left in Arabic script, and most Israeli signs include both Arabic and Hebrew.

Other languages

Waves of immigrants, who have arrived in Israel since 1948, brought with them many other languages spoken in Israel today. These include Russian (about 1 million speakers), French (500,000) Romanian (250,000), Spanish (175,000), and Polish (124,000). Yiddish, a hybrid of German and Hebrew that Ashkenazi Jews speak, has about 370,000 speakers. In addition to Hebrew and English, many Israeli students study French and Spanish.

English: Most Israelis understand English, as about 6.2 million have at least a working knowledge of the language. English is taught widely in public schools and an admission requirement at many Israeli universities (see p. 5 of *Learning and Knowledge*). English is also visible throughout Israel, as many public signs include English in addition to Hebrew and Arabic.

Communication

Communicating competently in Israel requires knowledge of Hebrew, as well as the ability to interact effectively using

language. This broad notion of competence includes paralanguage (rate of speech, volume, intonation), nonverbal communication (personal space, touch, gestures), and interaction management (conversation initiation, turn-taking, and termination). When used properly, these forms of communication help to ensure that statements are interpreted as the speaker intends.

Communication Style

Israeli communication tends to be direct and somewhat informal. This straightforward communication style is known as ***dugriut***, which expresses interests and desires with direct statements. Israeli communication patterns tend to be expressive, fast-paced, and often loud and accompanied by hand gestures, which can give the impression that the speakers are irritated or angry. Many Israelis also have overlapping speech patterns, meaning interruptions or talking over someone before they finish speaking is common. Israelis consider the use of direct eye contact as a sign of respect (see p. 3 of *Time and Space*).

Likewise, they consider it rude to back away from a speaker. Israelis often lightly tap or touch one another while speaking, and physical touch like placing an arm around someone's shoulder or a light punch to the arm is often a sign of friendship among Israeli men. Religiously observant Israelis often avoid physical touch with members of the opposite sex (see p. 7 of *Religion and Spirituality*).

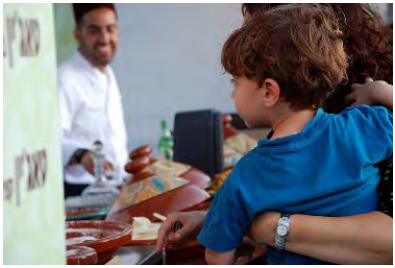
Greetings

Handshakes are typical greetings for men and many women. Close male friends often greet with a light pat on the back. Though often dependent on ethnic background and comfort level with physical touch, hugging or a light kiss on the cheek are also common greetings among Israelis. The most common Israeli verbal greeting is ***Shalom*** ("peace" in Hebrew). Likewise, many Israeli Arabs often use the greeting ***Salaam*** ("peace" in Arabic). Both Jewish Israelis and Israeli Arabs commonly use the Arabic greeting ***Ahlan*** ("hello"). Israelis typically say ***Shabbat shalom***

to greet during observation of *Shabbat* (Jewish holy day, see p. 5 of *Religion and Spirituality*).

Names

Israelis typically have first and last names. Many Jewish surnames originated when immigrants changed their names into Hebrew. While some Jewish names use the conjunction ***ben***- ("son of") or ***bat***- ("daughter of"), some Arab Israelis use ***ibn*** or ***bint***, respectively. Israelis often name their children after family members. Many traditional Jewish names are based on religious figures or Hebrew words for nature or geography. Modern Israeli names are often unisex or gender neutral. Many Israelis also use nicknames based on the diminutive of their first name, typically by shortening the name and adding -i or -y. For example, Benjamin often becomes Benny, Gershon–Gigi, and Yehezkial–Hezi.



Forms of Address

When meeting someone for the first time, Israelis typically use titles, such as ***Adon*** (Mr.) or ***Gveret*** (Mrs.), followed by last name. After getting to know someone, Israelis tend to use first names. Israeli men commonly address one another as ***ahi*** ("my brother"), also spelled ***achi*** or ***ahki***, to mean "brother" or "friend."

Conversational Topics

Among acquaintances, impersonal subjects such as the weather or news to personal topics like jobs, relationships, and families are the norm. Ancestry is important to many Israelis, who are often open to discussing their heritage and family history. However, foreign nationals should be respectful when discussing some sensitive subjects, particularly those pertaining to the Holocaust or other historical hardships (see p. 6 of *History and Myth*). Likewise, discussion of the government and political or religious issues can become easily emotional, and foreign

nationals should handle them tactfully with an emphasis on careful listening. Humor, particularly ***chizbat*** (humorous personal anecdotes or tall tales), is an important part of Israeli conversation.

Like Americans, Israelis have many perspectives and come from a wide range of backgrounds, so foreign nationals should be cognizant of this diversity and not assume someone's political or religious beliefs. Foreign nationals should also avoid criticizing the Israeli military or security agencies, as most Israelis have served in the Defense Forces (see p. 6-7 of *Political and Social Relations*), and have relatives who have been injured or killed during service. Likewise, foreign nationals should avoid the stereotype that Israel is a dangerous country, as many Israelis consider this notion offensive. In addition, they should be respectful of some Israelis' devout religious beliefs and strict observance of Jewish customs, which are central to many Israelis' identities.

Gestures

Israelis make frequent use of gestures in everyday conversations, often to add emphasis or punctuate a statement. As in the US, Israelis point with their index finger and consider holding up the middle finger obscene. To indicate "give me a minute" or "patience," Israelis form their fingers into a cone with the back of the hand facing down, while moving the hand up and down. Israelis beckon with their palm facing up, while waving their fingers towards their palm and moving their hand down.

Language Training Resources

Please view the Air Force Culture and Language Center website at www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/ and click on "Resources" for access to language training and other resources.

Transliteration

Transliteration is the process of spelling out Hebrew words using the Roman (Latin) alphabet. The table below shows sounds or letters having no English equivalent, or that vary from some English pronunciations, and uses the Sephardic pronunciation of Hebrew. In practice, Israelis sometimes place transliterations of Hebrew words or English translations on street signs next to or below Hebrew's North Semitic and the Arabic scripts. Some letters have different forms (shapes) and pronunciations, depending on their placement within the given word.

Hebrew Letter	Transliteration and Description	Example
א / ע	‘ (glottal stop)	pause in the middle of “uh-oh”
ה	h	**h**ello
כ	k / ch; pronunciation depends on the word	**k**angaroo
ך	ch; final form of the letter “kaf” (כ) – always at the end of a word and pronounced “ch”	lo**ch** (as pronounced in Scottish)
ח	ch; throat clearing sound	**ch**allah
ד	d	**d**inner
צ	ts	**ts**unami
ג	g	**g**reen
ק	k / q	**k**angaroo
שׁ	sh	**sh**ine

Useful Words and Phrases

English	Hebrew (Romanized)
Hello	Shalom
Goodbye	Shalom
Yes	Ken
No	Lo
Please	Bevakasha
Thank You	Toda
Excuse me / Sorry	Slicha
How are you?	Manishma
Fine, thanks. And you?	Tov toda
What's your name?	Ma shemkheh / shemkh (m / f)
My name is…	Shmi…
Do you speak English?	Ata medaber anglit (m) / At medaberret anglit (f)
I'd like the… please.	Ani rotsah ett… bevakasha
I don't understand	Ani lo mevin / mevina (m / f)
Where's a / the….?	Efo… / efo ha…
I'm looking for…	Ani mekhapes… (m) Ani mekhapeset… (f)
Turn right / left	Lefanott yaminah / shemolah
Straight ahead	Yashar qadimah
Today	Hayom
Tomorrow	Machar
Yesterday	Atmol
Morning	Boker
Afternoon	Ahkhar Hatsaharayim
Evening	Erev
Help!	Hatsilu
I am lost	Ani avud (m) / ani avuda (f)
What time is it?	Ma hasha'ah
When?	Matai
Taxi	Monit
Car	Mechonit
Bus	Otobus
Plane	Matos
Train	Rakevet
Airport	Sadeh te'ufah
Train station	Takhanat harakevet

7. LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE

Literacy

- Total population over age 15 who can read and write: 98.8%
- Male: 99.3%
- Female: 98.2% (2021 estimate)

Early Education

Before the arrival of standardized formal education, regional inhabitants informally transmitted values, skills, beliefs, and historical knowledge to younger generations.

Archaeological evidence indicates that some inhabitants of Judah and Samaria were literate in the 10th century BC (see p. 2 of *History and Myth*). When the Jewish community returned to the Levant in 516 BC after their exile in Babylon (in present-day Iraq, see p. 2-3 of *History and Myth*), religious education grew in importance. Jewish men studied to prepare for leadership in the priestly class, which entailed religious, political, and economic responsibilities in their communities.

In 333 BC, Greek invaders brought the region into contact with Hellenic forms of learning (see p. 3 of *History and Myth*). Many of the region's elites adopted Greek language and culture, benefitting from proximity to notable Seleucid centers of learning in Damascus and Antioch (in present-day Syria and Turkey). In 67 BC, Roman invasions (see p. 3-4 of *History and Myth*) further exposed the region to Western forms of education. The city of Caesarea Maritima (near present-day Haifa) became a center of early Christian learning and eventually hosted one of the Roman Empire's largest collections of Christian texts.

Islamic Education

With the spread of Islam to the region in the 7th century AD (see p. 4 of *History and Myth*), Islamic instruction for children was formalized. Teachers taught the children of elite Muslim families

Qur'anic verses, Islamic rituals and duties (see p. 7 of *Religion and Spirituality*), and Arabic calligraphy (see p. 2 of *Language and Communication*). Some male children received religious primary school instruction at their local ***kuttab*** (traditional Islamic school), and advanced students attended ***madrasas***, more comprehensive schools for civil servants.

Jewish Education

Many Jewish settlers in the late 19th century (see p. 6 of *History and Myth*) founded schools that mirrored the ***yeshivot*** (religious schools) of central and eastern Europe. However, small groups of ***Sephardim*** (Jews expelled from the Iberian Peninsula, who settled in the Middle East and North Africa) and ***Mizrahim*** (Jews who remained in the Middle East and North Africa) sent their children to Jewish *kataatiib* (plural of *kuttab*), where instruction was in Ladino (Judeo-Spanish) or Arabic. Education in the British Mandate of Palestine (see p. 7 of *History and Myth*) reflected these diverse religious, ethnic, and political affiliations. Parents' associations and charitable organizations in Europe largely funded the schools, which were mostly independent from British oversight.

Education in Early Israel

Upon Israel's founding in 1948 (see p. 8 of *History and Myth*), the country inherited a diverse network of schools from the Mandate, enabling the rapid establishment of a public education system. After education became compulsory in 1953, Israel needed to educate increasingly large numbers of immigrants, who arrived with varying educational levels while speaking many different languages. The government established special schools in ***ma'barot*** (immigration resettlement areas) to impart an Israeli identity to pupils and continue its efforts to use Hebrew as the primary spoken language (see p. 1 of *Language and Communication*). While the diversity of schooling allowed for various educational approaches, the government repeatedly attempted to integrate classrooms and bridge the educational achievement gaps characteristic of a variety of systems.

Modern Education System

Today, education in Israel is free and compulsory, with 1 year of mandated kindergarten at age 5, followed by a minimum of 12 years of formal education starting at age 6. The school system divides into multiple categories, with most students attending ***mamlachti*** (state-run secular schools), ***mamlachti dati*** (state-run religious schools), or ***torani***, which place more emphasis on religious instruction. Parents can enroll their children in state-funded Arab schools, ***chinuch atzmai*** (independent religious schools) that cater to ***Haredim*** (ultra-Orthodox Jews – see p. 7 of *Religion and Spirituality*), or private international schools with foreign (often US or European) curricula.

The Ministry of Education oversees *mamlachti* and *mamlachti dati*, which follow a standardized, nationally set curriculum. The content of study is similar in both, though religious schools dedicate more time and attention to religious subjects and observance in daily activities. As of 2020, some 77% of primary- and 88% of secondary-school students attended public schools. In 2020, Israel spent about 7.1% of GDP on education, higher than the US (6.1%), neighboring Jordan (3.2%) and Lebanon (1.7%). In an assessment of student performance in reading, math, and science in the same year, Israel had similar scores as Slovakia, Turkey, and Ukraine, but ranked below the US.

Chinuch Atzmai*:** Many members of Israel's *Haredi* community enroll their children in independent religious schools. While these institutions receive some government funding, they set their own curriculum. Many educators have criticized *chinuch atzmai* for focusing almost entirely on ***Torah (Judaism's most important primary text) and ***Talmudic*** (Jewish oral law) studies (see p. 2-3 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Consequently, *chinuch atzmai* often neglect basic subjects like mathematics, Hebrew, natural sciences, and social studies. While the government has attempted to pass laws designating mandatory baseline

standards for secular subjects, it has been unsuccessful, largely due to *Haredi* objections.

Arab Schools: The government also funds schools for Israel's Arab community (see p. 13 of *Political and Social Relations*), which teach Arab history and culture. Traditionally, the government has underfunded these schools as compared to the *mamlachti* and *mamlachti dati*, and human rights groups have claimed that Arab students do not receive the same level of governmental support for education. As a result, officials introduced a 5-year workplan in 2022 that includes extra funding for Arab education and a new curriculum with lessons on Arab identity. While students in Arab schools must learn Hebrew, students at other schools are not required to learn Arabic. As of 2022, Israel has less than 10 schools designed to explicitly integrate Israeli Arab and Jewish Israeli students.

Pre-Primary: Municipal governments or local women's organizations provide free public or fee-based private ***gan*** (preschools) to children ages 2-4. Attendance at a ***gan hova*** (kindergarten) is mandatory to prepare 5-year-old children for primary school. In 2020, over 97% of children of the appropriate age were enrolled in pre-primary school.

Basic Education: Primary school comprises 6 years (grades 1-6) beginning at age 6. While varying by school type, curricula at this level focus on Hebrew, mathematics, social studies, and natural sciences. Primary-school students typically center their studies around an annual theme that administrators deem nationally important, such as "immigration" or "peace." To continue to the next grade, students must score a minimum of 55 of 100 points in each subject. In 2020, some 99% of children of the appropriate age were enrolled in primary school.

Secondary Education: This third level divides into Intermediate School (grades 7-9), which is a continuation of primary studies,

and Secondary School (grades 10-12), which offers multiple tracks. While most students decide to continue their general studies, some enroll in programs specialized in agricultural sciences, military technology, vocational training, or religious *yeshivot*. In 2019, some 98% of children of the appropriate age were enrolled in secondary school. Many agricultural schools, military academies, and *yeshivot* are boarding schools, where students both live and study.

After completing grade 12, students receive a high school diploma and some take exams to attain the ***Te'udat Bagrut***, a certification used for admission to post-secondary institutions. The *Te'udat Bagrut* attests that students have passed exams in mathematics, Hebrew, English, civics, history, religious studies, and an elective of the student's choice with a score of at least 55%. Passing rates vary by school type. In the 2020 school year, *mamlachti* and *mamlachti dati* passing rates averaged 85%, compared to Arab schools (69%) and *chinuch atzmai* (24%).

Post-Secondary Education: Students can enroll in post-secondary institutes after completing their mandatory military service (see p. 6-7 of *Political and Social Relations*). Admission is based on *Te'udat Bagrut* scores and the results of the ***ha-Psikhometri*** (psychometric evaluation test), which officials use to determine potential academic success. While many universities receive some level of financing from the government, most students still pay tuition and fees to attend. Student military veterans who served in combat units are entitled to a 90% reduction in their first year's tuition.

The Council for Higher Education accredits colleges and universities and supervises and approves issuance of academic degrees. Some of Israel's most prestigious post-secondary institutions are the Weizmann Institute of Science, Tel Aviv University, and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

8. TIME AND SPACE

Overview
Israelis consider a reliable work ethic and punctuality as key to conducting business. While public displays of affection tend to be inappropriate, especially among some religious communities, social touching among friends and family is common.

Time and Work

Israel's workweek runs Sunday-Thursday, though many businesses also open Friday mornings. Normal business hours are 9am-6pm, and banks, supermarkets, and government offices generally follow this schedule. Although most businesses close from sunset Friday-sunset Saturday in observance of ***Shabbat*** (Jewish holy day – see p. 5 of *Religion and Spirituality*), the government sometimes permits non-Jewish employees to conduct commerce during this time. Many of Israel's Muslim and Christian minorities (see p. 7 of *Religion and Spirituality*) often close their businesses on their holy days – Friday and Sunday, respectively.

Working Conditions: Israeli labor laws establish an 8-hour workday, 5.5-day workweek, and guarantee a national minimum wage, overtime pay, paid vacation, and sick leave. Historically, labor unions, led by ***Histadrut*** (General Organization of Workers), have wielded significant political influence in Israel, resulting in robust benefits for workers. Despite these and other benefits and protections, lax enforcement sometimes results in unsafe working conditions, particularly in Israeli-controlled illegal settlements (see p. 2 of *Political and Social Relations*) and sectors with many Palestinian workers, such as construction and agriculture (see p. 5 of *Economics and Resources*).

Time Zone: Israel adheres to Eastern European Time (EET), which is 2 hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and 7 hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time (EST). Israel observes

Eastern European Summer Time (EEST) from the end of March-October when the country is 3 hours ahead of GMT.

Calendars: Most Israelis use both the Western (Gregorian) and Jewish (Hebrew) calendar. Government officials use the Hebrew calendar for official business and to mark national holidays. The Jewish calendar dates to ancient times and tracks both solar and lunar phases. To keep both cycles synchronized and satisfy religious requirements, years vary in length, generally ranging between 353-55 days. While most years have 12 months, every 2-3 years is a leap year with 13 months, which makes it 383-85 days long. The Hebrew calendar is in its 6th millennium, as it begins recording time from the date that 12th-century scholars determined was the Biblical moment of creation (see p. 1 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Consequently, July 4, 2022 in the US is 5 Tammuz, 5782 in Israel. Days begin at sunset on what the Western calendar would show as the previous day. For example, the Jewish holy day of Saturday begins on Friday evening.

National Holidays

- Mar/Apr: ***Pesach*** (Passover)
- Apr/May: Holocaust Remembrance Day
- Apr/May: Memorial Day
- Apr/May: Independence Day (see p. 8 of *History and Myth*)
- May/Jun: ***Shavuot*** (Pentecost)
- Sep/Oct: ***Rosh Hashanah*** (New Year)
- Sep/Oct: ***Yom Kippur*** (Day of Atonement)
- Sep/Oct: ***Sukkot*** (Feast of the Tabernacles)
- Sep/Oct: ***Simchat Torah*** (Rejoicing of the Law)

Any holiday that falls on a weekend is observed on the closest weekday.

Time and Business: Israelis typically value punctuality in most workplaces, and while short delays are acceptable, business meetings generally begin and end on time. Workplaces are often egalitarian (promote equal rights), and a shared desire to reach a consensus among employees may prolong negotiations and decision-making.

Public and Personal Space

As in most societies, personal space in Israel depends on the nature of the relationship. Israelis typically maintain close personal space with friends and family, yet preserve a greater distance among acquaintances. When waiting in line or riding public transportation, Israelis tend to stand or sit closer to each other than Americans.

Touch: Conversational touching depends largely on the level of familiarity. Formal situations rarely involve touching beyond a handshake (see p. 3-4 of *Language and Communication*). In many casual situations, same-sex Israelis engage in touching, such as a light pat on the back or touch of the arm. Observant Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jews (see p. 7 of *Religion and Spirituality*) rarely touch members of the opposite sex.

Eye Contact: Israelis typically engage in direct eye contact during greetings (see p. 3 of *Language and Communication*) to convey interest and respect. During conversation, moderate eye contact signals attentive engagement. Some Israelis consider staring rude.

Photographs

Foreign nationals should acquire an Israeli's permission before taking his photo. Government and military installations may prohibit photography, as do some religious sites during *Shabbat*.

Driving

Some Israelis drive aggressively, ignoring traffic laws and pedestrians' right-of-way. Despite often heavy traffic in urban areas, roads are generally well-maintained. Residents of some observant Jewish neighborhoods and other areas erect roadblocks during *Shabbat*. Likewise, few Israelis drive on *Yom Kippur*. Notably, officials typically do not allow cars with Palestinian license plates to drive on Israeli roads without special permits. In 2019, Israel registered just 4 traffic fatalities per 100,000 people, significantly lower than the US (13) and neighboring Jordan (17).

9. AESTHETICS AND RECREATION

Overview

Israel's clothing, sport, music, and arts reflect its unique history and religious and ethnic diversity.

Dress and Appearance

Most Israeli clothing is casual, even in many business settings, though politicians typically wear formal suits or dresses. Male and female visitors should dress in modest attire when visiting conservative areas, particularly religious sites and Orthodox neighborhoods (see p. 6-7 of *Religion and Spirituality*), avoiding shorts, mini-skirts, and sleeveless tops. Men should wear a ***kippah*** (small cap often made of velvet or knitted material) when visiting Jewish religious sites.

Everyday attire typically is either in Western or traditional styles. While many women follow the latest fashion trends, often wearing close-fitting attire and sleeveless tops, some observant Jewish and Muslim women wear modest outfits with only their hands and faces exposed. Likewise, many Israeli men follow the latest Western fashions, wearing jeans or trousers with a shirt and jacket.

Traditional: Dress typically varies by ethnic group, religious affiliation, and level of observance (see p. 13-15 of *Political and Social Relations* and p. 5-7 of *Religion and Spirituality*). For example, Orthodox women's dress includes long skirts with tights or leggings, long-sleeved tops, and head coverings, notably wigs or ***tichel*** (kerchief in Yiddish, see p. 2 of *Language and Communication*). Many Israeli Arab women wear the Palestinian ***thawb*** (a long dress featuring intricate embroidery called ***tatriz***). Some Muslim Israeli Arab women also wear a ***hijab*** (headscarf).

Traditional Ashkenazi men's dress typically includes a black jacket, pants, and shoes with a white shirt. Most religious men cover their heads, and members of different Jewish sects wear specific hats for certain occasions. For example, many ultra-Orthodox men wear a ***streimel*** (round fur cap) on ***Shabbat*** (Jewish holy day, see p. 5 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Most Jewish Israeli men wear a *kippah* during religious celebrations and events in temple or synagogue. Some Israeli Arab men wear traditional Palestinian clothing, such as a ***sirwal*** (loose trousers), ***qamis*** (undershirt), ***abaya*** (outerwear cloak), and ***keffiyeh*** (a scarf with black and white checkered pattern) or ***hatta*** (headscarf) with an ***agal*** (rope) to hold it in place).

Recreation and Leisure

Israelis tend to spend their leisure time with family and friends shopping and bargaining at local markets and socializing in restaurants, bars, nightclubs, and coffee shops. Day trips to the beach and national parks are also popular activities.

Holidays and Festivals: Israelis celebrate a wide array of holidays that reflect the country's religious diversity. While most Jewish Israelis celebrate ***Yom Kippur***, ***Rosh Hashanah***, and ***Hanukkah*** (see p. 2 of *Time and Space*), Ethiopian Jews also celebrate ***Sigd***, a holiday symbolizing the acceptance of the ***Torah*** (Jewish holy book, see p. 2 of *Religion and Spirituality*). While Muslim Israelis often commemorate Ramadan, Christian Israelis tend to celebrate Easter and Christmas.

Other holidays commemorate milestones in Israeli history and culture. Holocaust Remembrance Day is dedicated to those who died, were imprisoned, or resisted and fought Nazi Germany during World War II (see p. 8 of *History and Myth*). Remembrance Day pays tribute to those who died defending Israel. Both holidays feature a siren and two-minute silence. Independence Day commemorates the proclamation of Israel on

May 14, 1948 (see p. 8 of *History and Myth*) and typically features parades, barbeques, and parties.

Sports and Games

Israelis participate in a wide variety of sports such as soccer, basketball, tennis, scuba diving, volleyball, and running. ***Krav Maga***, a form of self-defense developed by the Israeli Defense Forces (see p. 6-7 of *Political and Social Relations*), is also common.

Israel has won 13 Olympic medals, most recently in the judo, gymnastics, and taekwondo events at the Tokyo 2020 Games. Israel hosts the Maccabiah Games, often called the Jewish Olympics, every 4 years. The sporting event is the world's third largest, with some 10,000 Israeli and foreign-national Jewish athletes from 85 countries competing in 43 sports in 2017.

Soccer: Known as "football" in the region, soccer is a popular sport and pastime, and many Israeli children learn to play at a young age. Israel's professional men's soccer league is the Israeli Premier League, consisting of 14 teams. Maccabi Haifa was the Premier League champion in 2020-21 and reached the quarterfinals of the European Champions League in 2003 and 2010. Some European clubs draft talented Israeli players, notably Yossi Benayoun, who played in five English clubs and captained Israel's national team before retiring in 2019.

Basketball: Along with soccer, basketball is one of Israel's most popular team sports. Maccabi Tel Aviv is the country's most successful men's team, having won the most national league championships, as well as the Euroleague in 2004 and 2005. Women's basketball is also popular. Female player Shay Doron became the first Israeli to play professional basketball in the US, when she joined the New York Liberty in 2007.

Games: ***Shesh-besh*** (backgammon in Hebrew and Arabic), also known as ***tawle***, is particularly popular. The game involves two players, who attempt to clear their markers from the board. Chess is also widely popular.

Music

Israel's diverse musical styles reflect traditions from the Levant, Middle East, Europe, and North Africa. For example, traditional Middle Eastern instruments used in some Israeli music include the ***oud*** (a stringed instrument similar to a guitar), ***nay*** (flute), and various percussion instruments. Ashkenazi Jews brought ***klezmer*** folk music to Israel from Eastern Europe. The instrumental *klezmer* music traditionally features orchestral instruments, an accordion, ***cimbalon*** (an Eastern European trapezoid-shaped string instrument), and vocal melodies from Jewish religious practices. ***Muzika mizrahit*** (Mizrahi music), a genre which Mizrahi Jews developed in Israel, combines Modern Hebrew with traditional Middle Eastern and North African rhythms and musical instruments, such as the *oud* and ***darbuka*** (drum). Notably, Polish-born violinist Bronislaw Huberman founded the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra in 1936.

Today, many Israelis listen to an array of foreign and Israeli musical styles, such as pop, rock, folk, classical, rap, and electronic. Hadag Nahash, a band known for its leftist political statements, blends Western hip-hop beats with Middle Eastern melodies and instruments. Elias Taiseer, a world-renowned musician and conductor of the Arab-Jewish Orchestra, played Vivaldi and Bach performances on the *oud*. In 2019, Israeli singer Netta Barzilai won the Eurovision Song Contest with "Toy," a pop song about female independence accompanied by chicken sounds and dance.

Dance

Israel has many traditional dances that vary by ethnic group. For example, ***tza'ad Yemani*** (Yemenite step) originates in Yemeni Jewish tradition and incorporates cross-over steps. The ***hora***, originally from Romania, is a dance performed in a circle, often celebrated at Jewish wedding receptions, with the bride and groom lifted in chairs. Performed throughout the Levant, ***dabke***

("stomping of the feet" in Arabic), is a traditional Arab line dance with rhythmic footwork. Today, *dabke* features prominently in many Israeli Arab weddings and celebrations.

Cinema

The Ophir Awards (known as the Israeli Academy Awards or Israeli Oscars) often feature Israeli films that gain international acclaim. Many films are social dramas that explore themes of Arab-Israeli conflicts, Israeli society and wars, and narratives of the Holocaust. *Beaufort* (2007), a story of an isolated Israeli Defense Forces (see p. 6 of *Political and Social Relations*) unit in the mountain post of Beaufort Castle at the end of a conflict between Israel and Lebanon, received an Oscar nomination. Israeli Eran Kolirin directed *Let It Be Morning* (2021), an adaptation of Palestinian author Sayed Kashua's novel about a Palestinian-born Israeli citizen, who is unable to return home to Jerusalem when Israeli soldiers blockade a road. With an all-Palestinian cast, the film expresses the Palestinian-Israeli story from an often-untold Palestinian point of view. The film won Israel's Ophir Award for Best Picture in 2021.

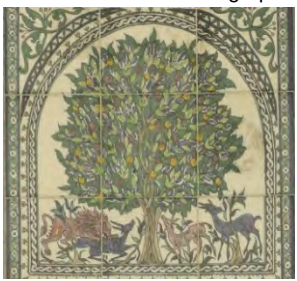
For decades, many Israeli actors have become famous in Hollywood. Chaim Topol won a Golden Globe for Best Actor for his portrayal of Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971). The film is about a Jewish milkman whose daughters wish to marry the men they love instead of being matched by the Russian village matchmaker. More recently, Gal Gadot, crowned Miss Israel in 2004, is known for her leading role in the superhero film *Wonder Woman* (2017).

Literature

Although Israel did not become a country until 1948, Jewish literature has existed for millennia, beginning with early religious texts (see p. 1-2 of *Religion and Spirituality*). The Jewish literary tradition continued outside of present-day Israel in the various Jewish diasporas (see p. 2 of *Religion and Spirituality*).

Israeli authors write about an array of themes and experiences, like immigration, war, and the Holocaust. For example, Shmuel Yosef Agnon (or S.Y. Agnon) won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1966 for his "narrative art with motifs from the life of the Jewish people." His novel *A Guest for the Night* examines the material and moral decay of European Jewry after World War I (see p. 7 of *History and Myth*). Memories of the Holocaust influenced Aharon Appelfeld's works, notably *Badenheim*, a story of assimilated European Jews vacationing at an Austrian resort and their sense of the approaching Holocaust.

Amos Oz initially focused on facets of Israeli society such as ***kibbutzim*** (collective settlements, see p. 1 of *Family and Kinship*) and the psychology of the first Israeli-born generation. Following the Six-Day War (see p. 10 of *History and Myth*), he published numerous articles on co-existence and peace. His memoir, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, was adapted into a film directed by American-Israeli actress Natalie Portman. David Grossman began writing about politics following his son's death in the 2006 Lebanon War (see p. 13 *History and Myth*). His novel *Falling Out of Time* deals with parents' grief after losing their child. Etgar Keret, known for his short stories and graphic novels, focuses on aspects of Israeli life using humor.



Folk Arts and Handicrafts

Traditional crafts, such as pottery, calligraphy, olive wood carvings, embroidery, and jewelry, often represent different Israeli Jewish, Arab, and other unique traditions. Israel's colorful patterned ceramics originated in Jerusalem within the Armenian Christian community. Today, many Arab ceramic traditions incorporate the Armenian styles. Judaica is Jewish ceremonial art used for ritualistic purposes, such as elaborate silver wine goblets used in blessing rituals at the beginning of most Jewish holiday meals, and embroidered velvet cloths to cover the ***challah*** bread for the *Shabbat* meal (see p. 2 of *Religion and Spirituality* and p. 1-2 of *Sustenance and Health*).

10. SUSTENANCE AND HEALTH

Sustenance Overview

Meals are often considered social events, with family and friends lingering for conversation and companionship. Israeli cuisine reflects the country's diverse heritage, featuring influences from the Levant, Europe, Middle East, and North Africa.

Dining Customs

Most Israelis eat three daily meals and snack throughout the day. Traditionally, breakfast and dinner are light, while lunch, served at midday or in the early afternoon, is the heartiest meal. Diners often begin their meals with traditional ***mezze***, such as olives, pickled vegetables, or cheeses, followed by larger courses. Nevertheless, demanding business schedules in urban areas (see p. 1 of *Time and Space*) have influenced smaller, less complex lunches. When invited to an Israeli home, guests usually arrive a few minutes late and bring sweets, flowers, or a bottle of wine to thank the hosts for their hospitality.

Observant Jews (see p. 6-7 of *Religion and Spirituality*) follow a series of dietary restrictions to ensure that their food is prepared according to religious laws and is ***kosher*** (proper). While these guidelines vary depending on the rules of rabbinates for different ethnic groups (see p. 5-6 of *Religion and Spirituality*), *kosher* preparation forbids the consumption of pork, seafood without scales (such as shellfish), game fowl, and mixing meat and dairy. *Kosher* guidelines also dictate particular rules of animal slaughter and meat preparation. Likewise, observant Muslims adhere to similar rules of animal slaughter and meat preparation to ensure that food is ***halal***, allowed by Islamic law. Many Muslims consume neither pork nor alcohol.

Many Jewish Israeli families celebrate a ***Shabbat*** (Jewish holy day, see p. 5 of *Religion and Spirituality*) family dinner on Friday nights, when they consume special foods and bless wine (see p.

6 of *Aesthetics and Recreation*). Because most Jewish Israelis do not work on *Shabbat*, many of them prepare foods in advance or slow cook them to be ready on Saturday. ***Hamin*** (or ***cholent***, a stew made with potatoes, beans, eggs, meat, and barley),

jachnun (a Yemeni pastry served with grated tomatoes), and ***kugel*** (sweet egg noodle casserole) are popular options.

Diet

While varying according to each family's heritage and level of religious observance, Israeli food typically consists of starches and legumes. Popular staples are pita, or pocket bread, ***laffa*** (a thick and chewy flatbread commonly used in wraps) and ***malawach*** (a fried flat puff pastry), which are often served with dips like ***hummus*** (blended chickpeas and sesame paste) and labneh (thick, creamy yogurt garnished with olive oil or served strained with diced cucumber, fresh mint, and crushed garlic). Beans, chickpeas, ***couscous*** (steamed balls of semolina), and bulgur wheat are also common ingredients. Fresh produce from the Mediterranean region is an important component of Israeli cuisine, with eggplant, tomatoes, and cucumbers featuring in several dishes.

Besides starches and legumes, Israeli cuisine also incorporates animal proteins, especially beef, lamb, and fish. Dishes tend to rely heavily on local produce and spices for their distinctive taste, using flavorings such as mint, garlic, parsley, and ***za'tar*** (a mixture of thyme, marjoram, and sumac). In addition, many dishes such as ***gefilte*** fish (poached and pickled whitefish), chopped liver, and beef brisket originally were brought to Israel from the country's ***Ashkenazim*** (Jews who migrated from Central and Eastern Europe). These dishes feature ingredients and flavorings, notably potato, dill, and artichoke, that are more European than Mediterranean in style. Likewise, many dishes such as ***yaprak dolmas*** (grape leaves stuffed with rice and meat) and ***pilaf*** (spiced rice) originated in North Africa and Asia

Minor (present-day Turkey) and are popular with ***Sephardim*** (Jews from the Iberian Peninsula, who settled in North Africa and the Middle East after their 1492 expulsion from Spain).

Meals and Popular Dishes

A common breakfast style popularized in Israel's ***kibbutzim*** (collective agricultural communities, see p. 1 of *Family and Kinship*) features a spread of eggs, olives, cheeses such as ***tzfatit*** (a semi-hard goat cheese), vegetable salads, and bread with jam. Another popular breakfast option is ***shakshuka*** (eggs stewed in a spiced tomato sauce), which is often served with bread and salad.

The mid-day meal consists of heartier options. ***Falafel*** (a deep-fried mixture of chickpeas with garlic, cumin, and parsley), ***sabich*** (fried eggplant, egg, and potato) wraps, and ***kibbeh*** (ground lamb or beef mixed with onion, cracked wheat, and spices) are some popular lunch choices. Other common dishes include meats grilled on skewers, such as ***kebab*** (ground meat), ***shishlik*** (lamb or chicken chunks), and ***meorav yerushalmi*** (chicken offal mixed with chunks of lamb).

Dinner is typically similar to the mid-day meal but often smaller and can feature other popular dishes such as ***bourekas*** (Balkan pastries made of puff pastry and cheese, potatoes, mushrooms, or spinach). Popular desserts are ***halva*** (a dense but flaky candy made from sesame paste), ***baklava*** (a pastry of layered filo dough, nuts, and syrup), and ***kanafeh*** (shredded filo dough layered with soft cheese and syrup).

Beverages

Like residents throughout much of the Levant, Israelis often drink strong black coffee (sometimes flavored with saffron, rosewater, or cardamom) or mint tea throughout the day, but especially at breakfast. Fresh fruit juices are also a popular option, with pomegranite juice and ***limonana*** (a mint lemonade) common during the hot summer months. Israel has several popular domestic breweries, such as Goldstar and Maccabee, and is

home to a substantial wine industry. Stronger liquors, such as ***arak*** (an anise-flavored spirit) and vodka, are also popular and distilled domestically.

Eating Out

Restaurants in large urban centers such as Tel Aviv and Haifa range from upscale establishments specializing in high-end Israeli and international cuisine to inexpensive food stalls and cafeterias. While many eateries in urban areas do not follow religious guidelines, most restaurants that Israeli Jews operate in Jerusalem are *kosher.* Street stalls are popular for *falafel, sabich,* and ***shawarma*** (meat grilled on a rotating spit, sliced, and wrapped in soft flatbread with vegetables and dips like *hummus*). In restaurants, a 15% tip for good service is expected.

Health Overview

While the overall health of Israelis has improved in recent decades, they continue to face significant non-communicable "lifestyle" diseases and other serious health challenges. Life expectancy at birth has increased from about 77 to 84 years since 1990, a figure higher than Middle East and North Africa (MENA) (73) and US (76) averages. Between 1990-2023, infant mortality (the proportion of infants who die before age 1) decreased from about 10 deaths per 1,000 live births to 3.5, also lower than the MENA (18) and US (5) averages.

Traditional Medicine

Traditional medicine consists of the knowledge, practices, and skills that are derived from a native population's beliefs, experiences, and theories. Today, traditional medicine in Israel focuses primarily on herbal remedies and other non-surgical procedures to cure both physical and mental illnesses. The use of herbal medicines and ***bankes*** (wet cupping, the process of applying heated cups to the skin to extract toxins from the body) are common treatments for colds and flus, especially among some Ashkenazi communities.

Healthcare System

Since the 1995 passage of a universal coverage law, all Israeli citizens and legal residents are entitled to free, basic medical services such as preventative medicine, hospitalization, mental health counselling, pediatric dental work, and long-term care for chronic illnesses. The Ministry of Health (MoH) oversees four health insurance schemes that provide these services. The national budget, payroll deductions, and employer contributions fund each scheme. To protect low-income and pensioned residents, the MoH sets contribution caps based on income levels, making contributions progressive with compensation. By law, any provider must accept any applicant, and all providers must offer the same standardized care.

At 5.9% in 2020, Israel's healthcare spending as a proportion of GDP has historically been lower than the US rate (11%), yet it has achieved consistently excellent healthcare outcomes and required less out-of-pocket expenses from residents. In a 2021 global ranking of healthcare systems, Israel's ranked second in quality, sixth in innovation, and fifth overall. Similarly ranked countries were Ireland and Germany. However, unlike in other countries with universal healthcare systems, where healthcare costs have increased, Israel has managed to maintain healthcare spending at relatively steady levels for the past 3 decades. Furthermore, the headquarters of Teva, the world's largest generic drug manufacturer, is based in Tel Aviv (see p. 5 of *Economics and Resources*).

Private insurance, a relatively small component of the healthcare system, has become more common in recent years. Many Israelis purchase supplementary insurance from their national insurance scheme or independent third parties to cover treatments or prescription medicines, such as dental and optometric care, which are not considered a basic service. In 2020, private for-profit institutions represented only about 3% of Israel's hospital capacity.

Health Challenges

As in most developed countries, the leading causes of death are chronic and non-communicable "lifestyle" diseases, which accounted for over 85% of deaths in 2019. Of these, cancer, cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, and diabetes are the most common. Preventable "external causes," such as suicides, car accidents, and other injuries resulted in about 4.2% of deaths, lower than the US rate (7%). Meanwhile, communicable diseases accounted for some 10.3% of deaths in 2019, higher than the US rate (5.3%).

Despite improved national-level health-care outcomes over the previous decades, disparities between Israeli communities persist. Overall disparities in health outcomes between Israeli Jewish and Arab residents have widened in recent years, particularly in the rates of communicable diseases. While many factors contribute to this phenomenon, public health experts have underscored the growing divergence in the socioeconomic status of the two groups as a driving force (see p. 15 of *Political and Social Relations*).

Haredi (ultra-Orthodox, see p. 7 of *Religion and Spirituality*) communities tend not to trust secular healthcare officials. A 2020 survey showed that some 75% of the community lacked confidence in the MoH's capacity to combat the COVID-19 (the disease caused by the coronavirus) pandemic. Some 48% similarly expressed distrust in the nation's hospital capacity to treat the disease.

As of mid-2023, the Israeli government had confirmed nearly 4.8 million cases of COVID-19, resulting in approximately 12,540 deaths. Israel gained global prominence early in the pandemic for its rapid, mass vaccination strategy and early adoption of booster doses. However, despite these early advancements, adherence to public health protocols and vaccination rates have lagged in some communities, particularly among *Haredi* and Arab groups.

11. ECONOMICS AND RESOURCES

Overview

Agriculture on the land comprising modern Israel dates back nearly 10,000 years. Early regional inhabitants used stone tools to grind grain for consumption before eventually developing cultivation techniques that enabled early settlement in small villages. While agriculture remained the cornerstone of these societies, they began trading with nearby civilizations in Egypt and Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq). By 2200 BC, nomadic tribes from the North moved into the region, replacing cities with a semi-nomadic system of subsistence agriculture and herding.

This alteration endured until around 1900 BC, when settled life resumed, and agriculture flourished.

Inhabitants of the region, then known as Canaan (see p. 1 of *History and Myth*), began producing pottery and trading it with Egypt. By 900 BC, trade networks had spread east towards India, south into Africa, and by seafaring traders into the western Mediterranean, aided by advances in shipbuilding and the domestication of camels for caravans.

During subsequent centuries, the region remained a crossroads for trade. The Achaemenid, Seleucid, Roman, and other empires (see p. 2-4 of *History and Myth*) traded precious metals, pottery, textiles, oils, and slaves in local markets. The Romans invested particularly heavily in Israel beginning in 67 BC. After adopting Christianity in the 4th century AD (see p. 3 of *Religion and Spirituality*), they built churches and encouraged Christian pilgrims to visit the region, resulting in its enrichment.

During the Crusader period that began in the late 11th century (see p. 5 of *History and Myth*), trade with Europe increased. However, by 1291, Egyptian Mamluks had defeated Crusaders and consolidated control of the region. After initial economic

growth, outbreaks of the plague and invasions from the East (see p. 5-6 of *History and Myth*) began to impact the economy.

In 1516, Ottoman Turks took control of the region (see p. 6 of *History and Myth*), resuming profitable trade and encouraging economic growth. In the mid-1800s, Ottoman reforms began to encourage private property and increase agricultural production for global trade. A few decades later, Jewish Zionist settlers arrived and began to establish agricultural communities that soon prospered.

The British Mandate of Palestine, founded after World War I (see p. 7 of *History and Myth*), temporarily brought the region under British control. British officials focused on improving infrastructure and modernizing cities and seaports, which increased both economic output and potential. The region became increasingly industrialized, which led to the creation of the influential ***Histadrut*** (General Organization of Workers) trade union, which still exists today (see p. 1 of *Time and Space*). In subsequent decades, numerous Jewish settlers traveled to the Mandate and continued to expand agricultural production.

After the 1948 founding of Israel (see p. 8 of *History and Myth*), the newly independent country struggled economically. Many immigrants, including Holocaust survivors and Jewish refugees from nearby Arab countries, were poor. Large numbers of poor settlers, the aftermath of the Arab-Israeli War that included an economic boycott by Arab countries (see p. 9 of *History and Myth*), and political infighting contributed to an era of austerity in Israel. Meanwhile, the government controlled many aspects of the economy. In 1952, Israel received West German loans, largely considered as Holocaust reparations, and funding from the US and Jews around the world, enabling economic growth.

Subsequent waves of Western European and North American immigrants were highly skilled and educated. The government rapidly founded educational, research, and financial institutions that also bolstered economic growth. Foreign funding helped

finance agricultural and industrial expansion, and economic growth remained robust into the early 1970s.

After the Yom Kippur War in 1973 (see p. 11 of *History and Myth*), Israel's economic growth stagnated, inflation rose, and a global recession reduced demand for Israeli exports. Israel was also heavily indebted due to high defense spending and lost trade relations due to Arab countries threatening oil embargos against nations that traded with Israel. These challenges worsened until 1985, when Israel executed a US-backed economic recovery plan that focused on privatizing sectors controlled by the state and *Histadrut*. These reforms helped the economy recover by the early 1990s.

Highly skilled migrants fleeing the collapsed communist states in Russia and Eastern Europe bolstered the economy. Foreign direct investment (FDI) rose substantially as Israel became a major technology hub, partially due to US aid and diplomacy that helped ease the effects of the Arabs' economic boycotts. By 1996, Israel had become an economic power in the region.

In the early 21st century, Israel experienced economic decline due to the violence of the second ***intifada*** ("shaking off," see p. 13 of *History and Myth*). Afterwards, growth quickly returned and FDI increased into the mid-2000s. The economy also endured the 2008-09 global financial crisis better than most Western economies, experiencing only a minor recession in 2009.

By 2011, cost-of-living surges had caused widespread protests. Nevertheless, Israeli GDP grew consistently during the 2010s, except for a minor recession in 2015. The economy endured the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (see p. 6 of *Sustenance and Health*) largely due to quick, effective fiscal policies and vaccination campaigns. Although Israel's economy shrank by about 2.2% in 2020, it rebounded by 8.6% in 2021 and 6.3% in 2022, and many economists project it to grow by 3.4% in 2023.

Today, Israelis still struggle with high living costs and growing income inequality, which varies significantly between ethnic groups and has led to considerable political tension (see p. 13-15 of *Political and Social Relations*). Further, in 2021, Tel Aviv was the world's most expensive city. Nevertheless, Israel's economic outlook is positive, bolstered by low unemployment and inflation and a dynamic and growing technology sector.

Services

The services sector comprised about 72% of GDP in 2021 and 82% of employment in 2021. Major subsectors include banking, tourism, retail, and healthcare.

Banking: Israel has a modern banking system consisting of five major and numerous smaller domestic banks. While the government no longer runs any major banks, it retains stock in many.

Tourism: This subsector accounts for about 3% of GDP. In 2022, some 2.6 million tourists mostly from the US and Europe visited Israel, often to see its many historical and religious sites, such as the Dome of the Rock, Temple Mount, and Western Wall (see p. 2 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Tourists also visit Israel's beaches, the Dead Sea, and museums. Many young Jewish people from around the world visit Israel as part of funded trips, paid in part by Israeli government grants, to better understand their Jewish heritage.

Industry

Israel's industrial sector accounts for some 17% of GDP and 17% of the labor force. Key subsectors include computer, medical, and pharmaceutical technology and manufacturing, chemicals, diamonds, and defense.

Technology: Israel is a leader in technological development, primarily semi-conductors and computer chips, hardware, and software. Technological inventions made in Israel include USB flash drives and the first commercially available firewall. Israel is particularly advanced in cyber security, and Israeli software

protects nearly a sixth of computers worldwide. The technology sector is based primarily in Tel Aviv.

Medical Technology and Pharmaceuticals: Israel is a hub for medical and pharmaceutical research, producing cutting-edge medical technologies, new drugs, and treatments. It has the world's most medical-device patents per capita, and its Teva Pharmaceuticals is a global leader in the production of generic pharmaceuticals (see p. 5 of *Sustenance and Health*).

Mining and Chemicals: Mining focuses on potash (a fertilizer), other sulphates, and bromides primarily used in chemicals and pharmaceuticals, many of which are exported. Israel's mineral wealth fuels its substantial chemical refining industry, which processes these minerals into compounds for commercial use.

Diamonds: Diamond-cutting, polishing, and trading comprise a major part of the industrial sector in Israel. The country imports most of its diamonds from Africa for processing and in 2021 was the world's sixth-largest exporter–cut diamond exports were valued at about $8.8 billion that year.

Defense: Israel has a substantial defense subsector that made over $10.5 billion in sales of small arms, missiles and missile defense systems, and other military equipment in 2021. The primary customer of the subsector is the Israeli Defense Forces (see p. 6-7 of *Political and Social Relations*), though Israel is also the world's twelfth-largest global arms supplier.

Agriculture

This sector accounts for just 1% of GDP and 1% of employment. Despite its small size and minimal naturally arable land, Israel uses irrigation to make farmland and is nearly self-sufficient in producing some crops.

Farming: Israeli farming is heavily mechanized and relies on advanced irrigation techniques to grow crops in its arid climate. Major crops include citrus fruits, peppers, and tomatoes. Israeli farms also produce poultry, eggs, and dairy products.

Fishing: Recent regulations have restricted overfishing primarily in the Red Sea. Common catches include mullet and grouper. Carp, tilapia, bass, and trout are raised in local fisheries and consumed domestically.

Currency

While the New Israeli Shekel (₪ or NIS), is issued in five coin values (1/2, 1, 2, 5, and 10) and six banknote values, Israelis commonly use just four banknotes (20, 50, 100, and 200). The NIS divides into 100 ***agorot*** issued in three coin values, though Israelis frequently use only the 10 *agorot* coin. Between 2011-23, US$1 fluctuated between ₪3.1-3.8.

Foreign Trade

Israel's exports, totaling $64.1 billion in 2021, primarily consisted of diamonds, pharmaceuticals, computer components, and chemicals sold to the US (27%), China (8%), the United Kingdom (3%), the Netherlands (3%), and Germany (3%). In the same year, imports totaled nearly $92.1 billion and mostly consisted of raw diamonds, vehicles, crude petroleum, and broadcasting equipment from China (14%), the US (11%), Germany (7%), Turkey (7%), and Switzerland (5%).

Foreign Aid

Israel has been a major recipient of foreign developmental and military aid throughout its history. The US is Israel's largest aid donor, providing some $1.16 billion in 2022. From 1949-2021, the US has provided Israel about $150.5 billion in bilateral assistance and missile defense funding. Israel provides humanitarian aid to other countries through its international aid organization *Mashav*. A large portion of Israeli aid has focused on helping developing nations improve agriculture and combat disease.

12. TECHNOLOGY AND MATERIAL

Overview

Israel has a modern physical infrastructure with advanced road, public transit, and telecommunication networks. Although Israel has a generally independent media, the government censors coverage of certain topics.

Transportation

Israeli cities have robust public transportation networks including buses, trams, subways, and commuter trains. Israelis tend to use buses for daily travel in cities. Recently, the government has sought to expand subway and light rail networks, with plans for a major subway system in central Israel and expansion of light rail in Tel Aviv. Israel has just over 300 cars per 1,000 people, and privately-owned vehicle use is rapidly growing, which has caused some traffic and congestion in cities. In 2022, officials unveiled a plan to cut traffic in half by incentivizing use of bikes, buses, and trains.

Roadways: Israel has just over 12,000 mi of roads and 280 mi of expressways, nearly all of which are paved. Israeli roadways are well maintained and connect most major cities and towns. In recent years, roadway construction has generally kept pace with the growing number of cars. Israel strictly controls its road border crossings into Syria, Lebanon, and the Palestinian Territory of Gaza due to a history of conflict and violence near these borders. The Israeli Defense Forces also manages numerous road checkpoints between Israel and the West Bank.

Railways: Israel has just under 1,000 mi of railways that connect major cities and carry both passengers and freight. Government-run Israel Railways operates some 69 stations and about 700 daily trains throughout Israel. Expansion of rail infrastructure has focused on connecting coastal cities to Jerusalem and other less well-connected cities in the country's interior. To make rail more

environmentally friendly, Israel Railways has begun converting some routes to electric rails and locomotives.

Ports and Waterways: While Israel has no major navigable waterways, it has about 170 mi of coastline, primarily on the Mediterranean Sea. Major ports include Haifa, Ashdod, and Hadera on the Mediterranean and Eilat on the Red Sea. Over 97% of Israeli cargo arrives via sea due to Israel's tightly controlled land borders and contentious relations with neighboring countries (see p. 9-13 of *Political and Social Relations*).

Airways: Of Israel's 42 airports, 33 have paved runways. The country's largest is Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion Airport, which welcomed some 18 million passengers in 2022. Israel has 6 airlines, the largest of which is national flag carrier ***El Al*** ("Upwards"), which offers direct service to 37 destinations and connections to hundreds more with its fleet of 42 aircraft. In 2018, 7.4 million passengers traveled on Israeli air carriers.

Energy

In 2021, Israel generated some 93% of its energy from fossil fuels. Although Israel produces some natural gas, it does not exploit its minor oil reserves and generates all its electricity domestically. Recent efforts have focused on increasing solar, wind, biomass, and other renewable energy production.

Media

In a 2023 press-freedom ranking, Israel had the Middle East's freest press, ranking 97th of 180 countries. Israel's constitution provides for freedom of press, and Israeli media are often outspoken and critical of the government. However, officials and political parties sometimes threaten and harass journalists and media outlets. The government often censors coverage of military or security issues, especially those related to Palestine. As a result, self-censorship is common. In 2019, out of 8,127 stories submitted for review, Israeli officials partially redacted 1,973 news items and fully barred the publication of 202 others.

Print Media: While readership of print media had been in decline for years, it recently rebounded slightly. Newspapers in Israel are privately owned and tend to reflect political positions. Popular Hebrew-language national dailies are *Haaretz*, *Yedioth Aharonot*, and *Israel Hayom*. English-language newspapers include *The Jerusalem Post*, *Haaretz English*, and *The Times of Israel*.

TV and Radio: The state-run Israeli Broadcasting Corporation (IBC) broadcasts three national TV channels, two in Hebrew and one in Arabic. Israel has many privately owned TV channels that broadcast news, sports, and entertainment programming. Israelis have access to hundreds of foreign channels via widely available satellite and cable packages, including the prominent English-language channel, *I24 News*. The IBC also operates eight major radio stations, and the Israeli Defense Forces Radio operates others (see p. 6-7 of *Political and Social Relations*). Israel also has 15 privately operated radio stations that broadcast news, music, and entertainment. *Israel News Talk Radio* is a prominent English-language station.

Telecommunications

Israel has one of the Middle East's most advanced telecommunications networks, including an ongoing rollout of 5G networks. In 2021, Israel had some 39 landlines and 140 mobile cellular subscriptions per 100 people.

Internet: In 2021, about 90% of Israelis used the Internet, and most rely on their mobile devices for access. Although Israelis have open and unrestricted access to the Internet, government officials have increasingly censored issues related to Palestine (see p. 15 of *Political and Social Relations*). Israeli officials often send content removal requests to social media and tech companies, and a bill proposed and approved in late 2021 expands the government's power to censor speech online.

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