

### Israel: Country and Culture

#### Introduction

Israel is a republic on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea that borders Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt. A Jewish nation among Arab and Christian neighbors, Israel is a cultural melting pot that reflects the many immigrants who founded it.

Population: 8,002,300 people  
 Capital: Jerusalem  
 Languages: Hebrew and Arabic  
 Currency: Israeli New Shekel



Flag of Israel

#### History

Long considered a homeland by various names—Canaan, Judea, Palestine, and Israel—for Jews, Arabs, and Christians, Great Britain was given control of the territory in 1922 to establish a national home for the Jewish people. Thousands of Jews immigrated there between 1920 and 1930 and laid the foundation for communities of cooperative villages known as “kibbutzim.”

A kibbutz is a cooperative village or community, where all property is collectively owned and all members contribute labor to the group. Members work according to their capacity and receive food, clothing, housing, medical services, and other domestic services in exchange. Dining rooms, kitchens, and stores are central, and schools and children’s dormitories are communal. Assemblies elected by a vote of the membership govern each village, and the communal wealth of each village is earned through agricultural, entrepreneurial, or industrial means.

The first kibbutz was founded on the bank of the Jordan River in 1909. This type of community was necessary for the early Jewish immigrants to Palestine. By living and working collectively, they were able to build homes and establish systems to irrigate and farm the barren desert land.

At the beginning of the 1930s a large influx of Jewish immigrants came to Palestine from Germany because of the onset of World War II. At the end of World War II, on May 14th, 1948, Israel declared its independence and became a United Nations-recognized country. Many kibbutzim, established along Israel’s frontiers after independence in 1948, were essential in defending the new nation.

#### Geography and Climate

At a crossroads between Asia, Africa, and Europe, Israel is divided into four geographic regions: the Mediterranean coastal plain, the Central Hills, the Jordan Rift Valley, and the Negev Desert.

The Mediterranean coastal plain is home to most of Israel’s population. This region is fertile, humid, and known for citrus orchards. It stretches along the Mediterranean coast from the border with Lebanon in the north to Gaza in the south.

The Central Hills is a mountainous region east of the coastal plain. Between the rolling hills in this region lie fertile valleys dotted with orchards and small farms. The northern section of this region is known as the Galilean hills, with mountains that average 2,000 feet in elevation.



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Farther east lies the Jordan Rift Valley, which runs along Israel's eastern border. This area is dominated by the Jordan River, the Sea of Galilee, and the Dead Sea. The Rift Valley is the largest source of fresh water in the region and has deep symbolic importance to Israelis, as it marked the end of their biblical journey from slavery in Egypt. It serves as the boundary between the West Bank and Jordan, giving it political significance as well. The Jordan River flows south into the freshwater Sea of Galilee and on to the Dead Sea, one of the saltiest seas on Earth.



An acacia tree in the Negev Desert

The Negev Desert is a triangular region of low, rocky hills in southern Israel. This area comprises more than half of Israel's total land area. The northern and western Negev are the most hospitable, averaging eleven inches of rain per year, while the south is mostly barren land.

### People and Culture

About 75% of Israel's population are Jewish, with the remainder being primarily Muslim and Christian. Because of the influx of Jews from around the world following World War II, the region's population represents diverse cultural backgrounds. Within the Jewish population, there are two ethnic groups: Ashkenazi Jews of European descent and Sephardi Jews who emigrated from Arab countries.



The city of Jerusalem around the Dome of the Rock, an important area for Jews, Muslims, and Christians

Modern Hebrew and Arabic are both official languages of Israel. Modern Hebrew is derived from the Hebrew spoken from the 10th to 7th centuries BCE. Despite periods of near extinction as a spoken language, Hebrew has been preserved through the Jewish religious texts, such as the Torah, and the spoken language experienced a revival in the late 19th century.

Despite the cultural significance of the kibbutzim in rural settlements, today Israel is one of the most urbanized countries in the world, with 92% of the population living in cities or large towns. The three major metropolitan areas are Tel Aviv, Haifa, and Jerusalem. Tel Aviv is the commercial center of Israel and boasts all of the cultural institutions of a modern city, such as theaters, museums, and universities. Jerusalem is the capital of Israel and is a holy city to Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Haifa, on the Mediterranean in northern Israel, is the country's largest port and an industrial center. It is also home to Mount Carmel, the global center of the Baha'i faith.

### Food

Israeli food is a blend of Middle Eastern and European flavors, demonstrating the multicultural influences in the country. Chickpeas form the base of two popular Israeli dishes: falafel and hummus. Falafel are deep fried balls of ground chickpeas, and hummus is a dip made of ground chickpeas and sesame paste. European Jewish influence is evident in such dishes as matzoh ball soup, a traditional holiday soup with dumplings in a chicken broth.



Falafel shop in Israel

### Resources

National Geographic Kids: Israel

<http://kids.nationalgeographic.com/kids/places/find/israel/>

Jewish Community Relations Council

[www.jcrboston.org/focus/support/resources/links-learn-more-about.html](http://www.jcrboston.org/focus/support/resources/links-learn-more-about.html)

Epicurious: Falafel Recipe

[www.epicurious.com/recipes/food/views/My-Favorite-Falafel-231755](http://www.epicurious.com/recipes/food/views/My-Favorite-Falafel-231755)

Learn more at [www.artsmidwestworldfest.org](http://www.artsmidwestworldfest.org)

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## Study Guide Israeli Language and Culture

### Let's learn about Israel!

Did you know that cell phones were invented in Israel? What about the fact that Israel has 11 basic laws instead of a constitution? Were you aware that Israel provides free critical heart surgery to children in developing countries through its "Save a Child's Heart" organization?

There are so many cool things about Israel that people are not aware of. Many people hear the word "Israel" and immediately think "Arab-Israeli Conflict," "current events," or "war." But Israel is so much more than a country with political concerns; Israel has a personality of its own. It has foods, music, science, and art unique to the country.

### Israel becomes a country

In July of 1922, Great Britain was given control of Palestine in order to form a Jewish national home. Thousands of Jews immigrated there between 1920 and 1930. These immigrants laid the foundation for the community, providing labor, schooling, and other necessities. At the beginning of the 1930's a large influx of Jewish immigrants came to Palestine from Germany because of the onset of World War II. At the end of World War II, on May 14th 1948, Israel declared its independence and became a United Nations recognized country.

### Language of Israel

Hebrew is a Semitic language of the Afro-Asiatic language family. Modern Hebrew is spoken by more than seven million people in Israel and Classical Hebrew is used for prayer or study in Jewish communities around the world. It is one of the official languages of Israel, along with Arabic. Hebrew is also spoken as a mother tongue by the Samaritans, though today fewer than a thousand Samaritans remain. As a foreign language it is studied mostly by students of Judaism and Israel, archaeologists and linguists specializing in the Middle East and its civilizations and by theologians.



The Hebrew Alphabet

The Hebrew alphabet consists of 22 letters and is written from right to left. Five of these letters have a different form when appearing as the last letter in a word. Keep in mind that the Hebrew language is written and read from right to left, so the first letter of the alphabet is Alef and the last is Tav.

### The Geography

Israel is divided into four physiographic regions: the Mediterranean coastal plain, the Central Hills, the Jordan Rift Valley and the Negev Desert

#### Mediterranean Coastal Plain

The Coastal Plain stretches from the Lebanese border in the north to Gaza in the south. It is about 25 miles wide at Gaza and narrows toward the north to about 3 miles at the Lebanese border. The region is fertile and humid is known for its citrus orchards. The plain is traversed by several short streams, two of which have prominent water flows.

#### The Central Hills

Inland, east of the coastal plain, lies the central highland region. In the north of this region lie the mountains and hills of Upper Galilee and Lower Galilee which range in height from 1,640 ft to 3,963 ft. South of the Galilee, in the West

Bank, are the Samarian Hills with numerous small, fertile valleys rarely reaching the height of 2,625 ft. South of Jerusalem, also mainly within the West Bank, are the largely barren Judean Hills, including Mount Hebron.

### Jordan Rift Valley

East of the central highlands lies the Jordan Rift Valley. In Israel the Rift Valley is dominated by the Jordan River, the Sea of Galilee, also known as Lake Tiberias, and the Dead Sea. The Jordan, Israel's largest river, originates in the Dan, Baniyas, and Hasbani rivers near Mount Hermon in the Anti-Lebanon Mountains and flows south through the drained Hula Basin into the freshwater Lake Tiberias. Lake Tiberias serves as the principal reservoir of the National Water Carrier (also known as the Kinneret-Negev Conduit). The Jordan River continues its course from the southern end of Lake Tiberias (forming the boundary between the West Bank and Jordan) to the incredibly salty Dead Sea.

### Negev Desert

The Negev Desert comprises approximately 4,633 sq mi, more than half of Israel's total land area. Unique to the Negev region are the craterlike makhteshim cirques; Makhtesh Ramon, Makhtesh Gadol and Makhtesh Katan. The Negev is also sub-divided into five different ecological regions: northern, western and central Negev, the high plateau and the Arabah Valley. The Northern and Western Negev are the most hospitable, averaging eleven inches of rain a year.

### The Kibbutz

Kibbutz is a cooperative village or community in Israel, where all property is collectively owned and work is organized on a collective basis. Members contribute by working according to their capacity and in return receive food, clothing, housing, medical services, and other domestic services. Dining rooms, kitchens and stores are central, and schools and children's dormitories are communal. Each village is governed by an elected assembly and by a vote of the membership. A kibbutz may support itself through agricultural, entrepreneurial or industrial means.

The first kibbutz was founded on the bank of the Jordan River in 1909. This type of community was necessary to the early Jewish immigrants to Palestine. By living and working collectively, they were able to build homes and begin to irrigate and farm the barren desert land. Each person could contribute individual abilities to the growth of the community. Many kibbutzim were established along Israel's frontiers after independence in 1948, and they were essential in defending the new nation.

### Additional Resources

The Jewish Children's Learning Network  
[www.akhlah.com](http://www.akhlah.com)

Jewish Community Relations Council  
[www.jcrcboston.org/focus/support/resources/links-learn-more-about.html](http://www.jcrcboston.org/focus/support/resources/links-learn-more-about.html)

Israel for Kids  
[www.israelemb.org/kids/index.html](http://www.israelemb.org/kids/index.html)

Virtual dig with the Israel Museum, Jerusalem  
[2002.imj.org.il/arc-tel](http://2002.imj.org.il/arc-tel)

Learn Hebrew  
[www.learn-hebrew.co.il](http://www.learn-hebrew.co.il)



Map of Israel from the CIA's World Factbook entry on Israel



Flag of Israel