# Israel COUNTRY & 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 Sheckel

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.

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

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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.

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.

An acacia tree in the Negev Desert

## 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. 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.

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

## 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.

## Additional Resources

**National Geographic Kids: Israel**
http://kids.nationalgeographic.com/kids/places/find/israel/

**Jewish Community Relations Council**
www.jcrcboston.org/focus/support/resources/links-learn-more-about.html

**Epicurious: Falafel Recipe**
www.epicurious.com/recipes/food/views/My-Favorite-Falafel-231755

**John Jacobson's Musical Planet: Israel**
https://youtu.be/RoUS2ssE-Zk

Falafel shop in Israel