



# Israel and Palestinian territories

## Introduction

Area (Israel): 20,072 square kilometers (7,750 square miles)

Area (Palestinian territories): 6,335 square kilometers (2,446 square miles)

Languages: Hebrew, Arabic

Currency: new Israeli shekel (ILS), Jordanian dinar (JOD)

Location: Middle East, bordered by Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, with coastline on the Mediterranean Sea

## Statistical Information

### Israel

Population	7.2 million
Birth rate	18 births/1,000
Death rate	6 deaths/1,000
Fertility rate	2.4 children/woman
Pop. growth rate	1.154 percent
Life expectancy	79.6 years
Literacy	97.1 percent
Below poverty line	21.6 percent

### Palestinian territories

Population	3.8 million
Birth rate	34 births/1,000
Death rate	4 deaths/1,000
Fertility rate	4.8 children/woman
Pop. growth rate	3.255 percent
Life expectancy	73 years
Literacy	92.4 percent
Below poverty line	59.6 percent

## Government

### Israel

Capital: Jerusalem, though most foreign embassies are in Tel Aviv

The role of the Israeli president is mainly ceremonial; executive power is vested in the cabinet, headed by the prime minister. On June 13, 2007, the Israeli parliament chose the veteran politician Shimon Peres

to succeed Moshe Katsav, who had taken leave of absence from the presidency earlier in the year after being accused of various sexual offenses. Katsav formally resigned on June 29. Though the presidency is largely ceremonial, in the past Israelis have seen the president as the nation's moral compass. Many hope that Peres would restore dignity to what they saw as a tarnished office. President Peres was a leading member of the Labor party for decades, but left in 2005; he later joined the centrist Kadima party. He has been prime minister twice, and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1994 in recognition of his role in the signing of Israel's first interim peace accord with the Palestine Liberation Organization the previous year.

Israel's current prime minister, Ehud Olmert, took over the position from Ariel Sharon when Sharon suffered a major stroke in January 2006. Elections had been called before Sharon became ill. The new prime minister faced his first real test in July of 2006, when Israel waged a military campaign lasting several weeks against Hezbollah guerrillas in Lebanon. Political opponents alleged shortcomings in the conduct of the war. The prime minister said the offensive had destroyed much of Hezbollah's weaponry and infrastructure. Olmert wishes to establish permanent borders for Israel, which would involve a withdrawal from parts of the West Bank and the absorption into Israel of several big Jewish settlement blocs in the occupied territories. The plan would be implemented irregardless of an accord with the Palestinians.

Ariel Sharon, prime minister from 2001 until January 2006, played an important role in Israeli politics and foreign policy. He founded the centrist Kadima party after he left the right-wing Likud party in late 2005. Peace with the Palestinians and Israeli security were to be the main goals of the new party. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert also left the Likud party for the Kadima party.

In 2002, Sharon's government decided to build a 640-kilometer (397-mile) barrier along the Israel-West Bank border, maintaining that the structure was necessary to protect Israel from Palestinian suicide bombers. The International Court of Justice said the barrier breached international law, partially because it was being constructed on West Bank territory, which is on Palestinian land. Many international observers believe the real purpose of the barrier is to separate Palestinians from family and friends. The barrier is therefore labeled either a separation wall or a security barrier, depending upon the perspective of the person doing the labeling. Many Israelis and all Palestinians believe the barrier is nothing more than a ruse to hide an egregious land grab.

While he was prime minister, Sharon also pursued a plan to evacuate more than 8,000 Israeli settlers from the Gaza Strip. He said the August 2005 withdrawal, which angered some pro-settlement activists, was intended to make Israel safer and could help revive an international peace plan.

#### *Palestinian territories (West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem)*

Capital: East Jerusalem is the intended seat of government for the Palestinian territories

Former Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas, the candidate of the Fatah faction, won the January 2005 poll to replace the late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, who died in a French hospital on November 11, 2004, at the age of 75. Abbas, also known as Abu Mazen, had already succeeded Yasser Arafat as leader of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), having been Arafat's deputy since 1969. Mahmoud Abbas was born in 1935 in Safed, a town in present-day northern Israel. He co-founded Fatah, the main political grouping within the PLO, with Yasser Arafat in the late 1950s. His brief stint as premier was plagued by power struggles with Arafat over the control of the Palestinian security apparatus and over planned reforms. Abbas resigned from the office of premier in September of 2003.

The surprise victory of the militant Islamic movement Hamas in parliamentary polls in January 2006 led to heightened tension between the Palestinian factions. There were recurring bouts of violence between Hamas and the Fatah faction, raising fears of civil war. In February 2007, Hamas and Fatah agreed to form a government of national unity. In response to the Hamas victory, Israel, the United States, and the European Union froze most of the financial aid coming into the Palestinian territories. Israel withheld proceeds from taxes on

goods imported through shared seaports. This resulted in a financial crisis within the Palestinian government. In June 2007, Hamas took control of the Gaza strip, seriously challenging the concept of a coalition government. Abbas subsequently dissolved the coalition.

Many analysts regard Mahmoud Abbas as a moderate. He has condemned the armed Palestinian uprising and favors the resumption of negotiations with Israel. He established contacts with left-wing Israelis in the 1970s and was the main Palestinian architect of the 1993 Oslo accords, which led to the foundation of the Palestinian Authority.

Abbas faces the challenge of persuading armed groups to stop their campaign of anti-Israeli attacks. These attacks are seen on the Israeli side as acts of terrorism and on the Palestinian side as an armed resistance to Israeli occupation. Either way, the result is an impasse that continues to stand in the way of any kind of peaceful solution. Both sides accuse the other of targeting civilians.

#### **Climate**

The region's climate is Mediterranean, with hot, dry summers and short, wet, cool winters. Mountainous areas usually have cool summer nights. Because of regional differences, temperature and rainfall vary depending on the topographic area. Areas include the coastal plain, the Jordan valley, the eastern slopes, the central highlands, and the semi-coastal zone. Rain usually falls between November and March with occasional snowstorms in the mountainous areas.

#### **Environmental Concerns**

Israel and the Palestinian territories have limited amounts of arable land and fresh water resources, which are decreasing due to desertification. Groundwater pollution from industrial and domestic wastes, chemical fertilizers, and pesticides are also a problem.

#### **History**

Palestine is one of the traditional names for the lands of the Bible. Other names include: Holy Land, the Promised Land, Israel, and Canaan. The name Palestine comes from the Philistines, an ancient culture also known as "the Sea Peoples," and was originally used just for the southern coastal area where the Philistines settled. The Greek historian Herodotus was the first to use the Greek Philistia in a wider sense. This name was reintroduced by the Roman emperor Hadrian to rid the region of its Jewish associations.

Setting aside modern political disputes between Palestinians and Israelis, the name Palestine has traditionally been used for the region between the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. As the western tip of the Fertile Crescent, it has often included the fertile, inhabited land east of the Jordan River as well.

The region of Palestine has always been relatively poor in natural resources, but it lay in a strategic location on the crossroads of the ancient world. Human history here goes back 500,000 years or more. In ancient history, it was a crossroads for religion, culture, commerce, and politics. Armies and caravans passed over its roads and lands for millennia, often meeting there and doing battle. Egyptians, Hebrews, Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Crusaders, the Ottomans, the British, and more have ruled Palestine over the years.

It is important to understand, but difficult to convey, just how close everything in this region can be. People are familiar with the names of places like Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Megiddo, and Galilee, but fewer realize just how short the distances between these places can be. Often just a few kilometers separate one from the other, a journey that would have been relatively easy to make on foot for travelers of the ancient world.

The division of the former British mandate of Palestine and the creation of the State of Israel in the years after the end of World War II have been at the heart of Middle Eastern conflicts for the past half century. The creation of Israel was the culmination of the Zionist movement, whose aim was a homeland for Jewish people scattered all over the world following the Diaspora. After the Nazi Holocaust, pressure grew for the international recognition of a Jewish state, and in 1948 the State of Israel came into being. Much of the history of the region since that time has been one of conflict between Israel on one side and Palestinians, represented by the Palestine Liberation Organization, and Israel's Arab neighbors, on the other. Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians have been displaced, and several wars were fought involving Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon.

Palestinians in the West Bank, including those living in East Jerusalem, have lived under Israeli occupation since 1967. The Jewish settlements that Israel has built in the West Bank are home to around 400,000 people; they are deemed illegal under international law, although Israel disputes this.

In 2005, Israel evacuated its settlers from the Gaza Strip and withdrew its forces, ending almost four decades of military occupation. Since then, Israel has walled in the Gaza Strip and stopped the flow of most goods, services, and people into and out of Gaza, including access from the sea.

Egypt and Israel signed a peace agreement in 1979, but it wasn't until the early 1990s, after years of an uprising known as the Intifada, that a peace process began with the Palestinians. Despite the handover of Gaza and parts of the West Bank to Palestinian control, an agreement spelling out the Palestinian territories' final status has yet to be reached. Israel continues to retain the right to enter the Palestinian territories whenever it deems necessary for the purpose of Israel's security.

The main stumbling blocks to Israeli-Palestinian agreements include the status of Jerusalem and the fate of Palestinian refugees and Jewish settlements.

### **Ethnic Groups**

Depending upon whether or not non-Israeli citizens permanently living in the State of Israel are included in the total population, and depending upon exactly which geographic land boundaries are used, somewhere between half and three-fourths of the State of Israel's population is Jewish. Many people with Jewish heritage are secular and do not practice any religion. Throughout history, the Jews have been a heavily persecuted people. After World War II, masses of Holocaust survivors and Jews fleeing Arab lands immigrated to the new State of Israel. Jewish Israelis speak both Hebrew and Arabic. Nearly all ethnic Jews in Israel identify themselves with Judaism as part of their cultural identity. Israeli Jews are considered Mizrahi, or Eastern Jews, while European Jews are Ashkenazi. In the early days of Israel, Ashkenazi Jews believed themselves superior to Mizrahi or Sephardic (Spanish) Jews, and Mizrahi and Sephardic Jews were often victims of discrimination.

A significant portion of the State of Israel's population is Arab. This includes both Arab Muslims and Arab Christians. Many Israeli Arabs have family ties to people living in the West Bank or Gaza Strip, or to other Arab nations such as Jordan. Israeli Arabs speak Arabic as their first language, and consider themselves the indigenous people in Israel, although the Jewish population disagrees. Israeli Arabs live with constant tension between their Palestinian Arab ethnicity and their status as residents of the State of Israel. As one Israeli Arab aptly observed, "My state is at war with my nation."

Within the Palestinian territories, most of the population is Palestinian. In the Gaza Strip nearly all the residents are Palestinians; the State of Israel removed Israeli settlers from the Gaza Strip in 2005. In the West Bank, Israelis remain in several large Jewish settlements, which comprise maybe 15 percent of the West Bank's total population. These settlements are not viewed as legal by the international community or by the Palestinian government.

### **Religion**

The region is holy to three monotheistic faith traditions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The Old City of Jerusalem, for example, has sacred sites that are important to adherents of all three faiths. For Judaism, Jerusalem is the holiest of holy places. For Christians, Jerusalem is the place of the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. For Muslims, Jerusalem is the third holiest place on earth.

Dotted throughout the region are numerous sites that are important for Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The Israeli Antiquities Ministry has established national parks on many of these places: Masada, Qumran, Gamla, Caesarea Maritime, and Megiddo, to name a few. Christian sites like Capernaum, Peter's Primacy, Tabgah, the Mount of Beatitudes, and Mount Tabor are just a few places that are considered holy by various Christian denominations. The Dome of the Rock, the Al Aqsa Mosque, and Abraham's Mosque are some of the places the Muslim community holds sacred. Visitors have no end to choices which help connect a person to their religious heritage, as well as the history of sister faiths.

Christianity is not a majority religion in Israel or the Palestinian territories. Most Christians in Israel are either Arabs or people of other nationalities come to work and worship in Israel. There are very few Jewish Christians. There are also around 10,000 Messianic Jews in the State of Israel, many of them immigrants from the former U.S.S.R.

### **Dress**

Jewish men wear a black skullcap known as a *yarmulke* for prayers; more observant Jewish men wear them at all times. Conservative Jewish men wear black hats, whereas more liberal men wear white crocheted caps. In strict Orthodox communities, men dress all in black and wear *peyes*, or long sidelocks of hair. Jewish women keep their heads covered. Secular or less conservative Jews wear western-style clothing.

Muslim Arabs, and some Christian Arabs, wear traditional Muslim dress, which consists of long robes and a turban or other headdress for men, and a long robe that covers the head and entire body for women.

### **Travel/Transportation**

Roads and highways in Israel and the Palestinian territories tend to be very crowded, especially in major cities.

Roads in the West Bank are strictly segregated according to license plate. Cars with Israeli license plates drive on one set of roads; those with Palestinian license plates drive on another set of roads. The Israeli roads have all been constructed in the past ten years, while the Palestinian roads were constructed prior to 1967.

During the winter, drivers must have their headlights on at all times of the day and night when driving in the city. All passengers in a car must wear seat belts. Every driver must carry an orange fluorescent vest in their car, and must wear the vest if they get out of the car to change a tire or make a repair. Drivers stopped for traffic violations will receive a fine if they do not have a vest in their car. Nearly all Israeli gas stations sell these vests. It is illegal to use a cell phone while driving.

### **Illness/Injury**

Modern medical care and hospitals are available. Consult the *Jerusalem Post* or the English-language edition of the *Ha'aretz* newspapers for information about emergency medical facilities and pharmacies.

### **Crime**

The crime rate in Israel and the Palestinian territories is moderate. Thefts from parked vehicles may occur at beaches, the Dead Sea, and national parks. Visitors should not leave valuables unattended in vehicles. Pickpocketing or purse-snatching may occur in large cities or crowded tourist areas.

### **Entry/Exit Requirements**

To enter Israel, Americans must hold a passport valid for at least six months and an onward or return ticket. A renewable three-month visa will be issued upon arrival. Travelers with diplomatic passports should obtain a visa prior to their arrival in Israel.

### **Immunizations**

There are no required immunizations for travelers to Israel or the Palestinian territories. The region has a high level of hepatitis A transmission and an intermediate to high level of hepatitis B transmission.

Travelers may wish to consider being vaccinated for both hepatitis A and B.

### **Special Circumstances**

Video cameras, laptops, and other electronic equipment should be declared upon arrival in Israel. Security-related delays are common, and security personnel may confiscate electronic equipment. Most effects are returned prior to departure.

#### *Media—State of Israel*

Israel's press and broadcasters are many and varied, and account for differences in language, political viewpoint, and religious outlook. The Israel Broadcasting Authority (IBA), set up along the lines of the BBC, operates public radio and TV services and is funded mainly by license fees on TV sets. Channel 2 and Israel 10 are the main commercial TV networks. Most Israeli households subscribe to cable or satellite packages. Commercial radio arrived in 1995, but faces competition from unlicensed radio stations, some of which carry ultra-Orthodox programming. All Israeli newspapers are privately owned, and many are available on the Internet. In its 2007 report, media rights watchdog Reporters Without Borders said Israel's journalists "enjoy a freedom not found elsewhere in the region" but added that Palestinian journalists "faced many restrictions by the Israeli authorities."

#### *Media—Palestinian territories*

Television is the key source for news and information in the Palestinian areas. Official broadcasting is run by the Palestinian Broadcasting Corporation (PBC), which operates *Voice of Palestine* radio, and *Palestine TV*. These outlets came under the jurisdiction of the Palestinian president in early 2006; the move was seen as an attempt to prevent the new Hamas-dominated government from exerting control over the official media. There are dozens of private TV and radio stations. Residents of the West Bank often watch Jordanian TV. Pan-Arab satellite broadcasters, including Qatar's *Al-Jazeera TV*, are popular. International watchdogs regard the media as being generally more independent than in much of the rest of the Arab world. However, journalists risk harassment, attack, or arrest by the security services, armed activists, or militant groups. Self-censorship is widespread. Media rights watchdog Reporters Without Borders said in 2007 that Palestinian and foreign journalists were the "victims of fierce clashes" between Hamas and Fatah.

### **Electricity**

Israel and the Palestinian territories use 220V/50Hz electricity, which means that a power converter is

necessary to use some American appliances, which are designed to run on a lower voltage. A set of plug adapters will also be necessary to convert American types A and B (flat-pin) plugs to fit in Israeli type-C (round-pin) receptacles. Most cell phone chargers and laptop computers can be used without a power converter.