

Israel's Liberal Democracy

In a region of autocracies and theocracies, [Israel](#) shines as a beacon of freedom and hope in the Middle East. Its diverse culture, open society and guaranteed civil and political liberties for all citizens, regardless of race, religion, gender or creed, follows closely to Western democratic tradition. It's liberal democracy, in fact, is the main reason that Israel has been able to have remarkable economic development despite being in a neighborhood surrounded by uncompromising enemies.

Israel's Population

The people of Israel come from more than 100 countries. They represent diverse ethnic, religious, and racial groups. Roughly half the [population](#) has origins in Africa, the Middle East and Asia.

Of Israel's 7.8 million residents, 75.5 percent are Jews, 20.2 percent are Arabs (mostly [Muslim](#) but also some [Christians](#)), and 4.3 percent include [Druze](#), [Baha'is](#), Circassians and others not classified by religion.

Israel's Arab citizens enjoy equal rights with Jewish citizens of the state. [Israeli Arabs](#) participate in all aspects of Israeli life, from menial jobs to [Supreme Court justices](#). In fact, [Abdel Rahman Zuabi](#), the first Arab to sit on the Supreme Court, took his seat on March 3, 1999, and in May 2004, [Salim Jubran](#) was selected as the first Arab to hold a permanent appointment as a Supreme Court Justice.

[Hebrew](#) and Arabic are the two official languages of the state.

Guaranteed Civil Liberties

All the freedoms and liberties that Americans hold dear from their bill of rights and constitution, are equally protected in Israel.

Israelis enjoy freedom of speech and press, freedom of assembly and the right to petition government, and, most importantly, the freedom of religion.

Freedom of Speech & Press

Israel's [free press](#) is one of the most vibrant in the world. Unlike the mostly government-controlled media outlets in the region, Israeli journalists can report on all aspects of Israeli life, and do not hesitate to criticize their government's failings. Journalists in neighboring

Arab countries who expressed similar views about the Palestinian Authority or other Middle Eastern regimes, for example, would likely face arrest — or worse.

Many major news outlets from around the world - including the BBC, CNN and Fox News - station their Middle East bureaus and correspondents in Israel. One reason is because Israel is so well-known for its genuine freedom of speech and the press. News media experts know that about Israel and feel more comfortable basing their enterprises in Israel than in other, less-free parts of the region.

Freedom of Assembly & Petition

Israel also recognizes the freedom of assembly and the right to petition the government without the threat of harassment or imprisonment.

Over the past few decades, millions of Israelis have turned out for all sorts of political rallies - sometimes voicing support for their government and, very often, to bitterly protest its policies.

In 2005, Israeli's led tens of large-scale demonstrations through the streets of Jerusalem protesting the government's decision to unilaterally withdraw from the Gaza Strip. From 2007 to 2011, thousands of Israeli's joined in protests together with the Shalit family in voicing their concern that the government was not doing enough to bring home their captured son, IDF soldier Gilad Shalit. And, in July 2011, hundreds of thousands of Israeli's from all walks of life, socio-economic and religious backgrounds demonstrated in the streets of Tel Aviv against the rising cost of living and the breakdown of public services such as education and healthcare.

While Arab residents of Muslim Middle East nations made international headlines across the world for finally taking to the street in the face of brutal repression to protest their tyrannical rulers, Israeli's have been freely protesting all sorts of political choices ever since the creation of the state.

Freedom of Religion

Israel's [Declaration of Independence](#) guarantees [freedom of religion](#) for all, regardless of which religion one may choose.

Each religious community in Israel has the right to found its own religious schools, councils, and courts, and they are even given jurisdiction to preside over matters of personal status such as marriage and divorce. The holy places of each religion are controlled by officials of that faith, not the Israeli government.

A popular slogan is that [Jerusalem](#) should be free and accessible to all faiths. Indeed it should be — but it has only had such openness since Israel assumed responsibility for the entire city in 1967. Today, Muslims, Jews, Christians, Bahai's, Druze and all others are free to pray at any of their holy sites.

Women's Rights

Israel is the only country in the Middle East that provides full equality for [women](#). In the Palestinian Authority and most Arab states, women are treated as second-class citizens, often denied the right to vote or work in most fields, and, in the case of [Saudi Arabia](#), they are not even allowed to drive a car. Worse, abuse of women, such as “honor killings” and spousal rape, is tolerated and accepted in society.

Women in Israel are protected by law from discrimination and abuse, and they have been engaged in all walks of life, from homemaker to combat soldier to prime minister. In September 2006, Dorit Beinisch was sworn in as Israel's first female Supreme Court President. In 2011, a tradition of women graduating from the Israeli Air Force's elite fighter pilot school reached a new high when five recruits successfully finished the intensive training.

Additionally, women comprise nearly 51% of all magistrate and district court judges, making it very likely that more women will be appointed to the Supreme Court in the future. Additionally, more than 44% of all lawyers registered in Israel are women.

Gay & Lesbian Equality

Israel is one of the most progressive countries in the world in terms of recognizing differences based on sexual orientation. Israeli law forbids discrimination based on sexual orientation.

In 2006, Israel hosted "Love Without Borders: WorldPride," a weeklong event organized by LGBT activists from around the world. In 2012, Israel's largest city, Tel Aviv, was named the World's Best Gay City by participants in an international competition. The Israeli city garnered a whopping 43 percent of votes in the online survey, ranking it far above other, more famous places such as New York City, Sydney and San Francisco.

By contrast, homosexuals are not protected in Arab and Muslim states, and they are often imprisoned and sometimes executed. In the Palestinian Authority, sodomy carries a jail term of three to 10 years.



Politics & Elections

Israel's [elections](#) are a model of the democratic process.

While the United States has only two major parties that are often criticized for being too similar, Israeli voters typically have more than a dozen [parties](#) to choose from, representing a wide variety of political views. After the most recent election in 2009, 15 different parties won representation in the [Knesset](#), including three Arab parties with eight representatives.

Additionally, Israel's political parties represent a wide range of views - their are Jewish nationalistic parties, secular and religious parties, communist parties, green leaf parties, Arab and Jewish parties and a slew of others.

Israel's Democracy in Comparison

Arabs living under the oppression of the [Palestinian Authority](#) and [Hamas](#) in [Gaza](#) do not enjoy these rights nearly to the extent that people living in Israel do, so it is not surprising that, despite their grievances, Palestinians tell pollsters the nation they admire most is Israel, and Israeli Arabs say they prefer to live in Israel rather than in a Palestinian state.

Israel is not a perfect society. While Israelis enjoy far greater freedom than any of their neighbors, they have not achieved the equality in all areas to which they aspire, but that is true of the United States and all the other western democracies as well. If the United States has not yet achieved this goal in more than 200 years, no one should be surprised that Israel has fallen short in just 56, but the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness for all Israeli citizens continues.