

Israel - Minority Rights Group

Main minority groups: According to 2016 data from the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (ICBS), of a total population of over 8.5 million, around 1.8 million (20.8 per cent) are Palestinian citizens of Israel (including Muslims, Palestinian Christians, Circassians and Druze), compared to 6.4 million Jews (74.8 per cent), with a small proportion of 'others' (non-Palestinian Christians and members of other religions).

Main minority religions: Israeli government estimates suggest that just over 1.5 million (17.6 per cent) are Muslims, 167,100 Christians (2 per cent) and 138,300 Druze (1.6 per cent) (ICBS, 2016).

The main languages are Hebrew (official) and Arabic ('special status'), as well as English, Russian and Yiddish. Arabic was one of Israel's official languages until the 'nation-state' law was adopted by the Knesset in July 2018.

Today, Palestinian citizens of Israel constitute around just over a fifth of the total population, a share that is growing due to its relative youth and higher birth rates. Nevertheless, Israel remains 'the State of the Jewish people' and not the state of all its citizens.

Jewish Israel was composed of immigrants from more than 100 countries, with their own languages, ethnicity, social and cultural practices and religious rites. In that sense it is difficult to talk of Jewish 'minorities'. Powerful cohesive forces, namely hostility from neighbouring countries, Jewish faith, Israeli nationality and an impressively revived language and literature, all helped to forge the new nation. Almost a quarter of the country's Jewish population were born outside Israel. Nevertheless, two broad issues affect Jewish society: cultural origin and religious adherence. Hierarchies consequently exist even within the Jewish population, with Mizrahi (Middle East and North African origin) and Ethiopian Jews facing significant social and economic marginalization compared to Ashkenazim (European-origin Jews).

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The Israeli government has attracted widespread condemnation for its violations of international law in the West Bank and Gaza, which comprise the Palestinian territory which it has occupied since 1967. These include continued military operations and blockades against the population of Gaza that have seen thousands of civilians killed and injured in recent years, as well as the continued expansion of illegal settlements on Palestinian territory in Israeli-controlled East Jerusalem and the West Bank. Approximately 600,000 Israeli settlers are now residing in these areas. The Israeli authorities remain primarily responsible for these repeated human rights violations, despite occurring beyond its legal borders. These are described in more detail in the Palestine directory entry.

Nevertheless, within Israel itself, ethnic and religious minorities also face significant barriers. While long maintaining its identity as a Jewish state, Israel has also emphasized equal rights for all its population, regardless of their faith. However, despite these guarantees, many communities continue to face discrimination: these include the sizeable minority of Palestinian Christians and Muslims, in particular

Bedouin residing in the Negev region (*al-Naqab* in Arabic), as well as Jewish communities of non-European descent (such as Beta Israel, originating from Ethiopia) and an increasingly stigmatized population of African refugees and asylum-seekers.

Palestinian citizens of Israel, who make up more than 20 per cent of the population, continue to experience marginalization in a range of areas including housing, access to services and employment. According to 2017 data from the Adva Centre, for example, infant mortality rates among Arabs are more than two and a half times those among the Jewish majority, while 38.1 per cent of Jews enrolled in higher education by the age of 25 compared to just 25.2 per cent of Arabs. These disparities continue to shape their outcomes as adults, with Arab men and women earning just 74 per cent and 55 per cent respectively of the national average. These outcomes are the result not only of protracted poverty among many belonging to the Palestinian minority, but also social prejudice and official discrimination.

Conditions are especially difficult for the 200,000 Bedouin in the southern Negev region who, despite long residing in the region, are not recognized as indigenous by the Israeli authorities. Many live in desert villages 'unrecognized' by the state as legal despite existing for many decades; besides refusing to supply water, electricity or other basic services, the government has frequently targeted these communities for demolition. Presented as 'squatters', thousands of Bedouin have experienced continued displacement from their communal lands. Such is the case of the Bedouin village of Umm al-Hieran, which the government intends to pave over with a new Jewish town. In January 2017, a Bedouin teacher and an Israeli police officer were killed during a police operation. In October 2017, the community was again razed to the ground by authorities – the 119th time the village had been destroyed since its first demolition in July 2010. The community signed an agreement in April 2018 to relocate to the nearby town of Hura, in order to avert further evictions and bloodshed.

Further alarming news – and confirmation of government policy intentions – came in January 2019 for the Negev's Bedouin population. The Israeli authorities announced a plan involving the forced removal of some 36,000 Bedouin currently living in 'unrecognized' villages. The intention is to expand military training areas and implement 'economic development' – including an extension of the main highway 'Road 6', a new phosphate mine and the relocation of an armaments testing facility. Little if any of this is intended to benefit the indigenous Bedouin community or been planned with their meaningful participation.

The situation of Palestinian citizens of Israel has also deteriorated in the wake of major clashes between Israeli forces and Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. For example, incitement to violence and racist language on social media directed at the Palestinian minority in Israel rose dramatically during the Israeli military's Operation Protective Edge in Gaza between July and August 2014, as did incidents of abusive graffiti and attacks on private property. Palestinians were also harassed and physically attacked by ultra-nationalist gangs during demonstrations against Israel's military actions. The hostile atmosphere was aggravated by provocative statements from public figures and by attempts to pass legislation undermining the rights of the Palestinian minority in Israel.

More recently, 7amleh, the Arab Center for Social Media Advancement, published its 2018 Index of Racism on Israeli Social Media in which it found that the rate at which messages inciting hatred against Palestinians has increased to every 66

seconds in 2018, from every 71 seconds in 2017. There were 474,250 social media posts (compared with 445,000 in 2017) that called for violence, racial profiling and/or were insulting towards Palestinians. A key driver of this increase was the debate around the controversial 'nation–state' law that the Knesset adopted in July 2018.

While privileged in comparison to non-Jews, forms of unofficial discrimination have persisted against Mizrahi and Sephardic Jews (originating from the Middle East and North Africa) who face deep-seated prejudice and remain socially and economically disadvantaged compared to Ashkenazim (European-origin Jews). A lack of investment or policies directed at improving social cohesion in urban areas, such as south Tel Aviv, where large numbers belonging to these groups reside, has resulted in poor living conditions, high levels of crime and social unrest.

This has been exacerbated by Israel's policy towards African asylum–seekers, who are assigned to social housing in neglected neighbourhoods that lack the necessary welfare services, infrastructure or personal safety measures to cater for the increased population. Tens of thousands of Africans, primarily from Eritrea and Sudan, have also faced the prospect of deportation, with Israeli authorities announcing in January 2018 a plan to offer the asylum–seekers a lump sum and a plane ticket out of the country, or face forcible expulsion. Negotiations with the UN appeared to have led to a deal in April 2018 for around half of the group to be resettled in Western countries with the remainder offered 'temporary residence' in Israel, but the deal was subsequently cancelled just a day after its announcement. The reason the deal fell through was that right-wing coalition partners of the government balked at the idea of temporary residence permits for the other half of the group. Throughout the debate, the terminology – 'illegal infiltrators' – used by the government and its allies to describe the asylum–seekers was highly stigmatising and objectifying. This language as well as the policies themselves caused considerable outcry both nationally and internationally; many Holocaust survivors and prominent Rabbis spoke out against the government's deportation plan.

Meanwhile, Israel pursued a policy of deporting Sudanese and Eritrean asylum-seekers – some 1,700 between 2015 and March 2018 – to Uganda, where many have ended up with insufficient resources and without proper documentation. The Israeli authorities maintained that these were 'voluntary departures', but when the alternative was indefinite detention there was little that was voluntary about them. In March 2018, the Israeli High Court ruled that the policy of indefinite detention was illegal, as neither Uganda nor Rwanda had officially agreed to accept the deportees.

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Environment

Israel is a long, narrow coastal state that extends along shores of the Mediterranean Sea, which forms its western border. It borders Lebanon in the north, Syria to the north-east, Jordan to the west and south-east, and Egypt to the south-west. Following the 1967 Six-Day War, Israel occupied all of East Jerusalem, as well as parts of Jordan (the West Bank), Syria and Egypt. For its size, Israel is geographically diverse. In addition to the coastal plain, it has desert in the south, central highlands, the Jordan River Valley in the east, and a mountainous north. Israel has few natural resources, although recent offshore natural gas finds may make the country a net energy exporter.

History

The State of Israel was established in May 1948 following the UN partition of Palestine (see Palestine) and the successful war fought between March and September that year to establish a Jewish state in the greater part of Palestine. The Jewish *yishuv* (or settlement) in Palestine was spurred on by the Holocaust, and by the international sympathy and support it engendered following World War II.

Before 1948, a Palestinian population of nearly one million formed a clear majority in the territory that became Israel. By the time the 1948 Arab-Israeli War was over only 160,000 Palestinian Arabs remained, largely in the Galilee, and only a fraction of the Bedouin indigenous to the Negev. By the 1960s the Palestinian share of the Israeli population had fallen to 11 per cent. The Jewish population numbered approximately 500,000 at the end of 1947, but between 1948 and 1972 Israel received some 600,000 immigrants from Europe and 700,000 from Africa and Asia.

Israel confiscated the lands of the Palestinians who had been expelled and also much of that from those who remained. Meanwhile, whilst those who remained in Israel after 1948 were granted citizenship, until 1966 they were subjected to travel restrictions and curfews amounting to martial law.

In 1967 Israel launched a military strike to pre-empt a planned attack by its neighbours, which had the support of other Arab countries. At the end of the Six-Day War, Israel had expanded its borders to include parts of Egypt, Syria and Jordan, as well as all of East Jerusalem, creating new sources of Arab resentment that in turn served to propagate Israel's sense of vulnerability. Egypt and Syria attempted to regain lost territory through a surprise attack in October 1973 but were defeated by the Israeli military. A peace process begun in the wake of the 'Yom Kippur War' led to the 1978 Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt that established a framework for peace negotiations and Palestinian self-rule in the occupied territories. Israel and Egypt signed a formal peace treaty in 1979. Palestinian frustration grew with a weakening of support from Arab countries and culminated in the first intifada (uprising) in the occupied territories from 1987 to 1991. Meanwhile the Cold War had ended, and in 1989 mass migration of Soviet Jews to Israel began in earnest.

A regional peace process launched in Madrid in 1991 led to the 1993 Oslo Accords, signed by Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat. The Palestinians recognized Israel's right to exist, and Israel agreed to the creation of a Palestinian Authority to govern the occupied territories, the staged withdrawal of Israeli forces, and a process toward establishment of a Palestinian state. One year later, Israel and Jordan concluded a formal peace agreement.

Dissatisfaction with the Accords led a radical right-wing Israeli Jew to assassinate Rabin in November 1995. Amid Palestinian suicide attacks in Israel and Israeli military and political provocations, further negotiations between Palestinians and Israelis broke down. A second intifada erupted in the occupied Palestinian territory in September 2000.

The Orr Commission, named after the Israeli High Court Justice that served as its chair, was established to investigate the causes of the rioting that broke out within Israel in October 2000. Among its conclusions, the Orr Commission found neglect and discrimination by the Israeli government with regard to its Palestinian population. The government established a committee to oversee the Commission's

recommendations on addressing the problems.

The Israeli government, under Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, unilaterally withdrew its forces and approximately 8,500 settlers from Gaza in 2005. The move was intended to be a step towards securing Israel's borders and paving the way towards further peace accords. That proved not to be the case, especially once the militant group Hamas consolidated its hold over the area. The years since have witnessed a sequence of large-scale Israeli military assaults on Gaza and Hamas rocket attacks on Israel.

In July 2006, Israel invaded Lebanon in response to Lebanon-based Hezbollah militants' abduction of two Israeli soldiers. Palestinian and Jewish Israelis maintained fundamentally different views of the ensuing month-long conflict, as well as the continuing turmoil in the occupied Palestinian territory. The antipathy felt by Palestinian citizens of Israel towards the Israeli government's treatment of their ethnic kin spiked again at the end of 2008, as Israel launched air strikes on Gaza that paved the way for a land invasion in January 2009. Israel said it was responding to Hamas' rocket attacks, but mounting civilian casualties shocked the world. The offensive also threatened to defer prospects for a lasting political settlement even further, ensuring that tensions between the Palestinian minority and the Israeli government would not abate in the near-future.

Military operations have intensified further in recent years, resulting in catastrophic numbers of civilian deaths and injuries. In late 2012 Israel launched a week-long military campaign against armed groups based in Gaza, avowedly in response to escalating rocket attacks on Israeli towns. This was followed over a seven-week period in July and August 2014 by one of the most violent episodes in a series of escalations. Israel launched aerial and ground assaults against militant groups in Gaza, known as Operation Protective Edge, which resulted in the deaths of at least 1,486 Palestinian civilians, including 513 children, and the displacement during hostilities of around 500,000 people. This was set against a backdrop defined by another failed round of US-convened peace talks and unprecedented Israeli settlement expansion in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

The hostile atmosphere towards Palestinians surrounding the events of summer 2014 were aggravated by provocative statements from public figures and by attempts to pass legislation undermining the rights of the Palestinian Israeli minority. This was exemplified by the endorsement of the so-called 'nation-state' bill by a majority vote in the Israeli cabinet in November 2014. The bill proposed limiting collective rights to Jewish citizens of the country and pave the way for other discriminatory policies against non-Jewish populations. The bill was returned to the national agenda by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in early 2017 and was adopted by the Knesset, or parliament, in July 2018.

Amongst other provisions, the new 'nation-state' law strips Arabic of its status as an official language, alongside Hebrew, and downgrades it to having a 'special status'. It also elevates Jewish identity over democratic values by affording rights to national self-determination exclusively to the Jewish majority, legitimizing the creation of Jewish-only settlements and has been criticized by rights groups as racist.

Governance

Israel has a parliamentary form of government with a largely ceremonial presidency. A series of basic laws serve as its Constitution in lieu of one fundamental

constitutional document. The 120-seat parliament, or Knesset, is elected by a system of proportional representation and party lists. Although there have long been two main Israeli parties, Labour and Likud, without a minimum hurdle for representation in parliament, many splinter factions and parties are also represented. Ultra-conservative religious parties in particular have been adept at using their few seats in the Knesset as leverage in broad, cobbled-together ruling coalitions to influence policy disproportionately to their numbers. The pressure on prime ministers and their cabinets to maintain unity among fractious parties has also been at the root of many Israeli corruption scandals. During the spring of 2019, the new Blue and White centrist alliance emerged, after Israel Resilience, led by Benny Gantz, joined forces with Yesh Atid ('There is a future'), led by Yair Lapid.

Israeli media reporting on security matters is subject to military censorship, and the government has occasionally pressured journalists, especially those critical of the state's treatment of Palestinians.

The government delegates marriage, divorce and burial proceedings to religious authorities, and for Jews the Orthodox community has had a near monopoly on such proceedings and on defining Jewish identity. This has fuelled tension between religious and secular Jews, as well as adherents of Reform or Conservative Judaism, although in recent years Orthodox control in these areas has begun slipping.

Political parties that deny that Israel is a 'Jewish state' (as well as those that oppose the democratic order or incite racism) are banned by law, which is one of the causes of Palestinian Israeli under-representation. Although Arab minority members of the Knesset (MK's) hold only a fraction of the seats commensurate with their share of the population, they remain vocal advocates on behalf of their community – securing for instance increased funding for services and infrastructure investment in a five-year plan agreed in 2015.

A bill adopted in March 2014 raised the electoral threshold for representation at the Knesset from 2 per cent to 3.25 per cent, a development that led the four main Arab political parties to combine together and form a Joint List with a common platform in order to achieve political representation in the March 2015 elections. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu formed a new coalition government after the elections with the ultranationalist Bayit Yehudi (Jewish Home) party, which was joined the following year by another right-wing party, Yisrael Beitenu. The number of Arab MK's increased from 12 to 17 following the 2015 vote, with 13 belonging to the Joint List.

Ahead of the April 2019 election, the Joint List was dissolved following a split. The vote saw a markedly low turnout – less than 50 per cent – by Palestinian citizens of Israel. The Arab parties won only 10 seats, compared with the 13 they had had following the previous election.

While Israel has long defined itself as 'Jewish and democratic', its laws have also emphasized the equality of all minorities within the country. First proposed in 2011, a long pending Basic Law, 'Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People' (also known as the 'nation-state bill'), aimed to consolidate the specifically Jewish character of Israel. The bill, following continued delays and revisions, was tabled for a first reading in early 2018. Critics pointed in particular to its creation of elevated 'national rights' for its Jewish citizens only.

The 2016 'NGO bill' passed into law in July 2016 – legislation that according to critics

disproportionately targets human rights organizations. This development is part of a wider years-long trend in government policies towards Israeli NGOs, limiting their access to foreign funding and imposing administrative burdens in order to restrict their activities.

Also in 2016, the Knesset passed a new 'Anti-Terror Law', which expands the definition of terrorist organization membership to include 'passive members' and likely will be used to suppress and criminalize legitimate political, humanitarian and cultural activities by Palestinian citizens of Israel. Just two days prior, an emergency provision (initially introduced in 2003) to Israel's Family Reunification Law was renewed, preventing Palestinians of the occupied Palestinian territory from obtaining or passing on to their children legal status in Israel or East Jerusalem through marrying Israeli citizens or residents.

The same year also saw the continued use of anti-democratic legislation to more directly curtail the rights of Israeli minorities. The 'Expulsion of MKs law' – supported by Prime Minister Netanyahu and passed in July 2016 – threatens minorities' political representation through allowing a three-quarters majority MK's to expel peers through a vote. Israel's High Court of Justice upheld the legislation in May 2018, although the ruling admitted that the legislation 'seriously infringes basic rights'.

In 2018, the 'nation-state' bill was tabled for debate in the Knesset. By the summer, the Knesset was discussing a portion of the draft text that would allow communities to protect their unique identity 'on the basis of their religion and nationality'. The proposal met with considerable criticism both inside Israel and abroad as paving the way for legal segregation. President Reuven Rivlin expressed fears that the proposal would harm the country's standing. The revised draft, later adopted, proposed that, 'The state views the development of Jewish settlement as a national value and will act to encourage and promote its establishment'. The bill was finally adopted in July 2018 by a vote of 62-55 and two abstentions.

The new 'nation-state' law establishes that, 'Israel is the historic homeland of the Jewish people and they have an exclusive right to national self-determination in it.' It also strips Arabic of its status as an official language, together with Hebrew, and downgrades it to having a 'special status'. During the debate, Prime Minister Netanyahu made clear the government's thinking, namely that, 'We will keep ensuring civil rights in Israel's democracy but the majority also has rights and the majority decides.' The law, as adopted, was met with anger by opposition MK's, especially those belonging to the Palestinian minority, and human rights groups.

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Minority based and advocacy organisations

Sources and further reading