

Israel

Introduction

Jewish State of Israel, was reestablished in 1948.

Location

The State of Israel is located in the Middle East. It is positioned between the Southwestern corner of the Asian continent and at the Southeastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. The country, which lies at the crossroads of three continents (Europe, Africa, and Asia), is positioned at the geographic coordinates of 31 30 N, 34 45 E. The State of Israel is bordered by Syria to the North East, Jordan to the East, Lebanon to the North, and Egypt to the South West. It is bordered to the West by the coastline of the Mediterranean Sea. The land boundaries of Israel add up to 1,017 km, while its coastline is 273 km.

Geomorphologic Features

The State of Israel is a small country. It occupies a total land area of 20,770 sq km, with water occupying about 440 sq km of this land area. Israel measures about 290 miles (470 km) in length from north to south and 85 miles (135 km) at its greatest width from east to west. The country is divided into five major topographic regions: the highlands of Galilee in the North; the Plain of Esdraelon (also called the Plain of Jezreel), which is densely populated; the Judean and Samarian hills; the coastal plains, which contain most of Israel's large cities, industry, and commerce; and the Negev desert in southern Israel.

The highest point of Israel is the summit of Mount Har Meron (1,208m above sea level). The Har Meron is located close to the extreme north of the country. The country's lowest point is the Dead Sea, which lies at 408m below sea level. The Dead Sea is the lowest depression on the face of the earth. The central column of Israel is hilly. The hilly Galilee region of the State of Israel lies to the northern

quarter of the country. Further northeast of the Galilee region is the Golan Heights, which was annexed by Israel from Syria after one of the Arab-Israeli wars. The Negev Desert is about the most dominant geomorphologic feature of the southern regions of Israel. The Negev Desert is rugged and mountainous. The Desert stretches from the area south of Beersheba to the Gulf of Aqaba, where the port of Eilat is built.

Because Israel is located at the crossroads of three continents, it has a great variety of flora and fauna. The country has about five distinct vegetative regions. Israel presently has about 2500 floral species. This figure far exceeds the floral diversity of Britain (1700 species), Norway (1335 species), and Egypt (1500 species), which are all larger than the Jewish state. Some of the plant species in Israel include: the papyrus, the moringa tree, and the doum Palm. The country also has animal species native to Africa, Asia, and Europe.

The country's largest body of fresh water is Lake Kinneret (Lake Tiberius, or Sea of Galilee), which lies in the eastern part of Galilee. The basin of Lake Kinneret occupies an area of 2700² km, a quarter of which lies within the borders of Lebanon. Another important fresh water system is the Jordan River system which flows along the Israeli-Jordanian border and empties into the Dead Sea. These two water bodies are important sources of fresh water for the state of Israel. Since its creation in 1948, Israel has been able to bring water from Lake Kinneret to the drier parts of the country, thus enabling settlement and agriculture in the Negev.

Climate

Israel's climate is considered as temperate, despite the fact that the country is located in a dry area. Israel has mainly two seasons, winter and summer. The winter season in Israel is characterized by cold rains, which begin in late October or early November and last through April. The wettest months are December, January, and February. The countries total annual precipitation ranges from 20-50

inches (50-125 cm.) in the north to less than an inch (2.5 cm.) in the far south, dominated by the Negev Desert. Though a substantially small country, regional climatic conditions vary considerably: hot, humid summers and mild, wet winters are experienced on the coastal plain; dry, warm summers and moderately cold winters, with precipitation and occasional light snow are experienced in the hilly regions; hot, dry summers and pleasant winters are experienced in the Jordan Valley; and semi-arid conditions, with warm to hot days and cool nights, in the southern Negev region. The table below (Table 1) provides the temperature figures for 1995 (January and July) for some major cities in Israel.

Table 1: Average Monthly Temperatures (Degree Centigrade) For some Four Israeli Locations in 1995 (January and July)

Location	January		July	
	Maximum	Minimum	Maximum	Minimum
Tel Aviv	17.5	10.2	29.7	24.5
Haifa	17.6	7.8	31.1	23.6
Jerusalem	12.2	4.5	30.3	18.5
Eilat	21.7	10.5	39.4	25.2

Source: <http://www.israel-embassy.org.uk/web/pages/bigeog.htm>

History

The history of Israel is linked to a reported covenant that was established between God and Abraham, an ancestor of the Jews. In this covenant, God is reported to have given the land of Canaan (an area represented by modern day Israel and the West Bank) to Abraham and his descendants (that is, the Jews) and promised to protect them. In return, the Jews were to worship only God (Yahweh) and to

follow all his laws and precepts. Israel was thus the homeland of the Jews until their exile in 68 B.C.E. For about two thousand years the land of Israel was desolate and ruled by many tribes and empires.

The modern history of Israel, however, began with the gradual and pioneering return of some Jews from the Diaspora to their ancestral home towards the end of the C19th. The Balfour Declaration of 1917 pronounced the present-day land of Israel as the place of refuge for the Jewish people. On November 29, 1947, the United Nations Organization voted to allow the creation of a Jewish State: a homeland for the Holocaust survivors and survivors of other anti-Semitic persecutions. On May 5, 1948, David Ben-Gurion, the first Prime Minister of the new State of Israel, declared its independence. This declaration drew the fury of its Arab neighbors and immediately plunged the new state into a war with its neighbors. In all, Israel fought four wars with its Arab neighbors (1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973). Arab countries at that time completely rejected the creation of Israel as an independent Jewish state within a purported Arab land.

The country has also been fighting insurgent Palestinian nationalists and militants over the years. While some of the Palestinian nationalists are fighting for an independent Palestinian state encompassing the West Bank, Gaza, East Jerusalem and other places, others call for nothing short of the total destruction of the Jewish State of Israel. The most famous of the Palestinian struggles include the two Palestinian uprisings (Intifada) in 1987 and from 2000 to date (2004).

Notwithstanding these long-standing struggles with its neighbors, Israel has survived as a strong and successful state in the Middle East. Israel is one of the few genuine democracies in the Middle East, having successfully followed a parliamentary system of government since its creation in 1948. Support from its western allies has played an important role in helping Israel deal with its difficult circumstances.

Important Dates

Dates of historical significance and important dates on the Israeli calendar are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Important Dates in Jewish History and Calendar

Date	Dates That are Significant in the Jewish Calendar
68 B.C.E	The Jewish people are exiled from their ancestral home
1917	Balfour Declaration pronounces Israel as the place of refuge for Survivors of the holocaust and other persecutions
November 29, 1947	The UN votes to create a Jewish state (Israel) in parts of Palestine
May 5, 1948	David Ben-Gurion declares the Independence of Israel
1948	First Arab-Israeli War (War of Independence)
October 29, 1956	The second Arab-Israeli Wars (The Suez/Sinai War) begun.
June 5, 1967	Third Arab-Israeli War. This war, also known as the Six-Day War, begun.
October 6, 1973	Fourth Arab-Israeli War (Yom Kippur War) begun
10 th Day of Tishri (September/October)	Yom Kippur , the holiest day in the Jewish calendar. Yom Kippur means "Day of Atonement"
15 th Day of Nisan (March/April)	Passover Holiday (Pesach)
6 th Day of Sivan (May/June)	Shavuot (Feast of Weeks/ Pentecost)
1 st & 2 nd Days of Tishri (September/October)	Rosh Hashanah (In Hebrew, literally meaning "head of the year" or "first of the year"). It marks the Jewish New Year
15 th Day of Tishri (September/October)	Sukkot. It is celebrated five days after Yom Kippur. Marks Jewish season of rejoicing. It is also solemn. Sukkot lasts for seven days.
22 nd Day of Tishri (September/October)	Shemini Atzeret (Hebrew phrase, which literally means "the assembly of the eighth (day).") It is a holiday marking the day after the seventh day of Sukkot

Population

Israel's population currently stands at approximately 6.8 million people, 81 percent consisting of Jews and others and 19 percent consisting of Arabs. It is important to indicate that at the time of its establishment in 1948, Israel had an estimated population of 806,000. The population density of Israel has risen from 43 persons per square kilometer in 1948 to about 260 persons per square kilometer today (excluding Israelis living in Judea, Samaria and Gaza Strip). Over half its population lives along the coastal strip, where the population density is among the highest in the world.

Language

The principal official language of Israel is Hebrew, a Semitic language written from right to left. Hebrew, which is spoken by the majority of the population, almost became one of the world's extinct languages until it was painstakingly revived following the Jews return and rebuilding of their homeland. The second official language of the country is Arabic. It is the medium of instruction for public schools in Arab areas of the country. Other languages spoken in Israel include Amharic (Ethiopian Jews), Yiddish, Ladino (Judeo-Spanish), Samaritan, and Tigrinya. The major foreign language spoken in the country is the English language.

Religion

The state of Israel allows the freedom of religion and conscience. Although Judaism is the most dominant religion in the country, it has not been proclaimed as the official religion of Israel. Israel safeguards the rights of both Jews and non-Jews alike to engage in their chosen form of religious faith or worship. The major religions in Israel are as follows: Judaism 80.1 percent; Islam 14.6 percent; Christianity 2.1 percent; and other 3.2 percent.

Education

Education has been a fundamental value in the Israeli society. Education is thus free and compulsory from age five (5) through eighteen (18). Because of the high value placed on education, Israel has a very high literacy rate (about 95 percent). The median year of schooling for the Israeli population is 12.1. The educational system is organized into a 4 tier system: preschool; primary school; secondary school; and university and colleges. Israel has (10) universities and colleges, which include: Bar-Ilan University; Ben-Gurion University of the Negev; University of Haifa; The Hebrew University (Mt.

Scopus campus); Technion Israel Institute of Technology; Tel Aviv University; Weizmann Institute of Science; Jerusalem College of Technology; ORT Israel Colleges & Schools for Advanced Technologies & Sciences; and Shenkar School of Engineering and Design. Israel's educational system lays emphasis on science and technology to ensure the continued development of the country.

Currency

The Israeli currency is called the New Israeli Shekel (NIS). Banknotes of the NIS are in the denominations of 10, 20, 100, and 200. The agorot, 100 of which are equal to one NIS, are in the denominations of 50, 10 and 5. Coins are minted in the denominations of 5, 2 and 1. The current (2004) exchange rate between the NIS and some major world currencies are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Exchange Rates between the NIS and Some Major World Currencies (July 5, 2004)

Major International Currencies	The Israeli Currency (NIS)
1 US Dollar (USD)	4.4716 NIS (1NIS=0.2236 USD)
1 Great Britain Pound Sterling (GBP)	8.1856 NIS (1NIS=0.1222 GBP)
1 Euro (EUR)	5.50 NIS (1NIS=0.182 EUR)
1 Canadian Dollar (CAD)	3.3735 NIS (1NIS=0.2964 CAD)
1 Japanese Yen (JPY)	0.041 NIS (1NIS=24.3714 JPY)
1 South African Rand (ZAR)	0.72 NIS (1NIS=1.3819)

Source: <http://www.ozforex.com.au/cgi-bin/custconvert.asp>

Agriculture

Agriculture contributes about 2.5 percent to Israel's GNP and about 3 percent to its exports. The country produces about 93 percent of its food requirement. This is supplemented by food imports from its trading partners. Israel's main agricultural produce include citrus, vegetables, cotton, beef, poultry, and dairy products. Israel's agricultural success depends heavily on the optimum use of its scarce water resources and limited arable land. Israel draws water heavily from the Jordan River and Lake Kinneret to make cultivation possible in the Negev region

Trade

As a small country with a relatively limited domestic market, Israel depends quite substantially on foreign trade. The export sector has been a major catalyst of Israel's economic growth. The country's trading partners include the United States, the European Union, Canada, Mexico, Turkey, and China. The country has also signed free trade or preferential trade agreements with a number of countries, some of which are not members of the World Trade Organization (WTO). The two principal trading partners of the country are the EU and the USA. For example, in 2000, the EU and the US accounted for 32 percent, and 30 percent of Israel's exports respectively and 22 percent and 41 percent of its imports respectively. Israel's export earnings amounted to about US\$28.1 billion (f.o.b). Its main export commodities include machinery, equipment, software, cut diamonds, agricultural products, chemicals, textiles, and apparel. The country's import bill in 2002 amounted to about US\$30.8 billion (f.o.b). Israel's main import commodities include raw materials, military equipment, investment goods, rough diamonds, fuels, grain, and consumer goods.

Food

The cosmopolitan nature of the Israeli society is reflected in the wide range of international foods and cuisines present in the country. However, many restaurants in Israel strictly observe the kosher (Judaic dietary) law, which forbids the eating of certain creatures and mixing of milk and meat (or cooking meat in milk). With respect to land animals, the kosher law allows the eating of only animals that have split hoofs and chew the cud. In addition, the animals must be slaughtered in a particular way.

The law also forbids the eating of sea creatures that do not have fins and scales. This rule, notwithstanding, one can always find cuisines that do not adhere to the kosher law in Christian neighborhoods and some restaurant. One important mark of Israeli food is its famous fresh fruits and vegetables. The Jaffa orange, for instance, has been a long-standing sweet symbol of the state. The Israeli agricultural sector produces a wide variety of fresh fruits and vegetables. A popular snack in Israel is the falafel, which is a pita (pocket bread) stuffed with dried chick pea (falafel) balls and many other stuffing.

Israel produces a good deal of fine wine and beers. It also has a wide variety of non-alcoholic drinks and beverages, such as fruit juices, coffee, milk products, and soft drinks to meet the food or dietary needs of teetotalers.

Landmarks and Historical Sites

Israel has a number of landmarks and historic sites, which will be of interest to tourists and religious pilgrims. The Dead Sea is one of the most important landmarks within the borders of the State of Israel. The Dead Sea lies 408m below sea level, representing the lowest depression on the earth surface. It extends approximately fifty miles from north to south with an average width of ten miles. The Dead Sea is located at about 31 degrees north and 36 degrees west. The distance between the Dead Sea and Jerusalem is about 25 km. The Judean Desert, which is another important landmark, has always attracted people seeking spiritual refuge from the world. The Dead Sea is located within the Judean desert. The Herodian volcanic mountain is another important site in the nation of Israel. This mountain is so named because it was adapted by Herod, who built a fortress on it. This mountain is also located within the Judean Desert. The Jordan River is another natural landmark of historical and religious importance. This river which runs along the Israeli-Jordanian border is believed to be the river in which Jesus Christ was baptized. Christians believe that Jesus Christ was baptized at the point where

the Jordan River runs out of the Sea of Galilee (Lake Tiberius). Many Christian pilgrims visit the site every year. The Jordan River is 320km long. Other areas of historical importance for both pilgrims and tourists include the Old City of Jerusalem, the Al-Aqsa Mosque, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Wailing Wall, the Damascus Gate, the Garden Tomb, and the Church of Gethsemane. For many tourists and pilgrims, the city of Jerusalem itself is an important landmark on the face of the earth that they hope to visit.

Lazarus Adua