

Facts About Israel You Should Know

Zionism

Zionism is the movement for the establishment and maintenance of a Jewish nation-state in the territory its adherents call Eretz Israel and Palestinians call Palestine. Jewish religious attachment to Zion is ancient; Zionism as an organised political movement dates from the 1880s and 1890s.

Political Zionism was founded in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century. Its principal architect, Theodor Herzl, was an Austro-Hungarian journalist: born in Pest in 1860 to a prosperous, German-speaking and largely secular Jewish family. Herzl was convinced that assimilation into other national cultures would never protect European Jews from antisemitism. He set out his solution in *Der Judenstaat* (1896) and convened the first Zionist Congress at Basel in 1897.

The model Herzl worked from was the chartered colonial company. He proposed a "Jewish Company" on the lines of the East India Company, sought a charter from the Ottoman sultan under the protection of the European powers, and in 1902 wrote to Cecil Rhodes -- the architect of British southern Africa -- asking him to put his authority behind the plan: "Because it is something colonial." The movement's first bank, agreed at the 1898 Congress and incorporated in London in 1899, was named the Jewish Colonial Trust. The State of Israel was established in 1948 by the institutions this movement built.

1. Israel defines itself as a Jewish and democratic state, however, in 2018 the Knesset passed *Basic Law: Israel -- the Nation-State of the Jewish People* by 62 votes to 55. Article 1(c), in the Knesset's own English translation, reads: "The right to exercise national self-determination in the State of Israel is unique to the Jewish people."

MK Amir Ohana (Likud), who chaired the committee that brought the bill forward, said on presenting it in March 2018: "This is the law of all laws... everyone has human rights, but national rights in Israel belong only to the Jewish people."

Petitions against the law were rejected by Israel's Supreme Court in 2021, 10–1; critics including Adalah and the Joint List argue it makes discrimination a constitutional value.

2. The Law of Return (1950, amended 1970) grants any Jew anywhere in the world the right to immigrate to Israel and receive citizenship -- automatically, and regardless of whether they or their family have ever set foot in the country. A Jewish person born and raised in Brooklyn who has never travelled to Israel can move there and be a citizen on arrival. The 1970 amendment extended the same right to the children, grandchildren and spouses of Jews, so a person who is not Jewish at all can qualify through a Jewish grandparent.

No comparable right exists for the roughly 750,000 Palestinians who fled or were expelled during the 1948 war, or for their descendants -- today around six million people registered with UNRWA. They cannot return as citizens or residents by right.

Apartheid

3. Discrimination is also written into ordinary legislation and into everyday practice. The Citizenship and Entry into Israel Law, reauthorised in March 2022, bars Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza who marry Israeli citizens from receiving residency or citizenship -- and unlike earlier versions, the 2022 text states outright that its purpose is to maintain a Jewish demographic

majority.

The Admissions Committees Law of 2011 allows hundreds of small Jewish community towns in the Negev and Galilee to screen applicants for "social suitability". The law formally forbids rejection on grounds of race or religion, but critics argue the criterion functions as a proxy. Israel's Supreme Court upheld it in 2014.

4. In the occupied West Bank the separation is starker still: settlers live under Israeli civil law while their Palestinian neighbours are tried in military courts. In July 2024 the International Court of Justice found that Israel's legislation and measures maintain a near-complete separation between settler and Palestinian communities in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, breaching Article 3 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, which prohibits racial segregation and apartheid.

B'Tselem (2021), Human Rights Watch (2021) and Amnesty International (2022) each concluded that the system as a whole amounts to apartheid.

5. Israel distinguishes in law between citizenship (*ezrahut*), which all citizens hold, and *le'om* -- nationality in the sense of ethnic belonging. The population registry records over a hundred *le'om* categories, among them Jewish, Arab, Druze and Circassian.

The category was printed on identity cards until 2005, when the Interior Ministry stopped printing it; a row of asterisks appears in its place. It remains in the registry, however passports do not show it.

Consequences of Zionism

6. The establishment of Israel in 1948 on already-inhabited land, against the wishes of the majority Arab population, began a conflict that has not ended. By the count of the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, the official Palestinian statistical agency, more than 154,000 Palestinians and Arabs had been killed since 1948 -- a figure it put at about 100,000 as recently as 2023. Gaza's health ministry records 73,651 people killed there since October 2023, and peer-reviewed mortality research indicates the true figure is higher.
7. Israel has occupied the West Bank and Gaza since 1967 -- approaching sixty years, and the longest ongoing military occupation in the modern world. More than 750,000 Israeli settlers now live in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem, around 15% of the West Bank's population, across 147 settlements and a rapidly growing number of outposts. The European Union's standing position is that the settlements are illegal under international law, and in July 2024 the International Court of Justice found Israel's continued presence in the occupied territory unlawful. The occupation is what makes the two legal systems described above possible: it has no end date, and the settler population grows faster each year than Israel's own.
8. Israel's wars have not been confined to the Palestinians. It invaded Egypt in 1956, in secret coordination with Britain and France. It invaded Lebanon in 1978 and again in 1982, then occupied the south until 2000 -- twenty-two years. During the 1982 invasion, a Lebanese Christian militia allied with Israel massacred civilians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps while Israeli forces held the surrounding area; Israel's own commission of inquiry found the state indirectly responsible, and Defence Minister Ariel Sharon was forced to resign. The Golan Heights, taken from Syria in 1967, was annexed in 1981 -- an act the UN Security Council unanimously declared null and void, and which almost no state recognises.

Genocide

In July 2025 B'Tselem, Israel's largest human rights organisation, published a report titled "Our Genocide", concluding that Israel is committing genocide against Palestinians in Gaza. Physicians for Human Rights-Israel reached the same conclusion the same day. Human Rights Watch had found Israeli authorities responsible for the crime against humanity of extermination and for acts of genocide in December 2024.

Israel is also facing proceedings at the International Court of Justice, brought by South Africa in December 2023, alleging breaches of the 1948 Genocide Convention. Eighteen states have sought to take part in the case, some supporting South Africa's reading of the convention and others, including the United States, opposing it. Israel filed its written defence in March 2026 and disputes the Court's jurisdiction. The case is still ongoing.

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