

Facts About Israel and Zionism -- Frequently Asked Questions

A short summary of the accompanying handout. Sources for every claim below are listed in the handout.

What is Zionism?

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.

Where did political Zionism come from?

From Europe. Its principal architect, Theodor Herzl, was an Austro-Hungarian journalist from a prosperous, German-speaking and largely secular Jewish family. He set out his plan in *Der Judenstaat* (1896) and convened the first Zionist Congress at Basel in 1897. The State of Israel was established in 1948 by the institutions this movement built.

Is Zionism a colonialist movement?

Its founders used the word openly. Herzl planned to settle Palestine through a company modeled on the British trading companies that had run India, and he asked the Ottoman Empire, which ruled Palestine at the time, for formal rights over the land, backed by the European powers. In 1902 he wrote to Cecil Rhodes -- the British businessman who founded the colony of Rhodesia -- asking him to support the plan "because it is something colonial". The movement's own bank, set up in London in 1899, was called the Jewish Colonial Trust.

Isn't Israel a democracy?

Israel defines itself as a Jewish and democratic state. In 2018 the Knesset passed *Basic Law: Israel -- the Nation-State of the Jewish People*, whose Article 1(c) states that national self-determination in Israel is "unique to the Jewish people". The Member of the Knesset who chaired the committee behind the bill said that everyone has human rights, but national rights in Israel belong only to the Jewish people. Israel's Supreme Court rejected petitions against the law in 2021.

Who can become an Israeli citizen?

Any Jew anywhere in the world, automatically, under the Law of Return -- along with their children, grandchildren and spouses. Someone born and raised in Brooklyn who has never visited can prove Jewish descent and be a citizen the day they land. No comparable right exists for the roughly 750,000 Palestinians displaced or expelled in 1948, or for their descendants, now around six million people registered with UNRWA.

Why do people call Israel an apartheid state?

Discrimination is written into ordinary legislation. The Citizenship and Entry into Israel Law, renewed in 2022, bars Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza who marry Israeli citizens from gaining residency, and states outright that its purpose is to maintain a Jewish demographic majority. The Admissions Committees Law allows small Jewish towns to screen applicants for "social suitability". In the occupied West Bank, settlers live under Israeli civil law while their Palestinian neighbours are tried in military courts.

B'Tselem, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have each concluded that the system amounts to apartheid. In July 2024 the International Court of Justice found that Israel's measures maintain a near-

complete separation between the two populations, breaching the convention that prohibits racial segregation and apartheid.

How long has the occupation lasted?

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, across 147 settlements. The European Union holds the settlements illegal under international law, and in July 2024 the International Court of Justice found Israel's continued presence in the occupied territory unlawful.

How many people have been killed?

The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics counts more than 154,000 Palestinians and Arabs 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.

Has Israel attacked other countries?

Yes. It invaded Egypt in 1956, in coordination with Britain and France, and Lebanon in 1978 and again in 1982, occupying the south for twenty-two years. During the 1982 invasion a Lebanese Christian militia allied with Israel massacred civilians at 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 the defence minister was forced to resign. Israel annexed the Syrian Golan Heights in 1981, an act the UN Security Council unanimously declared null and void.

Is Israel committing genocide?

In July 2025 B'Tselem, Israel's largest human rights organisation, concluded that it is. Physicians for Human Rights-Israel reached the same conclusion the same day.

South Africa brought a case against Israel at the International Court of Justice in December 2023, alleging breaches of the 1948 Genocide Convention. Eighteen states have sought to take part, some supporting South Africa's reading of the convention and others, including the United States, opposing it. The case is ongoing; the court has not yet ruled on the merits.