



Freedom in the World - Israel (2009)

Capital:
Jerusalem

Population:
7,500,000

Political Rights Score: 1 *

Civil Liberties Score: 2 *

Status: Free

Explanatory Note

The numerical ratings and status reflect conditions within Israel itself. Separate reports examine the Israeli-occupied territories and the Palestinian-administered areas.

Overview

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert resigned in September 2008 due to a series of corruption scandals, including a criminal investigation. However, he was set to remain as interim prime minister until new elections could be held in 2009. Olmert's successor as leader of the Kadima Party, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, requested the polls in October after failing to form a new majority government. Progress on peace negotiations with the Palestinian Authority government based in the West Bank stalled in the latter part of the year, and major fighting between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip erupted in December after a six-month truce expired.

Israel was formed in 1948 from part of the British Mandate of Palestine, which had been created by the League of Nations following World War I. A 1947 UN partition plan dividing Palestine into two states, Jewish and Arab, was rejected by the Arab Higher Committee and the Arab League, and Israel's 1948 declaration of independence led to war with a coalition of Arab countries. While Israel maintained its sovereignty and expanded its borders, Jordan (then known as Transjordan) seized East Jerusalem and the West Bank, and Egypt took control of the Gaza Strip.

As a result of its 1967 war with Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, Israel occupied the Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights. Israel annexed East Jerusalem in 1967 and extended Israeli law to the Golan Heights in 1981. It returned the Sinai to Egypt in 1982 as part of a peace agreement between the two countries.

In 1993, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's Labor Party-led government secured a breakthrough agreement with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). It provided for a phased Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza Strip and limited Palestinian autonomy in those areas, in exchange for Palestinian recognition of Israel and a renunciation of terrorism. In 1994, Israel and Jordan agreed to a U.S.-brokered peace agreement. The following year, a right-wing Jewish extremist assassinated Rabin in Tel Aviv.

Prime Minister Ehud Barak of Labor presided over the withdrawal of Israeli forces

from southern Lebanon in 2000 and renewed Israeli-Palestinian negotiations on a future Palestinian state. However, an extended U.S.-hosted summit failed to produce a final settlement. Following the breakdown of negotiations and a controversial visit by Ariel Sharon—then leader of the right-wing Likud Party—to the Temple Mount in September 2000, the Palestinians launched an armed uprising.

Sharon defeated Barak for the premiership in a 2001 election. In March 2002, after a series of attacks by Palestinian militants, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) reoccupied many of the West Bank areas that had been ceded to the Palestinian Authority (PA). Israel also began construction of a security barrier in Palestinian territory that roughly followed the 1949 armistice line in the West Bank. Critics accused the Israelis of confiscating West Bank land and impeding access to land, jobs, and services for Arabs living in the barrier's vicinity. As a result, the barrier—which was about 65 percent complete by the end of 2008—has been rerouted six times by order of the Israeli Supreme Court.

After the death of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, Mahmoud Abbas was elected president of the PA in January 2005. A verbal ceasefire agreement between Sharon and Abbas led to a general decline, but not a halt, in violence. In September 2005, Sharon's government completed a unilateral withdrawal of Jewish settlers from the Gaza Strip and four sites in the West Bank, overcoming fierce opposition from settler groups and many within Likud. Sharon subsequently left Likud and founded Kadima, a new centrist party. In January 2006, he suffered a stroke that left him in a coma. Then deputy prime minister Ehud Olmert became acting prime minister and acting Kadima chairman.

In the March 2006 elections, Kadima won 29 of the 120 seats in the Knesset (parliament). Labor placed second with 19 seats, while the religious Shas party and Likud each took 12 seats. The remainder went to a range of smaller parties. Olmert and Kadima headed the new coalition government, which included Labor, Shas, and other factions.

Israeli-Palestinian violence picked up after the Islamist group Hamas won elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) in January 2006, displacing Abbas's Fatah party. Over the next two years, Israel experienced a decreasing number of terrorist attacks in Israel and regular rocket and mortar fire from the Gaza Strip, while the IDF continued to stage air strikes against militant leaders and destructive incursions into Palestinian territory, including an invasion of the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2006.

Also that summer, Israel went to war against the Lebanese Islamist militia Hezbollah following a cross-border attack in which eight Israeli soldiers were killed and two—Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev—were taken captive. By the time a UN-brokered ceasefire took effect in mid-August, about 1,200 Lebanese, including many civilians, had been killed; 116 IDF soldiers and 43 Israeli civilians were also killed. Israel was condemned for the Lebanese civilian death toll as well as its targeting of civilian infrastructure and the large-scale displacement of civilians from southern Lebanon. Israel insisted that Hezbollah's deliberate use of civilians and residential areas to shield their belligerent activities made civilian casualties inevitable.

A 2007 report by Israel's state comptroller described the government's efforts to protect civilians during the conflict as "a grave failure." In January 2008, the government-appointed Winograd Commission found the war to have been a "large and serious" failure, accusing Olmert's government and military leaders of inadequate planning and poor, haphazard decisions. Amnesty International criticized the commission soon thereafter for failing to include sufficient criticism of Lebanese civilian casualties and Israel's use of cluster bombs, which the organization claimed had killed 40 people and wounded 243 since the end of hostilities. In July 2008, Israel obtained the bodies of Goldwasser and Regev in a controversial exchange with Hezbollah, handing over five Lebanese prisoners (including Samir Kuntar, a terrorist convicted of three brutal murders in 1979) and the bodies of 200 Lebanese and Palestinian militants; Hezbollah had refused to state before the exchange whether the two Israelis were dead or alive.

While Olmert's government survived considerable domestic discontent—and several high-profile resignations—over the conduct of the war in Lebanon, the prime minister resigned in September 2008 after being charged in an unrelated corruption case. Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni was elected to replace him as Kadima party leader, but she was unable to form a new majority coalition in the Knesset. She requested early elections, which would be held in 2009; Olmert was set to remain in place as caretaker prime minister until then.

Meanwhile, Israeli-Palestinian violence continued. Hamas had seized control of the Gaza Strip in June 2007, creating a rift with the Fatah-dominated West Bank; Israel thereafter regarded the Gaza Strip as a hostile entity and imposed an economic blockade, allowing only limited amounts of humanitarian aid through its border crossings. According to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), about 500 people were killed in Israeli-Palestinian fighting between November 2007 and June 2008, most of whom were Palestinian and over half of whom were armed militants. In June 2008, Israel and Hamas implemented a six-month truce agreement, leading to a significant decrease in clashes in and around Gaza. Separately, Israel had pursued accelerated peace talks with the Fatah-led PA in the West Bank, but despite a series of confidence-building measures—including the release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners and the wider deployment of Palestinian security forces—a resolution of final-status issues remained far off by the end of 2008.

Major fighting erupted between Hamas and Israeli forces in December, after the six-month truce expired. Hamas resumed and ramped up its rocket bombardment of Israel, and the IDF launched a major campaign of airstrikes in Gaza, preparing the way for a possible ground invasion. While Hamas's indiscriminate attacks on civilian targets were condemned by human rights groups and other observers, the IDF bombing revived long-standing complaints that Israel's tactics caused many Palestinian civilian casualties, destroyed civilian infrastructure, and inflicted "collective punishment" on Gazans; according to the BBC, over 350 Palestinians had been killed in the fighting by year's end, along with four Israelis. Israeli authorities argued that their actions were necessary to protect Israeli civilians, and that Palestinian civilian casualties were caused by Hamas and other militant groups' use of civilian areas to stage and prepare attacks.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Israel is an electoral democracy. A largely ceremonial president is elected by the 120-seat Knesset for seven-year terms. The prime minister is usually the leader of the largest party or coalition in the Knesset, members of which are elected by party-list proportional representation for four-year terms. The three main parties are the center-left Labor Party, the centrist Kadima, and the right-wing Likud. New special-interest parties typically emerge with each election cycle, but many of them dissolve quickly or merge with a larger bloc. No independent Arab party has been formally included in a governing coalition. All citizens aged 18 and over can vote.

Parties or candidates that deny the existence of Israel as a Jewish state, oppose the democratic system, or incite racism are prohibited. In 2007, Knesset member Azmi Bishara resigned his seat and eventually left Israel for fear of prosecution on charges of espionage and aiding an enemy during war; Bishara had previously expressed support for Hezbollah during visits to Lebanon and Syria, both technically at war with Israel. In 2008, leaders of Bishara's party (the National Democratic Alliance) continued to be questioned by the Shin Bet, Israel's internal security agency.

Twelve members of the current Knesset are Arab Israelis; in 2007, Labor's Raleb Majadele became the first Arab Muslim to serve as a cabinet minister. An Arab Israeli judge also sits on the Supreme Court. While the Arab population votes heavily for Arab-oriented parties, the left-leaning and centrist Zionist parties also count on strong support from the Arab community. Arab residents of East Jerusalem, while not granted automatic citizenship, were issued Israeli identity cards after the 1967 war. However, Israeli law strips such Arabs of their Jerusalem residency if they remain outside the city for more than three months. They have the same rights as Israeli citizens, except the right to vote in national elections. They can vote in municipal as well as PA elections and are eligible to apply for Israeli citizenship. The city's Arab population does not receive a share of municipal services proportionate to its numbers.

Under the 1948 Law of Return, Jewish immigrants and their immediate families are granted Israeli citizenship and residence rights; other immigrants must apply for these rights. In 2003, the Knesset passed a measure that temporarily denied citizenship and residency status to West Bank or Gaza residents married to Israeli citizens. The law was criticized as blatantly discriminatory against Arab Israelis and a violation of Israel's Basic Law. Supporters have cited security considerations; the Shin Bet has testified that 14 percent of suicide bombers attained Israeli identity cards via family reunification laws. The 2003 measure was upheld by the Supreme Court in 2006 and was renewed for the fifth time in 2008.

Israel was ranked 33 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2008 Corruption Perceptions Index. Recent years have featured a series of corruption scandals involving senior officials, including a prime minister, a finance minister, and the heads of the tax authority and the police. In September 2008, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert resigned amid a criminal investigation into donations and other gifts (reportedly worth up to \$500,000) he had received from a U.S. businessman over many years. Olmert had been investigated for several other alleged misdeeds dating to his previous posts in the cabinet and as mayor of Jerusalem. Separately, Knesset member Shlomo Benizri was sentenced in April 2008 to 18 months in prison for bribe-taking and other offenses. According to a

2008 survey by the Israel Democracy Institute, 90 percent of Israelis believe that there is “very much corruption” in Israel, and 51 percent believe that one had to be corrupt to make it to “the top” in politics.

Press freedom is respected in Israel, and the media are vibrant and independent. All Israeli newspapers are privately owned and freely criticize government policy. The Israel Broadcasting Authority operates public radio and television services, and commercial television networks and radio stations are widely available. Most Israelis subscribe to cable or satellite television; internet access is widespread and unrestricted. While print articles on security matters are subject to a military censor, the scope of permissible reporting is wide. In April 2008, police placed seven employees of the Ramallah-based RAM FM radio station under house arrest and confiscated the transmitter from the station’s Jerusalem studio. Authorities accused the station of operating without a permit and disrupting air-traffic communications; the station claimed its PA-issued permit was legal in Israel as well.

While Israel’s founding documents define it as a “Jewish and democratic state,” freedom of religion is respected. Christian, Muslim, and Baha’i communities have jurisdiction over their own members in matters of marriage, burial, and divorce. Since the Orthodox establishment generally handles these matters among Jews, civil marriages and marriages between Jews and non-Jews are not recognized by the state unless conducted abroad; many Israelis choose to marry in civil ceremonies abroad rather than submit to a religious ceremony. In addition, Orthodox definitions of Jewish identity are used in the implementation of the Law of Return. However, the Orthodox monopoly on Jewish religious affairs has eroded steadily since the 2003 disbandment of the Religious Affairs Ministry, a move that put rabbinic courts under the control of the Justice Ministry and allowed more resources to be allocated to non-Orthodox institutions. In 2005, the Supreme Court ruled that the state must recognize as Jews people who undergo non-Orthodox conversions begun in Israel but formalized abroad.

Muslim and Christian communities occasionally claim discrimination in resource allocation and upkeep of religious sites, though the state budget officially assigns funds according to need, regardless of faith or denomination. Israel, citing security concerns, occasionally restricts Muslim worshippers’ access to the Temple Mount, or Haram al-Sharif, in Jerusalem. Controversial archaeological excavations and construction work near the site was halted for public consultation in 2007 after they sparked riots by Muslim residents.

Primary and secondary education are universal, with instruction for the Arab minority based on the common curriculum used by the Jewish majority, but conducted in Arabic. In 2007, the government approved a textbook for use in Arab schools that presents the founding of the state from the typical Palestinian—and thus highly critical—perspective. However, the quality of schools in predominantly Arab municipalities is generally worse than in predominantly Jewish municipalities, and Arab parents have complained of difficulties in registering Arab children in mostly Jewish schools. Israel’s universities are open to all students based on merit. The government generally does not interfere in faculty appointments or curriculum development at universities, which have long been centers for dissent. Periodic road closures and other security measures in recent years have made it difficult for residents of the West Bank and Gaza to reach universities in Israel.

Freedoms of assembly and association are respected. Israel hosts an active civil society that includes an array of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and demonstrations are widely permitted. Groups committed to the destruction of Israel are not allowed to demonstrate. In February 2008, the Supreme Court backed a government order preventing a public commemoration of George Habash—founder of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—in Nazareth.

Workers may join unions of their choice and have the right to strike and bargain collectively. Three-quarters of the workforce either belong to unions affiliated with Histadrut, the national labor federation, or are covered under its social programs and bargaining agreements. General strikes are common but generally last under 24 hours. About 100,000 legal foreign workers enjoy wage protections, medical insurance, and guarantees against employer exploitation. However, foreign workers who leave their original employers are stripped of these rights and are subject to deportation. Advocacy groups claim that there are at least 100,000 illegal workers in Israel, many of whom are exploited. The government has come under increasing pressure from civil society to better regulate the status of foreign workers.

The judiciary is independent and regularly rules against the government. The Supreme Court hears direct petitions from citizens and Palestinian residents of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In recent years, the Supreme Court has repeatedly ordered the rerouting of the West Bank security barrier to decrease its negative effects on Palestinian residents. In 2008, the government committed to two court-mandated changes in the barrier.

The Emergency Powers (Detention) Law of 1979 provides for indefinite administrative detention without trial. Most administrative detainees are Palestinian; there are approximately 9,800 security prisoners in Israeli prisons. Negotiations between Israel and the West Bank-based PA resulted in the release of hundreds of these prisoners in 2007 and 2008. In 2007, the human rights groups B'Tselem and HaMoked Center reported that Palestinian prisoners are held in terrible conditions and are subject to abusive interrogation techniques, including instances of torture. The government disputed the accuracy of the report. In April 2008, the Public Committee against Torture in Israel accused the Shin Bet of using faux interrogations of family members to elicit confessions from Palestinian prisoners; authorities denied the charge.

While violence continued to decrease in Israel for most of 2008, personal security was still affected by rocket attacks and bombings. According to B'Tselem, 490 Israeli civilians have been killed by Palestinian attacks since September 2000. In February 2008, the country's first suicide bombing in over a year killed a woman in Dimona. The following month, a gunman from East Jerusalem killed eight students at a Jewish seminary in Jerusalem. In two separate attacks in July, Palestinians drove construction diggers into traffic in Jerusalem; the first attack killed three Israelis, while the second injured at least 10. Rockets were launched regularly into Israeli towns from Gaza prior to the Israel-Hamas truce, and the attacks resumed in greater numbers after the truce expired near the end of the year; two women were killed by rocket attacks in June, and four people were killed during the outbreak of violence in December. Knife attacks on Jews in Jerusalem increased slightly in 2008. In July 2008, four Arab Israelis (along with four East Jerusalem Palestinians) were arrested and charged with spying and planning attacks for Al-

Qaeda.

While they have full political rights, the roughly one million Arab citizens of Israel (about 19 percent of the population) receive inferior education, housing, and social services relative to the Jewish population. Arab Israelis, except for the Druze minority, are not subject to the military draft, though they may serve voluntarily. Those who do not join the military are not eligible for the associated benefits, including scholarships and housing loans. In 2000, 13 Arabs were killed by police attempting to quell several days of often violent protests in support of the concurrent uprising in the Palestinian territories. The Orr Commission—established to investigate the uprising—cited the government’s “neglectful and discriminatory” management of the Arab population, which over the course of decades led to “poverty, unemployment, a shortage of land, serious problems in the education system and substantially defective infrastructure.” In January 2008, the attorney general announced that no police officers would be prosecuted for the 13 killings due to lack of evidence, a decision that was criticized by human rights groups.

One-third of those killed by Hezbollah rockets during the 2006 Lebanon conflict were Arab Israelis. A July 2007 report by the state comptroller heavily criticized the government for failure to adequately protect Arab Israeli villages, most of which did not have bomb shelters. In December 2007, a polling study by the Association for Civil Rights in Israel found that anti-Arab sentiments among Israeli Jews had doubled that year, and that racist incidents were up 26 percent. A 2008 survey by the Israel Democracy Institute found that while 65 percent of Arab respondents felt that human rights are protected to a large extent in Israel (compared with 60 percent of Jews), only 33 percent believed that there is equality between Jews and Arabs (compared with 52 percent of Jews).

In October 2008, Jewish-Arab violence broke out in the city of Akko after an Arab Israeli drove through a mostly Jewish neighborhood during the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur; Jewish youths attacked the driver, prompting retaliation from Arab youths and subsequent riots that spread to other cities. While nobody was killed, scores were injured and arrested, and many properties were damaged. In late October, Israeli police arrested six Jewish youths suspected of throwing firebombs at Arab homes in Tel Aviv.

Most Bedouin housing settlements are not recognized by the government and are not provided with essential services. In March 2008, Human Rights Watch published a report accusing the government of pervasive land and housing discrimination against the Bedouin and urging authorities to stop demolishing unlicensed Bedouin homes. The state, through the Israeli Lands Administration, owns 93 percent of the land in Israel; 13 percent of that land is owned by the Jewish National Fund (JNF). In 2005, the Supreme Court and attorney general ruled that the JNF could no longer market land only to Jews. In 2007, the Knesset made a first attempt at overriding those rulings via legislation that reserved JNF land for Jewish use. The legislation would require two additional majority votes to become law.

Freedom of movement is affected by security measures that can lead to delays at roadblocks and in public places. Security forces sometimes carry out random identity checks of civilians. By law, all citizens must carry national identification cards. The West Bank security barrier restricts freedom of movement for some

East Jerusalem residents. Formal and informal local rules that prevent driving on Jewish holidays can also restrict freedom of movement.

Women have achieved substantial parity at almost all levels of Israeli society. However, Arab women and religious Jewish women face some societal pressures and traditions that negatively affect their professional, political, and social lives. The rise of so-called “modesty buses”—on which women are forced to sit at the back, separate from men—in very religious Jewish neighborhoods of Jerusalem in 2007 fueled heated opposition from women’s groups, some of which filed a brief at the Supreme Court. The trafficking of women for prostitution has become a problem in recent years. In 2005, a parliamentary report claimed that 3,000 to 5,000 women, mostly from the former Soviet Union, had been smuggled into the country as prostitutes over the previous four years. Both the United Nations and the U.S. State Department have identified Israel as a top destination for trafficked women. The government has opened shelters for trafficked women and passed more stringent legislation; in 2006, the Knesset passed a law mandating prison terms of up to 20 years for human trafficking.

Sexual minorities have made significant strides in recent years. A 2005 Supreme Court decision granted guardianship rights to nonbiological parents in same-sex partnerships, and two lesbians were granted permission to legally adopt each other’s biological children in 2006. Openly gay Israelis are permitted to serve in the armed forces.

**Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom. Click [here](#) for a full explanation of Freedom in the World methodology.*