

A densely-populated country on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea, Israel is the only state in the world with a majority Jewish population.

It has been locked in conflict with the Palestinians and its Arab neighbours over ownership of land considered holy by many Jews, Christians and Muslims since its creation in 1948.

The division of the former British Mandate of Palestine and the creation of the State of Israel in the years after the end of the Second World War was the culmination of the Zionist movement, whose aim was a homeland for Jews hitherto scattered all over the world.

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After the Nazi Holocaust, pressure grew for the international recognition of a Jewish state, and in 1948 Israel declared its independence following a UN vote to partition Palestine.

At a glance

- **Politics:** Security concerns over the conflict with the Palestinians are a constant factor in a political environment marked by volatile coalition governments
- **Economy:** Israel has a diverse and sophisticated economy
- **Foreign relations:** Israel faces hostility from much of the Arab region. The US provides crucial diplomatic and military support. Some borders remain in dispute.

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Much of the history of the area since that time has been one of conflict between Israel on one side and Palestinians - represented by the Palestine Liberation Organisation - and Israel's Arab neighbours, on the other.

Hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Arabs were displaced in the fighting in 1948, during which Israel's Arab neighbours came to the aid of the Arab Higher Committee in Palestine. Israel lost one percent of its population in the fighting, which ended in a series of uneasy armistices.



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A Jewish man takes part in a ceremony in Jerusalem

Israel has developed from an agrarian state run along collectivist lines into a hi-tech economy in the past 60 years. It has absorbed Jewish immigrants from Europe, the rest of the Middle East, North America and, most recently, the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia along the way.

Its political life has nonetheless been dominated by the conflict with its Arab neighbours, including full-scale regional wars in 1948, 1967 and 1973, and many smaller-scale conflicts including the 1956 invasion of Egypt and the Lebanon wars of 1982 and 2006.

Relations with the Palestinians have been a major factor in foreign and security policy. The Palestinians in the West Bank and eastern Jerusalem have lived under Israeli occupation since 1967. The settlements that Israel has built in the West Bank are home to nearly 500,000 people and are deemed to be illegal under international law, although Israel disputes this.

Gaza conflict

Israel evacuated its settlers from the Gaza Strip in 2005 and withdrew its forces, ending almost four decades of military presence inside Gaza. Israel continues to control Gaza's air space and coastal approaches, on the basis of which the international community considers Gaza still to be occupied territory.

After the militant Islamic group Hamas reinforced its power in Gaza in June 2007, Israel intensified its economic blockade of the Strip. In 2008 and in 2014 it launched major military assaults on Gaza to halt cross-border rocket attacks.

In 1979 Egypt and Israel signed a peace agreement, but it wasn't until the early 1990s, after

years of an uprising known as the intifada, that a peace process began with the Palestinians. Despite the handover of Gaza and parts of the West Bank to Palestinian control, a final agreement has yet to be reached.

The main stumbling blocks include the status of Jerusalem, the fate of Palestinian refugees and their descendants, Jewish settlements, and attacks by Palestinian armed groups.



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The ancient hilltop fortress of Masada is one of many historical sites to be found in Israel

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