

MEMO

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Democracy in Israel

Jan. 25 marks the 67th anniversary of Israel's first parliamentary election. As a vibrant, liberal democracy, Israel's parliamentary system has produced governments drawn from across the political spectrum – left, center and right. The parliament, known as the Knesset, currently features a diverse set of parties representing the full range of political thought. In a region plagued by war, authoritarianism and instability, Israel remains the sole functioning democracy and a valued strategic ally of the United States.

Israel Shares America's Commitment to Democracy, Liberty and Civil Rights

- On May 14, 1948, President Harry Truman made the historic decision to recognize the State of Israel, making the United States the first nation to do so. From the start, the U.S.-Israel relationship has been grounded in common values and interests.
- Both countries share a fundamental commitment to democracy, rule of law, freedom of speech, press, religion and equal rights for all of its citizens. And like America, Israel has been strengthened by waves of immigrants seeking to flee persecution and find peace.
- America's strong connection with Israel is regularly reflected in public opinion polls that demonstrate overwhelming support among Americans for a strong U.S.-Israel relationship.

A Thriving Democracy from the Beginning

- Israel's devotion to liberty is remarkable given the country's neighborhood – where many regimes deny their populations the most basic rights, and in some cases, support extremist groups that seek to impose repressive interpretations of Islamic law.
- As a parliamentary democracy, Israel's system of government vests legislative power in the Knesset – a unicameral legislative body of 120 representatives elected through a proportional representation system. The Knesset chooses the prime minister from among its members. The prime minister heads the government, and is responsible for handling executive duties. The judiciary is an independent entity, with the right to legal review of government and Knesset decisions.
- The first and longest serving Prime Minister of Israel, David Ben-Gurion provided exceptional stability for the young country. He personally declared Israel's independence in 1948 and headed the provisional government, until winning the first national elections. Ben-Gurion served as Prime Minister from 1949 to 1954, and again from 1955 to 1963.
- Mapai/Labor, the center-left political party, dominated early Israeli politics, controlling the government from its founding through 1977. Since that date, the prime ministership has rotated between parties, with different governments choosing to focus on a range of different issues.

Today, Israel's Knesset debates some of the most controversial topics in an open environment that is often heated, but representative of the full diversity of Israeli views.

- Israel's elected officials represent a diverse cross-section of Israeli society; over 20 parties competed in the 2015 Knesset elections. The current Knesset includes representation from 10 parties with political affiliations from far-left to far-right, as well as secular and religious, and Jewish and Arab, including some that are Islamist and openly anti-Zionist. The Joint List, a coalition of Arab parties, won 13 seats – the third highest of any party in the election. Local governments are equally diverse; of the 265 local governing authorities in Israel, more than 70 are led by Arab mayors.

Promoting Due Process, Political Rights and Civil Liberties

- Israel goes to great lengths to protect the civil liberties of its citizens. Israel was the only Middle Eastern country ranked “free” in [Freedom House's 2015 Freedom of the Press Rankings](#). Israeli media is vibrant, independent and often vigorously criticizes Israeli government policy.
- Israel has a fiercely independent judiciary that hears direct petitions from Israeli citizens and Palestinians on a wide variety of issues. The Supreme Court, which is presided over by a female chief justice, frequently rules against the Knesset on issues ranging from security to religious liberty. Israel's justice and legal system responds swiftly and forcefully to prosecute perpetrators in a nondiscriminatory way.
- Although Israel is a Jewish democratic state, it protects freedom of religion for all citizens. Israel's Jews, Muslims, Christians, Druze, Baha'i and others enjoy equal protections and a great deal of autonomy – each religion is permitted to establish its own religious schools, courts and councils, and to preside over their distinct communities in matters of marriage, divorce and burial. Religious officials, and not the Israeli government, hold jurisdiction over holy sites. All places of worship for recognized religious communities are exempt from taxation.
- Israel emphatically protects the right of citizens to peacefully assemble and petition their government. Freedom of assembly is a legally-protected right and has been staunchly defended by Israel's Supreme Court. Millions of Israelis have participated in political demonstrations, turning out both in support of and in opposition to government policies.
- Over the past 50 years, Israel has emerged as a world leader in upholding the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people. Israel is a world leader in its commitment to the LGBTQ community and Israeli law recognizes same-sex couples as legal units in matters such as spousal benefits and hospital visits. Members of the LGBTQ community serve openly in elected office and in the Israeli Defense Forces. Voted the “Top Gay City” in the world in 2011, Tel Aviv's annual pride parade drew 180,000 participants from around the globe in 2015.
- Israel is the only nation in the Middle East where women enjoy full equality. Israeli law forbids discrimination and abuse, and women participate extensively in military, professional and political life. The Knesset passed the Women's Equal Rights Law in 1951 and has since enacted additional legislation to strengthen its anti-discrimination laws. One or more women have served on the Supreme Court since 1977, and Israel is the only country in the Middle East to have ever elected a female prime minister.