

MEMO

September 15, 2016

International Day of Democracy

On Sept. 15, Israel joins countries around the world in celebrating International Day of Democracy. Israel's strong democratic institutions and robust civil society ensure that every Israeli citizen has the ability to shape Israel's future. In a Middle East plagued by war, authoritarianism and instability, Israel remains the region's sole functioning democracy and a key U.S. ally.

Celebrating International Day of Democracy

- In 2007, the United Nations declared Sept. 15 as the International Day of Democracy. This day celebrates the upholding and promotion of the principles of democracy throughout the world.
- Israel, like the United States, has a fundamental commitment to democracy; rule of law; freedom of speech, press, religion; and equal rights for all of its citizens.

A Thriving Democracy

- Israel is a parliamentary democracy: Israeli citizens vote in free and fair elections to determine the distribution of the 120 available seats in Israel's parliament, known as the Knesset, among competing parties. Heads of parties elected to the Knesset then recommend a choice for prime minister to the president. The president is responsible for tasking a member of Knesset to form a coalition government. If successful, this individual becomes prime minister. The prime minister heads the government, and is responsible for handling executive duties.
- The judiciary is an independent entity, with the right to provide legal review of government and Knesset decisions.
- Israel has a robust, multi-party system representing views from across the political spectrum. Whereas the current government consists of a coalition of the right and center right, Israel's center-left Mapai/Labor party dominated early Israeli politics, controlling the government from its founding through 1977. Since that date, the post of Prime Minister has been held by the head of three different parties.
- Today, Israel's Knesset debates even the most controversial topics in an open environment. While discussions are often heated, they fully represent the diversity of Israeli views.
- Israel's elected officials mirror the diversity of Israeli society; more than 20 parties competed in the 2015 Knesset elections. The current Knesset is comprised of 10 parties with political affiliations from far-left to far-right, including both secular and religious parties, as well as parties that represent Israel's Arab minority—even those that are openly anti-Zionist. The Joint List, a coalition of Arab parties, won 13 seats, making it the third largest party in the current Knesset. 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 is a vibrant, liberal democracy which values the promotion of due process, political and civil freedom, and the participation of all Israeli citizens irrespective of their gender, race, religion, marital status, political views, sexual orientation, or disability.
- Israel has an 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.
- Israel's government protects freedom of religion for all citizens. Israel's Jews, Muslims, Christians, Druze, Baha'i and others benefit from equal protection under the law, and minorities enjoy a great deal of autonomy. Each religious group is permitted to establish its own schools, courts and councils, and 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—millions of Israelis have participated in political demonstrations, turning out both in support of and in opposition to government policies.