

# MEMMO

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May 11, 2016

## Israeli Independence Day

This May 14th marks the 68th anniversary of Israel's Declaration of Independence. As the British Mandate expired, the Jewish People's Council gathered at the Tel Aviv Museum to announce the formation of the State of Israel. Israel's Declaration of Independence promised social and political rights to all Israeli inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex. Israel guaranteed freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture, and pledged to safeguard the holy places of all religions. For 68 years, Israelis have strived to make their founding principles a reality.

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### Society and Political Equality for All

- Israel is a vibrant, participatory democracy. All Israelis over the age of 18 have the right to vote; elected officials represent the diversity of Israeli society.
- The current Knesset includes lawmakers who represent 10 political parties drawn from across the political spectrum. Parties winning Knesset representation include both Jewish and Arab parties, as well as secular and religious parties. The Knesset also includes members who hold viewpoints that are Islamist and openly anti-Zionist.
- Israel's Supreme Court, which is presided over by a female chief justice, is fiercely independent and hears direct petitions from Israeli citizens and Palestinians on a wide variety of issues.
- Israel provides full minority protections for its citizens, including Arab citizens. Israeli civil society includes advocacy groups committed to minority rights, including Adalah: The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel; Mossawa—The Advocacy Center for Arab Citizens of Israel; and The Association for Civil Rights in Israel.
- Israel is deeply committed to advancing gender equality, and it was among the first nations to select a female head of government. Just three years after the country's founding, the Knesset passed the Women's Equal Rights Law, and has since enacted additional legislation to strengthen its anti-discrimination laws. Women participate extensively in military, professional and political life.



**From the day Israel was established, U.S. presidents and Israeli prime ministers have worked closely together to ensure the safety and security of both nations.**

## **Freedom of Religion, Conscience, Language, Education and Culture**

- While Israel is a Jewish democratic state, it protects freedom of religion for all. Israel's Jews, Muslims, Christians, Druze, Baha'i and others enjoy equal protections and autonomy. Each religion may establish its own religious schools, courts and councils, and preside over its distinct community in matters of marriage, divorce and burial.
- As part of its support for religious minorities, Israel pays for the upkeep of most mosques and the salaries of their imams.
- Both Hebrew and Arabic are the official languages of Israel. Following a November 2000 Israeli Supreme Court case which affirmed Arabic as an official language of Israel, all road signs, food labels, and government messages are now published in both Hebrew and Arabic. All major road signs are printed in English as well.
- All Israelis have access to free education, from kindergarten through 12th grade; in disadvantaged areas, the Israeli Ministry of Education also allocates special resources for preschool. Israel's nine major universities offer affordable education, with annual tuition of approximately \$3,000 USD.

## **Safeguard the Holy Places of All Religions**

- Each religious group controls its own holy sites, free from government interference. All places of worship for recognized religious communities are exempt from taxation.
- Israel works to ensure free and open access to holy sites in Jerusalem and throughout the country. The 1967 Protection of Holy Places Law guarantees the "freedom of access of the members of the different religions to the places sacred to them." Damaging any holy site is a criminal offense.
- Under the terms of the 1994 "Treaty of Peace Between the State of Israel and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan," Jordan administers the Temple Mount and secures worship for Muslims; non-Muslims are allowed on the compound, but barred from prayer or other forms of religious worship.