



Middle East Spotlight

The Diversity of the Israeli People

We often describe Israel as the “Jewish state.” It is certainly an accurate description, but it is in no means a complete portrayal. The reality is that Israel is a far more complex and diverse society than this short moniker may indicate. Since even before its founding, Israeli society has been a vibrant mixture of people of different races, religions and national origins. Unlike other countries in the Middle East that have devolved into sectarian strife, Israel has made its diversity a strength.

Israel’s Declaration of Independence [guarantees](#) “complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex.” Holding true to this founding principle, Israel has consistently upheld its liberal democratic ideals, even under trying circumstances.

As of 2017, [almost](#) 2.2 million non-Jews (mostly Muslim Arabs) reside in Israel. Arab citizens of Israel, unlike Arabs in other parts of the Middle East, have the right to vote in free and fair elections. In addition, they have risen to hold positions at the highest echelons of Israeli society, including top universities and companies, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), the Knesset and the Supreme Court.

Countless non-Jewish Israelis make tremendous contributions to Israeli society. In December 2017, Brig. Gen. (res.) Kamil Abu Rokon was named Israel’s next Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), the second Druze to hold this position and the second to be promoted to the rank of IDF major general. As of January 2018, there are 18 members of Knesset (MKs) who are not Jewish, including Druze, Bedouin, Muslim and Christian MKs. Ayoob Kara, the Israeli Minister of Communications and former Deputy Speaker of the Knesset, is an Israeli Druze.

Even Israel’s Jewish community, which makes up [about](#) 75 percent of the country’s total population of 8.7 million, comes from a diverse array of backgrounds, cultures, religious practices, ethnicities and nationalities—hailing from more than 70 countries and speaking more than 100 different languages.

In 1985, Israel airlifted thousands of Jews from drought-stricken Ethiopia to Israel, welcoming them as citizens from the moment they arrived. Today, more than 100,000 Ethiopians call Israel home. Here, too, there are many success stories: Avraham Neguse, who immigrated to Israel in 1985, is an Israeli MK; Esti Molla is the first Ethiopia-Israeli supermodel; Balinach Ayeche, who migrated to Israel from the rural Gondar region at 16, became the first Ethiopian to join Israel’s diplomatic corps; and Tzion Ankur, who arrived at age 4, became the first Ethiopian Israeli to attain the rank of Regiment Commander in the IDF in 2009.

Israel is not perfect—no country is. But we can take pride in the fact that it is one of the most diverse and tolerant societies in the world. The Jewish state has undoubtedly succeeded in fulfilling its original declaration of equality “irrespective of religion, race or sex,” and should be seen as a role model for countries in the region and beyond.

