

# **Civil Rights in Israel**

By Sandy Berger

The Israeli Declaration of Independence, establishing the state in 1948, clearly defines Israel as a democratic nation, providing equal rights to all:

***The State of Israel ... will be based on freedom, justice and peace ... it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.***

During its short time as a nation, just over 60 years, Israel has remained committed to its promise to be a free and open society, despite the challenges of a diverse population, multiple wars and terrorist threats.

## **Demographics**

Israel is a diverse nation. Like the US, Israel reflects a range of religions and ethnic groups. Immigrant citizens come from throughout the Middle East, Africa, India, Russia, US and Europe:

|                      | <b>Christian</b> | <b>Jewish</b> | <b>Muslim</b> | <b>Other*</b> | <b>Total Population</b> |
|----------------------|------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|-------------------------|
| <b>Israel</b>        | 2.1%             | 75.5%         | 16.8%         | 5.6%*         | 7.5 million             |
| <b>United States</b> | 78.5%            | 1.7%          | 0.6%          | 21.2%*        | 308 million             |

*\*Includes Buddhist, Druze, Baha'i, other, unaffiliated and none.*

## **Citizens' Rights**

- **Voting Rights**: All Israeli citizens, 18 and over can vote. Israeli citizens include Arab Israelis, Bedouins and other minorities.
- **Government Representation**: All citizens, including Arab Israelis, may be elected into the Knesset (Israeli legislature), serve on the Israeli Supreme Court and hold government posts. Since 1949, Arab Israelis have participated in all aspects of Israeli government, ranging from a Supreme Court Justice to foreign ambassadorships. Some examples include:
  - Seif el-Din el-Zoub, an Arab Israeli, was elected to the first Knesset in 1949.
  - Arab Israeli Abdel Rahman Zuabi was appointed to the Israeli Supreme Court in 1994, Salim Jubran was appointed in 2004.
  - Ali Yahya became the first Arab Israeli ambassador for Israel in 1995 when he was appointed ambassador to Finland. Walid Mansour, a Druze, was appointed ambassador to Vietnam in 1999. In 2006, Ishmael Khaldi was appointed Israeli Consul in San Francisco, becoming the first Bedouin consul of Israel.
- **Women's Rights**: All Israeli women, regardless of ethnicity or religion, enjoy broad freedoms, rights and protections. Unlike many women in the Middle East, the lives of Israeli women mirror those living in Western democracies: Israeli women can vote, work, dress, study and live how and where they choose. Israeli women participate in all aspects of Israeli society, from Prime Ministers and Supreme Court justices to senior army officers and CEOs of corporations.
- **LGBT Rights**: The Israeli LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) population is fully protected by law and entitled to serve openly in the military, adopt children and receive partner benefits. Gay and lesbian marriages abroad are recognized in Israel.

- **Legal Redress**: Much like the US, Israeli citizens enjoy a full range of freedoms that are protected by law and enforced by the Israeli Supreme Court. Palestinians living in the West Bank have successfully petitioned the Israeli Supreme Court. For example, in June 2006, the Court ordered Israel to tear down and reroute a two-mile stretch of the security fence to accommodate Palestinians in the area.
- **Democratic Elections**: Israel's elections are a model of the democratic process. The Israeli government is a parliamentary democracy, whereby the Prime Minister of Israel is the head of the government with a multi-party system. Israeli voters typically choose among more than 30 parties, representing a full spectrum of political views, for the 120-seat Knesset (parliament). In the 2009 election, thirteen parties won seats; fourteen Arab Israelis (11% of the Knesset), from several different political parties, were elected.
- **Religious Freedom**: Israel protects the freedom of Jews and non-Jews alike to engage in their chosen form of religious practice or worship.
- **Cultural Representation**: Hebrew and Arabic are both official languages.
- **Health Care**: All Israeli citizens are covered by Israel's universal health care system.

## **Freedom of the Press, Freedom of Assembly, Freedom to Organize**

- Israel is consistently rated "FREE" by the independent watchdog organization, FreedomHouse.org, the only country to earn the highest rating throughout Middle East and Africa.
- Numerous daily, weekly and monthly newspapers and magazines, independently owned and operated, are available in multiple languages and present a wide range of views. Editorials highly critical of the Israeli government appear regularly; Israeli television and radio regularly broadcast debates and discussions critical of government activities and policies.
- Freedom to assemble and protest is protected; over 10,000 Israelis (equivalent of 500,000 in the United States) participated in a 2011 protest without incident.
- Israelis have unrestricted access to the internet.
- As a democratic state, Israel – like the US – nurtures many progressive organizations committed to protecting and ensuring the rights of those living within Israel and the territories. These organizations continually evaluate and criticize government policies and use the legal system to remedy perceived injustices. Among these organizations are The New Israeli Fund, Association for Civil Rights in Israel and Rabbis for Human Rights.

## **Palestinians**

- Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza are not Israeli citizens. Palestinians living in Jerusalem were offered citizenship following the 1967 war, but most refused the offer.
- Following the 2006 Palestinian elections, the Palestinian government split into two factions, with *Fatah* ruling the West Bank and *Hamas* in control of the Gaza Strip. Hamas, which refuses to accept the State of Israel, is considered a terrorist organization by the United States, the European Union, Canada, Japan and Israel.
- Hamas (in Gaza) and the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority (in the West Bank) control all aspects of civil life, including voting rights, freedom of expression, women's rights and LGBT rights. Israel maintains military rule of the West Bank, but withdrew from the Gaza Strip in August 2005.
- In response to the violence of the Second Intifada and thousands of mortars fired into Israel, the Israeli government has restricted Palestinian access to Israel from the West Bank and Gaza Strip.