

ISRAEL

THE STATE OF ISRAEL

General Information

Area: 20,700 sq.km (2/3 the size of Vancouver Island).

Population: 5,300,000 (1993); Growth rate: 1.5%; Urban/rural ratio: 92/8%

Capital: Jerusalem (544,000) *Note: Israel has declared Jerusalem to be its capital. However, the final status of Jerusalem has yet to be resolved and Canada, like most countries, maintains its embassy in Tel Aviv.*

Other urban centres: Tel Aviv-Jaffa agglomeration (1,000,000); Haifa (251,000); Be'er Sheva (135,000).

Ethnic composition: Jewish 82%; Arab 16%; others 2%.

Religion: Judaism 82%; Islam 14% (mostly Sunni muslim); Christian 2%; Druze 2%.

Languages: Hebrew; Arabic is an official language but spoken little outside Arab communities. English is widely spoken.

Currency: NIS (new Israeli shekel) = 100 agorot.

Exchange: 1 NIS = C\$.4239 (June 26, 1996)

Time: 7 hours ahead of Eastern Standard; 2 hours ahead of GMT.

Diplomatic Relations in operation since: July 28, 1954 - Accredited as resident in Greece

Israeli Embassy: 50 O'Connor St., Suite 1005, Ottawa, Ont., K1P 6L2, tel.: (613) 567-6450, fax.: (613) 237-8865.

Canadian Embassy: 220 Rehov Hayarkon, Tel Aviv, 63405, tel.: (011-972-3) 527-2929, fax.: (011-972-3) 527-2333.

Regional importance: Israel has a well-developed economy with a strong base in advanced technology. Canada and Israel signed a Free Trade Agreement in July 1996, with a scheduled implementation date of January 1, 1997. Israel also has free trade agreements with the USA and EU. The Arab-Israeli conflict has historically dominated Middle Eastern politics, with wars between Israel and its neighbours in 1948, 1956, 1967, 1973 and 1982. Tension has now lessened and regional peace is becoming a possibility, with Israel signing historic peace agreements with the Palestinians in September, 1993 (Declaration of Principles) and follow-up agreements in May, 1994 and September, 1995. Israel and Jordan signed a peace agreement in 1994. Syria and Lebanon have not yet made peace with Israel.

Government

Present Constitution: Israel has no written constitution, but a number of basic laws covering key areas of public life. Legislative authority lies with a unicameral legislature (Knesset) elected every four years through proportional representation. The President is elected by the legislature for a five year term but the post is mainly ceremonial. Real power lies with the Cabinet led by the Prime Minister. In 1996, the Prime Minister was directly elected on a separate ballot for the first time.

Head of State: President Ezer Weizman.

Head of Government: Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu.

Minister of Foreign Affairs: Mr. David Levy.

Main Political Parties: Likud (centre-right, governing, elected May 1996), *Labour* (centre-left, main opposition). Three religious parties are part of Likud coalition government, as well as new Immigrant's party.

Human Rights Record: Israel has been criticized for its human rights violations within the Occupied Territories, including collective punishment, arbitrary arrest, and torture of Palestinians. These complaints have, however, been greatly reduced in number since the signing of the Israeli-PLO peace agreements.