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The State

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**David Ben-Gurion
proclaiming
the
establishment
of the
State of
Israel**
Photo:
GPO

The State (2006 edition)

Introduction

...in the multitude of counselors
there is safety.
(Proverbs 11:14)

Israel's Declaration of Independence

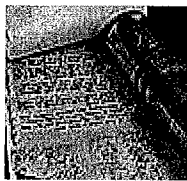
The Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel, signed on 14 May 1948 by members of the National Council representing the Jewish community in the country and the Zionist movement abroad, constitutes the nation's credo. Included therein are the historical imperatives of Israel's rebirth; the framework for a democratic Jewish state founded on liberty, justice and peace, as envisaged by the biblical prophets; and a call for peaceful relations with the neighboring Arab states for the benefit of the entire region.

Eretz Israel (the Land of Israel) was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped. Here they first attained statehood, created cultural values of national and universal significance and gave to the world the eternal Book of Books.

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...Jews strove in every successive generation to reestablish themselves in their ancient homeland. ...they made deserts bloom, revived the Hebrew language, built villages and towns, and created a thriving community, controlling its own economy and culture, loving peace but knowing how to defend itself...

The State of Israel will be open for Jewish immigration... will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; 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.

We extend our hand to all neighbouring states and their peoples in an offer of peace and good neighbourliness, and appeal to them to establish bonds of cooperation and mutual help with the sovereign Jewish people settled in its own land.

[Full text](#)

The Israeli Flag

The flag of the State of Israel is based on the design of the Jewish prayer shawl (*tallit*), with a blue Shield of David (Magen David).



A.Hirschfeld

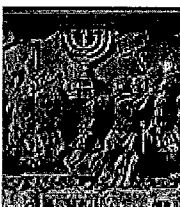
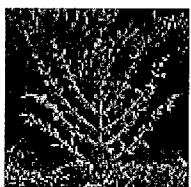
The Menorah



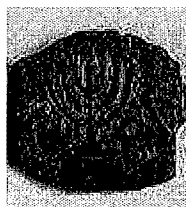
The official emblem of the State of Israel is a candelabrum (*menorah*), whose shape is said to be derived from the seven-branched *moriah*, a plant known since antiquity. The olive branches on either side represent Israel's yearning for peace.

The Menorah through the Ages

The Goldan Menorah (a seven-branched candelabrum) was a major ritual object in King Solomon's Temple in ancient Jerusalem. Through the ages it has served as a symbol of Jewish heritage and tradition in countless places and in a variety of forms.



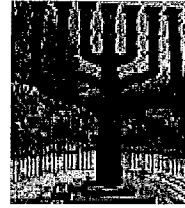
The Menorah on the Arch of Titus, Rome



The Menorah on a Hasmonean coin from the 1st century BCE Israel Antiquities Authority



The Menorah on two plaster fragments from the 1st century CE found in the Jewish Quarter in Jerusalem. Israel Exploration Society



The Menorah in the mosaic floor of a 5th-gth century synagogue in Jericho Israel Antiquities Authority

The Menorah near the Knesset by Benno Elkan GPO

Hatikva - The National Anthem



*As long as deep in the heart,
The soul of a Jew years,
And towards the East*



*An eye looks to Zion,
Our hope is not yet lost,
The hope of two thousand years,
To be a free people in our land,
The land of Zion and Jerusalem.*





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THE STATE: Political Structure

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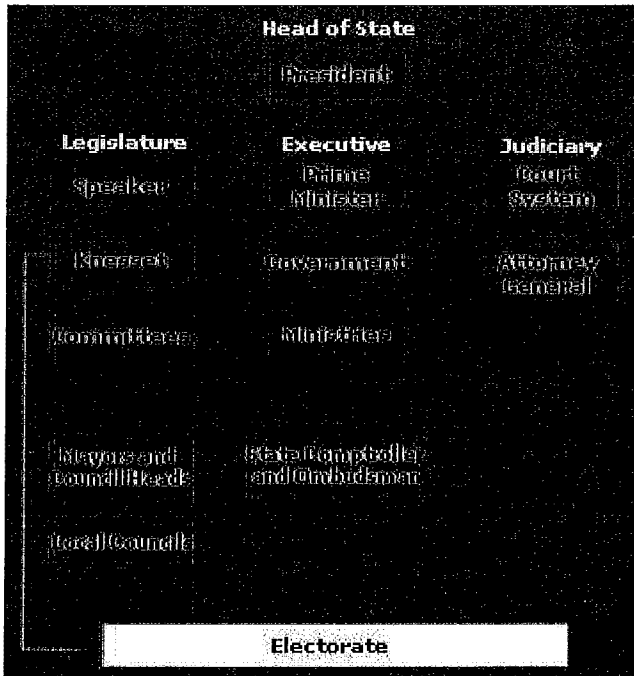
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The Knesset in plenary session
Photo: Y. Loeff

Political Structure

Israel is a parliamentary democracy consisting of legislative, executive and judicial branches. Its institutions are the presidency, the Knesset (parliament), the government (cabinet of ministers) and the judiciary.

The system is based on the principle of separation of powers, in which the executive branch (the government) is subject to the confidence of the legislative branch (the Knesset) and the independence of the judiciary is guaranteed by law.



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THE STATE: The Presidency

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President Katsav receiving credentials of Ambassador of the People's Republic of China

Photo: "NOY"



The Presidency

The *nasi* (president) bears the ancient title of the head of the *Sanhedrin*, the supreme legislative and judicial body of the Jewish people in the Land of Israel in ancient times. The president is the head of state, with the presidency symbolizing the nation's unity, above and beyond party politics. The president is elected by a simple majority of the Knesset from among candidates nominated on the basis of their personal stature and lifelong contribution to the state. Revised legislation (1998) provides for the election of the president for a single term of seven years.

Presidential duties, which are mostly ceremonial and formal, are defined by law. They include opening the first session of a new Knesset; directing a member of Knesset to form a new government; accepting the credentials of foreign envoys; signing treaties and laws adopted by the Knesset; appointing, on recommendation of appropriate bodies, the heads of Israel's diplomatic missions abroad, judges and the governor of the Bank of Israel; and pardoning prisoners, on advice of the minister of justice. In addition, the president performs public functions and informal tasks such as hearing citizens' appeals, lending prestige to community organizations and strengthening campaigns to improve the quality of life in the society at large.

Israel's Presidents

- [Chaim Weizmann](#) (1949-52), Zionist leader, prominent scientist
- [Yitzhak Ben-Zvi](#) (1952-63), head of the Jewish Agency, historian
- [Zalman Shazar](#) (1963-73), politician, scholar, historian, author, poet
- [Ephraim Katzir](#) (1973-78), renowned biochemist
- [Yitzhak Navon](#) (1978-83), politician, educator, author
- [Chaim Herzog](#) (1983-93), attorney, general, diplomat,

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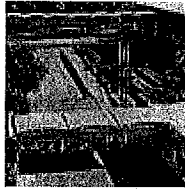
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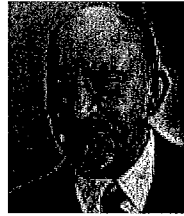
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**The
Presidential
residence**

author

- [Ezer Weizman](#) (1993-2000), air force general, politician, businessman
- [Moshe Katsav](#) (2000-), social leader, politician



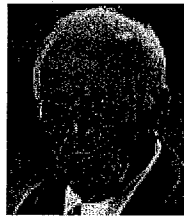
CHAIM
WEIZMANN



YITZHAK
BEN-ZVI



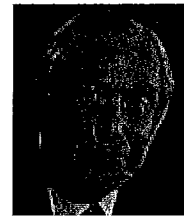
ZALMAN
SHAZAR



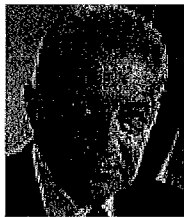
EPHRAIM
KATZIR



YITZHAK
NAVON



CHAIM
HERZOG



EZER
WEIZMAN



MOSHE
KATSAV

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THE STATE: Legislature: The Knesset

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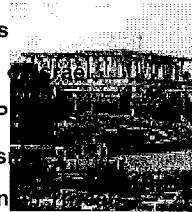
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Legislature: The Knesset

The Knesset (Israel's unicameral parliament) is the country's legislative body. The Knesset took its name and fixed its membership at 120 from the *Knesset Hagedolah* (Great Assembly), the representative Jewish council convened in Jerusalem by Ezra and Nehemiah in the 5th century BCE.

A new Knesset begins to function after general elections, which determine its composition. In the first session, [Knesset members](#) declare their allegiance, and the Knesset speaker and deputy speakers are elected. The Knesset usually serves for four years, but may dissolve itself or be dissolved by the prime minister any time during its term. Until a new Knesset is formally constituted following elections, full authority remains with the outgoing one.

The Knesset operates in plenary sessions and through 15 standing and special committees: the anti-drug abuse committee; the constitution, law and justice committee; the economic affairs committee; the education and culture committee; the finance committee; the foreign affairs and defense committee; the house committee; the immigration, absorption and diaspora affairs committee; the internal affairs and environment committee; the labor, social welfare and health committee; the state control committee; the committee on foreign workers; the committee on science and technology; the committee on the status of the child; and the committee on the status of women.



In plenary sessions, general debates are conducted on legislation submitted by the government or by individual Knesset members, as well as on government policy and activity. Debates are conducted in Hebrew, but members may speak Arabic, as both are official languages. Simultaneous translation is available.

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**The
Knesset
in plenary
session**
Photo: Y.
Loeff

To become law, a bill must pass three readings in the Knesset. In the first reading, the bill is presented to the plenary, followed by a short debate on its contents, after which it is referred to the appropriate Knesset committee for detailed discussion and redrafting, if necessary. When the committee has completed its work, the bill is returned to the plenary for its second reading, at which time committee members who have reservations may present them to the plenary. Following a general debate, each article of the bill is put to a vote and, unless it is necessary to return it again to committee, the third reading takes place immediately, and a vote is taken on the bill as a whole.

If the bill passes, it is signed by the presiding speaker and is later published in the Official Gazette, with the signatures of the president, prime minister, Knesset speaker and the minister responsible for the law's implementation. Finally, the state seal is placed on it by the minister of justice, and the bill becomes law.

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Executive: The Government

The executive authority of the state is the government (cabinet of ministers), charged with administering internal and foreign affairs, including security matters. Its policy-making powers are very wide, and it is authorized to take action on any issue which is not legally incumbent upon another authority.

The government determines its own working and decision-making procedures. It usually meets once a week, but additional meetings may be called as needed. It may also act through ministerial committees.

All governments to date have been based on coalitions of several parties, since no party has ever received enough Knesset seats to form a government by itself.

Following consultations, the President presents one Knesset member with the responsibility of forming a government. To do so, this Knesset member has to present, within 28 days of being given responsibility for the formation of a government, a list of ministers for Knesset approval, together with an outline of proposed government guidelines.

Once approved, the ministers are responsible to the prime minister for the fulfillment of their duties and accountable to the Knesset for their actions. Most ministers are assigned a portfolio and head a ministry; ministers who function without portfolio may be called upon to assume responsibility for special projects. The prime minister may also serve as a minister with a specific portfolio.

All the ministers must be Israeli citizens and residents of Israel. Ministers, with the approval of the prime minister and the government, may appoint a deputy minister in their ministry; all must be Knesset members.

See

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- > [ministers and officials of the government](#)
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Like the Knesset, the government usually serves for four years, but its term may be shortened by the resignation or death of the prime minister, or a vote of no-confidence by the Knesset.

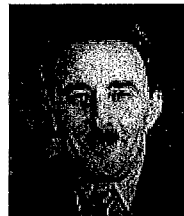
If the prime minister is unable to continue in office due to death, resignation or impeachment, the government appoints one of its members (who must be a Knesset Member) as acting primeminister. In case of a vote of no-confidence, the government and the prime minister remain in their positions until a new government is formed.

Israel's Prime Ministers

- David Ben-Gurion (1948-53)
- Moshe Sharett (1954-55)
- David Ben-Gurion (1955-63)
- Levi Eshkol (1963-69)
- Golda Meir (1969-74)
- Yitzhak Rabin (1974-77)
- Menachem Begin (1977-83)
- Yitzhak Shamir (1983-84)
- Shimon Peres (1984-86)
- Yitzhak Shamir (1986-92)
- Yitzhak Rabin (1992-95)
- Shimon Peres (1995-96)
- Benjamin Netanyahu (1996-1999)
- Ehud Barak (1999-2001)
- Ariel Sharon (2001-2006)
- Ehud Olmert (2006-)



DAVID
BEN-
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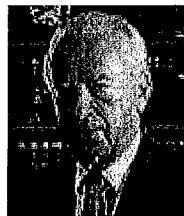
MOSHE
SHARETT



LEVI
ESHKOL



GOLDA
MEIR



YITZHAK
RABIN



MENACHEM
BEGIN



YITZHAK
SHAMIR



SHIMON
PERES



BENJAMIN
NETANYAHU



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BARAK



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Elections



Photo: W. Braun

Elections are general, national, direct, equal, secret and proportional. The entire country constitutes a single electoral constituency, and all citizens are eligible to vote from age 18. On election day, voters cast a ballot for a political party to represent them in the Knesset.

Election day is a national holiday, free transportation is available to voters who happen to be outside their polling district on that day and polling stations are provided for military personnel, hospital patients and prisoners, as well as for merchant seamen and Israelis on official assignment abroad. A central elections committee, headed by a justice of the Supreme Court and including representatives of the parties holding Knesset seats, is responsible for conducting the elections. Regional election committees oversee the proper functioning of local polling committees, which include representatives of at least three parties in the outgoing Knesset. In each election to date, between 77 and 90 percent of all registered voters have cast their ballots, expressing the great interest taken by most Israelis in their national and local politics.

Knesset elections are based on a vote for a party rather than for individuals, and the many political parties which run for the Knesset reflect a wide range of outlooks and beliefs. The two main parties - Likud, substantially national-liberal, and Labor, essentially social-democratic - have historical roots and traditions pre-dating the establishment of the state in 1948. In recent years they have become increasingly populist and relatively pragmatic, compared to the parties to their left and right. Neither party has ever attained a majority of Knesset seats. For decades, Labor and Likud have together held about two thirds of the Knesset membership, with the remaining seats gained by small parties, which reflect a variety of opinions concerning security, social issues, religion and economics. However, in the 1999 elections, the two large parties together received less than half of the seats, with the small parties increasing in

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strength.

Prior to elections, each party presents its platform and a list of Knesset candidates in order of precedence, determined through various internal procedures; candidates must be Israeli citizens over 21 years of age. The president, state comptroller, judges and senior public officials, as well as the chief-of-staff and high-ranking military officers, are disqualified from presenting their candidacy unless they have resigned their position at least 100 days before the elections.

Parties in the outgoing Knesset may automatically stand for reelection; other parties may present their candidacy by obtaining the signatures of 2,500 eligible voters and depositing a bond, which is refunded if they succeed in receiving at least 1.5 percent of the national vote, entitling them to one Knesset seat. Knesset seats are assigned in proportion to each party's percentage of the total national vote. A party's surplus votes, insufficient for an additional seat, are redistributed among the various parties according to their proportional size, or as agreed between parties prior to the elections. An allocation, funding the expenses of election campaigns is granted to each party from public funds, based on its number of seats in the outgoing Knesset. New parties receive a similar allocation retroactively for each member elected. The state comptroller reviews the disbursement of all campaign expenditures.

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The Supreme Court

Judiciary: The Court System

The independence of the judiciary is guaranteed by law. Judges are appointed by the president, upon recommendation of a nominations committee comprised of Supreme Court judges, members of the bar and public figures. Appointments are permanent, with mandatory retirement at age 70.

- Magistrates' Court** (1 judge) Civil and minor criminal offenses; jurisdiction in civil and criminal cases
- District Court** (1 or 3 judges) Appellate jurisdiction over magistrates' courts; original jurisdiction in more important civil and criminal cases.
- Supreme Court** (1, 3, 5 or a larger uneven number of judges) Ultimate appellate jurisdiction nationwide; right to address issues when necessary to intervene for the sake of justice; authority to release persons

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Photo: B.
Gian

illegally detained or imprisoned; sitting as a High Court of Justice, hears petitions against any government body or agent and is the court of first and last instance.

Special
Courts
(1 judge)

Traffic, labor, juvenile, military and municipal courts, with clearly defined jurisdiction; administrative tribunals.

Religious
Courts
(1 or 3
judges)

Jurisdiction in matters of personal status (marriage, divorce, maintenance, guardianship, adoption) vested in judicial institutions of the respective religious communities: Jewish rabbinical courts, Muslim sharia courts, Druze religious courts, ecclesiastical courts of the ten recognized Christian communities in Israel.

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The Law of the Land

Upon attaining independence (1948), Israel passed the Law and Administration Ordinance, stipulating that laws prevailing in the country prior to statehood would remain in force insofar as they did not contradict the principles embodied in the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel or would not conflict with laws to be enacted by the Knesset. Thus the legal system includes remnants of Ottoman law (in force until 1917), British Mandate laws, which incorporate a large body of English common law, elements of Jewish religious law and some aspects of other systems. However, the prevailing characteristic of the legal system is the large corpus of independent statutory and case law which has been evolving since 1948. Following the establishment of the state, the Knesset was empowered to enact a series of basic laws, relating to all aspects of life, which would eventually be brought together to form a constitution. Most chapters have already been passed as Basic Laws outlining the fundamental features of government such as the President, the Knesset, the Government, the Judicature, Israel Defense Forces, the State Comptroller, Freedom of Occupation (dealing with the right to follow the vocation of one's choosing) and Human Dignity and Liberty, which addresses violation of a person's life, body or dignity.

The normative superiority of Basic Laws over ordinary legislation was confirmed in 1995, when the Supreme Court assumed the power of judicial review of Knesset legislation violating a Basic Law.

Basic Laws

- [The Knesset \(1958\)](#)
- [State Lands \(1960\)](#)
- [The President \(1964\)](#)
- [The Government \(1968/2001\)](#)
- [The State Economy \(1975\)](#)

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- Israel Defense Forces (1976)
- Jerusalem (1980)
- The Judiciary (1984)
- The State Comptroller (1988)
- Human Dignity and Liberty (1992)
- Freedom of Occupation (1992)

Over the years, a body of case law has developed through Supreme Court rulings which protect civil liberties, including freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion, and equality as fundamental values of Israel's legal system. In its capacity as a High Court of Justice and acting as the court of first and last instance, the Supreme Court also hears petitions brought by individuals appealing for redress against any government body or agent.

Attorney General

The government's legal service is headed by the attorney general, who holds exclusive power to represent the state in all major criminal, civil and administrative matters. The government is bound to abstain from any action which, in the opinion of the attorney general, is unlawful, as long as the courts do not rule otherwise.

Although appointed by the government, the attorney general functions independently of the political system.

The State Comptroller

The State Comptroller, established by law (1949) to assure public accountability, carries out external audit and reports on the legality, regularity, economy, efficiency, effectiveness and moral integrity of public administration. Since 1971, the state comptroller also serves as ombudsman, receiving complaints from the public against state or public bodies subject to the comptroller's audit. The state comptroller is elected by the Knesset in a secret ballot for a seven-year term and is responsible only to the Knesset. The scope of state audit includes the activities of all government ministries, state institutions, branches of the defense establishment, local authorities, government corporations, etc. In addition, the state comptroller is empowered by law to inspect the financial affairs of the political parties represented in the Knesset as well as their election campaign accounts, imposing monetary sanctions when irregularities are found.



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Law Enforcement

Israel Police



In common with police forces around the world, the task of Israel's police is to maintain the quality of life by fighting crime, assisting the authorities in carrying out the law and enforcing traffic regulations, as well as providing guidance on preventive measures for the safety and protection of the population.

The police's principal mobile task force, the Border Guard, deals mainly with internal security problems and includes a special anti-terrorist unit. The frequency and threat of terrorist incidents led concerned citizens to request active participation in the protection of their communities. Thus, a volunteer civil guard was established (1974) to maintain neighborhood security units, including command centers, armed patrols and training programs.

Prison Service

Separate prison facilities are maintained for male criminals, security prisoners, white-collar offenders, juveniles and women. Rehabilitation programs are available to prisoners. Among them are educational and vocational courses; probation frameworks; counseling; and employment opportunities within and outside prison. Home leave is granted every 2-3 months to all prisoners except those considered a danger to public safety.

The right of the prisoner to early release is provided by law. Inmates sentenced to more than six months may be discharged at the discretion of the Release Committee after having served two thirds of their sentence. Prisoners serving a life sentence may appeal to the president for either a pardon or a reduction of sentence.

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**Kfar
Tavor
(Local
Council)**

Photo: B.
Gian

Local Government

Services provided by local government include education, culture, health, social welfare, road maintenance, public parks, water and sanitation. Each local authority functions through by-laws, complementing national laws, which have been approved by the Ministry of the Interior. Some authorities operate special courts in which transgressors of local by-laws are tried. Financing for local authorities comes from local taxes as well as allocations from the state budget. Every authority has a comptroller who prepares an annual report.

The law recognizes three types of local authorities: municipalities which provide the framework for urban centers with populations of over 20,000; local councils which manage towns with populations of between 2,000 and 20,000; and regional councils which are responsible for several villages grouped within a certain radius.

Each local authority is administered by a mayor or chairperson and a council. The number of council members is determined by the Ministry of the Interior, according to the authority's population. Currently there are 69 municipalities, 141 local councils and 54 regional councils. All municipalities and local councils are united, on a voluntary basis, in a central body, the Union of Local Authorities, which represents them before the government, monitors relevant legislation in the Knesset and provides guidance on issues such as work agreements and legal affairs. Affiliated with the International Association of Municipalities, the Union maintains ties with similar organizations throughout the world, arranges twin cities programs and exchanges of international delegations.

Local Elections

Elections for local government are conducted by secret

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ballot every five years. All permanent residents, whether Israeli citizens or not, are eligible to vote in local elections from age 18 and to be elected from age 21.

In elections for municipal and local councils, ballots are cast for a party list of candidates, with the number of council seats attained by each list proportional to the percentage of votes received. Mayors and chairpersons of local councils are elected directly.

Photo: V.

Etzion

In regional council elections, one candidate in each village is elected by a simple plurality, with those elected becoming members of the council. Heads of regional councils are selected from among the regional council's members.

Local elections are financed by government appropriations, on the basis of the number of mandates that each faction or list wins in the local authority.

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Pilot cadets celebrating graduation

Photo:
GPO/
A. Ben-Gershon

Israel Defense Forces (IDF)

The IDF, founded in 1948, ranks among the most battle-trained armed forces in the world, having had to defend the country in five major wars. Currently, the IDF's security objectives are to defend the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the State of Israel, deter all enemies and curb all forms of terrorism which threaten daily life. Its main tasks include reinforcing the peace arrangements; ensuring overall security in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in coordination with the Palestinian Authority; spearheading the war against terrorism, both inside Israel and across its borders; and maintaining a deterrent capability to prevent the outbreak of hostilities.

To ensure its success, the IDF's doctrine at the strategic level is defensive, while its tactics are offensive. Given the country's lack of territorial depth, the IDF must take initiative when deemed necessary and, if attacked, to quickly transfer the battleground to the enemy's land. Though it has always been outnumbered by its enemies, the IDF maintains a qualitative advantage by deploying advanced weapons systems, many of which are developed and manufactured in Israel for its specific needs. The IDF's main resource, however, is the high calibre of its soldiers.

In preparing for defense, the IDF deploys a small standing army (made up of conscripts and career personnel) with early warning capability, and a regular air force and navy. The majority of its forces are reservists, who are called up regularly for training and service and who, in time of war or crisis, are quickly mobilized into their units from all parts of the country.

The IDF's three service branches (ground forces, air force and navy) function under a unified command, headed by the chief-of-staff, with the rank of lieutenant-general, who is responsible to the minister of defense. The chief-of staff is appointed by the government, on recommendation of the prime minister and minister of defense, for a three-year

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term, which is usually extended for an additional year.

Except when combat duty is involved, men and women soldiers of all ranks serve side by side as technicians, communications and intelligence specialists, combat instructors, cartographers, administrative and ordnance personnel, computer operators, doctors, lawyers and the like.

The IDF is responsive to the cultural and social needs of its soldiers, providing recreational and educational activities, as well as personal support services. Recruits with incomplete educational backgrounds are given opportunities to upgrade their level of education, and career officers are encouraged to study at the IDF's expense during their service. The integration of new immigrant soldiers is facilitated through special Hebrew language instruction and other programs. Active in nation-building enterprises since its inception, the IDF also provides remedial and supplementary education to civilian populations and contributes to the absorption of newcomers among the population at large. In times of national crisis or emergency, the IDF responds immediately with appropriate action and assigns trained personnel to fill essential jobs or carry out special tasks.

Terms of Service in the IDF

Compulsory Service: All eligible men and women are drafted at age 18. Men serve for three years, women for 21 months. Deferments may be granted to qualified students at institutions of higher education. New immigrants may be deferred or serve for shorter periods of time, depending on their age and personal status on entering the country.

Reserve Duty: Upon completion of compulsory service, each soldier is assigned to a reserve unit. Men up to age 51 serve up to 39 days a year, a period of time which can be extended in times of emergency.

Career Military Service: Veterans of compulsory service meeting current IDF needs may sign up as career officers or NCOs. The career service constitutes the command and administrative backbone of the IDF. Graduates of officers' or pilots' schools or special military technical schools are required to sign on for periods of career service.

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