

## Israel's strengths and challenges as a society

- **Israel's key asset is its liberal and democratic traditions.**
- **High levels of further education have allowed it to reach the front rank of hi-tech nations but schools are underfunded compared to other OECD countries and there is a gap in educational attainment for the Arab and Haredi minorities**
- **The diversity of Israel's society is both a strength and a challenge.**

### **Israel's key asset is its liberal and democratic traditions.**

Despite the fact that the vast majority of Israelis trace their origins to countries with little or no democratic traditions, democracy has taken root solidly in Israel, and is a key reason why the country has proved adaptable and resilient in the face of continuous threats to its existence.

### **However, a key challenge is the complexity of its social makeup, which is reflected via its system of proportional representation in a fractured and complex party system.**

This voting system, while ensuring representation of all sections of the population, makes it hard to form a coalition capable of governing for a full term. Minority sectors have often enjoyed a high degree of influence, with their representatives able to trade support for one or another potential government in exchange for concessions that favour their constituency. The ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) parties have frequently found themselves in this position, and as a result have been able to negotiate concessions (government financial support, budgets for their educational institutions, exemption from military service) to which the majority of Israelis are opposed. It has also been in a position to block reforms, such as civil marriage, which would command the support of a majority of Israelis. An alternative viewpoint about the electoral system, arguing that it has helped give a voice to minorities, is presented in [this article by Shany Mor](#).

### **The Israeli educational system has allowed it to reach the front rank of hi-tech nations.**

In 2012, Israel was named the second most educated country in the world according to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Education at a Glance report, in terms of the percentage of its population with degrees.

Two of Israel's major institutions of higher learning – the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the Technion (Israel Institute of Technology in Haifa) were established in the 1920s, long before the state itself. Today, at least four Israeli institutions regularly appear in the top 200 in world university rankings. Other world-class institutions include the Weizmann Institute of Science in Rehovot, Tel Aviv University, Haifa University, Bar Ilan University and Ben Gurion University of the Negev.

However, weaknesses remain. While primary and secondary education are free and universal, Israel falls behind the OECD average in educational spending per head (though above average in terms of spending as a proportion of national income). There are also considerable gaps in standards and attainment, with Arab-Muslim and Haredi sectors falling behind the rest.

Training within the army has tended to supplement the conventional education system in many technological areas, and this has underpinned Israel's increasing importance in IT and other leading-edge sectors of the economy.

### **The Arts are a sector of major importance in Israel.**

Israel's leading school of the visual arts – Jerusalem's Bezalel Academy of Art and Design - was established as early as 1906. It is now located in the Mount Scopus campus of the Hebrew University.

Israeli cinema has an importance out of proportion to the size of the country. Ten Israeli films have been nominated for the best foreign language film Oscar.

Israeli TV is having an increasing impact on the world. The drama series *Hatufim* ('Abductees'), about three Israeli soldiers captured in Lebanon and held for 17 years, was sold to 20th Century Fox Television and adapted into the acclaimed series *Homeland*. Another Israeli drama series, *Betipul (In Treatment)* about a psychologist, has likewise been adapted for an American audience.

Other world-class Israeli cultural institutions include the Batsheva Dance Company, the Habima Theatre, and the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra.

### **The diversity of Israel's society is both a strength and a challenge.**

Critics of Israel tend to be unaware of the extent to which Israel is a diverse, multi-ethnic society. Within the majority Jewish population there are Jews of European origin, Jews from Middle Eastern countries, as well as Jews from Ethiopia, India and a multitude of other places. A glance at any street in Israel reveals a country whose population (even just its Jewish population) covers the full range of ethnic backgrounds, from African to Latin, to South Asian and European.

There are also of course non-Jewish Israeli citizens. The majority of non-Jewish Israelis are Arabic-speaking Muslims, and there are also Christian Arabs, Druze, Baha'i and many others, comprising in total about a quarter of the population.

There is no doubt that the existence of a large Arab minority within Israel poses particular challenges in a country which faces considerable security threats and hostility emanating from Arab and Muslim states in the region.

Arab citizens possess the full civil rights, including voting rights, of Israeli citizens. However, as in other societies, minority groups still suffer from inequalities, including discrepancies in the allocation of resources and access to the labour market. The Arab-Israeli conflict makes particularly difficult the relationship between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority, and between Israeli Arabs and the state.

However, the situation is not as clear-cut as Israel's critics often suggest. There are ongoing efforts by governmental and non-governmental agencies to overcome inequalities between Jews and Arabs in Israeli society. Attitudes to the state among Arab citizens also vary enormously. While Arabs are exempt from compulsory military service, some – mostly among the Bedouin of the Negev – do join voluntarily, and sometimes attain senior positions. Recently there has been a move on the part of some Christian Arabs to volunteer for the army and relate more positively to the state.

Another feature of Israeli diversity is the existence of a growing Haredi (ultra-Orthodox Jewish) community. This creates tensions in a variety of areas:

- Exemption of Haredim from military service creates resentment among the majority who are expected to serve;
- The failure of many Haredim men to engage in (or even be educated for) jobs in the regular economy creates a drain on the public finances – a burden which inevitably falls on regular taxpayers who are already under considerable economic pressure;
- Attempts by some Haredi Jews to impose their religious strictures in the public space have created a backlash from the secular (and often highly socially liberal) majority).

### **As Israel's prosperity has grown, so have its inequalities.**

For both good and ill, Israel is very far from the socialist utopia dreamed of by many of its pioneers, or the social democratic realities of its early decades. Yet that society was in many ways backward, with average living standards far behind those of advanced economies in Europe and North America. The emergence of a modern high-tech economy has transformed Israel's economy and living standards, but also exposed growing inequalities.

One feature of the modern economy has been the exorbitant cost of housing, especially in those areas with access to the most lucrative employment (such as Tel Aviv and its environs). This is of course a problem in many successful modern urban conurbations (London is a prime example). However, it has been exacerbated in the case of Israel by Israel's population growth, which is very high for an OECD country, and long standing legal and bureaucratic challenges involved with freeing up land for new housing.

The high price of consumer goods is also a major problem. Indeed, it was cost of housing and basic goods that sparked the nationwide social protest movement in 2011. The tent encampments which symbolised the movement were preceded by a successful social media campaign to bring down the

cost of cottage cheese. This broadened into a general protest which encompassed many public grievances, but particularly the cost of living.

The protests forced the authorities to address some of the issues raised, although views vary on the solutions. Some have looked to a generalised critique of capitalism, while others have focused the blame on excessive concentration of wealth in the Israeli economy, where a small number of families control a very large share of the economy.

Another source of concern for Israel's leaders is the desire of educated young Israelis to emigrate in search of high level jobs and opportunities. This threatened 'brain drain' poses an obvious threat to Israel's future in knowledge-based industries.

***Would you like to know more about Israel and to get more involved in supporting Israel? This email is one of a series of educational emails from We Believe in Israel, the grassroots initiative of BICOM. We Believe in Israel is a UK grassroots network of people united in believing in the right of the State of Israel to live in peace and security. We aim to support and facilitate activists who seek through local engagement and campaigning to create a more complete understanding of Israel and its situation in the UK. You can join We Believe in Israel's mailing list [here](#). Our website is [www.webelieveinIsrael.org.uk](http://www.webelieveinIsrael.org.uk). BICOM's website, with all the latest news and analysis about Israel is [www.bicom.org.uk](http://www.bicom.org.uk).***

