

Essay 1 - Israel's Diverse Society

- **Israel is known as the world's only Jewish State but is made up of a kaleidoscope of ethnic and religious identities.**
- **Israel is a significant centre for three world faiths. The state of Israel officially recognises 15 faiths amongst its population and extends freedom of worship to all**
- **Around 20 per cent of Israelis are Arabs, both Muslim and Christian.**
- **Over 50% of Jewish Israelis are of Middle Eastern and North African origin.**

Israel today is made up of a kaleidoscope of ethnic and religious identities.

Modern Israelis come from many different backgrounds – Jewish, Christian and Muslim; Western, Middle Eastern and African, Russian and Indian.

Israel is a significant centre for four faiths.

It is well-known that Jerusalem is a holy city for the three great monotheistic faiths. For Jews, it is the site of the biblical temples and the capital of ancient Israelite kingdoms. For Christians it is also the place where Jesus preached and died. For Muslims it is the place where Muhammad ascended to heaven. The Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqsa mosque, the Western Wall (last remaining part of the Jewish temple to which Jews have access) and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre are all places of veneration and pilgrimage for the faithful.

Less well-known is Israel's role as the centre of the Baha'i faith (a monotheistic religion originating in 19th century Iran with more than five million followers worldwide). The Baha'i World Centre, the spiritual and administrative heart of the Baha'i community, is located in the twin cities of Akko and Haifa in northern Israel.

Nineteenth-century Palestine was home to a multitude of ethnic and religious communities.

Although the majority were Arabic-speaking Muslims, there were also various denominations of Christians (predominantly Catholic, Orthodox and Armenian, although with a few Protestants), Druze, Jews and Samaritans (an early offshoot of Judaism).

The early Zionist immigrants came predominantly from Russia and Eastern Europe.

These were mostly Ashkenazi Jews (Jews of European origin), whose native language was Yiddish. However, as part of their movement for national revival, they championed the use of modern Hebrew, based on the ancient language of the Jewish bible and Jewish prayer, and this became the national language of modern Israel.

These immigrants came in a number of distinct waves, in the 1880s, early 1900s and following the First World War.

Many of the early immigrants were socialists, and they established the labour movement and the kibbutzim (collective farms) as major institutions of the Jewish community and later of the Israeli state.

The rise of Nazism gave rise to huge waves of further immigration.

From the early 1930s until escape became impossible later in the decade, many Jews from Germany, Austria and other Nazi-occupied lands arrived in Palestine as refugees. They differed in a number of ways from the earlier Eastern European pioneers. Firstly, many were professional people, and their presence increased the size of the Yishuv's urban middle class (the Jewish Community in Palestine was known as the Yishuv before the foundation of the State of Israel). The judiciary and legal profession, for example, tended to be dominated by this group.

The liberation of the death camps at the end of the war produced a very different migration. Traumatized by their experiences, many of the survivors rejected their earlier national loyalties and clamoured to be allowed into Palestine. Before independence, with the British authorities banning most immigration, many came as illegal immigrants. If they avoided the British they were spirited away to hiding places on kibbutzim and elsewhere. If they were caught they were often treated brutally by the British and interned in camps in Cyprus.

Following independence the gates opened and they came to Israel legally.

The next wave of Jewish immigration was driven by persecution in Arab countries.

Although historically the treatment of Jews in the Muslim world was less brutal than in Christian Europe, Jews were always treated as an inferior group, having the status (along with Christians) of 'dhimmis'. While at many times they were able to live in peace, there were periodic explosions of persecution. While they often fared well under western colonial regimes, such as the French in North Africa, their position worsened again with the rise of Arab nationalism in the twentieth century. Anti-Jewish pogroms occurred in Iraq (1941), Libya (1945), Syria and Yemen (1947) among others. In the period before and during the Second World War this persecution was often incited by Nazi agents. During 1947-48 and in the years following, Arab countries deliberately targeted their Jewish populations with violence, expropriations and expulsions.

The result of this was a mass migration to Israel from 1948 onward. These 'Mizrachim' ('easterners') today account for around half the Jewish population of Israel.

A further major wave of Jewish immigration came with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

During the last decades of the Soviet era, small numbers of brave activists fought for the right to emigrate, and often suffered loss of jobs, imprisonment and even incarceration in mental hospitals as a result. Campaigning in the West forced the Soviets to release a few of these, notably Anatoly (now Natan) Sharansky, released by the Soviets in 1986, and subsequently an Israeli government minister.

However, the end of the Soviet Union allowed many more to emigrate, and close to a million people moved to Israel from the former Soviet Union.

Other immigrants, both Jewish and non-Jewish, came from elsewhere.

One significant community is from Ethiopia. This includes both practicing Jews and the descendants of those who at one time converted to Christianity but who have since returned to Judaism.

Another group is from India. This group comprises a number of different communities, from Mumbai, Kerala and elsewhere, of different origins.

There are also small numbers of non-Jewish immigrants in Israel. Around three hundred Vietnamese boat people were admitted in the 1970s. More recently, thousands of Africans have arrived, both legally and illegally.

Around 20 per cent of Israelis are Arabs, both Muslim and Christian.

While many Arabs left during the War of Independence (the Palestinian refugees) many others stayed, and today form about 20 per cent of the population. They enjoy full civil rights, including voting, and some occupy senior positions in government, the judiciary and elsewhere.

The only legal difference between Arabs and Jews is that the former are not liable to military conscription. However, they may join the armed forces if they wish. Some men from the Negev Bedouin community do join, and a small number of other Arabs (mostly Christian) also do so.

The Druze form a distinct ethnic and religious group.

There are approximately 125,000 Druze in Israel, and there are also communities in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. The Druze faith is an offshoot of [Ismailism](#), a branch of [Shia Islam](#). The Druze identify much more closely with the state than the general Arab population, and are eligible for military conscription.

Israel's rising knowledge economy has brought even more diversity.

No longer a relatively isolated and predominantly agricultural society, Israel is today plugged into the global economy, especially in modern knowledge-based industries. As a result there is a continual movement of people in both directions between Israel and leading urban centres around the world.

Nonetheless, there are major problems of integration and inequality.

The same modern knowledge economy, while bringing prosperity to many, has increased inequality in Israel as it has elsewhere. There were of course already problems of inequality and social integration regarding Israel's Arab and Haredi (strictly Orthodox) minorities.

There have been major cultural changes in the direction of a more relaxed and liberal culture.

There have been contradictory changes in Israeli society. The old labour Zionist establishment was often austere and socially conservative. 'The sixties' largely passed Israel by, and The Beatles were banned from the country on moral grounds.

This started to change from the 1970s onward. The offspring of the pioneer generations were attracted to a more relaxed lifestyle, and Israel caught up with the social changes occurring elsewhere.

These changes were highlighted in 1998, when a transsexual of Yemenite origin with the stage name of Dana International represented Israel and won the Eurovision Song Contest.

Tel Aviv in particular is the centre of a diverse, urban, Mediterranean lifestyle, with a very liberal culture including a thriving gay community.

Israel's densely populated coastal plain, with Tel Aviv at its heart, is a major global centre for high-tech industries, earning Israel the nickname of 'The Start Up Nation'.

Demographic changes have increased tension between the secular majority and an ultra-Orthodox 'Haredi' minority.

Quite different from and hostile to these changes has been the growth of Israel's strictly Orthodox 'Haredi' population. This has taken both militantly Zionist, and also anti-Zionist forms. Because the Haredi community have very large families, their share of the population has grown massively.

Conflict between Haredi and other Jewish Israelis now comprises one of the major fault lines of Israeli society and politics. This is exacerbated by the privileges which the Haredi community is seen as enjoying, such as exemption from army service, and the burden on the state of having large numbers of Haredi men who study religious texts rather than work. The outcome of this conflict will play a major role in determining the kind of society Israel becomes in the future.

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