



# Country Profile: Israel

## Israel: The Basics

Size (square miles)	8,019- Slightly smaller than New Jersey
Population	7,112,359- Slightly more than the population of Massachusetts
Major Ethnic Groups	Jewish 76.4% (of which Israel-born 67.1%, Europe/America-born 22.6%, Africa-born 5.9%, Asia-born 4.2%), non-Jewish 23.6% (mostly Arab)
Major Religious Groups	Jewish 76.4%, Muslim 16%, Arab Christians 1.7%
GDP Growth Rate 2007	5.3%

## Government Overview

Israel is a multiparty parliamentary republic with ultimate authority vested by the people in the legislature, or Knesset. There is no written constitution, but a number of basic laws passed by the parliament over the decades determine government operations and activities. Israel has a unitary, or non-federalist, system of government; the central government in Jerusalem runs most government functions across the country.

***Freedom House Political Rights Score: Free***

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## Key Players



**Ehud Olmert:** Current Prime Minister of Israel. A supporter of former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's 2005 Disengagement Plan – which forcibly removed Israeli settlements from the Gaza Strip – he followed Sharon in splitting from the right-wing Likud Party and forming the more moderate and centrist Kadima Party. Widely criticized for mishandling the 2006 Lebanon war – in which Hezbollah and Israel engaged militarily, leading to the deaths of many civilians in Lebanon – he has also been accused of corruption, and will resign from office once his party chooses a new leader in the fall of 2008.

**Mahmoud Abbas:** President of the Palestinian National Authority since 2005, Abbas is a leading Fatah politician, the political entity of the PLO. He has served as the Chairman of the PLO's Executive Committee since 2004. Despite a fairly militant past, including a doctoral dissertation that flirted with Holocaust denial, Abbas has always been an intellectual pragmatist. He is now widely regarded as a moderate among Palestinians, and is engaged in fierce battle with the religious Hamas movement which won the 2005 Palestinian Authority elections.



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## Key Players

**Ehud Barak:** served as the 10th Prime Minister of Israel from 1999 to 2001. After losing the 2001 election, Barak embarked on a business career. In June 2007, he completed a political comeback by winning the liberal Labor Party leadership election. He was appointed as Minister of Defense, replacing outgoing party leader Amir Peretz. In a controversial move, he withdrew Israeli forces from southern Lebanon in 2000, which many say emboldened the terrorist organization Hezbollah. Barak also took part in the Camp David Summit in 2000, called by U.S. President Clinton. Although the Summit failed to achieve a negotiated settlement between Israelis and Palestinians, it did create a framework – the “Clinton Parameters” – which is widely regarded as a blueprint for an eventual settlement.



**Shimon Peres:** former Prime Minister and current President of Israel (a largely ceremonial post as Head of State). Peres has been a major proponent of peace between Israel and the surrounding Arab countries. He served as Yitzhak Rabin’s foreign minister from 1992 to 1995. Without Rabin’s knowledge, he began illegal secret negotiations with Yasser Arafat’s PLO organization. The negotiations led to the Oslo Accords, which won Peres, Rabin and Arafat the Nobel Peace Prize.

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## Key Players

**Benjamin Netanyahu:** As leader of the conservative Likud party, he was Prime Minister from June 1996 to July 1999. He was Finance Minister of Israel until August 9, 2005, having resigned in protest at the Gaza Disengagement Plan advocated by then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. Netanyahu retook the Likud leadership on December 20, 2005. As of December 2006, he is the official leader of the Opposition in the Knesset and Chairman of the Likud Party. As Prime Minister, Netanyahu liberalized Israel's economy, which had been heavily regulated, leading to a burst in economic growth. He also emphasized a policy of "three no's": no withdrawal from Golan Heights, no discussion of the case of Jerusalem, no negotiations under any preconditions. In a March 8, 2007 interview with CNN, he asserted that there is only one difference between Nazi Germany and the Islamic Republic of Iran: the former entered a worldwide conflict and then sought atomic weapons, while the latter is first seeking atomic weapons and, once it has them, will then start a world war.



**Tzipi Livni:** is foreign affairs minister, and a leading member of the Kadima party. Livni was first elected to the Knesset as a member of the Likud party in 1999. In Sharon's Cabinet, Livni was an avid supporter of the prime minister's Disengagement Plan and was generally considered to be among the key dovish or moderate members of the Likud party. On November 20, 2005, Livni followed Sharon and Olmert into the new Kadima Party. After the March 2006 Knesset election, Livni was described as "the second most powerful politician in Israel." Livni is the second woman in Israel to hold the post of foreign minister, after Golda Meir. She is regarded by many as a potential successor to Ehud Olmert.



## **Israel and the United States: A Strategic and Moral Partnership**

Israel has been America's closest ally in the Middle East since 1967. As the region's only democratic country, the U.S.-Israeli partnership is based upon shared values every bit as much as it is based upon shared interests. In terms of national security, it is in the interest of the United States to help Israel maintain its qualitative military edge over its neighbors. In a region where the United States is not well-liked, our relationship with Israel is crucial if we are to maintain a strong military presence in the Middle East.

Since World War II, no single country has received more economic and military support from the United States than Israel (Israel currently receives approximately \$3 billion in military aid per year). As a major purchaser of U.S. arms, Israel is also involved in the joint development of new technology and engages in joint military exercises with the U.S. and other friendly nations, giving us a ready operating base in the region. Our close relations also allow us to produce and share intelligence on terrorist organizations and other threats emanating from the Middle East.

Yet the United States must maintain its close ties to Israel not simply to counter threats, but to help Israel seek opportunities that will bring greater peace to the region. By helping Israel maintain a qualitative military edge over its neighbors, the U.S. allows Israel to develop the security and confidence it needs in order to move forward in the peace process with the Palestinians, as well as secure and maintain peaceful relations with its neighboring Arab states. From the Camp David Accords that brought peace between Israel and Egypt in 1979, to the "Clinton Parameters" that established a framework for a settlement of the Israel-Palestine conflict in 2000, U.S. involvement has been critical in advancing the cause of peace between Israel and its neighbors. Daunting though it may be for U.S. policymakers, this dynamic is certain to persist into the future.

Constant war with neighboring countries, and the threat of terrorism from the West Bank and Gaza Strip, are not healthy for Israel's security, economy, or development as a nation. For the sake of Israel's survival and security – as well as for the sake of reducing tensions and terror in the Middle East – it is up to the United States to continue to support Israel by looking for new ways to broker peace in the Middle East.

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## **Israel: Historical Background**

The Jewish State of Israel was founded in 1948. In an effort to escape persecution, especially in Eastern Europe and Russia, Jews began migrating to Palestine – then a part of the Ottoman Empire – in the late 1800s. Hoping to re-establish the Jewish homeland, Jewish settlers were eventually able to secure the backing of Great Britain in 1917. Through the “Balfour Declaration,” Great Britain stated its support for the creation of “a national home for the Jewish people” in Palestine and expressed its “sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations.”<sup>1</sup>



However, the British had also signed the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement with France, divvying up the same land between France and Britain. And they had conducted a two year correspondence promising Arabs the land in reward for their help in WWI. More decisive than these competing claims were the emotions of the local Arab population, which did not look favorably upon the establishment of a Jewish homeland in their midst. Never able to organize a united front against Jewish settlers or their British patrons, violent outbreaks occurred periodically throughout the following thirty years. After the “Arab Revolt” of 1936-1939, the British, who had remained in control of Palestine since the end of World War I, crushed the rebellion, killing and exiling many Palestinian leaders. With the Arab leadership in disarray and the Jewish population highly motivated to establish a state after the Holocaust, the Jewish State of Israel was proclaimed in May 1948. It was immediately recognized by the United States and the Soviet Union, while neighboring countries immediately proclaimed war on the new nation. Israel became a member of the United Nations in 1949.

<sup>1</sup> Although often used as a racial slur, or in otherwise derogatory manners, the term “Zionism” originally referred to the movement that favored the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine.

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**Since Israel became an independent country in 1948, it has fought a number of wars with its Arab neighbors.**

**The 1948 Arab-Israeli War.** After proclaiming itself a sovereign nation, Israel's Arab neighbors – including Egypt, Lebanon, Transjordan (now Jordan), Syria, Iraq and Saudi Arabia – immediately proclaimed war. Though overwhelmingly outmanned and initially outgunned, Israel eventually obtained greater manpower and greater firepower, vanquishing the armies of the Arab countries. Although the Arab effort was uncoordinated and halfhearted – many nations sent token forces and were more interested in preventing each other from gaining new territory than they were in defeating Israel – the war has become known among Arabs as “al Nakbar (the Disaster),” because of the overwhelming loss they suffered. Israel refers to the conflict as the War of Independence or the War of Liberation.

**The Suez War (1956).** After Egypt nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956, Great Britain and France, eager to protect their own interests in Egypt, teamed up with Israel to launch a military assault against Egypt. The attack was denounced by both the United States and the Soviet Union. Consequently, Great Britain, France, and Israel were forced to withdraw from Egypt.

**The Six Day War (1967).** In 1967, following months of belligerent rhetoric and aggressive troop movements on the part of Arab countries, especially Egypt, Israel launched a preemptive strike that destroyed most of Egypt's air strike capabilities as they were on the ground waiting to launch. Israel eventually defeated three other Arab armies within a span of six days, capturing the Gaza Strip and the Sinai peninsula from Egypt, the Golan Heights from Syria, and the West Bank and Jerusalem from Jordan. Almost immediately, Israel proclaimed Jerusalem as its new capital. The status of Jerusalem remains a hotly contested topic between Israelis and Palestinians, each claiming all or part of the city for its capital.

**The Yom Kippur War (1973).** Also known as the October War, it began when Egypt and Syria launched a joint surprise attack against Israel on a holy fast day in October 1973, in an attempt to regain the territory they had lost in 1967. Although Israel eventually pushed Syria back out of the Golan Heights and forced Egypt to retreat across the Suez Canal, the Arab armies' strong showing was taken as a sign of hope by the Arab world and a warning by Israel. Largely as a consequence of the October War, Egypt and Israel eventually came to the negotiating table and signed the Camp David Accords in 1979, establishing peace between the two former enemies.

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## Israel's Most Recent War

**The Lebanon War (2006).** In July 2006, Hezbollah militants fired missiles from southern Lebanon into Israeli border towns, then attacked an Israeli border patrol, killing three soldiers, wounding two, and kidnapping two more. Israel responded with massive retaliation not just against the Shia religious-political-military organization Hezbollah, which had de facto control of much of southern Lebanon, but also against Lebanese civilian infrastructure in the north. Israel instituted an air and naval blockade against Lebanon and a ground invasion of southern Lebanon. Meanwhile, Hezbollah continued to shell deep into Israeli territory. The conflict killed over 1,000 and displaced 300,000-500,000 Israelis and over one million Lebanese. Israelis' use of unexploded cluster bomblets in the last days of the war have rendered parts of Southern Lebanon uninhabitable. The war ended in August with a UN brokered ceasefire, and the Lebanese government deploying into its south to control Hezbollah. Widely regarded as a military failure in Israel, the war has been the country's first modern military stalemate. In 2008, the two captured soldiers were returned to Israel in coffins, after Israel provided hundreds of prisoners in exchange.



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## **Israel Since the 1980s: Domestic Politics**

Israel is a parliamentary democracy of 7.3 million people—76% Jewish, 20% Arab, and 4% other minority groups. The domestic political spectrum is highly fragmented—there are currently thirteen parties represented in the 120-seat Knesset (the parliament) and they span the political spectrum from left to right and from secular to religious. They include three Arab parties. Legislative elections are conducted at least every four years through a system of nationwide proportional representation; rather than electing individual candidates, voters cast ballots for an entire party. Any party that receives at least two percent of the vote is assigned a proportional number of seats in the Knesset. Prior to the general Knesset elections, each party determines a list of representatives to occupy any seats the party should win; most large parties determine their lists in internal elections.



For the past two decades, two principal parties have led most government coalitions: the social-democrat Labor Party of Ehud Barak, Shimon Peres, and Yitzhak Rabin, and the right-wing Likud Party of Menachem Begin and Benjamin Netanyahu. However, the system of proportional representation almost ensures that governments will need to form coalitions to govern. This often provides outsized power to smaller parties with strong demands on the government that are often domestic in focus—such as providing Shas, a conservative religious party of largely Sephardic Jews, with greater control over Israeli education. In recent years, the main differences between the Likud and Labor parties have been their divergent positions regarding negotiations with the Palestinians and the Peace Process, with the Labor Party more willing to negotiate with the Palestinians and withdraw from settlements. In 2005, former prime minister Ariel Sharon, once a stalwart Likud member, defected from his party amid objections to his plan to withdraw Israeli troops and settlers from the Gaza Strip. His new third party, Kadima, placed first in the March 28, 2006 parliamentary elections, with Likud faring its worst in years. Kadima's new leader, Ehud Olmert, has been prime minister since Ariel Sharon's debilitating coma in early 2006.

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## **Israel Domestic Politics Continued...**

In the spring of 2008, Olmert faced a maelstrom of public criticism after it became public that he is under investigation for accepting illegal campaign contributions. After months of uncertainty over the fate of Olmert's coalition government, Olmert struck a deal with Labor leader Ehud Barak in June 2008; Barak promised not to back an effort to dissolve parliament early and in exchange Olmert promised to hold elections for a new leader of the Kadima party by the end of September. Since Olmert has pledged to step down, the front-runners in the race as of summer 2008 are foreign minister Tzipi Livni and current transportation minister Shaul Mofaz. Most observers believe that the winner of these elections will replace Olmert as prime minister. The average life span of an Israeli government is 22 months because contentious issues such as the peace process, the role of religion in the state, and political scandals frequently break apart coalitions and force early elections.



## **Israel Since the 1980s: the Peace Process**

In the early 1990s Israel began secret negotiations with the PLO in Oslo. Known as the Oslo Accords, Israel recognized the PLO – led by Yasser Arafat – and gave them limited autonomy in return for peace and an end to Palestinian claims on Israeli territory. In 1994, Israel signed a peace treaty with Jordan. Israelis and Palestinians struggled to make good on their commitments to one another, and the peace process ebbed and flowed. The assassination of pro-Oslo Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by a Jewish extremist opposed to Oslo cast the entire process in doubt.

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### **The Peace Process: the Clinton Parameters**

Thanks in part to the Clinton administration, which worked closely with each side to try and establish a compromise, talks continued. However, President Clinton was unable to foster a final agreement before leaving office in 2001. The Israelis claimed they had done more than ever to meet Palestinian demands. Although true, Palestinians argued that Israel's offer carved the potential Palestinian state into small zones that were economically unviable; and that Israel would maintain too much control over access to those zones through roadways that could separate them at Israel's whim. Nevertheless, the "Clinton Parameters," proposed in December 2000, are widely seen as the basis upon which a final settlement can be established.

#### **The plan offers the Palestinians:**

- Control over a viable sovereign state recognized by the international community.
- Sovereignty over Al Haram al-Sharif – also known as the "Dome of the Rock," which is the third holiest spot in Islam – in Jerusalem. This is contentious because the Dome of the Rock is located on the Temple Mount, which is the holiest site in Judaism. Guaranteeing Jewish access to the Temple Mount and Muslim control over the Dome of the Rock is thus one of the most delicate challenges to be faced in the peace process.
- Control over the Arab sections of Jerusalem, which would become the capital of the new Palestinian state.
- A settlement plan for refugees that offers several options: return to the new state of Palestine, return to Israel, resettlement in a third country, or compensation. This piece of the plan is meant to neutralize the issue of the "right of return," which is categorically rejected by Israel. The right of return refers to the ability of all Palestinian refugees to return to the land that currently makes up the state of Israel. If that happened, Israel would no longer be a majority Jewish state, which is why Israeli leaders cannot accept it.

#### **The plan offers the Israelis:**

- The right for 80% of West Bank settlers, most of whom live near the border that existed before the 1967 War, to stay where they are.
- Security guarantees.
- Control of the Jewish sections of Jerusalem, which would be internationally recognized as the capital of Israel.
- Control over, and access to, Jewish holy sites in Jerusalem, including access to the Temple Mount.

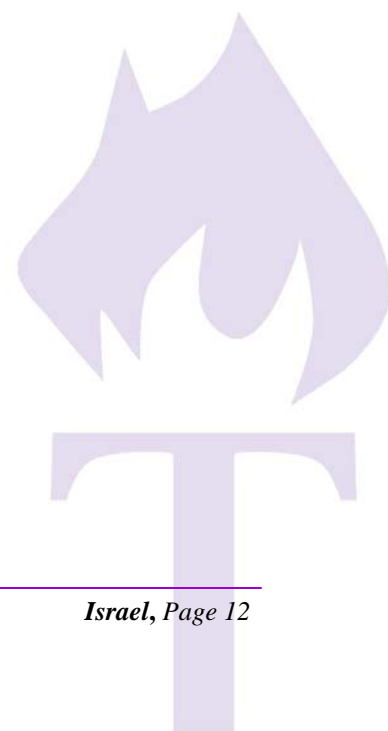
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## **The Peace Process Continued...**

Since George W. Bush became president, these parameters have been largely adopted in the “Roadmap for Peace,” which envisions a two-state solution, whereby a peaceful Palestinian state exists side by side with its Israeli neighbor. Yet the peace process has been plagued by a number of challenges, including Jewish settlements in Palestinian lands and the rise of Hamas and suicide terrorism.

### **Israel and Hamas**

Created in 1987, Hamas (an Arabic acronym for the “Islamic Resistance Movement”) was a religious-political movement with both a violent terrorist wing and an extensive social service network, which Israel had initially supported in an effort to reduce the power of the secular Palestinian Liberation Organization. However, the plan backfired, and by the new millennium, Hamas not only opposed the PLO, but had also become a political force and a major player behind violence in Israel. Hamas won the Palestinian Authority’s (PA) general legislative elections in January 2006, despite last-minute U.S. aid and efforts to support the corrupt, but more moderate, PLO. Hamas’ success in funding schools, hospitals, and orphanages, as well as the Palestinian perception that it is less corrupt than the party of Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas (member of Fatah, a major part in the PLO) contributed to its political victory in 2006.





### **Israel and Hamas Continued...**

Some hoped that Hamas—designated a foreign terrorist organization by the U.S. and Israel, and responsible for the death of nearly 350 Israeli civilians since 2000—would moderate its ideology once obtaining political power. Yet since 2006, Hamas has refused to recognize the State of Israel or to change statements in its charter calling for violence against Israel. As a result, the international community has maintained severe economic sanctions against the new government.

Tensions that were simmering between Fatah and Hamas since the 2006 elections culminated in Hamas' violent overthrow of the PA Fatah forces in Gaza in June 2007. As a result, the tenuous unity Fatah-Hamas government dissolved and the Palestinian territories separated into two de facto governance units. Since 2007, the West Bank has been ruled by a Fatah government led by Abbas, and Gaza has been under Hamas control under the leadership of Ismail Haniyah, subject to sanctions and border closings by Israel and Egypt. In June 2008, Egyptian mediators brokered a truce between Israel and Hamas; Hamas would stop the cross-border rocket fire into Israel and Israel would gradually ease the economic blockade by opening commercial crossings for fuel and food shipments. The truce was still holding steady as of August 2008, despite periodic rocket attacks attributed to non-Hamas militant groups within Gaza.

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## Settlements

Another major sticking point between Israelis and Palestinians is the issue of settlements. After its victory in the 1967 war, Israel, in violation of international law, began building settlements for Israeli citizens in the newly occupied territories of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, and the Golan Heights. The Gaza settlements were dismantled in 2005 as part of the “disengagement plan,” when Israeli soldiers also withdrew from Gaza. According to the Israeli Human Rights group B’Tzelem, by the end of 2007, the West Bank contained 120 settlements recognized by the Israeli government with 271,400 Israeli citizens. There are roughly an additional 100 unrecognized and smaller settlements in the West Bank, referred to in the media as “outposts.” The Israeli government has on occasion dismantled unoccupied outposts. In addition, there are 12 other settlements, with 190,000 Israelis, located on land de facto annexed by Israel in 1967 and made part of Jerusalem; the U.S., Europe, the UN, and the Arab states do not recognize this territory as having a status different than the West Bank.



During both the Oslo Peace Process of the 1990s and the current peace negotiations begun at the Annapolis Conference in November 2007, settlements emerged as one of the most contentious issues. The Clinton Peace Parameters proposed in December 2000 involved a solution whereby Israel would consolidate 80 percent of settlers, including those in East Jerusalem, within its final borders, and in exchange swap an equivalent land mass within the new Palestinian state. Settlements are a contentious issue for the final resolution of a two state-solution, but they have also proven to be harmful in the short-term. In particular, continued Israeli construction of new settlements and new housing in existing settlements, which has been recently criticized by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, eroded the Palestinian public’s confidence in Israeli intentions and in the peace process itself.

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## **Israel and Hezbollah**

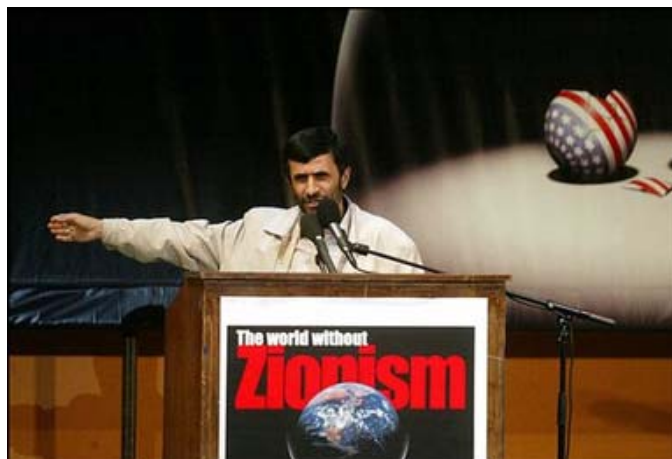
Hezbollah (literally “party of God”) is a Lebanese political and military Islamic Shiite organization established in 1982 with Iranian support to fight the Israeli occupation of Lebanon. Today it is part guerilla movement, part terrorist organization, and part social service provider—as well as the most successful political movement within Lebanon. Hezbollah is on the U.S. list of foreign terrorist organizations and is widely reviled among many Americans for its 1983 attack on the U.S. Marine Barracks in Beirut that killed more than 200 American servicemen. Hezbollah is also the most important bloc in the pro-Syrian faction of the Lebanese government, which is pitted against the pro-Western faction led by President Fouad Siniora. As the 18-month political stalemate (November 2006-May 2008) between the two factions suggested, Hezbollah can effectively destabilize Lebanese politics. Hezbollah’s kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers in July 2006 in a cross-border raid sparked a fierce month-long war with Israel, which ended in a ceasefire amid Hezbollah claims of victory. Hezbollah’s charismatic leader Hassan Nasrallah is idealized by many Lebanese Shiites, particularly those who live in Hezbollah strongholds within Lebanon: southern Beirut, most of southern Lebanon, and the Bekaa Valley region. In these areas, Hezbollah is also the major provider of social services.



The de-militarization of Hezbollah is currently a contentious issue, with ramifications for domestic Lebanese politics and implications for U.S. and Israeli relations with Lebanon. Despite two UN resolutions (1559 passed in 2004, and 1701, which halted the Israel-Hezbollah war in 2006) calling for disarming of militias in Lebanon, Hezbollah’s military arm remains intact, with several thousand well-trained fighters. A recent UN report suggested that Hezbollah has re-armed since the 2006 war, and that it is smuggling missiles into Lebanon from Syria. According to experts, Hezbollah receives military training, weapons shipments, and over \$100 million annually from Iran. Hezbollah claims it must maintain its weapons in order to continue its resistance against Israel.

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## Israel and Iran



According to the U.S. State Department, Iran remains the world's “most active” state sponsor of terrorism. Supporting terrorist groups in the Middle East enables Iran to increase its own regional influence while putting pressure on the U.S. and its allies in the region. Iran primarily backs Islamists groups, such as Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the Lebanese movement Hezbollah, all of which are considered terrorist organizations by the U.S. government. Iran helped Lebanese Shiites found Hezbollah in the early 1980s to fight the Israeli invasion of Lebanon.

On the Palestinian front, Iran provides funding, weapons, and training to Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), the Al Aqsa Martyr’s Brigades, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC). All are named as foreign terrorist organizations (FTO) by the State Department for their use of violence to undermine the Arab-Israeli peace process. Iran opposes the current peace process and objects to a two state solution; therefore, its position was further strengthened by Hamas’ victory in the Palestinian legislative elections in 2006, as well as by Hamas’ June 2007 armed takeover of the Gaza Strip.

Iran is even more directly involved in arming and training Hezbollah fighters. Whether or not Iran encouraged Hezbollah to provoke the July- August 2006 crisis, Iran has long been its major arms supplier. As part of a package of aid to Hezbollah said to exceed \$100 million per year, Iranian shipments to Hezbollah over the past five years have included the long-range rockets that were fired at Israel’s northern towns during the 2006 Israeli-Lebanon war. Personnel from Iran’s Revolutionary Guards Qods Force were in Lebanon during the 2006 conflict to provide training and advice.

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### **Israel and Iran Continued...**

Iran's nuclear program is also of great concern to Israel. Given Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's incendiary comments regarding the Holocaust and his desire to see Israel "wiped" from the map, many Israelis fear that if Iran develops nuclear weapons, it will use them to destroy Israel. Although the Israeli military would have the ability to strike Iran with nuclear weapons in return, some fear that Iran's leadership, motivated by radical religious ideology, would not be deterred. The possibility that Israel would launch a military strike against Iran to try and destroy its nuclear program – or cooperate with the United States to do so – remains real.

### **Israel and Syria**

Though Israel and Syria have technically been at war since 1967, the parameters of the Israeli-Syrian peace agreement are well-known to both sides. In the 1967 War, Israel seized the strategic Golan Heights, which serve as a high-ground buffer area with Syria and protect Israel's key water sources. Both the first direct bilateral peace talks held in 2000 and current negotiations mediated by the Turkish government involve a land-for-peace swap: Israel will return the Golan Heights in exchange for a peace treaty and the normalization of ties. In January 2000, President Clinton led marathon talks that collapsed over a sliver of land, about 100 meters wide, that Israel wanted in order to ensure its access to the Sea of Galilee, its major water source. Israel's recently renewed interest in a Syrian peace deal likely derives from an expectation that peace with Damascus might drive a wedge between Syria and Iran, as well as reduce Syria's material support for groups threatening Israeli security. Syria houses the head of the Palestinian group Hamas (along with representatives from all other major Palestinian terrorist groups) and is said to be actively rearming Lebanon's Hezbollah since the 2006 Hezbollah-Israel war.

Syria's recent interest in direct talks is surprising, given the timing. Bashar Al-Assad, who succeeded his father in 2000, has long insisted that the Syrian peace deal should follow the Palestinian-Israeli one. In addition, the Syrian-Israeli talks underway appear to have begun shortly after the September 2007 Israeli air-strike against an alleged nascent Syrian nuclear facility. Although the attack was clouded in secrecy for months, Israel said it attacked the al-Kibar nuclear weapons facility; Syria denied the allegations. In April 2008, the Bush administration shared with Congress intelligence said to support Israeli claims that the building it destroyed was a nuclear reactor constructed with years of help from North Korea.

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