

The Palestine Strategic Report 2020 – 2021



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Chapter Five

The Israeli Scene

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The Israeli Scene

Introduction

In 2020–2021, Israel experienced political instability followed by political polarization between two camps: Benjamin Netanyahu’s supporters, on one hand, and his detractors on the other. This situation produced alliances and partisan divisions of unprecedented intensity in the history of the Israeli political system, indicating the centrality of Netanyahu to the Israeli political scene, for even after the formation of a new government in Israel headed by Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid, Netanyahu’s presence remained the key to its cohesion despite political, ideological, and economic differences (in terms of trends and policies) between its various constituent parts.

The political scene was marked by the historic accession of an Arab list, the United Arab List (UAL—*Ra’am*), to the government coalition, the first time in the history of the Israeli political system that an Israeli government has relied on an Arab list for its survival. Ostensibly, the UAL will remain a central player in the formation of a future government, as long as Netanyahu remains on the political scene. Therefore, it can be said that Netanyahu’s survival on the political scene, despite his continued and his failure to form a government, as well as his knowledge that Likud will remain in opposition, this time because of him, will be a central factor in shaping the internal political scene in the years to come.

First: The Internal Israeli Political Scene

The Israeli scene in 2020–2021 was marked by the continuing political instability of two electoral cycles during the March 2020–March 2021 period, and the formation of a new Israeli government in June 2020, headed by Naftali Bennett in rotation with Yair Lapid.

1. March 2020 Elections

The 23rd Knesset elections were held on 2/3/2020, following the failure of Likud and the Blue and White Party (*Kachol Lavan*) to form a government after



the September 2019 elections, which had followed the failure of Likud to form a government in the April 2019 elections.

In the 2020 elections, Likud succeeded in increasing its representation in the Knesset from 32 to 36 seats, despite the indictment filed by the government's legal adviser against party leader Benjamin Netanyahu during the run-up to the elections, and the trial hearings that began on 17/3/2020. These developments did not affect Netanyahu's political performance. Likud strengthened its parliamentary representation and increased the representation of the right-wing bloc (the parties supporting Likud) from 55 seats in the September 2019 elections to 58 in these elections (March 2020). In the September 2019 elections, Likud received 1,113,617 votes compared to 1,352,449 votes in the March 2020 elections, meaning that Likud increased its voter turnout by more than 200 thousand.¹ It should be noted that the rest of the lists in the right-wing bloc maintained their strength, which indicates that the electoral bases of Likud are static, and that the electoral mobility of the right-wing bases essentially remains within the control of the right-wing camp.

The most important reason for the strengthening of Likud's power was the intensive outreach work of Likud to stimulate right-wing electoral bases, which had not voted in the previous elections. This was in addition to promoting the idea that the government that Gantz might form would be established through the Joint List support, whose representatives were dubbed "supporters of terrorism"² by Netanyahu. Moreover, he succeeded in persuading right-wing voters that he was being prosecuted with the aim of a political ouster, emphasizing his self-assigned "victim" status. He benefited from the wish of many right-wing voting bases to settle the elections in order to prevent a fourth election, and it was thus only by voting for Likud that the right-wing reached a stable Jewish government.

In contrast, the Blue and White Party maintained its parliamentary representation in the March 2020 elections with 33 seats, but unlike the September 2019 elections, it was no longer the largest party in the Knesset, after Likud gained 36 seats. It grew by about 70 thousand votes, whereas the bloc opposing Netanyahu (Blue and White, Yisrael Beiteinu, and the Labor-Gesher-Meretz Alliance (Emet)) declined from 52 to 47 seats.

The March 2020 elections indicated the collapse of the Labor Party, as Party members in the alliance gained only two seats (two for Labor, one for Gesher

and four for Meretz). The second loss came after Gesher split from this alliance, after it failed to bring votes from Eastern right-wing bases. Moreover, Labor Party representation declined from the September 2019 elections. Gesher thus gained a seat from the Labor Party and Meretz bases, after which it split, with the party's president announcing that she would join Netanyahu's right-wing bloc, raising the bloc's representation from 58 to 59.

2. The Netanyahu-Gantz Government

After the 23rd Knesset elections in March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic crisis worsened in Israel, and the transitional government under Netanyahu began to take more action, announcing from mid-March a near-total closure of all institutions and facilities, except those identified as vital facilities. This, in turn, was reflected in the economic situation where unemployment gradually rose, reaching almost 25%, and government spending increased in an unprecedented manner to cope with the crisis and its economic repercussions.

During the crisis, Netanyahu was at the forefront of the media and political scene. Since he is known for his demagoguery, his almost daily-televised speeches contributed to increasing people's fear of the consequences of the crisis and the pandemic's spread, and he proposed an emergency government under his presidency as the best option to overcome the crisis, which he dubbed the "invisible enemy."³ Netanyahu grabbed this opportunity to market himself, especially after the head of the State Reuven Rivlin tasked Benny Gantz to form the government, having received a recommendation from 61 Knesset members, including the 15 members of the Joint List, in exchange for Netanyahu's recommendation by the right-wing bloc (58 seats).

After Gantz failed to form a government owing to the refusal of the Knesset members of the Blue and White Alliance to form an administration based on the votes of the Joint List, Gantz split from the Blue and White Alliance and joined a government in rotation with Netanyahu. Gantz justified the formation of the government by his defense of democratic institutions, preventing the annexation project that was at the center of Likud's election campaign after the announcement of the "Deal of the Century" in early 2020, and confronting the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The prospect of a Joint List-backed government fell short after three Knesset Blue and White members declared their rejection of this option, leaving



Benny Gantz with a blocked fourth election on the horizon along with a COVID-19 pandemic crisis. The possibility of forming a national unity government between the Blue and White party and Likud also fell away, following Lapid and Moshe Ya'alon's opposition. Moreover, Netanyahu considered the COVID-19 crisis a "national crisis" of the first degree requiring a "national unity" government as was the case on the eve of the June 1967 war, as well as the fact that the health crisis had strengthened Netanyahu's political power. This complicated scene led Gantz to split from the Blue and White alliance and debate a rotation government with Netanyahu, with a large representation of a shrunk Blue and White party headed by Gantz, and where the ministries would be distributed between them. This was in addition to his willingness to support a law that would allow Netanyahu to be in the government (acting in rotation) despite the indictment.⁴

The Netanyahu-Gantz government was unable to last for more than a year, because Netanyahu refused to rotate with Gantz to head the government, believing that if the Knesset disbanded and headed to new elections, this would ensure the formation of a new government. Indeed, in voting on the bill to dissolve the Knesset on 2/12/2020, it passed with 61 votes in favor and 54 against. The Joint List voted in favor of the resolution with the exception of the UAL headed by Mansour 'Abbas, which abstained from voting.⁵ Gantz saw this vote as a signal to Netanyahu to reach a budget settlement, as Likud refused to approve the 2021 budget that Gantz wanted.

The date for the dissolution of the Knesset was well known and awaited by all. The disagreement over the government budget was the apparent predicament, but it concealed other crises as we mentioned earlier. The grave crisis between Likud and the Blue and White party emerged on the issue of the approval of the State's general budget, which was one of the key reasons why each party could justify joining an alliance with the other. Likud demanded the approval of a one-year budget, while the Blue and White Party demanded a two-year budget. This disagreement stemmed from a lack of Blue and White confidence in Benjamin Netanyahu, as it was felt that the goal of adopting a one-year budget reflected Netanyahu's intention to elude his agreement with Gantz to rotate as head of government.

Although the budget approval crisis represented the ultimate point of tension within the government, other issues helped fuel that tension. For example, the

judiciary and law enforcement authorities were constantly attacked by Netanyahu, ministers and members of the Likud Knesset, while the Blue and White Party defended these bodies, especially as the then Minister of Justice, Avi Nissenkorn, was a member of the Blue and White Party. Netanyahu and Likud attacked these authorities repeatedly during his alliance with Gantz, increasing tension between the parties. The Minister of Justice himself was attacked and offensive statements between the parties suggested that the issue was not about blocs within the government, but rather about a government and opposition with strong political and ideological antagonism. Tension also emerged between the parties because Netanyahu did not involve Benny Gantz, Minister of Defense and alternate head of government, and Gabi Ashkenazi, Minister for Foreign Affairs, in an agreement with the UAE. Indeed, the two men were dumbfounded by former US President Donald Trump's announcement of diplomatic relations and normalization. As a justification, Netanyahu said he feared that the agreement would fail if he shared the secret talks with the two men because "They could have spoken uncarefully to people close to them, and the information could have come out."⁶ More likely, Netanyahu did not share the agreement because he wanted to register it as a personal achievement, which he might well employ in upcoming elections in Israel. In the same vein, there was tension between Likud and the Blue and White party following the statements of Ashkenazi, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, in which he declared that the issue of annexation was no longer on the table and that the normalization phase had begun with the Arab States instead of the annexation phase. This statement provoked members of the Likud Party, among them Netanyahu, who had repeatedly assured that annexation was not the price paid for the "peace agreement" with UAE and that it was merely delayed. This issue was considered important for Likud because its political legitimacy among parts of its electoral base resided in its promise to annex areas in WB.

The Netanyahu-Gantz government ended for these reasons, but the most important reason was Netanyahu's decision not to relinquish the position of head of government to Gantz under the rotation agreement. Netanyahu believed that he could dismantle the government, prevent Gantz from becoming prime minister, and head to a new election armed with the signing of normalization agreements with Arab States, which he thought would ensure that he had a government without a rotating agreement with another party.



3. March 2021 Elections

The Israeli elections on 23/3/2021 were marked by a decline in the overall voting turnout from 71.5% to 67.4%. In the Palestinian population, however, the decline was significant, from 65% in the March 2020 elections to 45% in the March 2021 elections⁷ (see table 1/5). This decline was due to the following reasons:

- a. The dismantling of the Joint List contributed to a significant decline in the voting rate of the Palestinian society, which was reflected in the overall voting rate.
- b. The indifference of Israeli society as a result of repeated electoral cycles, with four cycles held in two years, and Israel becoming the most politically unstable parliamentary “Western” state due to the number of electoral cycles.
- c. Distrust in the ability to change the political map, in terms of what can be expected from elections, has led many to abstain from voting.
- d. The fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic crisis that accompanied it contributed to people’s reluctance to vote.

This election was also marked by the number of lists that won the election, which succeeded in surpassing the electoral threshold, with 13 lists winning against 8 in the 2020 election. This was indicative of the disintegration of the Israeli political landscape, as the Joint List split into two, the Yemina coalition split into two (Yemina and Religious Zionism). Moreover, Gideon Sa‘ar defected from Likud, forming a new party; the Blue and White alliance split into two parties (Blue and White and Yesh Atid (There is a Future)); and the Labor Party Alliance disintegrated into two lists again (Labor and Meretz). This showed that the coalitions from the March 2020 elections and the breakup from the March 2021 elections could not save Israel from the political quandary created by the April 2019 elections.

Table 1/5: Results of the 21st, 22nd, 23rd and the 24th Kneset Elections⁸

List name *	24th Kneset (23/3/2021)		23rd Kneset (2/3/2020)		22nd Kneset (17/9/2019)		21st Kneset (9/4/2019)	
	No. of valid votes	No. of seats	No. of valid votes	No. of seats	No. of valid votes	No. of seats	No. of valid votes	No. of seats
Likud	1,066,892	30	1,352,449	36	1,113,617	32	1,140,370	35
Yesh Atid	614,112	17	–	–	–	–	–	–
Shas	316,008	9	352,853	9	330,199	9	258,275	8
Blue and White**	292,257	8	1,220,381	33	1,151,214	33	1,125,881	35
Yemina (United Right: April 2019)	273,836	7	240,689	6	260,655	7	159,468	5
Labor	268,767	7	–	–	–	–	190,870	6
United Torah Judaism	248,391	7	274,437	7	268,775	7	249,049	8
Yisrael Beiteinu	248,370	7	263,365	7	310,154	8	173,004	5
Religious Zionism	225,641	6	–	–	–	–	–	
Joint List (Hadash, Balad, Ta'al)	212,583	6	–	–	–	–	–	–
New Hope	209,161	6	–	–	–	–	–	–
Meretz	202,218	6	–	–	–	–	156,473	4
UAL	167,064	4	–	–	–	–	–	–
Joint List (UAL, Hadash, Balad, Ta'al)	–	–	581,507	15	470,211	13	–	–
Hadash – Ta'al	–	–	–	–	–	–	193,442	6
UAL – Balad	–	–	–	–	–	–	143,666	4
Labor – Gesher – Meretz	–	–	267,480	7	–	–	–	–
Labor – Gesher	–	–	–	–	212,782	6	–	–
The Democratic Camp (Meretz, Israel Democratic Party and Green Movement)	–	–	–	–	192,495	5	–	–
Kulanu***	–	–	–	–	–	–	152,756	4
Number of eligible voters	6,578,084		6,453,255		6,394,030		6,339,729	
Total valid votes	4,410,052		4,553,161		4,310,102		4,309,270	

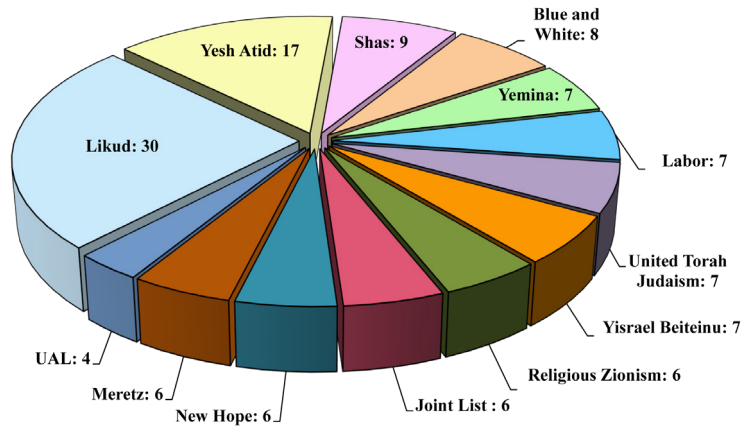
* Some names have been shortened in an attempt to simplify the table, where Hadash: Democratic Front for Peace and Equality; Balad: National Democratic Assembly; and Ta'al: Arab Movement for Renewal.

** Yesh Atid officially dissolved itself before the April 2019 elections and joined the Blue and White Party.

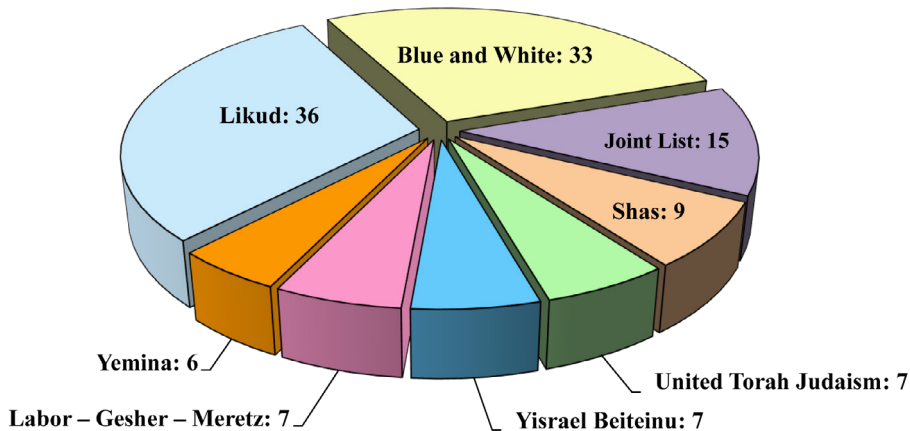
*** Kulanu officially dissolved itself before the September 2019 elections and joined the Likud Party.



Results of the 24th Knesset Elections on 23/3/2021



Results of the 23rd Knesset Elections on 2/3/2020



In the September 2019 elections, Likud received 1,113,617 votes compared to 1,352,449 votes in the March 2020 elections, meaning it gained more than 200 thousand votes. In the March 2021 elections, the number of Likud voters fell to 1,066,892, i.e., Likud lost about 300 thousand voters from the previous elections. In these elections, Likud obtained 24.2% of votes, representing 30 seats, which is 6 seats fewer than the March 2020 elections.⁹ The reason for the decline of Likud can be attributed to the following factors:

First: Gideon Sa'ar defected from Likud at the end of 2020 and formed a new party called New Hope. Many Likud leaders at the national level, such as Minister Ze'ev Elkin, and local leaders, defected with Sa'ar. This split contributed to the loss of many votes for Likud, as Sa'ar and his party competed on the same electoral rules as Likud.

Second: People were reluctant to vote, with overall turnout falling by about 4%, which must have contributed to Likud losing a significant number of votes.

Third: The economic crisis in Israel caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the accusations against Netanyahu of mismanaging the crisis shifted the votes of the weak social sectors to the Shas movement, which increased its representation by one seat.

This brings us to New Hope, the new party founded by Gideon Sa'ar the Likud dissident, whose popularity has gradually eroded since its founding. After it was formed, opinion polls predicted it would gain about 20 seats,¹⁰ with Sa'ar announcing that he was a candidate for prime minister. As the election approached, his popularity eroded, and the party obtained 6 seats, with 4.7% of votes (209 thousand votes). Apparently, these votes were mostly taken from the Likud Party, which as previously mentioned, declined by some 300 thousand votes.

After the dissolution of the Blue and White alliance, and following Gantz's entry to the Netanyahu government, two parties remained for the elections: the Blue and White headed by Gantz, and Yesh Atid headed by Yair Lapid. The latter obtained 17 seats, with the party being second in terms of parliamentary representation, i.e., 13.9% of votes (around 614 thousand votes). The Blue and White Party obtained about 292 thousand votes with 6.6% of the valid votes, represented in 8 seats in the Knesset. This means that together they received less than the alliance in the 2020 elections, with about 1.2 million votes. This underlined the transition of many of the former Coalition's voters to other parties, mainly the Labor Party and the Meretz Party, as well as the decline in overall voting, which negatively affected everyone.

The Shas movement headed by Aryeh Deri obtained 316 thousand votes (7.2% of votes) compared to 353 thousand votes and 9 seats (7.7%) in the previous elections. The movement maintained its representation despite a decline in the number of voters due to a decline in the voting rate in Israeli society, but overall, it maintained most of its electoral base. This is what distinguishes Haredi religious parties, as their bases are fairly steady.



In the elections, United Torah Judaism won 248 thousand votes (5.6% of votes) compared to 274 thousand votes and 7 seats in the previous elections. In other words, it maintained its number of seats despite a decline in the number of votes. This also applied to the Shas movement, which did not lose many voters, even though the party claimed that it could have had more votes had it not been for the support of Netanyahu to the Religious Zionism Party, resulting in part of the two movements' voters (Shas and United Torah Judaism) voting for the Religious Zionism Party.

The Religious Zionism party—one of whose components was the Kahanist (after Meir Kahane) party, the Jewish Power (*Otzma Yehudit*)—managed to obtain some 226 thousand votes (5.1% of votes), and Netanyahu worked hard to build this party for fear of losing tens of thousands of right-wing votes, as in previous election cycles. The party was able to achieve a major electoral breakthrough by gaining 6 seats in the Knesset, re-representing the old/new Kahane Party in the Knesset for the first time since the 1980s, when Meir Kahane was a member of the Knesset and his party Kach was prevented from running in 1984.

The Yemina party headed by Naftali Bennett obtained 7 seats, having received some 274 thousand votes (6.2% of votes), meaning that it was weaker than that of the Religious Zionism party. Naftali Bennett had refused to build an alliance with the head of the Religious Zionism Party, Bezalel Smotrich, and the head of the Jewish Power party, Itamar Ben-Gvir, hoping to attract voters from the Israeli political center. However, his strategy failed because of Netanyahu's propaganda campaign against him claiming that he would be a compound of a "leftist" government headed by Yair Lapid.

On the other side of the political map, Labor Party leader Merav Michaeli managed to save the party from a fall in the elections, with the Labor Party receiving some 269 thousand votes (6.1% of votes) and 7 seats in the Knesset. In the previous elections, the party also gained 7 seats, but in alliance with Meretz and Gesher. These results demonstrate Michaeli's success in increasing the party's number of voters, as well as its representation on its own of the number of seats previously held.

Following the failure of its previous alliance with Labor and Gesher, the Meretz Party was able to strengthen its power, running in the elections on its own and trying to win votes from the Arab community by including two Arab candidates

in the fourth and fifth places. The party obtained 202 thousand votes (4.6% of the votes) with 6 seats in the Knesset. It was an outcome that the party did not expect, as it was struggling to exceed the electoral threshold.

The Yisrael Beiteinu party, headed by Avigdor Lieberman, has maintained its representative power in the Knesset with 7 seats, as was the case before, thanks to 248 thousand votes (5.6% of votes) compared to 263 thousand votes (5.8%) in the previous elections. This demonstrates that the party has a stable electoral base that cares about religion and the State, and that religious parties have a position of strength in the Israeli political landscape.

4. May 2021 Popular Uprising

The Palestinian popular uprising in Israel was an important moment in the history of Palestinians since 2000, particularly as it emerged in the midst of political fragmentation and frustration stemming from the spread of crime and violence in Palestinian society, and the critical state of society due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with all its economic, political and psychological repercussions. Perhaps the most important factor was the “Israelization” that has been strengthened in recent years, which is represented by individual integration and the wagering on individual movement, independently from the collective political project.

There were several direct and indirect reasons that contributed to the outbreak of the popular uprising. The immediate reasons were the repression by the armed police of the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood protests against the expulsion of Palestinian families from their homes, in addition to the series of violent incursions into *al-Aqsa* Mosque and its courtyards and the attacks on worshippers inside it. In both cases, the presence and participation of the Palestinians was remarkable. The importance of the issue of the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood lay in the fact that it brought to mind the conditions of the Palestinians in Israel, particularly in the coastal towns of Lod and Ramla. Indeed, the inhabitants of these towns endure the same attempts to evict them and take over their homes by bringing Jewish families to an obvious settlement project aiming to restrict Arabs, Judaize their neighborhoods, and thus Judaize the coastal cities. Since Lod was the most afflicted place by this settlement policy, perhaps this explains to some extent the violence of the events in this town, where the Judaism project was initiated by planting settlement hotbeds under the cover of Torah schools in the town.¹¹



The poll conducted by the Arab Center for Applied Social Research (Mada al-Carmel) in Jaffa after the popular uprising indicated that 60% of Palestinians in the 1948 occupied territories believed that the uprising was chiefly ignited by events in Jerusalem (the attacks on the *al-Aqsa* Mosque and Sheikh Jarrah). 21% of Palestinians believed that it was due to discrimination towards Arabs, while 15% indicated that it was due to anger at the failure of the police and the State to tackle violence and crime in the Arab community.¹²

Table 2/5: Stances of Palestinians of the 1948 Occupied Territories on the Causes of the Popular Uprising 2021¹³

What do you think is the main factor behind the outbreak of the popular uprising in the Arab community in Israel?	Percentage (%)
Events at the <i>al-Aqsa</i> Mosque and Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood	60.5
Anger at the failure of the police and the State against crime and violence	15.2
Discrimination of the State against Arab citizens in civil life	21.1
The growing role of youth movements in popular protests	0
The Judaization of the coastal towns of Lod and Ramla	1
The attacks against the Gaza Strip	0
Other	2.1

Successive incursions into *al-Aqsa* Mosque and its courtyards fueled the anger of Palestinians, who prayed at the mosque during the month of Ramadan in 2021, particularly in the last days of the month. On 8/5/2021, the Israeli police broke into the *al-Aqsa* Mosque and its courtyards on Laylat al-Qadr (the Night of Power), and suppressed worshippers. These incursions continued during the days leading up to Eid al-Fitr and on the day thereof. The events were preceded by the erection of barricades at the Damascus Gate to prevent the presence of Palestinians, bringing back to memory the electronic gates Israel had placed at the entrances of the *al-Aqsa* Mosque in 2017, and the essential role played by the popular uprising to thwart this action. This happened again after the police erected the barricades at the Damascus Gate entrance, where the uprising and protests of Palestinians, including those from in the 1948 occupied territories, played an important role in the police retreat.¹⁴

Israel stepped up its crackdown on the popular uprising that spread from Jerusalem to the Arab towns within the Green Line. The Israeli government approved the expansion of police powers in dealing with the uprising in Arab towns, including imposing checkpoints, searching cars, closing the entrances to Arab towns, placing concrete blocks on the entrances to other towns, and shutting down areas in coastal cities, as the police did in the old town of Acre during the Eid al-Fitr days. This was in addition to imposing a curfew in Lod.¹⁵

During the first week of the uprising, the police launched an arrest campaign against the young people involved. The campaign resulted in hundreds of arrests within days, including minors. A small number of the youths were arrested for only a few days, while the majority remained in detention. In addition, in less than a week, the police filed about 200 indictments against young Arabs in an unprecedented campaign in a short period of time. The arrests were not limited to young men, they included also political leaders such as the deputy head of the banned Islamic movement Sheikh Kamal al-Khatib, whose detention was extended twice. Others were released after a few days.¹⁶

This uprising saw the entry of organized Jewish militias, some of them armed, from West Bank outposts, Torah religious schools settled in the coastal towns of Lod and Jaffa, and fascist organizations such as La Familia, the Beitar Jerusalem Supporters Association, and Lehava. These two organizations believe in the purity of the Jewish race, the superiority of Judaism and the inferiority of other ethnic groups.¹⁷

5. The Formation of the Bennett-Lapid Government

After Netanyahu failed to form a government in the aftermath of the 2021 elections, owing to the refusal of the Religious Zionism party to enter the coalition's consolidated list, the mandate was transferred to Yair Lapid, who was able to form a government headed by Naftali Bennett (until August 2023), followed by Lapid. The latter succeeded in forming the government because of two factors: the agreement among all its constituents to prevent Netanyahu from forming a government, and their agreement that the UAL would participate in the coalition government.

The government was formed from eight lists of 62 members, an unprecedented low number that carried a major challenge: each of its constituents was capable of toppling it on their own.



The government included parties from very diverse political and ideological backgrounds, with right-wing parties (Yemina, New Hope, Yisrael Beiteinu), left-wing parties (Meretz, Labor), centrist parties (Yesh Atid, Blue and White), and an Arab party.

The main reason for the formation of the Change Government was because its central constituents sought to topple Benjamin Netanyahu. The right, left and centrist parties that had refused to sit with each other in the past came together to that end. Apart from wanting to topple Netanyahu, this government was a way out for the opposition stance of the Zionist left that lasted for many years. For example, the left-wing Meretz Party had not participated in an Israeli government since 2001, the Labor Party had been outside the government since 2009, and Yesh Atid had not participated in the government since 2015. The permanent opposition situation and the right-wing dominance of government ministries prompted some Israeli movements to participate in the government and try to influence and build themselves as powerful parties, which could improve their electoral popularity. These parties, namely Meretz and Labor, gained access to social ministries, which could improve their ability to influence social and educational policies according to their party perspectives.

These constituents, especially the right-wing ones and the Blue and White Party headed by Gantz, decided to prevent Netanyahu from forming the government. Sa'ar and Bennett ignored the right-wing's pressure to abstain from joining the Change Government,¹⁸ and joined it in order to send a message to the right-wing electoral bases in general, and the Likud electoral bases in particular: Likud will not return to power as long as Netanyahu is its leader, and only his removal can give way to forming a purely right-wing government led by Likud.

The new government was formed based on a rotation between Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid. However, Lapid stepped down from this deal even though his was the largest party after Likud, in order to persuade Bennett to join the government. This constituted a precedent in the Israeli political system. For the first time, the government was headed by a person belonging to a party that had only six seats in the Knesset. Nonetheless, Bennett's condition to join the government was the non-compliance with the agreements Lapid had signed with the other partners, and compliance only with the agreement he had signed with Lapid. Moreover, each of the heads of government would alternately have the veto power over each

government decision,¹⁹ which would impede the government's work. However, Lapid made these concessions for the formation of the government.

6. Palestinians in Israel and the Participation in Knesset Elections

a. The March 2020 Elections

The voter turnout in the Arab community (not including mixed cities) in the March 2020 elections reached 65%, compared to 60% in the September 2019 elections and 49% in the April 2019 elections. The Joint List obtained 581,507 votes (12.67% of votes), of which 487,911 were from Arab voters (87% of the total), while the rest went to Zionist parties. The Joint List attained the largest electoral achievement in Arab history in Israel with 15 seats. For comparison, in the April 2019 elections, the two Arab lists (Hadash-Ta'al and UAL-Balad) obtained 337,108 votes, equivalent to 70% of all votes in the Arab community, while 30% of all votes went to Zionist parties. Compared to the voting results of the 2015 Joint List, the list obtained 446,583 votes, (10.61% of the total vote), which is 82% of the votes of the Arab community.²⁰

Several reasons may be cited for the increased representation of the Joint List in the elections. Since its establishment in 2015, these elections have been the first without conflict and struggles between its four constituents over the division and ranking of seats on the list. Each of the last three sessions (2015, April 2019, and September 2019) was preceded by months of debates that reached the level of accusations, which left a negative impact on social groups. It was thought the Joint List had become a mere "lifeboat" through which everyone was trying to reach the Knesset rather than a political project aimed at promoting Arab representation in the Knesset and improving its performance. In the March 2020 elections, the Joint List entered the elections in the absence of such conflicts between its constituents and their bases. Rather, there was collective action on the ground that left a positive impact on its objective to promote Arab representation.

The US Deal of the Century plan made the vote for the Joint List increase. The Arab public was convinced that the strengthening of the Joint List would be at the expense of a stronger representation of the right-wing bloc led by Likud and Benjamin Netanyahu, which would prevent the right-wing government from carrying out its promises to annex parts of WB and impose Israeli sovereignty over these areas. This conviction increased following the results of the Knesset elections in September 2019. With the rise of the Joint List representation to



13 seats, the representation of the right-wing bloc declined from 60 seats in the April 2019 elections (at which time two Arab lists had been elected and obtained 10 seats together) to 56 in the September 2019 elections. The Joint List was able to market this equation through its electoral slogan that the “Deal of the Century” would be dropped by voting for the Joint List, especially since the US plan included a land-population exchange clause where the “Triangle Communities become part of the State of Palestine.”²¹ The results showed that the increased representation of the Joint List prevented the right-wing bloc from reaching 61 seats.

In addition, the two major parties and contenders for the formation of the government, Likud and the Blue and White party, joined forces with a view to de-legitimizing the Joint List.²² Netanyahu continued to incite against the Joint List, while the Blue and White Party announced that it was refusing to cooperate with the Joint List in forming the government, even if the option was to receive external support, announcing its preference to form a government dependent on a “Jewish majority.” The Blue and White Party’s perseverance in de-legitimizing the Joint List came under Likud propaganda that Gantz wanted to form a government with the Joint List. The party responded by intensifying its rejection of all cooperation with the Joint List, on the one hand, while a bloc in the party refused to cooperate with the Joint List based on racist ideologies, on the other hand. This was in addition to the party’s support for the removal of Member of Knesset (MK) Heba Yazbak. The Blue and White Party’s stance emerged despite the fact that the three Joint List constituents (except for Balad) recommended Gantz to form a government in September 2019. The de-legitimization rhetoric against the Joint List played an important role in rallying people around it, hoping to increase its representation.

b. The March 2021 Elections

On the eve of the March 2021 elections, the Joint List was split into two lists, the UAL and the Joint List, which maintained the alliance of its three constituents (Hadash, Ta‘al, and Balad). Dissent in the Joint List began after a series of statements by MK Mansour ‘Abbas. The relationship between the UAL and the other Joint List constituents reached the point of estrangement prior to the split of the Joint List. There have been attempts by the High Follow-up Committee for Arab Citizens of Israel to maintain the Joint List with its four constituents, but to no avail. Indeed, the break-up culminated at the level of electoral bases and party activists who preferred such division, with each side blaming the other.

The two parties considered that each party made the decision to split the Joint List. The UAL accused the Joint List of having taken a decision to exclude it, even though it had reached understandings on political issues with the other constituents. As for the other constituents, namely Hadash and Balad, they accused the UAL of having rejected the principle of political decision-making within the Joint List through democratic determination of the four constituents, and of refusing to adhere to a common political agenda,²³ claiming that this was an intentional position to dissociate itself from the Joint List. The Hadash likened the UAL to Likud, saying it refused to have a Likud branch in the Joint List.²⁴

During the election campaign, the UAL focused on putting the issue of the preservation of religion and the religious identity of the community at the center of the conflict with the three Joint List constituents, in order to form a supportive social bloc away from the political debate on the speech and behavior of MK Mansour ‘Abbas during the previous year (2020). Meanwhile, the Joint List placed the political debate and national discourse at the center of its discussion with the UAL, which works on social segregation in the context of a religious-secular conflict, while the Joint List works on social segregation on the basis of national and Israelized political positions.

The voter turnout in Palestinian society was only 45%. It is the lowest percentage since the beginning of Palestinian participation in Israeli parliamentary elections since 1948, while in March 2020, it was 65%. There has been a serious decline in the voting rate and a rise in the abstention rate. Non-voting is the most important given in Palestinian electoral behavior since the formation of the Joint List in 2015. According to the results of the last four elections in 2019–2021, the voting rate fell to less than 50%, and then jumped to 60% before declining to 45% in 2021. These sharp changes in voting patterns bear many connotations about the relationship between the Palestinian public and parliamentary work in general, and between it and Arab parties in particular (see table 3/5).

The Joint List obtained 212,583 votes in the March 2021 electoral cycle, equivalent to 4.82% of the total public vote, while the UAL obtained 167,064 votes, equivalent to 3.79% of the total public vote.²⁵ By comparison, the Joint List obtained 581,507 votes equivalent to 12.67% of the total public vote in the 23rd Knesset elections (March 2020).²⁶ Despite the decline in voting in Palestinian society, the majority of Arab voters elected the two Arab lists, accounting for about



80% of the Arab vote, while the rest went to Zionist parties. In the 2020 elections, 87% of Arab voters voted for the Joint List, while the remaining 13% voted for Zionist parties.

Table 3/5: Voting Patterns of the Arab Community Since the Formation of the Joint List in 2015²⁷

	2015	April 2019*	September 2019	March 2020	March 2021**
No. of votes for the Joint List	446,583	337,108	470,611	487,911	317,384
No. of seats	13	10	13	15	10
Voters for the Joint List (%)	82	70	80	87	79.5
Voters for Zionist parties (%)	18	30	20	13	19.4
Abstention from voting (%)	36	51	40	35	55

Note: These results do not include mixed cities.

* Numbers of votes for Hadash-Ta'al and UAL–Balad.

** Numbers of votes for the Joint List (Three components) and the UAL.

In this election, the Zionist parties obtained approximately 20% of the Arab vote, i.e., around 80 thousand votes. Of these votes, Likud obtained 26%, Meretz 19%, Yisrael Beiteinu 17%, and Yesh Atid 11%.²⁸

The voting rate in the Arab community for the 24th Knesset is indicative of first-rate protest and punitive behavior against the Joint List, and does not carry a negative political stance against parliamentary action.

We cannot infer from the marked rise and decline in voting rates from one session to another, with such speed and high proportions for one side or the other, that it has de-legitimized parliamentary action in domestic Arab politics altogether. In the current election cycle, the two Arab lists obtained almost 380 thousand votes, about 200 thousand fewer than the March 2020 elections, when they were on the Joint List. The current number of votes and the split into two lists, as well as the stable number of votes obtained by the Zionist parties in the last two sessions, indicate that the primary options for the Palestinian public were either to vote for the two Arab lists or to abstain.

c. UAL Participation in the Government

The UAL decided to join the Bennett-Lapid government. This decision came a year after it had moved to participate in or support any governmental coalition. It also came under the umbrella of domestic influence, in the words of its leaders.

The UAL, headed by Mansour ‘Abbas, followed political rhetoric and behavior that bet on involvement in any Israeli government, notably after the March 2020 elections, the failure of wagering on the Gantz project, and the toppling of Netanyahu by the Joint List, of which the UAL was a constituent.

After Netanyahu failed to form a government due to the refusal of the Religious Zionism party²⁹ of the UAL’s support of the coalition government, the latter signed the government coalition participation agreement with Yesh Atid. On 2/6/2021, the Yesh Atid head Yair Lapid, and the UAL head Mansour ‘Abbas, signed an agreement to form a unity government. This agreement covered understandings agreed between the two lists and an annex regulating the work of the government. The most important items, as set out in the agreement, were:³⁰

- “The UAL supports the formation of the government, is part of the governmental coalition, is committed to the decisions of the government and the management of the coalition, and supports its actions in the Knesset.”
- “The UAL supports all legislative amendments submitted to the Knesset after the signing of this agreement.”
- “The UAL is committed to supporting coalition actions in the Knesset and voting for coalition candidates for various positions in the Knesset and various committees.”
- “The UAL works to ensure that the government remains until the end of its term, including supporting the State budget and opposing proposals of no confidence or proposals for the dissolution of the Knesset.”
- “The Committee of the Interior and Environmental Protection will be split into two committees: the Committee of the Interior and Environmental Protection and the Committee of Internal Security.”
- “The UAL will have the following positions: Deputy Minister in the Office of the Head of Government; Chairman of the Committee of the Interior; Deputy Speaker of the Knesset; and Chair of the Special Committee on Arab Society Affairs.”



- “The parties agree to work on the formulation of a five-year plan to reduce gaps in Arab, Druze, Circassian and Bedouin communities with a budget of 30 billion shekels [around \$9.2 billion]³¹ by the end of 2026, without prejudice to previous government decisions (at least 50% of which is budget increase). The five-year plan is developed in coordination between the Authority for Economic Development of Arab Society and the Budget Section of the Ministry of Finance, and in consultation with the Special Committee on Arab Society Affairs.”
- “The government will approve a five-year plan to combat violence and crime in Arab society, according to the report of the Directors and the government’s resolution No. 852 for a budget of 2.5 billion shekels [around \$771 million] for five years, including one billion shekels [around \$308 million] of a civilian nature to combat crime and violence unrelated to the Department of Internal Security.”
- “Establishment of a ministerial committee for Arab society affairs under the chairmanship of the head of government.”
- “To overcome the planning and bureaucratic obstacles to building permits in Arab society and to approach the government’s legal adviser in order to examine the cancellation of fines imposed on Arabs in connection with unauthorized construction.”
- “The government is under the obligation to ratify within 45 days of its formation the decision of the government on the recognition of three Bedouin villages in the Negev. In parallel, within nine months of its formation, the government will present for ratification a plan to settle/ regulate the settlement of Bedouins in the Negev according to the general interest of the Negev.”

Second: Demographic Indicators

The Israel Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) estimated the population of Israel at the end of 2021 at 9.451 million, including 6.983 million Jews, i.e., 73.9% of the population, compared to 9.29 million people, including 6.874 million Jews, i.e., 74% of the population at the end of 2020. The Arab population, including those in East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, was estimated at 1.996 million in 2021, compared to 1.957 million in 2020, i.e., 21.1% of the population (see table 4/5). If we exclude the population of East Jerusalem (370 thousand)³² and the Golan Heights

(25 thousand), the number of 1948 Palestinians (i.e., the Palestinian territories occupied in 1948) was about 1.6 million in 2021, i.e., 16.9% of the population.

In 2021, the CBS classified 472 thousand people as “others” (5%), compared to 458.6 thousand in 2020. These “others” are mostly immigrants from Russia, the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, who are not recognized as Jews, or who tend to deal with Judaism as a nationality rather than a religious affiliation, or who are non-Jews or non-Arab Christians.

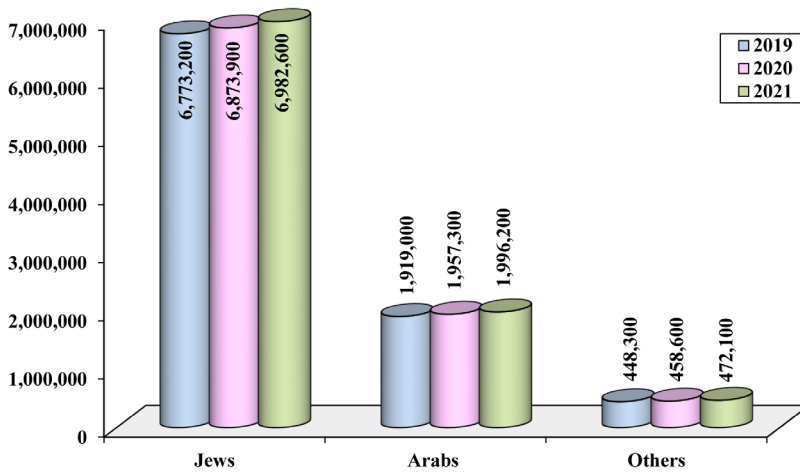
A CBS statement issued on the commemoration of the occupation of the eastern part of Jerusalem in 1967, affirmed Jerusalem as the largest city in Palestine with a population accounting for 10% of the total population of Israel. At the end of 2020, the population of Jerusalem reached 951 thousand, including 585 thousand settlers and 367 thousand Palestinians, approximately 38.6%.³³ Israeli estimates indicated that in 2021, the number of settlers in East Jerusalem was 800 thousand, while ARIJ estimates for the same year indicated that the number was 913 thousand.

Table 4/5: Population of Israel 2013–2021³⁴

Year	Total	Jews	Arabs (including the population of East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights)	Others
2013	8,134,500	6,104,500	1,683,200	346,800
2014	8,296,900	6,219,200	1,720,300	357,400
2015	8,463,400	6,334,500	1,757,800	371,100
2016	8,628,600	6,446,100	1,797,300	386,200
2017	8,797,900	6,554,500	1,838,200	405,200
2018	8,967,600	6,664,300	1,878,400	424,900
2019	9,140,500	6,773,200	1,919,000	448,300
2020	9,289,800	6,873,900	1,957,300	458,600
2021	9,450,900	6,982,600	1,996,200	472,100



Population of Israel 2019–2021



In 2020, Israel's population growth rate was 1.63%, compared to about 1.7% in 2021. In 2021, there was an increase of 1.58% for Jews and 1.99% for Arabs, including eastern Jerusalem and the Golan Heights.

According to the CBS, life expectancy in Israel was 80.7 years for men and 84.8 years for women. Moreover, 44.8% of Jews identified themselves as secular, 20.5% identified themselves as conservative but not particularly religious; 12.5% saw themselves as traditionally religious; 11.7% said they were religious; and 10% identified as ultra-Orthodox.³⁵

The 1948 Palestinians suffered greatly from the spread of organized crime and weapons, with some 500 weapons found in Arab towns without a permit, according to Israeli police estimates. They also suffered from the inaction of the responsible authorities and the complicity of the Israeli police with crime gangs. There seems to be an unstated Israeli policy to create an undesirable environment for Palestinians. A total of 113 Palestinians were killed by organized crime in 2020,³⁶ and some 110 more had been killed by November 2021.³⁷

Simultaneously, there has been increased incitement in Israeli Zionist circles against the 1948 Palestinians and against the Palestinians in general. According to the Racism and Incitement Index in Israeli social networks, published by 7amleh–The Arab Center for the Advancement of Social Media, hate speech towards Arabs increased by 8% in 2021 compared to 2020, with 620 thousand monitored conversations involving violence and inciting hate speech against Arabs. This violent discourse saw a 16% increase in 2020 compared to 2019.³⁸

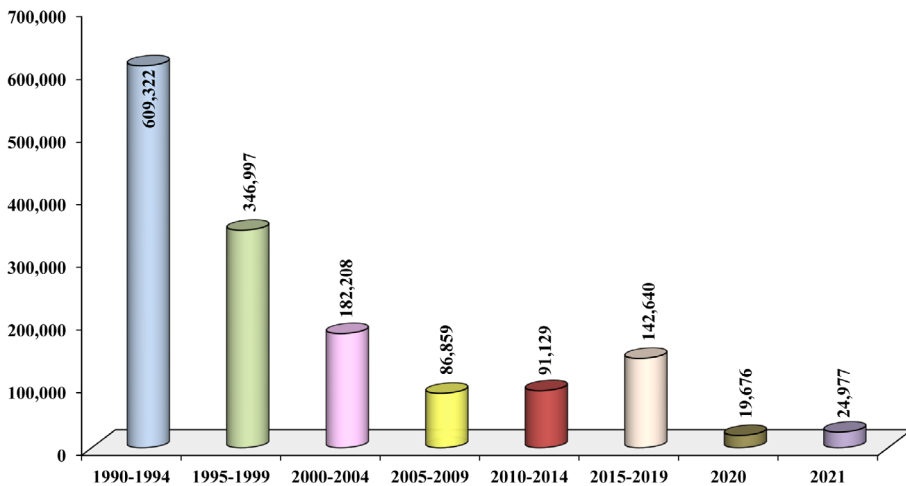
In 2021, according to the CBS, 24,977 immigrants went to Israel, compared to 19,676 and 33,247 in 2020 and 2019 respectively (see table 5/5). According to statistics pls. expand between words, the number of immigrants to Israel since its establishment in 1948 has reached 3.3 million, 45.6% of whom arrived following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990.³⁹ These figures show relative stability in the immigration rate in 2015–2021. However, they remain minimal compared to the 1990s. This comes after the diminution of the numbers of Jews willing to migrate, and after most Jews abroad went to countries in North America and Europe, so Jews do not have an incentive to migrate on a large scale.

Table 5/5: Numbers of Jewish Immigrants to Israel 1990–2021⁴⁰

Year	1990–1994	1995–1999	2000–2004	2005–2009	2010–2014	2015–2019	2020	2021	Grand Total
No. of immigrants	609,322	346,997	182,208	86,859	91,129	142,640	19,676	24,977	1,503,808

The following chart shows the evolution of the number of Jewish immigrants to Israel every five years in 1990–2019, except for 2020–2021.

Numbers of Jewish Immigrants to Israel 1990–2021



It should be noted that immigration to Israel has been accompanied by continued counter-migration. According to the CBS, 15,500 Israeli passport holders exited, in 2019, while 8,000 returned in the same year. In other words, the rate of counter-migration was about 7,500 persons.⁴¹



According to CBS estimates, 560–596 thousand Israelis lived abroad as of the end of 2016, not including the number of children born to them while they were outside the country.⁴² According to an annual report released by the National Union of Israeli Students in 2018, 59% of university students in Israel think of immigration for various reasons, mostly personal and economic.⁴³

With reference to the religious distribution of the 1948 Palestinians, it should be noted first that Israeli statistics incorporate the eastern Jerusalem Palestinians and Syrians of the Golan Heights with the 1948 Palestinians. Thus, according to data at the end of 2020, there are approximately 1.671 million Muslims (Sunni) at 85.4%, 147 thousand Druze at 7.5%, and 137.6 thousand Christians at 7%.⁴⁴

As for the world Jewish population, it was estimated at 15.166 million in 2021, the vast majority of whom lived in the US and Israel. This figure was a jump in estimates compared to previous years. The reason for the sudden increase in the figures that used to be published by the same sources, is that they started to include those Jews who do not believe in Judaism as a religion, and children whose parents are Jewish, mostly in the US. It is an increase of about 500 thousand compared to 2019, up from an annual increase of about 100 thousand per year.

Demographer and activist at the Jewish Agency for Israel, Sergio DellaPergola, noted that the number of Jews in the US was about 6 million, an increase of only 300 thousand from 2013. However, according to a Pew Research Center poll, the number of Jews in the US is 7.5 million, an increase of 800 thousand from 2013. Another estimate in the American Jewish Youth Book by Ira Sheskin and Arnold Dashefsky showed that the number of Jews in the US was 7.3 million, an increase of 600 thousand from 2013, a figure close to the Pew Research Center poll. According to Ira Sheskin, the majority of American sociologists accepted this difference in numbers as reasonable estimates, and DellaPergola did not count 1.5 million people identified as “Jews without religion.”⁴⁵ They belong to Judaism as a nation, rather than a religion. However, the adoption of this figure would bring the total number of Jews in the US and Israel to 14.298 million (according to the Jewish Virtual Library), i.e., 94.3% of the world’s Jews, which does not make sense if the rest of the world’s Jews were added. In this case, one has to either remove or decrease the Jewish presence in a number of countries, or has to increase the total number of Jews by 15.166 million to accommodate the rest of the world’s Jews.⁴⁶ In this report, we therefore prefer to maintain an estimate of 6 million Jews in the

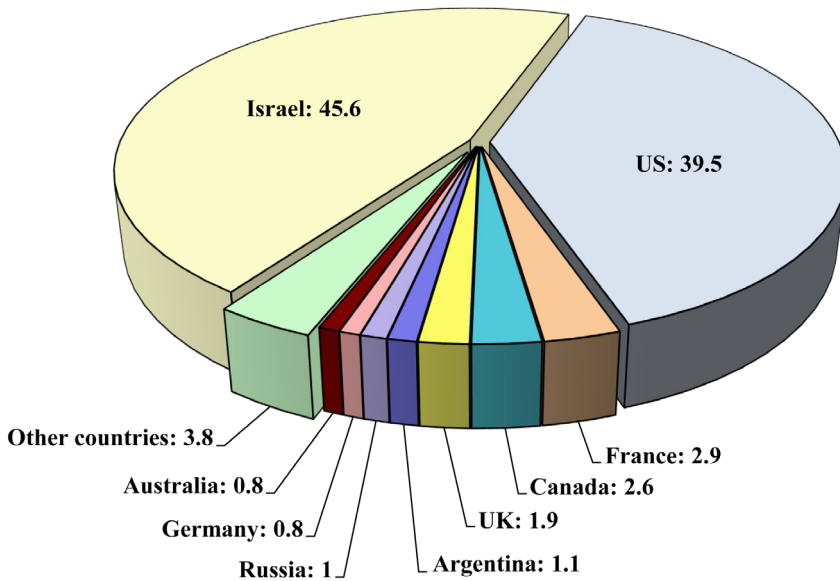
US, which is closer to the logical distribution of Jews and their global spread, the same figure as the Jewish Agency.

Undoubtedly, this great disparity in the assessment of the numbers of Jews, mainly due to the definition of who is Jewish, is confusing. However, it does not negate the small number of Jews worldwide, their concentration of more than 85% in two countries, and the overall slow growth of their numbers. It also underlines a state of declining numbers in other societies and reflects the problems and challenges of globalization on Jewish people around the world.

Table 6/5: World Jewish Population by Country 2021⁴⁷

Country	Israel	US	France	Canada	UK	Argentina	Russia	Germany	Australia	Other countries	Total
Estimates (thousands)	6,930	6,000	446	393.5	292	175	150	118	118	577.5	15,200
Percentage (%)	45.6	39.5	2.9	2.6	1.9	1.1	1	0.8	0.8	3.8	100

World Jewish Population by Country 2021 (%)



Third: Economic Indicators

Israel enjoys an advanced economic situation comparable to the standard of living and economies in western Europe and a higher standard of living and stronger economy than the countries of the Middle East. This prosperity is at the expense of the Palestinian people, their land and their natural wealth, and it is boosted by US support and the influence of the Western world. Israel also benefits from the absence of Arab states willing to challenge them and from normalization with numerous Arab countries.

During the years 2020–2021, the Israeli economy suffered greatly from the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. Israeli experts spoke of Israel's worst economic downturn since its establishment and of an economic crisis that wiped out several years of economic progress. At the end of 2021, the number of cases reached 1.38 million.⁴⁸

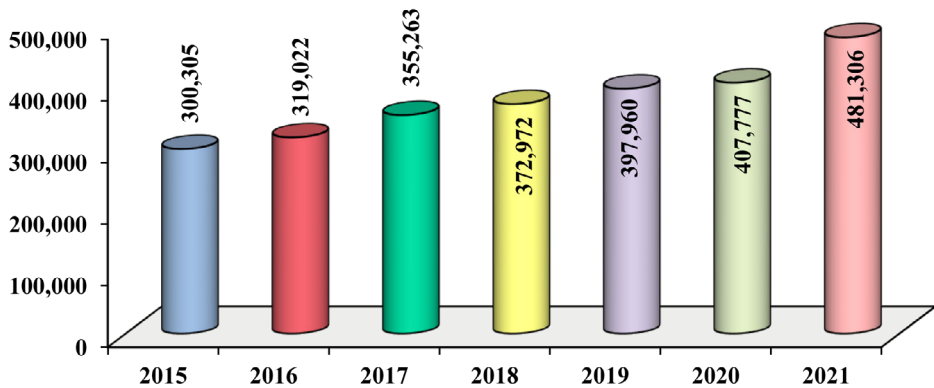
Israel spent some \$9.3 billion up to the end of 2021 to deal with the pandemic. The government deficit rose to 11.6% in 2020, and the public debt rose from 60% to 72.6% of national income. Each week cost the Israeli economy 6–9 billion shekels (about \$1.9–2.8 billion). Hotel occupancy rates by foreign tourists fell by 95% in 2020. The economic improvement of 2021 remained partial, although losses were lower than expected.⁴⁹

The Israeli economy was also affected by the consequences of the war on Gaza during the Sword of Jerusalem Battle, in May 2021, with economic losses totaling some \$2.14 billion.⁵⁰

According to CBS estimates, GDP totaled 1,554.3 billion shekels (\$481 billion) in 2021, compared to 1,401.4 billion shekels (about \$408 billion) in 2020 and 1,418.4 billion shekels (\$398 billion) in 2019. Based on these estimates, GDP grew in local currency by 10.9% in 2021 and regressed by 1.2% in 2020. When dollar growth is calculated, and because of the fluctuation in the value of the shekel against the dollar, growth rose by 18% in 2021, while it fell by 2.5% in 2020 compared to the previous year (see table 7/5). Note, however, that the statistics we present are derived from official sources, which update data and make adjustments from time to time.

Table 7/5: Israeli GDP 2015–2021 at Current Prices⁵¹

Year	GDP (million shekels)	GDP (\$ million)	Shekel exchange rate (according to Bank of Israel)
2015	1,166,354	300,305	3.8839
2016	1,225,235	319,022	3.8406
2017	1,278,841	355,263	3.5997
2018	1,341,581	372,972	3.597
2019	1,418,449	397,960	3.5643
2020	1,401,406	407,777	3.4367
2021	1,554,281	481,306	3.2293

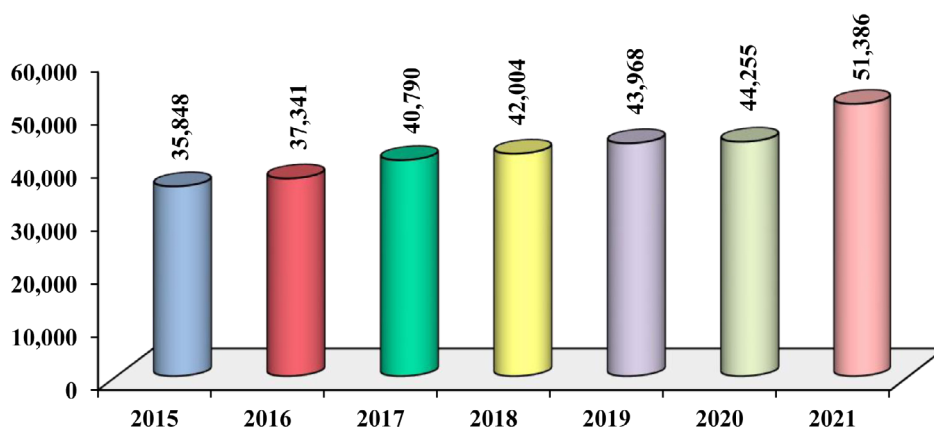
Israeli GDP in 2015–2021 at Current Prices (\$ million)

According to Israeli statistics, Israeli GDP per capita income in 2021 was 165,942 shekels (\$51,386), compared to 152,090 shekels (\$44,255) in 2020 and 156,716 shekels (\$43,968) in 2019. According to these statistics, GDP per capita income grew in the local currency by 9.1% in 2021 and declined by 3% in 2020. When dollar growth is calculated, and because of the fluctuation in the value of the shekel against the dollar, growth increased by 16.1% in 2021 and by 0.7% in 2020 compared to the previous year. Therefore, one should not rush to conclusions if the difference in the local currency against the dollar is not considered (see table 8/5).



Table 8/5: Israeli GDP per Capita 2015–2021 at Current Prices⁵²

Year	GDP per capita (shekels)	GDP per capita (\$)
2015	139,231	35,848
2016	143,413	37,341
2017	146,830	40,790
2018	151,087	42,004
2019	156,716	43,968
2020	152,090	44,255
2021	165,942	51,386

Israeli GDP per Capita 2015–2021 at Current Prices (\$)

According to the annual poverty report of the Israeli organization Latet published on 21/12/2021, 27% of the population of Israel live below the poverty line. This statistic is often calculated before they receive social benefits that reduce their poverty by about 29%. What is striking, however, is that these allocations raise about 45% of poor Jews above the poverty line, as opposed to 11% of poor 1948 Palestinians. 27% means that 2.5 million people live below the poverty line, including 1.1 million children under 18.⁵³

The NII's Annual Poverty Report of 29/12/2021 stated that the poverty rate was 21% in 2020 and 22.7% in 2021.⁵⁴

The Adva Center in Tel Aviv noted in its March 2021 report that almost one million people had become unemployed or closed their small businesses in 2020,

mostly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, while high earners in Israel were not affected. The number of millionaires declined by only a small percentage, and there were 157 thousand millionaires in Israel.⁵⁵

With regard to the budget of the Israeli government, CBS data indicated that total expenditures in the approved amended budget for 2019 amounted to 572.345 billion shekels (about \$160.58 billion). However, the grand total of budget performance of government receipts was 624.526 billion shekels (\$181.7 billion) in 2020 compared to 554.726 billion shekels (about \$155.6 billion) in 2019.⁵⁶

The budget is spread across three areas: first, the ordinary budget covering the expenses of the presidency, the prime minister and the ministries; second, the development budget and debt repayment; and third, the budget of business enterprises. We note that the ordinary budget performance of 2020 was 455.957 billion shekels (\$132.7 billion), including that of the Ministry of Defense at 71.928 billion shekels (\$20.9 billion), and the Ministry of Public Security at 19.797 billion shekels (\$5.76 billion). This was in addition to 79.909 billion shekels (\$23.3 billion) spent by the Ministry of Education, and 77.434 billion shekels (\$22.5 billion) spent by the Ministry of Social Affairs. It should also be noted that debt repayment carved out a significant portion of total expenditure, reaching 97.392 billion shekels (about \$28.3 billion) in 2020 compared to 104.85 billion shekels (\$29.4 billion) in 2019.⁵⁷

The big jump in expenditure in 2020 appears to be mainly related to the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic and the provision of social welfare and financial support to workers, who had been temporarily or completely disrupted by the pandemic.

The grand total of budget performance of government receipts in 2020 was 610.8 billion shekels (\$177.7 billion) compared to 512.13 billion shekels (\$143.7 billion) in 2019. A large proportion of the current receipts came from income tax (139.3 billion shekels or about \$40.5 billion) and value added tax (VAT) (100.2 billion shekels or about \$29.2 billion) as was apparent in the 2020 budget.⁵⁸

Statistics obtained from the Ministry of Finance of Israel showed that expenditures reached 519.9 billion shekels (\$161 billion) in 2021, without referring to debt repayment and business enterprises. Statistics showed expenditure of 478.5 billion shekels (about \$139.2 billion) in 2020, compared to 420.3 billion shekels (about \$117.9 billion) in 2019.⁵⁹



It must be noted that, according to statistics and figures issued by official Israeli authorities, there may be some confusion among researchers due to the lack of precise distinction between the grand total or ordinary budget, and whether it was the budget approved by the government or by the Knesset or the actual budget updated for receipts and payments after the completion of the fiscal year.

The following table shows the actual public receipts and payments of the Israeli government during 2018–2020:

Table 9/5: Budget Performance of Israeli Government Receipts and Payments 2018–2020⁶⁰

		2018		2019		2020	
		Million shekels	Million \$	Million shekels	Million \$	Million shekels	Million \$
Receipts	Current receipts	314,753	87,504.3	323,245	90,689.6	316,192	92,004.5
	Capital receipts	128,694	35,778.1	162,575	45,612	269,135	78,312
	Business receipts	25,072	6,970.3	26,312	7,382.1	25,473	7,412.1
Receipts grand total		468,519	130,252.7	512,133	143,684	610,800	177,728.6
Payments	Ordinary budget	368,549	102,460.1	384,165	107,781.3	455,957	132,672.9
	Development budget and debt repayment	113,338	31,509	144,229	40,464.9	143,101	41,639.1
	Business enterprises	24,983	6,945.5	26,332	7,387.7	25,468	7,410.6
Payments grand total		506,870	140,914.7	554,726	155,633.9	624,526	181,722.6
Deficit (%)		-8.2		-8.3		-2.2	

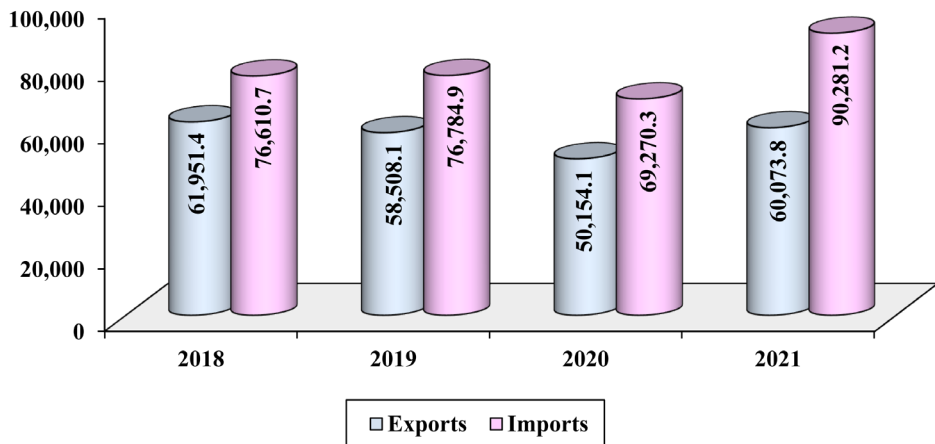
Israeli exports for 2021 amounted to \$60.07 billion, compared to \$50.154 billion in 2020 and \$58.508 billion in 2019. Exports thus increased by 19.8% in 2021, after a 14.3% decrease in 2020. Imports for 2021 totaled \$90.28 billion, compared

to \$69.27 billion in 2020 and \$76.79 billion in 2019. Imports thus increased by 30.3% in 2021, after a 9.8% decrease in 2020 (see table 10/5). These statistics do not include foreign trade services (import and export activities) and the ratios were based on the dollar, not the shekel.

Table 10/5: Total Israeli Exports and Imports 2018–2021 at Current Prices⁶¹

		Exports	Imports	Deficit (%)
2018	Million shekels	222,432.6	275,436.4	-23.8
	\$ million	61,951.4	76,610.7	
2019	Million shekels	208,769.1	273,743.8	-31.1
	\$ million	58,508.1	76,784.9	
2020	Million shekels	172,326.2	237,861.8	-38
	\$ million	50,154.1	69,270.3	
2021	Million shekels	193,828.8	291,387.8	-50.3
	\$ million	60,073.8	90,281.2	

Total Israeli Exports and Imports 2018–2021 at Current Prices (\$ million)



The US still maintains its status as a primary trading partner of Israel. In 2021, Israeli exports to the US amounted to \$16.195 billion, representing 27% of all Israeli exports, compared with \$13.132 billion in 2020 (26.2% of all Israeli exports). Israeli imports from the US declined significantly in 2021, reaching \$8.293 billion, representing 9.2% of all Israeli imports, compared with \$8.05 billion in 2018 (11.6% of all Israeli imports). Israel offset its trade deficit to a large extent with most of its trading partners through the trade surplus of \$7.9 billion in 2021 and \$5.08 billion in 2020, with the US, which represented significant support to the Israeli economy (see table 11/5).

China was the second largest trading partner of Israel, with exports to Israel amounting to \$4.356 billion in 2021 and \$4.241 billion in 2020, and Israeli imports from China amounted to \$10.724 billion in 2021 and \$7.67 billion in 2020. Germany ranked third, with a trade volume of \$8.35 billion, up from \$6.91 billion in 2020.

Switzerland advanced from fifth to fourth place in 2021, with a trade volume of \$7.341 billion compared to \$5.672 billion in 2020. It was notable that Turkey advanced from seventh to fifth place to a trade volume of \$6.67 billion in 2021, up from \$4.93 billion in 2020. Belgium and the Netherlands each occupied the sixth and seventh positions with \$5.99 billion and \$5.94 billion respectively. Britain slipped from third place in 2019 to fourth place in 2020 with a trade volume of \$6.68 billion, then to eighth place in 2021 with a trade volume of \$5.38 billion (see table 11/5).

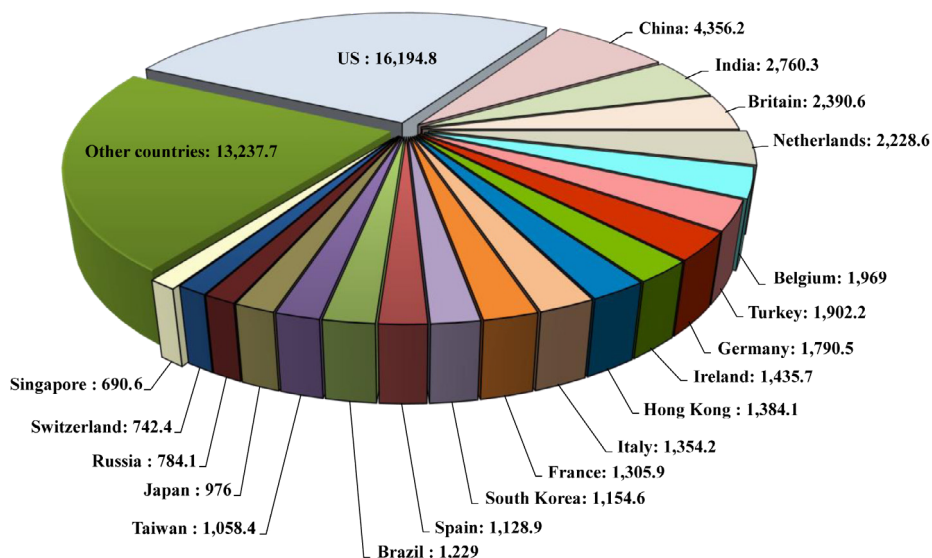
Along with the aforementioned, the most notable countries to which Israel exported goods in 2021 were India (\$2.76 billion), Ireland (\$1.44 billion), Hong Kong (\$1.38 billion), Italy (\$1.35 billion), France, and Brazil. It is noteworthy that Israeli exports to Ireland rose by 625%, and overall trade between Ireland and Israel rose by 141% in 2021 compared to 2020. The main countries from which Israel imported goods in 2021 are Italy (\$3.36 billion), Hong Kong (\$2.67 billion), France (\$2.37 billion), South Korea (\$2.25 billion), India (\$2.24 billion) and Spain (\$2.03 billion) (see table 11/5).

Table 11/5: Volume of Israeli Trade, Exports and Imports to/ from Selected Countries 2020–2021 at Current Prices (\$ million)⁶²

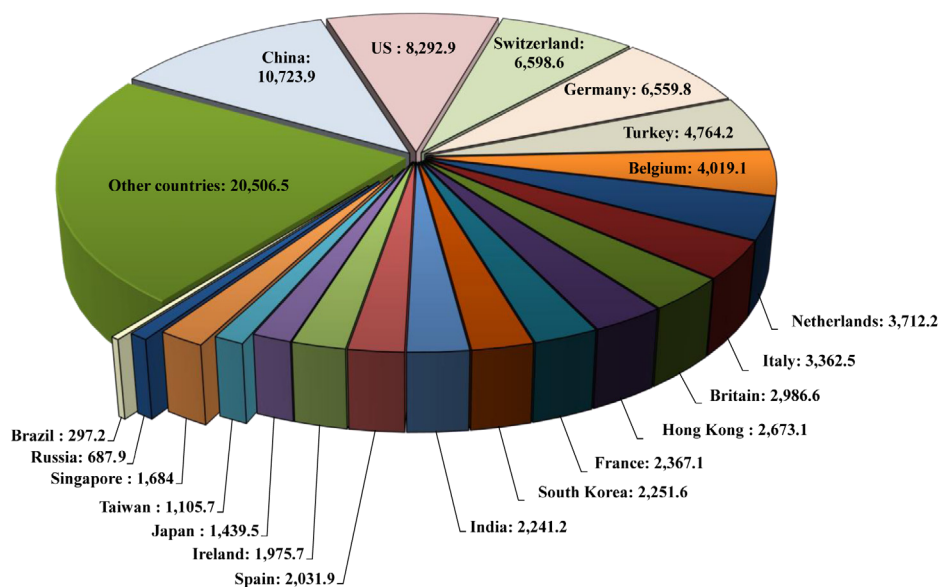
	Country	Trade volume		Israeli exports to:		Israeli imports from:	
		2021	2020	2021	2020	2021	2020
1	US	24,487.7	21,181.8	16,194.8	13,132.3	8,292.9	8,049.5
2	China	15,080.1	11,910.2	4,356.2	4,240.5	10,723.9	7,669.7
3	Germany	8,350.3	6,911.5	1,790.5	1,681.1	6,559.8	5,230.4
4	Switzerland	7,341	5,671.9	742.4	445.2	6,598.6	5,226.7
5	Turkey	6,666.4	4,928.8	1,902.2	1,430.8	4,764.2	3,498
6	Belgium	5,988.1	4,524.4	1,969	1,458.3	4,019.1	3,066.1
7	Netherlands	5,940.8	5,364.9	2,228.6	2,462.8	3,712.2	2,902.1
8	Britain	5,377.2	6,681.4	2,390.6	3,712.7	2,986.6	2,968.7
9	India	5,001.5	3,112.6	2,760.3	1,598.9	2,241.2	1,513.7
10	Italy	4,716.7	3,470.2	1,354.2	786.7	3,362.5	2,683.5
11	Hong Kong	4,057.2	3,249.4	1,384.1	1,239.6	2,673.1	2,009.8
12	France	3,673	3,290	1,305.9	1,153.7	2,367.1	2,136.3
13	Ireland	3,411.4	1,414.1	1,435.7	198	1,975.7	1,216.1
14	South Korea	3,406.2	2,480.4	1,154.6	787.7	2,251.6	1,692.7
15	Spain	3,160.8	2,401.2	1,128.9	874.8	2,031.9	1,526.4
16	Japan	2,415.5	2,187.7	976	948.3	1,439.5	1,239.4
17	Singapore	2,374.6	1,587.1	690.6	513.9	1,684	1,073.2
18	Taiwan	2,164.1	1,671.2	1,058.4	733.2	1,105.7	938
19	Brazil	1,526.2	1,226.3	1,229	1,006.7	297.2	219.6
20	Russia	1,472	1,090.3	784.1	672	687.9	418.3
21	Other countries	33,744.2	25,069	13,237.7	11,076.9	20,506.5	13,992.1
Total		150,355	119,424.4	60,073.8	50,154.1	90,281.2	69,270.3



Israeli Exports to Selected Countries 2021 at Current Prices (\$ million)



Israeli Imports from Selected Countries 2021 at Current Prices (\$ million)



Manufacturing, mining, and quarrying topped the list of Israeli exports for the years 2020 and 2021 with 91.9% and 89.1%, respectively. The proportion of net Israeli diamond exports was 6.5% in 2020 and 9.4% in 2021. Agricultural

exports and those relating to forestry and fishing totaled to 2% in 2020 and 2021 (see table 12/5). The breakdown of industrial exports by technological intensity, high-tech industries accounted for 38% of all such exports in 2020, with medium-tech industries accounting for 55% and low-tech industries for 7%.⁶³

Table 12/5: Israeli Exports by Commodity Group 2019–2021 (\$ million)⁶⁴

Year	Agriculture, forestry and fishing	Manufacturing, mining & quarrying excl. working diamonds	Working of diamonds & Wholesale of diamond	Other	Discarded exports	Total
2019	1,124.6	46,069.5	4,843.8	7.3	–394.2	51,651.1
2020	1,039.4	43,640.9	3,099.4	52.3	–341.8	47,490.1
2021	1,129.1	50,165.6	5,314.5	14.2	–340.5	56,283

For Israeli imports, raw materials topped the list of imports in 2020 and 2021, with 45.7% and 44.1% respectively, fuel imports amounted to 8% and 10.1%, consumer goods 26%, investment goods 16%, and diamond imports 4% in 2020 and 2021 respectively (see table 13/5).

Table 13/5: Israeli Imports by Commodity Group 2019–2021 (\$ million)⁶⁵

Year	Consumer goods	Raw materials	Investment materials	Fuel	Polished and rough diamonds	Others	Total
2019	17,307.5	31,229.9	11,263.6	9,155.2	3,879.7	2,975.8	75,811.7
2020	17,962.4	31,384.2	10,842.6	5,528.4	2,432.1	597.8	68,747.5
2021	23,337.7	39,259.2	13,884	9,002.9	3,413.9	199.7	89,097.4

Although Israel is a rich and developed country, it still receives US annual aid, which has seen an increase of about \$700 million annually since 2018. Support increased to \$3.8 billion annually, including \$3.3 billion in military grants. Therefore, Israel received a total of \$3.8 billion in 2020 and the same in 2021. The total support received by Israel in 1949–2021 is approximately \$145.89 billion, according to the report by the Congressional Research Service (CRS).⁶⁶



Table 14/5: US Foreign Aid to Israel 1949–2021 (\$ million)⁶⁷

Period	1949–1958	1959–1968	1969–1978	1979–1988	1989–1998
Total	599.6	727.8	11,426.5	29,933.9	31,551.9

Period	1999–2008	2009–2018	2019	2020	2021	Grand total
Total	29,374.7	30,878.2	3,800	3,800	3,800	145,892.6

Fourth: Military Indicators

Despite Israel's huge military superiority compared to the Palestinian resistance or even to Arab States, and despite the availability of all forms of weapons, training, mobilization, advanced techniques and huge budgets, the Palestinian resistance, particularly in GS, imposed itself and managed to confuse the Israeli army and thwart its plans in the Sword of Jerusalem Battle. It even managed to confuse the Israeli community in historic Palestine. This led the political and military apparatuses to conduct reviews of their plans. The military indicators for 2020–2021 are as follows:

1. Appointments and Structural Changes

In 2020 and 2021, there were regular appointments to important positions in the Israeli army. In August 2020, Brigadier General Nimrod Aloni took over as Commander of the Gaza Division.⁶⁸ In October 2020, General Yaron Finkleman became the leader of the Operations Section of the Israeli Army Operations Directorate, a central role in planning military activities and often a starting point for a position in the Israeli Army General Staff.⁶⁹

In September 2021, following Major General Amikam Norkin, a new Israeli Air Force Commander was appointed Tomer Bar, who was the head of the Force Design Directorate (a rejigged version of what was once the Planning Directorate), while he was replaced by General Yaakov Banjo.⁷⁰ On 12/10/2021, Major General Tamir Yadai was appointed Commanding Officer of the Ground Forces, succeeding Major General Yoel Strick.⁷¹

2. Manpower

The Israeli army's forces numbered around 635 thousand, including 170 thousand active personnel, and 465 thousand reserve personnel.⁷² It is an effective reserve that can enter service and be ready to fight in just four days. In recent years, the influence of the right-wing religious movement has increased, including in the upper ranks of the army.

In January 2022, the Israeli Army's Manpower Directorate issued its annual data showing the number of soldiers killed in different circumstances during 2021: 31 Israeli soldiers were killed in 2021, compared to 28 in 2020 and 27 in 2019. In 2021, 19 soldiers were killed in training, road or work accidents compared to 13 in 2020. A soldier was killed by an anti-tank missile in GS during the Sword of Jerusalem Battle in May 2021, while in 2020, a soldier in the Golani unit was killed as a result of a stone being thrown at his head during an arrest campaign in WB. There were 11 suicides in 2021, 3 of them Falasha Jews, compared to 9 in 2020 and 12 in 2019.⁷³ It should be noted that Israeli sniper Barel Shmueli, who was killed by a Palestinian gunman during a protest at the GS border in August 2021, was not included in the death statistics because he was serving with the border guard police.⁷⁴

Regarding military motivation, on 1/8/2020 the Walla! website indicated that the Israeli army was suffering from the low motivation of young soldiers about serving in combat units. The desire of young Israelis to serve in the military is constantly declining, as 11.5% of new soldiers evaded service in 2019 compared to 7.9% in 2018.⁷⁵ On 6/1/2022, the Israel Democracy Institute revealed in its annual report that public trust in the army has reached its lowest level in 10 years. Indeed, it has declined from 90% in 2019 to 81% in 2020 and 78% in 2021.⁷⁶

3. Military Plans and Directions

According to security and military estimates and research center analysts, the challenges for Israel are increasing in 2022, following the long series of global, regional and local events affecting the Israeli landscape in 2020–2021.

According to Israeli consensus, Iran's nuclear program has been defined as the most serious threat to Israel and its national security, under the pretext that Iran is gaining the necessary knowledge and expertise in nuclear weapons and advancing uranium enrichment to high levels.⁷⁷ However, in its report summarizing its



operations and security conditions on various fronts during 2021, the Israeli army acknowledged its inability to launch an attack on Iran without preparing for a preliminary battles on the Lebanese front, in Syria and GS. Israel's internal front remains "fragile" and ill-equipped for simultaneous warfare on several fronts and is not immune from rocket attacks that could affect Israeli targets that would be logical targets of an attack.⁷⁸

The Herzliya Conference in 2020 and 2021 concluded that the challenges and threats facing Israel were traditional (armies), non-traditional (resistance), nuclear and cyber-related. Ranking first, the Iranian threat is represented by its nuclear program and conventional military expansion in the geographical vicinity of Israel, especially in Lebanon and Syria. Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett threatened at the 2021 Herzliya Conference that Israel would respond directly to what he called attacks by Iran's proxies by targeting the Iranian regime.⁷⁹

While addressing the Israeli military option against Iran, the commander of the Israeli Air Force, General Amikam Norkin, also stressed during the same conference that according to the instructions of the Chief of Staff of the Israeli Army, Aviv Kochavi, Iran is top of the army's priorities. This determines the allocation of resources and training, and prompts the army to improve its capabilities. He said that the army had to accelerate part of the procurement, production and long-distance refueling capabilities, and the strategic plan would no doubt be adapted to this.⁸⁰

In the document reviewing the main challenges facing Israel submitted by INSS to President Isaac Herzog in 2021, the Iranian nuclear program was defined as "the most serious threat to Israel". The document called for the military option to be ready if negotiations in Vienna failed to reach a new nuclear agreement. Moreover, it stressed that "Israel must continue to try to obstruct Iranian entrenchment in the northern arena and disrupt its subversive regional activity as part of the ongoing campaign between wars (CBW), while improving capabilities and avoiding signs of weakening in its struggle against Iranian influence." With regard to the Northern front, the potential threat there is growing with the disintegration of Lebanon, the growing division in Syria, and the consolidation of Hizbullah's power in Lebanon.⁸¹

As for the Palestinians, the document concluded that "the Palestinian arena is marginal to the international and regional agenda," but stressed the need to

strengthen the PA to “to achieve stability in the West Bank and to retain it as a partner in a future settlement, while maintaining high level dialogue and extending security coordination.” It added that “Preparations must be made for the post-Abu Mazen era, particularly since Hamas continues to gain strength,” and “Israel must improve its preparedness for a military operation in the Strip, including ground maneuvers designed to cause serious damage to the Hamas military wing.”⁸²

With the approval of the general budget for 2022 by the Israeli Knesset, the Multi-Year Tnufa Plan, which was developed by Aviv Kochavi, received a strong boost for implementation in regard to the training, structure and armament of the army, in particular the improvement of the standard of living, the operational level and the health situation within the army. This had been a key demand of Kochavi since he took office in 2018.⁸³ The credibility of the Israeli army, which was shaken on the eve of the May 2021 Sword of Jerusalem Battle, is being re-examined through the Tnufa Plan, which is based on a “sudden war” approach.

The Israeli army’s annual assessment found the security situation to be “improving,” and it believed the approval of the Ministry of Defense’s budget would help through further procurement, acquisition of equipment, and training of military and reserve personnel in the next two years. Despite the state of “improvement” in the security situation, according to the assessment, this cannot prevent the possibility of a sudden unexpected escalation on any of the fronts. This is especially true for the GS front, where the assessment finds that the factors that might lead to escalation have not diminished, for Hamas and the PIJ movements are resistance groups, and because Israel continues to refuse to improve the economic situation of Gaza, and negotiations on prisoner exchanges remain stalled. According to the report, the Israeli army recommended that Hamas and the PIJ must not be allowed to increase their military power.⁸⁴

4. Military Maneuvers

During the years 2020–2021, the Israeli army intensified its maneuvers simulating a confrontation on several fronts with a series of varied military exercises, in an effort to raise its readiness against the “security risks” of neighboring countries.

The maneuvers arose against the backdrop of repeated statements by senior Israeli officials predicting an escalation in the region, in a scenario where the Israeli army could fight a war on several fronts with Lebanon, Syria and GS, apart



from cyber warfare and cyberattacks. In a remarkable turn of events, the army conducted maneuvers in Arab towns in the 1948 occupied territories, simulating the outbreak of unrest inside Palestine and WB in the event of a war on one of the fronts, as had occurred during the Sword of Jerusalem Battle.⁸⁵

One of the most visible exercises of recent years was the exercise by the Israeli army in December 2021, dedicated to preparing for the next war. According to the army statement, the maneuver simulated combat scenarios for improving the Israeli army's readiness for the next war, indicating that these "exercises were led by the Technology and Logistics Division in cooperation with the Ground Forces, the Operations Division and the Southern Command."⁸⁶ The Israeli army also conducted an exercise simulating a possible invasion of GS, the first after the Sword of Jerusalem Battle in May 2021.⁸⁷

In March 2021, the Israeli army's Multidimensional Unit (Ghost Unit) completed a three-week exercise involving live ammunition maneuvers that included all its formations in the Golan Heights and at the Lebanese border. In the same vein, the Commander of the Ground Forces, Major General Yoel Strick, said, "We want the next war to be more precise and more lethal, with great intelligence, as live ammunition is activated next to Ground Forces."⁸⁸

As for the joint exercises between the Israeli army and other armies of the region and the world, they have become frequent and entrenched year after year, taking advantage of the often-tense relations between a number of States in the region. In March 2021, the Navy participated in international military exercises with Greece, Cyprus and France, in the eastern Mediterranean.⁸⁹ On 12/4/2021, Israel and the UAE conducted a 10-day joint air exercise.⁹⁰ In April 2021, Israel also participated in a maneuver called Iniohos held in Greece with the participation of seven countries, which simulated several scenarios, notably dealing with advanced surface-to-air missile threats and other scenarios.⁹¹

5. Arms and Arms Trade

State Comptroller Judge Matanyahu Engelman published his annual report in which he criticized the decision-making process of the security system and military armament. He wrote that there were flaws in the way security information about the purchase of new artillery is presented to the Chief of Staff, Minister of Defense and Cabinet. The Albert company, which won the tender, was the only company

considered, and the German competing company was not given a chance. The State Comptroller confirmed that the reports submitted to the Chief of Staff and to the Cabinet about the artillery were false and unclear.⁹²

In August 2020, four new F-35 stealth fighter jets were delivered to the Israeli Air Force⁹³ followed by three others in September 2021, bringing the total number to 30 delivered aircraft out of the 50 expected to be received by 2024.⁹⁴ On 30/12/2021, Israel also signed an agreement with the US to acquire 12 Lockheed Martin CH-53K helicopters and two Boeing KC-46 refueling aircraft. The Ministry of Defense estimated the total deal to be worth \$3.1 billion, with aircraft expected to arrive in 2026.⁹⁵

Israeli arms exports reached \$8.55 billion in 2020, mostly to the Asia and the Pacific region. It was an indicator of the growth in arms exports compared to 2019, when it reached \$7.3 billion.⁹⁶ Whereas in 2021, they reached \$11.3 billion, the highest since the establishment of Israel.

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (Sipri) arms trade control report, Israeli arms exports represented 3% of the global total in 2016–2020, and were 59% higher than in 2011–2015, whereas Israeli arms exports represented 2.4% of the global total in 2017–2021, and were 5.6% less than in 2012–2016.⁹⁷

6. Military Budget

Due to the long political crisis that led to four legislative elections in less than two years, no budget was voted on in Israel after 2018. In December 2020, the Knesset was also dissolved because the MKs were unable to agree on a budget.

With the approval by the Knesset of the general budget for the year 2022 on Friday 5/11/2021 at dawn, the military received an important boost, particularly since the defense balance for the year 2022 was in accordance with the aspirations of the military. This gave impetus to the military's plans and programs in the face of what it saw as existential challenges.

The Israeli military budget amounted to \$20.929 billion (71.928 billion shekels) for 2020 based on the budget actual expenditure (see table 15/5), while the military budget for 2021 was estimated at more than \$23.9 billion (77.3 billion shekels).⁹⁸

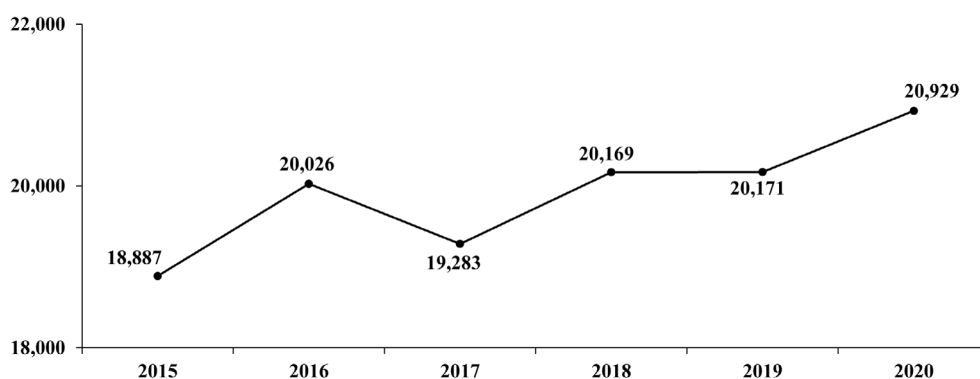


The following table shows actual Israeli military expenditure according to the CBS figures in the 2015–2020 period:

**Table 15/5: Actual Israeli Military Expenditures 2015–2020
at Current Prices⁹⁹**

Year	Expenditures (million shekels)	Expenditures (\$ million)
2015	73,356	18,887
2016	76,912	20,026
2017	69,414	19,283
2018	72,547	20,169
2019	71,897	20,171
2020	71,928	20,929

Actual Israeli Military Expenditures 2015–2020 at Current Prices (in \$ million)



Fifth: The Israeli Position on the Internal Palestinian Situation

Although two Israeli governments governed in the years 2020 and 2021, the first with a right-wing majority headed by Benjamin Netanyahu, and the second with right-wing, “centrist” and “left-wing” movements headed by Naftali Bennett, the policy of the two governments towards the internal Palestinian situation did not differ. Israel continued to exert pressure in order to consolidate the Palestinian

division, pursuing the GS siege, implementing closer security coordination, creating political and administrative tracks in WB as a substitute for the sovereignty of the PA, and preparing for the post-‘Abbas period by finding a successor in accordance with Israeli security and political criteria. 2021 witnessed a new war on GS, just before the end of the Netanyahu government and his replacement by Bennett.

With the progress of the Palestinian reconciliation during 2020, and the announcement of an agreement on PLC, presidential and PNC elections starting with the PLC ones in May 2021, it was clear how much Israel feared that Hamas could win these elections. Multiple Palestinian polls supported this notion, intersecting with Israeli estimates confirming such a possibility. Consequently, there were a series of Israeli statements warning against such a scenario, in conjunction with arrests, repression and threats against many Palestinian faction candidates in WB, the largest share of them being Hamas candidates and officials, which was a clear intervention to enshrine division and undermine the Palestinian democratic track.

Gabi Ashkenazi, the Israeli Foreign Minister in Netanyahu’s government, stressed that the Palestinian elections seemed more serious than previous attempts, but expressed concern about the growing strength of Hamas in GS.¹⁰⁰ On 9/4/2021, the Walla! website quoted Ashkenazi, who claimed during a phone conversation with his US counterpart Antony Blinken that Israel was not putting obstacles to legislative elections, however, Israel was concerned that the internal split in Fatah would weaken ‘Abbas’s party and pave the way for Hamas’s victory.¹⁰¹ This claim was also repeated by Tal Kalman, head of the Israeli Army’s Strategic Division.¹⁰² The coordinator of government activities in the territories, Kamil Abu Rukun, threatened to cease relations and security coordination should Hamas win the legislative elections.¹⁰³ On 19/3/2021, Channel 12 revealed the content of a meeting between Israeli Shabak Chief Nadav Argaman and Mahmud ‘Abbas, where the former warned the latter not to involve Hamas in the PLC elections for fear of them dominating.¹⁰⁴

As part of its effective interference in impeding the holding of elections, Israel has arrested and summoned candidates from Palestinian factions, particularly Hamas candidates in Jerusalem¹⁰⁵ and the rest of WB.¹⁰⁶ Press conferences for candidates were banned in Jerusalem.¹⁰⁷



Not only has the Israeli side disrupted the Palestinian democratic track through actions and arrests, but it also escalated, including increasing the frequency of incursions by settlers into *al-Aqsa* Mosque, in addition to increasing Israeli attacks and repressive measures. This led to the outbreak of the Sword of Jerusalem Battle in May 2021, which entailed Israeli aggression against GS and the continuation of the suffocating siege, as exchanges of prisoners and the dismantling or easing of the siege faltered.

Israeli concerns continued to center on controlling and calming the situation in WB, particularly as armed resistance is growing and popular uprisings are escalating, hence consolidating security coordination with the PA and the enshrinement of schism. Israel is also concerned with finding a Palestinian successor to Mahmud ‘Abbas who is in line with Israeli and US conditions, and who is “reasonably cooperative” in the PA’s “functional” administration of WB.

On 17/11/2020, Palestinian Authority Civil Affairs Commissioner Hussein al-Sheikh announced the return of the PA’s relationship with Israel after it had been suspended for six months.¹⁰⁸ This entailed a series of meetings between Palestinian and Israeli leaders, the first of which being between Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz and Mahmud ‘Abbas in Ramallah in August 2021, followed by another in Tel Aviv on 8/12/2021.¹⁰⁹ Gantz confirmed that the meetings were to address “issues related to security, diplomacy, economics and civil affairs,” and “Gantz told [‘Abbas] that Israel is ready for a series of measures that would strengthen the PA economy,”¹¹⁰ stressing that the stronger the PA was, the weaker Hamas would be.¹¹¹ There were also numerous meetings by Palestinian figures with high-level Israeli political and security figures, most notably Hussein al-Sheikh and the GIS head Majid Faraj.

Within the framework of security coordination, the Chief of General Staff of the Israeli Army Aviv Kochavi revealed that, at the request of Tel Aviv, PA security forces, rather than Israeli forces, had launched a series of crackdowns in November 2021 against armed resisters in the Jenin Refugee Camp and had “acted against terrorists there.” The request was conveyed by the new Shabak Chief Ronen Bar, who met ‘Abbas at his headquarters in Ramallah and warned him that his Fatah opponents and Hamas activists were cooperating together to rebel against his authority.¹¹²

The Israeli fear of a possible PA collapse, the weakening of PA security grip and the chaos that could follow, which would certainly strengthens those forces that reject the peace process, primarily Hamas, have led the Israeli side to lend the PA some \$155 million.¹¹³ Gantz also asked Washington to exert pressure on Arab and European countries to increase financial aid to the PA.¹¹⁴ Israel then authorized a bundle of facilities for Palestinians in WB and GS, including the approval of thousands of reunion requests for unregistered Palestinians, where the process was administered by Hussein al-Sheikh.¹¹⁵

The succession of ‘Abbas was an Israeli concern in recent years, in particular because of the lack of clarity of who the successor will be. Perhaps partly because he marginalized or alienated his rivals, thereby enhancing his standing among international actors, making them unwilling to exert pressure on him because of concerns that he would leave without a successor.

The frequency of meetings increased in the months prior to the writing of this report, namely between Hussein al-Sheikh and Majid Faraj with Israeli officials, in addition al-Sheikh—who was ‘Abbas’s Fatah candidate—was elected a member of the PLO Executive Committee to succeed the late Saeb Erekat during the PCC session, on 6–8/2/2022.¹¹⁶ Moreover, al-Sheikh is likely to also serve as the secretary of the PLO Executive Committee (a position also formerly held by Erekat). Hence, he has practically entered ‘Abbas’s succession race.¹¹⁷ There is no doubt that the extent of the Palestinian political and security cooperation with Israel and the US is a key determinant for them in supporting the individual or “current” that will succeed ‘Abbas in the future. Hussein al-Sheikh may be closer to gaining Israeli-US support, but he still has much to prove at both the Fatah and the national Palestinian levels.

Conclusion

Israeli society continues to develop to become more radical, religious and nationalist, and right-wing and religious movements have become dominant in the Israeli system of governance and politics, with the decline and near-demise of the Israeli left. Along with the government system, Israeli society is moving towards enactment of laws that entrench the Jewish-Zionist identity of Israel, Judaization of Jerusalem and the rest of WB, and intensification of settlement building.



The Israeli political system has experienced confusion, instability and difficulty in resolving important decisions, due to multiple general elections (four in 2019–2021) and the inability of large parties to form stable governments. Many parties have wished to end Netanyahu's reign as prime minister, after he served the longest term since the establishment of Israel, in addition to his facing charges of corruption.

This has led to a state of political polarization between two camps; Anti- and pro-Netanyahu supporters, spawning major coalitions and party divisions. Even after the formation of a new government headed by Naftali Bennett, Netanyahu's presence remained the key to its cohesion, despite the political, ideological and economic differences (in terms of trends and policies) among its various constituents. Although the nature of this configuration may cause it to fall at any moment, it seems to be in the interest of the parties involved to continue, especially when Netanyahu remains a possible alternative in the event of its collapse.

The political scene was marked by the historic accession of the UAL to the government coalition, which like all its constituent parts, is considered essential to the survival of the government. This is the first time in the history of the Israeli political system that an Israeli government has relied on an Arab list for its survival. It seems that the UAL will remain a central player in the formation of the government to come, as long as Netanyahu remains in the political landscape.

Israeli population statistics show general stability in population growth. Despite its limited decline, the Palestinian Arab population growth rate remained higher than that of the Jewish community. Jewish immigration rates to Israel also remained stable compared to the previous 10 years. Experts consider the increase in the number of Jews in the world is mainly because of their expansion of the definition of a Jew, including those who do not believe in Judaism as a religion, and those who have one Jewish parent.

Israel enjoys an advanced economic situation at the expense of the Palestinian people, their land and natural resources. It benefits from the US support and influence in the Western world, the absence of official Arab threat and the normalization with several Arab countries. However, the Israeli economy suffered greatly in 2020–2021, due to the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused one of the worst economic regressions since Israel's establishment. Nevertheless, its ability

to recover from the crisis has been faster than many countries that have suffered from the pandemic. Its GDP per capita has remained close to that of Europe, and has surpassed most of those of the Middle East.

Israel continues to enjoy qualitative military superiority compared to the countries of the region, in addition to its large supply of non-conventional weapons. Its military budget compared to its population size is among the highest in the world, and it continues to be one of the world's largest arms exporters. However, the resistance's performance in the Sword of Jerusalem Battle confused Israeli military and security forces, who failed to stop the escalation of resistant action, particularly in GS, thus forcing them to review their plans and actions.

Israel continues to face the risk of escalation of resistance in the Palestinian interior and of having a wide global public opinion against it that supports the resistance. The surrounding strategic environment is unstable, which may open the way for further hostility and for resistant action in the future. The Israeli leadership has declined in quality and the Israeli soldiers' will to fight has declined, not to mention the internal contradictions of Israeli society. This keeps Israel in a precarious position.



Endnotes

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This Report

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Prof. Dr. Mohsen Mohammad Saleh

The Palestine Strategic Report 2020 – 2021



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