# Jewish Agency

**The Jewish Agency for Israel** (Hebrew: הסוכנות היהודית לארץ ישראל,romanized: *HaSochnut HaYehudit L'Eretz Yisra'el*), formerly known as the **Jewish Agency for Palestine**,[2] is the largest Jewish non-profit organization in the world. It was established in 1929 as the operative branch of the World Zionist Organization (WZO).[3]

As an organization, it encourages immigration of Jews in diaspora to the Land of Israel, and oversees their integration with the State of Israel.[4] Since 1948, the Jewish Agency claims to have brought 3 million immigrants to Israel,[5] where it offers them transitional housing in "absorption centers" throughout the country.[6] David Ben-Gurion served as the chairman of its executive committee from 1935, and in this capacity on 14 May 1948, he proclaimed Israel's independence,[7] following which he served as the first Israeli prime minister. In the years preceding the founding of Israel, the Jewish Agency oversaw the establishment of about 1,000 towns and villages in the British Mandate of Palestine. The organization serves as the main link between Israel and Jewish communities around the world.[8][9]

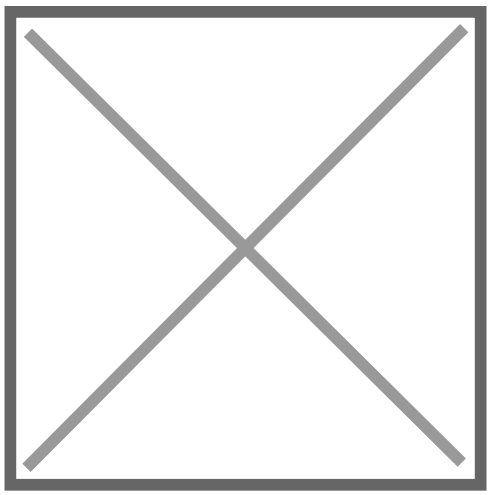
By law, the Jewish Agency is a parastatal organization, but does not receive core funding from the Israeli government.[10] The Jewish Agency is funded by the Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA), Keren Hayesod, major Jewish communities and federations, and foundations and donors from Israel and around the world.[11][3] In 2008, the Jewish Agency won the Israel Prize for its historical contribution to Israel and to the Jewish community worldwide.[12]

## History

Established as the Land of Israel Office [he] (Hebrew: משרד ארץ-ישראל) of the Zionist Organization in 1908, the organization became the Zionist Commission, then later the Palestine Zionist Executive.[13] The body was designated as the "Jewish agency" responsible for coordinating the establishment of the Jewish National Home provided for in the League of Nations' Mandate for Palestine, and was thus again renamed as **The Jewish Agency for Palestine** in 1929.[14][15] After the establishment of the State of Israel, it received its current name: **The Jewish Agency for Israel**.

## 1908–1928: Beginnings as an arm of the World Zionist Organization

The Jewish Agency began in Jaffa in 1908 as the **Palestine Office** (Hebrew: ילארשי-ץראה דרשמה, *HaMisrad HaEretz Yisraeli*; lit. 'Office for the Land of Israel'), of the Zionist Organization (ZO) in Ottoman-controlled Palestine. It was headed by Arthur Ruppin and was founded as the operational branch of the ZO,[16] with its main tasks being to represent the Jews of Ottoman Palestine in dealings with the Sultan and other foreign dignitaries, to aid Jewish immigration, and to buy land for Jewish communities to settle in.[*citation needed*]



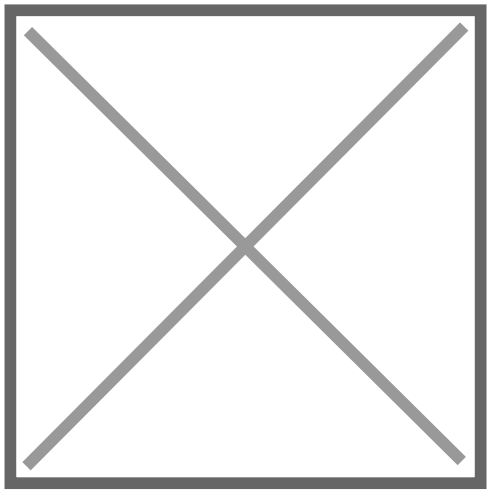
Jewish immigrants of the Second Aliyah, 1912

The Palestine Office was established under the inspiration of Theodor Herzl's vision for a solution to "the Jewish question": the issue of anti-Semitism and the place of Jews in the world.[*citation needed*] In his pamphlet "The Jewish State," Herzl envisioned the Jewish people settled as an independent nation on its own land, taking its place among the other nation-states of the world.[*citation needed*] The Palestine Office, which eventually became the Jewish Agency, was based upon Herzl's organizational ideas for how to bring a Jewish state into being.[17][*better source needed*]

The influx of Jews during the Second Aliyah (1904–1914) made the purchase of land particularly urgent.[*citation needed*] With the aid of the Jewish National Fund (JNF) (Hebrew: לֵאָרְשִׁיל תֶמְיֵיק ֶוֶרֶק, *Keren Kayemet L'Yisrael*), the Palestine Office bought land for newcomers in two locations: Chavat Kinneret (near the Sea of Galilee), and Kibbutz Ruhama (near Sderot of today).[*citation needed*] Kibbutz Ruhama was specifically designated for Russian Jews from the Second Aliyah. Over the following decades, the Palestine Office established hundreds more *moshavim* and kibbutzim[18] and continued to purchase land together with the JNF.[*citation needed*]

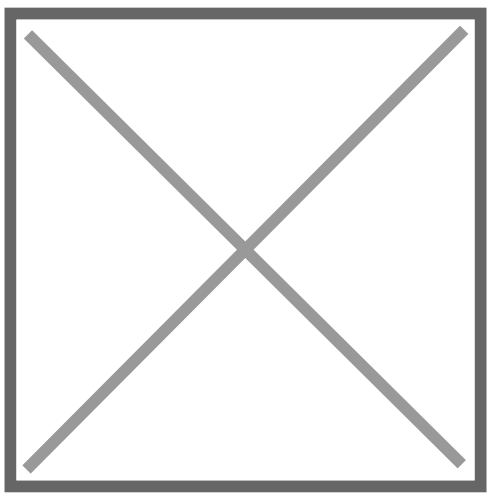
With the outbreak of World War I, the anticipated disintegration of the Ottoman Empire raised hopes among Zionists for increased Jewish immigration and eventual sovereignty in Palestine.[*citation needed*] In 1917 the United Kingdom captured Jerusalem from the Ottomans, and in 1918 pushed the Ottomans out of the Levant entirely,[19] and the region fell under British military rule. After World War I, the Ottoman Empire is dissolved and the League of Nations create plans for the

administration of former Ottoman territory.[20]



Chaim Weizmann, founder and director of the Zionist Commission (a precursor of the Jewish Agency), leader of the Zionist Organization, and first President of the State of Israel

Following the promulgation of the Balfour Declaration, in which the British government promised to facilitate the establishment of a Jewish National Home in the region,[21] Dr. Chaim Weizmann, president of the British Zionist Federation, formed the **Zionist Commission** in March 1918 to go to Palestine and make recommendations to the British government.[22] The Commission reached Palestine on 14 April 1918 and proceeded to study conditions and to report to the British government.[23] Weizmann was instrumental in restructuring the ZO's Palestine office into departments for agriculture, settlement, education, land, finance, immigration, and statistics.[*citation needed*] The Zionist Organization's Palestine Office was merged into the Zionist Commission,[*when?*] headed by Chaim Weizmann.[24]



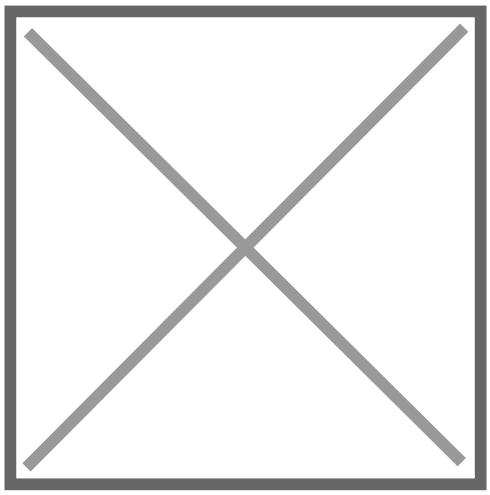
The front page of the Mandate for Palestine and Transjordan memorandum, presented to UK Parliament in December 1922, prior to it coming into force in 1923. The British control of the region lasted until 1948.

On 25 April 1920, the Principal Allied Powers agreed at the San Remo conference on the temporary administration of Ottoman territories by the victorious powers, and assigned Palestine, Transjordan and Iraq as Mandates to Britain.[20] The League of Nations formally approved these mandates in 1922,[25] with the Balfour Declaration and the requirement to create a Jewish National Homeland being incorporated into the Britain's Mandate for Palestine.[15] Article 4 of the Mandate provided for "the recognition of an appropriate *Jewish agency* as a public body for the purpose of advising and co-operating with the Administration of Palestine in such economic, social and other matters as may affect the establishment of the Jewish National Home and the interests of the Jewish population of Palestine."[15][26]: "Zionism", p. 76 In November 1921, the Zionist Commission became the **Palestine Zionist Executive** and was designated as the "Jewish agency" for the purpose of Article 4 of the League of Nation's Palestine Mandate.[13][27]

In 1921 Ze'ev Jabotinsky was elected to the executive but he resigned in 1923, accusing Weizmann of not being vigorous enough with the Mandatory Government. Other issues between the Revisionists and the agency were the distribution of entry permits, Weizmann's support for the Zionist Labour Movement, and the proposal to expand the agency.[*citation needed*] The Revisionists broke completely with agency in 1935, but rejoined ZO in 1947.[*citation needed*] In 1951 the ZO/JA included all Zionist organizations except Herut.[28]

The **Palestine Zionist Executive** was charged with carrying out the duties of the ZO's former Land of Israel Office, namely: facilitating Jewish immigration, land purchases for Jewish communities, and planning the general policies of the Zionist leadership. It ran schools and hospitals, and formed a defence force, the Haganah.[*citation needed*] Chaim Weizmann was the leader of both the World Zionist Organization and the Palestine Zionist Executive until 1929.

## Jewish Agency for Palestine 1929–1948



Palestine immigrant certificate issued in Warsaw (16–9–1935) by the Jewish Agency.

In 1929, the 16th Zionist Congress decided to restructure and the rename the Palestine Zionist Executive as **The Jewish Agency for Palestine**,[29][30] in reference to its role as the "Jewish agency" required by Article 4 of the League of Nations Mandate.[14] The new Jewish Agency was larger to accommodate the growing logistical task of managing the Yishuv, and also included mandatory representation from non-Zionist Jewish organizations. The change was Chaim Weizmann's initiative, and was established on the principle of parity between Zionist and non-Zionist Jews working together in the building of a Jewish national home.[26]: 142

The 16th Zionist Congress determined that in the event of the future dissolution of the agency, the World Zionist Organization would replace it as representative of the Jews for the purpose of the Mandate.[31]

Weizmann was criticized for being too pro-British.[*citation needed*] When the 1930 White Paper was published recommending restricting Jewish immigration, his position became untenable and he resigned from the ZO and the Jewish Agency.[*citation needed*] He protested that the British had betrayed their commitment expressed in the Balfour Declaration and that he could no longer work with them.[32][*better source needed*] Nahum Sokolow, who had been elected to succeed Weizmann, remained in his position.[*citation needed*] Arthur Ruppin succeeded Sokolow as chairman of the Jewish Agency in 1933 and David Ben-Gurion and Moshe Shertok joined the executive. In 1935, Ben-Gurion was elected chairman of the agency to succeed Ruppin.[33]

In 1937 The Peel Commission published its report into the disturbances of the year before. For the first time, partition was recommended.[*citation needed*] The 20th Zionist Congress, meeting in 1937, hotly debates the Peel Commission and the topic of partition.[34] In a compromise, the Congress rejected the commission's conclusions, demanding a full realization of the requirements of the Mandate; namely, the establishment of a Jewish National Home throughout Mandatory Palestine.[35][34] However, in a sign of reluctant openness to partition, the Congress also voted to authorize the executive "to enter into negotiations with a view to ascertaining the precise terms of His Majesty‘s government for the proposed establishment of a Jewish state."[35][34] This decision revealed differences within the Jewish Agency, with some of the non-Zionist faction disagreeing with the decision and some calling for a conference of Jews and Arabs.[26]: 107–108

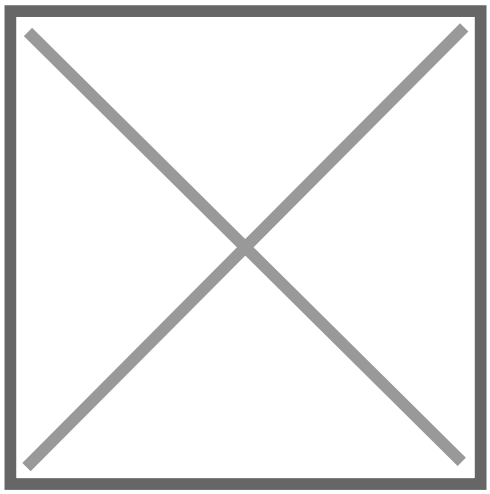
## Non-Zionist representation

The new body was larger and was required by its constitution for half of the members of its governing bodies to be made up of Jewish non-Zionist individuals and organizations.[36] Many of the organizations were philanthropic rather than political, and while they were interested in Jewish immigration to the Yishuv, many opposed talk of a Jewish State.[26]: 76

There was strong opposition within the ZO when the idea of enlargement of the board of governors of the Jewish Agency was first raised in 1924 to include non-Zionist Jews, but the idea was accepted by the Zionist Congress in 1927.[37]

Even though non-Zionists took part in the agency, it was still closely tied to the Zionist Organization. The president of the ZO served as the chair of the Executive Council and the Assembly of the Jewish Agency, and the half of its membership that was designated for Zionists was selected by the ZO.[36] The two bodies cooperated closely.[38][31]

Those participating included Sholem Asch, H.N. Bialik, Leon Blum, Albert Einstein, Immanuel Löw, Lord Melchett and Herbert Samuel.[26]: 104, 165, 175, 249 American non-Zionists received 44 of the 112 seats allotted to non-Zionists.[26]: 213 The British Board of Deputies joined as a constituent body.[26]: 168



David Ben-Gurion was Chairman of the Executive of the Jewish Agency from 1935 to 1948. Upon the founding of the State of Israel, he left his position to become the first Prime Minister of the state.

In 1947 the last non-Zionist member of the Jewish Agency, Werner Senator, resigned[26]: 142 and while the 50 percent participation of non-Zionists in the Agency before had not worked in practice, the Jewish Agency and the World Zionist Organization now became de facto identical.[39]

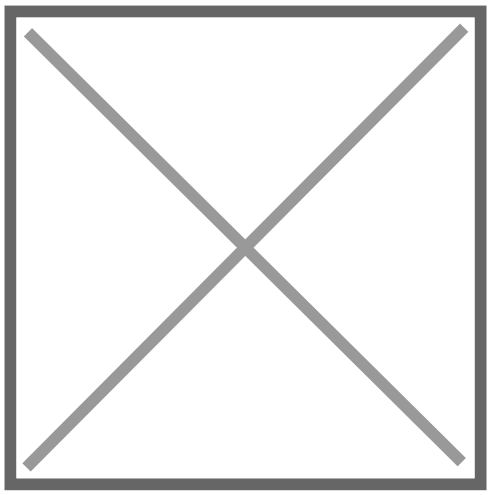
## Organization

From 1929 to 1948, the Jewish Agency was organized into four departments: the Government Department (performing foreign relations on behalf of the Jewish community of Palestine); the Security Department; the Aliyah Department, and the Education Department. The Jewish Agency Executive included David Ben-Gurion as chairman, and Rabbi Yehuda Leib Maimon and Yitzhak Gruenbaum, among others. The Jewish Agency was (and is still) housed in a fortress-like building in the Rehavia neighborhood of Jerusalem.[40] The land for the Rehavia neighborhood had been purchased in 1922 by the Palestine Land Development Corporation,[41] and construction of the Jewish Agency headquarters was paid for by the ZO. The three-winged structure with a large open courtyard was designed by Yochanan Rattner.[41] Along with the Jewish Agency it also houses the headquarters of the JNF and Keren Hayesod-United Israel Appeal.

## Bombing

Main article: 1948 Jewish Agency bombing

On March 11, 1948, a bomb planted in the courtyard of the building by Arab militants killed 13 and wounded many others.[42] The Keren Hayesod wing was completely destroyed.[43] Leib Yaffe, director-general of Keren Hayesod, was among those killed in the bombing.[44]

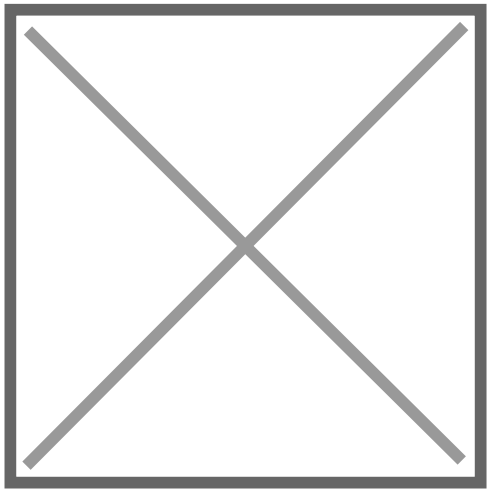


Offices of the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem following car bomb 11 March 1948

The building continues to serve as the headquarters of the Jewish Agency as of 2019. Another building "Kiriyat Moria" is located in southern-east Jerusalem, Armon Hanatziv, Ha-Askan 3. The organization also has satellite sites worldwide.

# Pre-state immigration and settlement 1934–1948

Throughout the years 1934–1948, in a phenomenon known as the *Ha'apala (*ascension), the Jewish Agency facilitated clandestine immigration beyond the British quotas. In 1938 it established *HaMosad LeAliyah Bet* (המוסד לעלייה ב', lit. *Institution for Immigration B*), which took charge of the effort. Overall, in these years, the agency, in partnership with other organizations, helped over 150,000 people in their attempt to enter Palestine, organizing a total of 141 voyages on 116 ships.[45] The potential immigrants were Jews fleeing the Holocaust and, after the war, refugees from displaced persons camps who sought a home in Palestine. Most of the Ma'apilim ships (of the Ha'apala movement) were intercepted by the British, but a few thousand Jews did manage to slip past the authorities. The operation as a whole also helped to unify the long-standing Jewish community in Palestine as well as the newcomer Jewish refugees from Europe.[46]



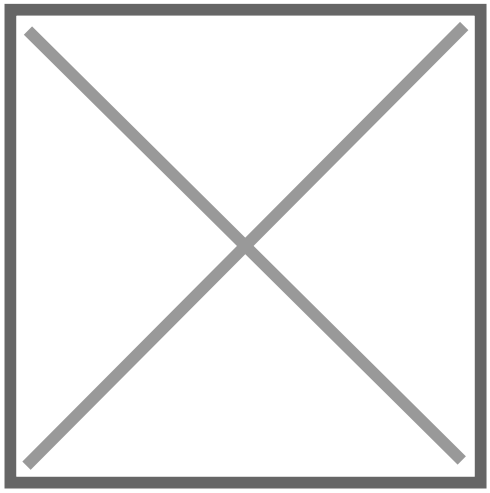
Recha Freier, founder of Youth Aliyah, circa 1964. Youth Aliyah saved more than 5,000 young European Jews by bringing them to Palestine in the years preceding the Holocaust.

In these years The agency made use of the "tower and stockade" (Hebrew: לדגמו המוח) method to establish dozens of new Jewish settlements literally overnight, without obtaining permission from the Mandate authorities. These settlements were built on land purchased by the JNF and relied on an Ottoman law stating that any building with a full roof could not be torn down.[47]

In 1933 the Jewish Agency negotiated a Ha'avara (Transfer) Agreement with Nazi Germany under which approximately 50,000 German Jews were allowed to immigrate to Palestine and retain some of their assets as German export goods.[48][*better source needed*]

In 1943, the Jewish Agency's Henrietta Szold joined Recha Freier in developing the Youth Aliyah program, which between 1933 and 1948 rescued more 5,000 young Jews from Europe, brought them to Palestine, and educated them in special boarding schools.[49][50] According to Professor Dvora Hacohen, between 1933 and 2011 the Youth Aliyah movement helped over 300,000 young people make Aliyah.[50]

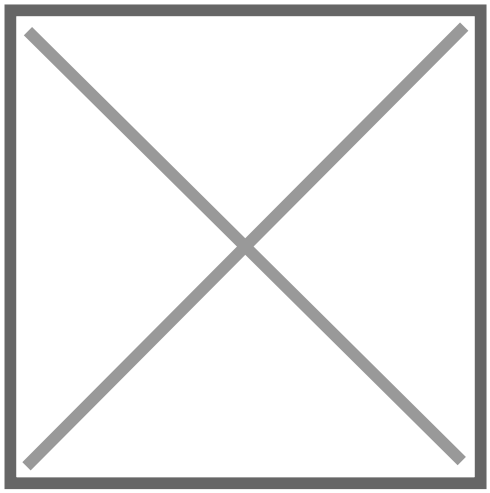
When World War II broke out, the Jewish Agency established a committee to aid European Jewry by finding them entry permits to Palestine, sending them food, and maintaining contact. The agency also helped recruit 40,000 members of the Palestinian Jewish community (a full 8 percent of the Jewish population of Palestine) to be trained by the British military and aid in the Allies' struggle against the Nazis; most served in the Middle East and Africa, but some served behind enemy lines in Europe, among them a group of 32 parachutists that included Hannah Szenes. In total, 800 were killed in their efforts.[51]



Survivors of the Buchenwald concentration camp arriving in Palestine in 1945. Since their immigration was illegal, they were arrested by the British.

When World War II ended the Agency continued to aid illegal immigration to Palestine through *HaMossad LeAliyah Bet* in an effort known as the *Bricha*. Between 1945 and 1948 the Jewish Agency sent 66 ships of refugees to Palestine.[52] Most were intercepted by British authorities, who placed the illegal immigrants, who had just survived the Holocaust, in detention camps in Palestine and later in Cyprus. Only with the establishment of the State of Israel were the detainees allowed to enter the country.[53]

## Resistance and formation of Israel's first government



David Ben-Gurion, Chairman of the Jewish Agency, declaring the establishment of the State of Israel, in Tel Aviv, May 14, 1948. Ben-Gurion became Israel's first Prime Minister.

Frustrated with the United Kingdom's continued anti-Zionist stance, the Jewish Agency helped put together an agreement signed by the Hagannah, the Irgun, and the Lehi to form a United Resistance Movement against the British.[54][*better source needed*] In 1946 British troops raided Jewish Agency headquarters as part of Operation Agatha, a broad effort to quash Jewish resistance in

Palestine. Important figures in The Agency including Moshe Sharett, head of the agency's political department, and Dov Yosef, member of the agency's executive committee, were arrested and imprisoned in Latrun.[55]

The United Nations recommended the partition of Palestine on 29 November 1947. Meanwhile, the Jewish Agency collaborated with the Jewish National Council to set up a People's Council (*Mo'ezet Ha'am)* and National Administration (*Minhelet Ha'am)*.[56] After the declaration of independence on 14 May 1948, these two bodies formed the provisional government of the State of Israel.[57]

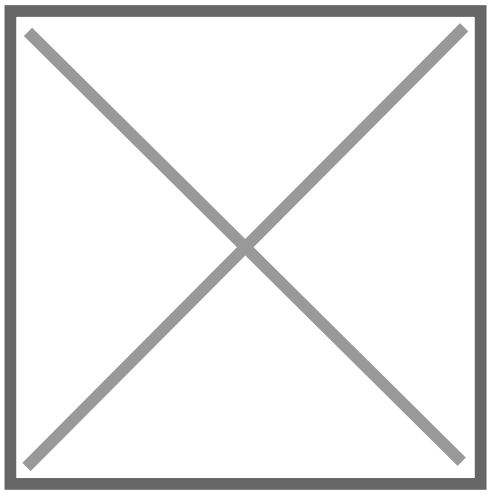
# The Jewish Agency for Israel

## Post-State immigration, settlement, and infrastructure

Following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the Jewish Agency for Israel shifted its focus to facilitating economic development and absorbing immigrants. Organizationally, it changed its structure: The Aliyah Department remained, as well as the Education Department (which promoted Jewish and Zionist education in the diaspora), but the Security and Government Departments were replaced by the Department of Agriculture and Settlement, and by the Israel Department (supporting activities that help vulnerable populations within Israel).

The agency's budget in 1948 was IL 32 million; its funding came from Keren Hayesod, the JNF, fund-raising drives, and loans.[58]

In 1949, the Jewish Agency brought 239,000 Holocaust survivors, from DP camps in Europe and detention camps in Cyprus, to Israel.[59] In the years following Israel's founding, Jews in many Arab countries suffered from violence and persecution, and fled or were driven from their homes.[*citation needed*] The agency helped to airlift 49,000 Yemenite Jews to Israel on Operation Magic Carpet, and over the next few years brought hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees to Israel from Northern Africa, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran.



Yemenite Jews arriving in Israel through Operation Magic Carpet.

Between 1948 and 1952, about 700,000 immigrants arrived in the new state. The Jewish Agency helped these immigrants acclimate to Israel and begin to build new lives. It established schools to teach them Hebrew, beginning with Ulpan Etzion in 1949.[60] (The first student to register for Ulpan Etzion was Ephraim Kishon.[61]) It also provided them with food, housing, and vocational training. For a time the construction of new housing could not keep up with demand, and many of the new immigrants were placed in temporary *ma'abarot*, or transit camps.[62]

In 1952, the "Zionist Organization-Jewish Agency for Israel Status Law" was passed by the Knesset formalizing the roles of each group.[*citation needed*] It was agreed that the WZO and the Jewish Agency would continue to supervise Aliyah, absorption, and settlement, while the state would handle all other matters previously dealt with by The agency including security, education, and employment.[63] Article 4 of the Status Law stipulated that the World Zionist Organization (clarified in Article 3 as "also the Jewish Agency") is an "authorized agency" of the State, establishing its ongoing parastatal rather than purely nongovernmental status.[64]

In the early years of the state the Jewish Agency aided in the establishment of a variety of different institutions that developed the country's economic and cultural infrastructure. These included El Al, the national airline; Binyanei HaUma, the national theater and cultural center; and museums, agricultural, and land development companies.[65]

In the years after 1948, the Agency's Department of Agricultural Settlement established an additional 480 new towns and villages throughout Israel. It provided them with equipment, livestock, irrigation infrastructure, and expert guidance. By the late 1960s these towns produced 70% of Israel's total agricultural output.[65]

The agency also focused its energies on Jews outside of Israel. The Department for Education and Culture in the Diaspora and the Department of Torah Education and Culture in the Diaspora were created to help replace the loss of centers of Jewish learning destroyed by the Holocaust. They trained Hebrew teachers; sent Israelis abroad to supplement Diaspora schools, camps, and youth organizations; and trained cantors, *shochatim* (ritual slaughterers) and *mohelim* (ritual circumcisers) in Diaspora communities.

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