Israel’s Foreign Service needs improvement, as has become profoundly evident over the last few years. Israel’s foreign policy is not based on clear guiding principles, Israel lacks a full-time Foreign Minister, and responsibility for core foreign policy issues has been transferred from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) to other governmental entities. This situation is detrimental diplomatically and to Israel’s national security and foreign relations.

The Israeli public recognizes these problems. Mitvim’s yearly public opinion polling shows that the public consistently gives low marks to Israel’s standing in the world, to the government’s conduct in the realm of foreign policy, and to the MFA’s ability to fulfill its mission. The polls also show that the public thinks that weakening the MFA harms national security.

In this context, Mitvim mapped the central problems facing Israel’s Foreign Service, and identified potential solutions. We initiated a project that included an experts workshop at the MFA, held in cooperation with the Israeli Association for Diplomacy; a conference in the Knesset, in cooperation with the Lobby for Strengthening Israel’s Foreign Service, led by MK Nachman Shai (Zionist Union); and research conducted by Yonatan Zlotogorski, in which approximately thirty current and former diplomats were interviewed.

After mapping the situation, Mitvim assembled a task-team of former senior diplomats to devise recommendations for overcoming each challenge. The task-team included Gadi Baltiansky, former Press Counselor at the Israeli Embassy in Washington DC and Spokesperson for Prime Minister Ehud Barak; Yigal Palmor, former MFA Spokesperson; Arthur Koll, former Deputy Director-General for Media and Public Affairs at the MFA; Daniel Shek, Former Ambassador to France; and Nadav Tamir, former Consul General in Boston and Senior Policy Adviser to President Shimon Peres. From the Mitvim Institute, Dr. Nimrod Goren, Merav Kahana-Dagan, and Meirav Sela took part in the task-team’s deliberations.

This document presents the recommendations devised by the task-team. They were first released at a special conference at the Knesset, in February 2017.

A. Developing a coherent foreign policy paradigm

- Israel lacks a clearly defined foreign policy paradigm. This must change; it is insufficient to consider foreign affairs merely a component of Israel’s national security.

- There is a need for a comprehensive, detailed document that presents broad guiding principles for Israel’s foreign policy, drawing on the working model that was implemented by former Minister Dan Meridor, when he was assigned with devising a national security concept for Israel.
• The initiative for such a move should come from the Knesset’s Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, with a central role for the Subcommittee for Foreign Policy and Public Relations. It is important that the initiative receive support from the Foreign Minister (or the acting minister, in the absence of a full-time Foreign Minister).

• The initiative requires dual leadership, through the appointment of two prominent and respected public figures with relevant knowledge and experience from both sides of the political map.

• Under this leadership structure, a regular panel of experts should be established, including a wide array of professionals who represent diverse viewpoints and disciplines.

• Political disputes around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will make the establishment of a bipartisan foreign policy paradigm difficult. If basic agreements prove impossible to reach, or if circumstances do not allow for the consolidation of a foreign policy paradigm within the government apparatus, it may be possible to advance it through think tanks.

B. Empowering the Foreign Service vis-à-vis the security establishment

• Naturally, security considerations are central to decision making processes in Israel. However, most of the challenges Israel currently faces are political and diplomatic, and cannot be solved militarily.

• The MFA is at a structural disadvantage compared to the many national security entities that are represented in government and cabinet deliberations. Balance must be achieved between the attention given to national security and that given to foreign affairs.

• An MFA official should be appointed as Head or Deputy Head of the National Security Council. Such a step would contribute to the desired balance between security and diplomacy, and ensure that diplomatic considerations receive sufficient attention.

• It is advisable to appoint a political advisor to the IDF’s Chief of Staff and Head of the Planning Directorate, as well a military secretary to the Foreign Minister.

• Periodic policy briefings and presentations by Foreign Service officials should be delivered to the government and cabinet. The MFA’s yearly assessment should be presented to the public.

• A new national security and diplomacy unit should be established within the MFA to assess the diplomatic implications of military actions. This could be a joint unit of the MFA and the Ministry of Defense.

• The Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee should be separated into two different committees: A Foreign Affairs Committee and a Defense Committee. Today, this committee deals almost exclusively with security issues. Dividing the Committee will allow regular, serious discussion of foreign affairs issues alongside proper parliamentary oversight of Israel’s foreign policy and the MFA.
● Until this division is made, the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee should expand its deliberations on foreign affairs. It should ask the MFA for periodic reports, and call before it senior officials from the MFA (including ambassadors and deputy directors).

C. Bringing the MFA to the forefront of core foreign policy issues

● Empowering the MFA is also a responsibility of the Ministry itself, regardless of external decisions made by political leadership. The Ministry must see itself as relevant to the core issues of Israel’s foreign policy, and not wait for others to confirm its relevance or request its participation.

● Officially, the MFA is responsible for formulating, implementing, and presenting the foreign policy of the Government of Israel. Today, the Ministry deals mostly with public diplomacy and not with policy formulation, and it is only partially involved in policy implementation.

● MFA staff do not fulfill, and perhaps are not even fully aware of, the range of responsibilities and authorities they hold. Reasons include internal fears of engaging on controversial political issues, and attracting criticism or accusations of overstepping.

● The MFA should increase its engagement in policymaking, and proactively provide professional recommendations. If the Ministry takes the initiative to provide quality recommendations on core issues, requests for such material will naturally grow, and the Ministry’s exclusion from core foreign policy issues will decrease.

● Diplomats are supposed to lead negotiations with foreign entities, or at least take part in them. In practice, the MFA is often excluded from such processes. One reason for this is that MFA officials are not sufficiently trained in negotiation. A new department specializing in training diplomats in negotiation should be established within the Ministry.

● The Foreign Minister and senior MFA staff need to routinely appear before the cabinet and present analysis and policy options.

● The Ministry must challenge the view that information coming from military intelligence research bodies is more relevant than content produced by the MFA’s Center for Policy Research. The Head of the Center should publicly present its yearly assessment, as the Head of Military Intelligence regularly does.

● The MFA’s leadership should be restructured: The Director-General should deal with policy issues and operate the Bureau for Policy Planning. The Bureau should report directly to the Director-General and prepare policy options for debate in government or cabinet discussions. The responsibility for internal ministerial matters should be relegated to the Deputy Director-General.

● The Head or Deputy Head of the National Security Council should be required to possess rich foreign policy experience, and potentially even come from the ranks of the Foreign Service.
D. Minimizing the damage from the dispersal the MFA responsibilities

- Since responsibility for the distribution of powers between ministers and ministries is held by the Prime Minister and influenced by political and personal interests, mechanisms should be put in place for oversight to make it harder to disperse MFA responsibilities and to highlight the consequences of doing so.

- There should be alignment between authority and responsibility, in order to prevent instances in which the MFA is held responsible for issues (like countering BDS) when authority for them has been transferred to another ministry.

- The MFA’s areas of responsibility need to be reassessed, even if the result is that certain responsibilities are moved to other ministries or governmental bodies. Such an effort has not been made in many years, and is needed in light of developments in modern diplomacy. The MFA should be empowered and equipped to successfully operate in the fields assigned to it.

- The MFA should be in charge of all foreign policy issues, even those for which day-to-day operations are the responsibility of the Prime Minister or another minister (such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict). Policy planning should be centered at the MFA and should become a more significant component of the Ministry’s function.

- Staff exchanges should be implemented between relevant government ministries and the MFA. This will ensure that diplomatic points of view are represented in other government ministries dealing with issues related to foreign affairs.

- A forum of director generals should be established, consisting of directors from ministries that deal with issues related to foreign affairs and led by the Director-General of the MFA. The forum should function as a non-ministerial diplomatic cabinet that will position the MFA as the leading government entity on foreign affairs and will ease the government’s workload on such issues.

- In accordance with past recommendations, Nativ should be shut down and some of its powers transferred to the MFA. In general, it is advisable that relations with the diaspora not be managed by a government ministry, due to the tendency of such ministries to adopt an instrumental position towards the diaspora.

E. Strengthening the MFA headquarters

- The strength of the MFA headquarters has been diminished by problems related to bureaucracy, budget, human resources, structure and organizational culture. The headquarters should fill a central role in formulating and implementing foreign policy; to succeed, it must be strengthened.

- Additional financial resources should be allocated to the MFA, so that it is able to deepen and broaden its diplomatic work, and resolve the deficit in human resources at headquarters and missions abroad.

- The MFA headquarters should adopt a working model of specialization in specific issues and geographical areas. This model will professionalize the Ministry and
increase its ability to produce significant policy output. The transition towards such a model requires additional personnel and a conceptual shift in the way current personnel are managed.

- The MFA needs to establish routine media briefings for the local and foreign press. These briefings should relate to diplomatic developments and international events. They should also include information on upcoming diplomatic events, meetings and delegations. Such briefings will raise the MFA’s public and policy standing. They will also assist in improving the Ministry’s work, since they will require departments to supply information and assessments on a regular basis and expand cooperation between different units and departments.

- The MFA headquarters and missions abroad need to increase transparency, for example, by publishing detailed work plans – with goals and objectives – at the beginning of every year, as well as content and budget reports at the end of the year. The Knesset needs to take a central role in promoting such transparency in the MFA, and in the Foreign Service in general.

F. Changing the MFA’s organizational culture

- The MFA’s organizational culture encourages conformity, and conservative and reactive behavior. The MFA, as a body responsible for formulating foreign policy, should be characterized by policy pluralism. Diplomats should be encouraged to take more professional initiatives and to exhibit independent thinking, separated as much as possible from political interests or concerns of personal advancement.

- The characteristics of diplomatic work need to be redefined in a way that is more relevant to 21\textsuperscript{st} century foreign policy, and an ethics code – according to which Israeli diplomats will be trained and operate throughout their career – should be drafted by an unaffiliated, professional, interdisciplinary team.

- A policy alternatives department should be established within the MFA and tasked with routinely supplying divergent assessments and recommendations to systematically challenge existing processes and policies. Concurrently, the research and planning units within the Ministry should be strengthened and allowed to distribute their findings to the whole governmental system and not just the MFA.

- It is advisable to update the selection process for the MFA’s cadet course, both with regard to acceptance criteria and to the composition of the selection committee. Define additional, innovative, objective minimum requirements and give them more weight in the selection process. In addition, the selection committee should be diversified so as to include people from outside the MFA to reduce the risk of the system continuously “cloning itself”.

- The evaluation process for serving diplomats can be improved to include an assessment of initiative and creative thinking. Alongside this, a fast-track promotion model for outstanding diplomats is necessary, as an improvement to the existing seniority model. These steps would help counter the socialization phenomena at the MFA, whereby diplomats become increasingly similar to each other over the course of their service despite the growing diversity of their backgrounds.
● It should be possible to hire experts and senior officials from outside the MFA ranks for defined, short-term positions. This would enable the Ministry to enrich its work in core foreign policy issues in which it lacks expertise and personnel.

● Simultaneously, existing employees should be encouraged to take fixed periods of unpaid leave for work in other sectors, or for higher education in relevant fields, without it negatively affecting their chances of promotion within the MFA.

G. Empowering the Knesset on issues of foreign policy

● Parliamentary involvement is important to strengthening the Foreign Service and elevating its importance in the eyes of leaders and the public. Therefore, action should be taken to raise the level of interest and knowledge of Members of Knesset (MKs) in foreign affairs.

● Steps should be taken to establish a separate Foreign Affairs Committee that focuses on promoting debate, distributing knowledge, attracting interest, and initiating research on issues related to foreign affairs. Furthermore, it is worth considering reopening the international wing in the Knesset, which was closed after only a short period of operation.

● Intensified activity by the MFA in the Knesset would elevate the Ministry in the eyes of MKs and empower the Foreign Service. The Ministry must be more efficient in its Knesset activities, and should expand the role of the MFA’s diplomatic advisor to the Knesset. It should identify the needs of MKs and respond to them with relevant material and content, and not only public diplomacy messaging. The result could be weekly briefings, occasional topic-specific briefings, and preparatory briefings to MKs before they take part in delegations abroad and conduct meetings with international counterparts.

● Non-governmental organizations should continue to be permitted to engage in Knesset activities on foreign affairs. The international activities of MKs do not end with representation in forums, delegations, and meetings. MKs also act privately with international partners to advance political goals. This is an important part of parliamentary diplomacy, and it is often possible through opportunities for engagement created by civil society.

● The Knesset Research and Information Center only performs research ordered by MKs, and, as a result, rarely deals with foreign policy issues, which are not high on the agenda of most MKs. A practice should be established whereby every six months the Center approaches the Defense and Foreign Affairs Committee to encourage it to request a study on foreign policy issues, in accordance with the issues it deems important.

● MKs should be encouraged to submit parliamentary questions on foreign policy issues. This is a parliamentary tool that can be used for oversight of foreign policy and the MFA, and it is hardly used as such.
H. Promoting a Foreign Service Bill

- Israeli diplomacy can be empowered through legislation that formalizes the role and status of the MFA. Such legislation could establish a general framework and guiding principles for the Foreign Service, while providing some flexibility for effective implementation.

- In recent decades – including in the current and previous Knesset – there were a number of legislative attempts intended to legally anchor the status of the MFA. All failed, due to political calculations and constellations. The common assumption is that such legislation is not politically feasible in the current Knesset.

- Even if legislation fails, attempts to pass it ignite public debate -- but this is insufficient justification for another serious legislative attempt. Futile attempts at promoting a Foreign Service Bill are best avoided. Once when favorable political circumstances emerge, perhaps after the next elections, should a new effort be established.

- In the meantime, it is best to undergo a preparatory phase in which previous legislative proposals – some of which would have done more harm than good – are assessed, and a suitable draft for a future bill is devised.

- In the absence of a Foreign Service Bill, there is a need to institutionalize the desired working patterns of the Foreign Service through instructions and procedures. There is also a need to create a conceptual document with public validity – ordered by the Knesset or a body within it – regarding the goals, objectives, and guiding principles of Israel's foreign policy.

I. Raising public awareness of the importance of foreign policy

- Public awareness, interest, and understanding of the importance of foreign policy needs to be raised through public action within Israel. This action should highlight the following: foreign relations as a central component of national security; the importance of diplomacy and foreign policy – not just in terms of explaining Israel’s position to the world – but in terms of actually shaping Israel’s place among the nations; and the central role in policymaking that the MFA should assume.

- A mechanism should be established to engage with students at various stages of their education on foreign policy and its importance. It should consist of experts and diplomats who will give lectures throughout Israel, and it should be tasked with promoting formal and informal curricula on diplomacy.

- Former diplomats and foreign policy experts should be encouraged to increase their media visibility. Retired Foreign Service officials are frequently absent from newsrooms and the public sphere, despite their knowledge and experience. Media advisors can assist in changing this, and a database of experts and spokespeople should be created and distributed to written and electronic media outlets.

- Similar to the situations in the United States and in Europe, the importance of think tanks focusing on foreign policy should be recognized. Such institutes are rare in Israel today and they should be encouraged and supported. Their significance is in
their ability to consistently publish articles and policy recommendations on a variety of foreign policy issues which contribute to promoting a more informed public discourse on foreign affairs and better decision-making. Think tanks can also create quantitative measures to assess the status of Israel’s foreign relations.

- Though gathering substantial public support for strengthening Israel’s Foreign Service is difficult at this time, even limited public pressure could be lead to the allocation of more government resources to the MFA. Efforts should be made to create such pressure.