

# The Israeli Governmental Conduct in Advancing Cooperation with Arab States

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## **A. Introduction**

Cooperation can yield stability, continued development and strengthened ties between states. Broad, fruitful Israeli cooperation with Arab states will open many economic, security, intelligence, energy, tourism, and medical opportunities, with the potential for more to come. Therefore, this goal must be identified and pursued. This paper is intended to enrich the theoretical and practical knowledge of Israel's regional cooperation and provide background for understanding and assessing the variety of existing practices that Israel employs, on the governmental level, to advance regional cooperation and implement it. The paper details the various Israeli ministries and agencies tasked with managing and developing cooperation with Arab states, the division of responsibility among them and the practices they employ. It also identifies current opportunities and characterizes the challenges hampering and delaying potential cooperation.

## **B. Government-led regional cooperation practices**

Many Israeli government bodies maintain some ties with other countries in the region. While the government formulates and carries out policy, the Knesset is charged with overseeing its activity and it can contribute to promoting regional cooperation through meetings and participation in international conferences. The following is a review and analysis of the governmental and Knesset bodies engaged in advancing cooperation and of the practices they employ.

### **1. Government Ministries**

#### **A) The Prime Minister's Office**

*The Prime Minister*

Over the past decade, due in part to the continuous weakening of the Foreign Ministry and the Foreign Minister's status, the Prime Minister has served as Israel's de facto minister of foreign affairs. The Prime Minister of Israel is its former representative in the international arena. Israel's foreign policy is derived from the coalition the Prime Minister is leading. This is especially apparent in the case of Prime Minister Netanyahu. Netanyahu runs Israel's foreign relations almost single handedly, especially vis-à-vis Arab states. This allows him to independently advance strategic measures, without the typical consolidated staff work and

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while excluding other government bodies such as the defense and foreign ministries.<sup>1</sup> Netanyahu attributes tremendous importance to meetings and talks with Arab leaders,<sup>2</sup> which he regards as buttressing the strong diplomatic image he nurtures.

Arab and Muslim states recognized the value of the excellent Israel-US partnership and particularly in the past four years the strong relations between PM Netanyahu and President Trump, and came to the realization that warming up to Israel could have a positive impact of their relations with America. Therefore, in some cases the perceptions that “the road to Washington passes through Jerusalem” led Arab nations to warm up to Israel. The apogee of which was the latest normalization agreements signed between Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain.

### *The Prime Minister's personal envoys*

Many Israeli prime ministers have used envoys who enjoyed the trust of both sides to deal personally with strategic issues and advance policy. The work of personal envoys is effective, as they enjoy the trust of the Prime Minister and perceived by the other side as the most credible and direct source to the Prime Minister. However, the position of a personal envoy often lacks transparency and oversight despite its crucial role in shaping Israeli policy and expropriates authority from elected and professional bodies.<sup>3</sup>

### *The National Security Council*

The National Security Council (NSC) was established by law in 2008 as the Prime Minister's and government's staff forum on issues of national security reporting directly to the Prime Minister. The NSC's Middle East Division maintains contacts with various states in the region. Some NSC directors have served as personal prime ministerial envoys in advancing ties with moderate Arab states. Such was the case, for example, in recent US-mediated talks on consolidating ties between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).<sup>4</sup> In accordance with the law, the NSC was supposed to constitute the central staff forum on foreign and defense issues. However, reports by the State Comptroller General, the government watchdog, contend that the NSC had failed to fulfill its designated role. A 2012 report concluded, “On many issues, there is no integrative staff work conducted by a non-operational body that takes into account all the aspects involved in said activity, and therefore the decision making process at the top echelon of the state of Israel, on some essential issues, is not optimal.”<sup>5</sup> There are also many contradictions and overlaps between the activity of the Middle East Division and other government and defense entities.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Noa Landau, “[Netanyahu Says He Kept Top Ministers in the Dark on UAE Deal So They Wouldn't Leak Details](#)”, *Haaretz*, August 17, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> “[PM Netanyahu Meets with Egyptian Pres. Abdel Fattah el-Sisi](#)”, *Prime Minister's Office*, September 27, 2018; Isabel Kershner, “[Israeli Prime Minister Visits Oman, Offering a Possible Back Channel to Iran](#)”, *The New York Times*, October 26, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Herb Keinon, “[Israel's shadow diplomat - Who is Yitzhak Molcho?](#)”, *Jerusalem Post*, November 7, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Dave Lawler, Barak Ravid, “[Israel and UAE discuss anti-Iran cooperation at secret White House meeting](#)”, *Axios*, February 4, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Tal Inbar, “[State Comptroller's Report](#)”, *Israel Defense*, June 13, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> “[Mossad-NSC tensions over managing ties with Arab states](#)”, *Maariv Online*, April 7, 2019 [Hebrew]; “[Netanyahu sought deal with US, Morocco to allow normalization of ties — report](#)”, *Times of Israel*, February 4, 2020.

### *The Mossad*

The Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations (known as the Mossad, Hebrew for “institute”) is tasked with collecting intelligence, researching collected intelligence and conducting special operations beyond the borders of the state. In addition to its intelligence collection roles and covert counter-intelligence operations, it is also in charge of “establishing covert relations with countries that avoid overt contact with Israel.”<sup>7</sup> The Mossad plays a key role in developing and maintaining ties with the states of the Middle East as well as in developments and activities related to the Gulf States and arenas such as North Africa. The Mossad’s cooperation with other states and agencies is tactical in nature and based on specific interests. Its clandestine nature enables cooperation with plausible deniability but also provides for its immediate disruption given changing circumstances. Such relationships are innately less stable than overt ones can be.

Most of the strategic level coordination, discourse and cooperation is currently conducted through the Mossad, although the NSC has a growing foothold in such activity because current agency head Meir Ben-Shabat also serves as the Prime Minister’s personal envoy for advancing cooperation with these states in some cases. Following the 2015 appointment of former NSC director and close Netanyahu associate Yossi Cohen to lead the Mossad, the agency restored its leading role in this aspect.

### **B) The Foreign Ministry**

The Foreign Ministry is tasked with formulating, implementing and explaining the government’s foreign policy. It seeks to ensure the state’s national resilience by continuously expanding and deepening its international ties and ensuring international sympathy for Israel and its positions. The Ministry is tasked with planning, managing and coordinating the activities of 103 diplomatic missions around the world and administering the government’s ties with other states and international organizations in Israel and abroad.

At its disposal are the diplomatic missions and the ambassadors, the Public Diplomacy Directorate which is a leading member of the National Advocacy Center at the Prime Minister’s Office, and the Center for Political Research. However, the definition of its activities as presented on the ministry’s web site<sup>8</sup> describes an ideal somewhat detached from the current state of affairs. In recent years, especially when Benjamin Netanyahu served simultaneously as prime minister and foreign minister from 2015 to 2019, many of the Ministry’s responsibilities were farmed out to other agencies – whether other ministries or the head of the Mossad – and it was excluded from important decisions.<sup>9</sup> In recent years, the Ministry has launched accelerated public diplomacy activity and promotion of cooperation through social media.

#### *Diplomatic missions’ activity*

The Foreign Ministry is tasked with maintaining, staffing and administering the two Israeli embassies in Arab states with which Israel has formal diplomatic ties – Egypt and Jordan. However, the role of the Israeli ambassadors in these two countries is largely symbolic, their work hampered by the anti-normalization movement. The more significant ties are

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<sup>7</sup> From the “[About Us](#)” page of the Mossad internet site.

<sup>8</sup> [The Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#)

<sup>9</sup> Itamar Eichner, “[Mossad chief edging out Foreign Ministry, diplomats say](#)”, *Ynet*, July 5, 2019.

conducted through the states' security agencies. While the Foreign Ministry warns against the militarization of Israel's ties with Egypt and Jordan, the Prime Minister keeps handing over responsibilities for the contacts with these states to his NSC or Mossad envoys. Israel maintained missions in other Arab countries in the past, such as a trade office in Doha, which was shut down during Operation Cast Lead,<sup>10</sup> and a liaison office in Rabat, Morocco, which was closed with the outbreak of the second intifada.<sup>11</sup>

### *Informal ties with Arab states*

Not all Foreign Ministry activity in advancing regional cooperation is conducted through public channels. For example, between 2013 and 2014, Israel opened a "Gulf representative office" in a Gulf state capital. Members of the small Israeli team carried foreign passports and did not identify themselves publicly as Israelis. These representatives operated only in countries that invited them to come and expressed an interest in specific cooperative ventures with Israel. This office promoted Israeli business, helped Israelis participate in international conferences held in those countries and tried to advance diplomatic interests mostly related to the issue of radical Islam and Iran's growing power.

The Foreign Ministry hosts delegations of senior representatives from states with which Israel does not have diplomatic ties and sets up meetings, mostly in secret, between them and Israeli decision makers. This practice has increased in recent years, but the ties with these states are clearly being developed primarily by the Prime Minister's envoys, NSC officials and the Mossad. The Foreign Ministry often encounters problems in obtaining visas for its Arab guests because decisions on such matters rest with the Interior Ministry, an agency that relies on the recommendations of the Shin Bet security agency.

### *The economic channel*

In order to promote trade, the Foreign Ministry works in tandem with the Israel Export Institute and with the Defense Ministry's Defense Exports Control Agency. Defense agencies have separate channels and they do not necessarily notify the Foreign Ministry about all their activities. While the Foreign Ministry updates the Mossad on such developments, the Mossad does not reciprocate. On the other hand, representatives of Israel's military and aircraft industries occasionally directly seek the Foreign Ministry's help. The Ministry also holds workshops and seminars for business people seeking to promote themselves in the Gulf region.

### *Virtual diplomacy*

The Foreign Ministry has launched several Arabic-language web pages in recent years. The "Israel in Arabic" page has some 1.9 million followers as of May 2020, some from states hostile to Israel, with many expressing a desire to visit Israel. A 10-member team produces the contents of two Arabic-language web pages, Twitter and Instagram accounts and a YouTube channel. These platforms draw some 10 million viewers and followers from around the region every week. Many of the video clips posted on them have gone viral. The department for Arab-language digital diplomacy is the second largest in the Foreign Ministry

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<sup>10</sup> Barak Ravid, "[Israel Rejects Qatar Bid to Restore Diplomatic Ties](#)", *Haaretz*, May 18, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Tomer Shadmi and Ali Waqed, "[Long-standing ties with Morocco severed in phone call](#)", *Ynet*, October 24, 2000 [Hebrew].

and it focuses on presenting life and culture in Israel, sidestepping politics and issues related to the occupation and the Palestinians.

### *Mashav – Israel's Agency for International Development Cooperation*

Mashav, Israel's national foreign aid agency, is tasked with formulating, leading and implementing the state of Israel's foreign aid policy. Mashav has run agricultural and development programs in Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinian territories at various times, as well as projects in other Arab countries. Israel currently invests much less in foreign aid than it did in previous years.<sup>12</sup> The limited budget hampers the state's ability to leverage its investments in destination countries to promote its economic and diplomatic interests as well as its image.

### **C) The Defense Ministry**

The Ministry of Defense has a relative advantage over other government ministries and agencies in terms of resources and ability to exploit them rapidly for the sake of security cooperation. The Defense Minister enjoys significant influence in promoting regional cooperation since he can mobilize the military, security agencies, defense industries and his political power to that end. However, the Defense Minister's power has been eroded recently compared to that of the Prime Minister, who leads policy, which is often in contradiction with the views of the Defense Minister. The Defense Ministry took over the handling of ties with many African states in the past, arguing that most were security-related, generating tension with the Foreign Ministry that continues to this day. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and defense trade departments operating under the Defense Ministry are the most significant agencies involved in regional cooperation.

#### *The IDF*

The IDF has a significant role in Israel's cooperation with the states of the Middle East. It operates under the purview of the Defense Ministry and in cooperation with it, leveraging its reputation for technological and intelligence capacity and its ability to maintain discreet relations. The IDF's Planning Directorate is the key agency tasked with managing these ties. Since the military in many Middle Eastern Countries holds substantial sway in the government and the turnover among top officers is low, relationships that develop with them are often long term, making them especially valuable.

Over the years, Israeli military officials have forged steady and robust relationships with Jordanian<sup>13</sup> and Egyptian counterparts, managing to maintain stability despite the regional upheavals generated by the Arab Spring and other changes, and even as political and economic ties were chilly at best. The Shin Bet also has a role in inter-state relations, as was evident when agency Chief Nadav Argaman was dispatched to Jordan to help resolve the crisis prompted by an incident involving a shooting by an Israeli embassy guard.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> ["Regulation of Foreign Aid: Israel"](#), Library of Congress.

<sup>13</sup> ["Israel, Jordan fighter pilots flew together in recent US exercise"](#), *i24News*, November 4, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Barak Ravid, ["Israeli Security Chief Visits Jordan in Bid to Solve Embassy Crisis"](#), *Haaretz*, July 24, 2017.



Another practice employed by the IDF which contributes to advancing regional cooperation beyond Jordan and Egypt is participation in joint multilateral military exercises. One reported example involves joint Israel Air Force drills with the UAE's air force.<sup>15</sup>

#### *Defense trade and defense industries*

Several Defense Ministry agencies are charged with defense-related export and import ties, among them the Defense Export Control Agency (DECA) and the International Defense Cooperation Directorate (SIBAT), operating vis-à-vis defense exporters and the defense industries. IMI Systems, previously named Israel Military Industries, also plays a significant role in advancing cooperation with the Arab world, which seeks to acquire the technological and intelligence capabilities it develops.<sup>16</sup>

#### **D) The Ministry of Regional Cooperation**

In recent years, the declared goal of the Ministry of Regional Cooperation was to strengthen Israel's economic and cultural relations with states in the Middle East, by advancing economic ties and collaborating on infrastructure, agricultural, emergency response as well as people-to-people projects. In practice, the Ministry's influence was minor due to the absence of government support to tailwind its activity. Over the years, hundreds of projects have been suggested, none of which were implemented, and the Ministry works almost solely on projects with Jordan and the Palestinian Authority. The Ministry is also dealing with a growing anti-normalization challenge through involving third parties and conducting its projects far from the spotlight.

The Ministry is engaged in two major initiatives with Jordan – the Jordan Gateway and the Red Sea-Dead Sea (Red-Dead) project. Although the agreements to move forward with the Red-Dead Canal were signed in 2013 and 2015 and a tender was issued calling for contractor bids, the project is stuck due to governmental and public opposition. The project has a Joint Administration Body composed of five representatives from each state (Israel's representatives are from the Ministry of Regional Cooperation, the Finance Ministry, the Water Authority, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Foreign Ministry) chaired by the Ministry of Regional Cooperation. All decisions must be adopted by consensus. There is also a broader administrative body made up of representatives of Israel Customs, security agencies, the IDF, the NSC, the Ministry of Economy, the Environmental Protection Ministry and the Interior Ministry, who discuss and promote Israel's position. The body meets once a quarter, or more often if necessary. The partners on the Jordanian side are from the Foreign Ministry and the Ministry of Water and Irrigation. The Jordan Gateway project for the establishment of a shared industrial zone is also stuck, mostly because the Israeli government has failed to budget it.

The Ministry also seeks to promote people-to-people events through the private and civil society sectors. Despite the distinct potential for economic profit, economic activity encounters difficulties in operation. The Ministry initiates additional activity through calls for

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<sup>15</sup> Gili Cohen. "[Israeli Air Force Holds Joint Exercise With United Arab Emirates, U.S. and Italy](#)", *Haaretz*, March 29, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Yahel Arnon, Yoel Guzansky, "[A Conventional Arms Race](#)", *INSS Insight* No. 1074, July 11, 2018; Yoel Guzansky, "[The Gulf States in a Changing Strategic Environment](#)," *Institute for National Security Studies (INSS)*, Memo 116, p. 120, April 2012 [Hebrew].

project suggestions with NGOs it supports. The activity through the non-profits is relatively new and its influence is still unclear.

The Ministry of Regional Cooperation is weak in terms of its influence compared to other agencies and ministries operating in the same field, such as the Finance Ministry, the Civil Administration, the Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) and other security agencies. Its ties with the Foreign Ministry are not very successful either, with some arguing that the Foreign Ministry thinks the Regional Cooperation Ministry should be incorporated into the ministry as a department under its purview. Even those who agree with this view fear that if that happens, regional cooperation projects will be buried in the Ministry's bureaucracy and budget deficits.

### **E) The Ministry of Intelligence**

The Ministry of Intelligence was established under a 2009 government resolution to “oversee policies pertaining to the operation of the intelligence organizations”.<sup>17</sup>

The Ministry has statutory tasks but none of the state's intelligence agencies are subordinate to it. Nonetheless, the entire intelligence community is in contact with the Ministry, mostly through the “Line of Horizon” forum, which is charged with “scanning the horizon” for global and regional trends, identifying them and providing advanced warning about those that have a high likelihood of impacting Israel.<sup>18</sup>

The ongoing ties with the NSC and intelligence community purportedly provide the Ministry with broad access to promoting regional cooperation. Each of the four ministers who has held this office approached the task somewhat differently. The first two Intelligence Ministers Dan Meridor and Yuval Steinitz underscored security-intelligence issues and focused on ties with Western intelligence agencies while the last one to hold the office before Eli Cohen, Israel Katz, led several projects, two of which required broad cooperation with Middle Eastern states and with which the public is familiar: the artificial island off the coast of the Gaza Strip and the “Tracks for Regional Peace” project to build a regional rail network extending from the Haifa port to the Persian Gulf.

The artificial island project requires massive outlays and the Ministry tried to forge cooperation, mostly with Gulf investors to raise capital. Katz presented the rail project at a transportation conference in Oman in 2017 and envoys on his behalf met with Arab figures from the fields of transportation, diplomacy and the economy to present the vision and its proposed implementation. Israel's cabinet approved the rail project, but not the Gaza island. The ongoing deterioration in Israel's relations with Jordan is one of the main obstacles to progress on the rail project.

### **F) The Ministry of Economy and Industry**

The Ministry of Economy has an important role to play regarding trade with states in the region. Although Israel does not maintain ties with all Arab states in the region, it does maintain trade ties with most, barring its three enemy states with which cooperation is banned by Israeli law – Iran, Syria and Lebanon (Iraq is also on the list but is excluded for

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<sup>17</sup> From the [About page](#) of the Ministry of Intelligence

<sup>18</sup> [Interview with Ministry Director Hagai Tzurial](#), Civil Service Commission, October 10, 2019.

under a temporary but reoccurring order).<sup>19</sup> The Minister of Economy is authorized to expand the ordinance that allows imports from states with which Israel does not maintain diplomatic relations. Nonetheless, the volume of trade with the states of the region is incommensurate with its potential. Most imports and exports are conducted under the radar and therefore no exact trade figures are available. Israel has free trade agreements with Jordan and Egypt, but the trade with Jordan remains minimal and the Egyptian side is not keen on trade cooperation.

The Ministry itself, however, does not develop cooperation independently with functions in Arab states. It is the executer of agreements made by other government agencies. A significant segment of such inter-state activity is conducted by Israeli companies that have foreign partners or that are registered abroad. There are also companies specializing in “political documents” that enable products to be sold to Arab states after the label of origin has been erased.<sup>20</sup> This process is expensive and complex, and not every company is able or willing to adopt it.

### **G) The Ministry of Energy**

The Ministry of Energy is responsible for leading and implementing three key cooperative ventures with the states of the Middle East: natural gas exports to Jordan, natural gas exports to Egypt, and Israel’s membership in the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), which also includes Egypt, Italy, Greece, Cyprus, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority. France had requested to join the forum, and the United States has become a permanent observer. The forum was created to serve as a platform for cooperation in developing natural gas reserves in the Mediterranean region. The Ministry’s representatives were joined in negotiations on the agreement mostly by officials from the Foreign Ministry and the Prime Minister’s Office. The Forum meets on three levels: Ministerial (the energy ministers of each country), professional-administrative (director generals of ministries or their representatives) and private sector. As with other fields, the activity within the framework of companies and international organizations facilitates ties with the Arab side for deals with Israel.

In October 2020, the CEO of the Ministry of Energy lead the Israeli delegation to the negotiation with Lebanon over the maritime border between the states.<sup>21</sup> This represents the growing weight assigned to the energy Ministry in dealing with Israel’s foreign affairs, specifically in the region.

## **2. The Knesset**

The task of the legislative branch is to monitor and supervise the work of the government. In the context of this paper, its task is to monitor and oversee the promotion of cooperation with states of the region. The main oversight tools are in the hands of the Knesset’s relevant committees – the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee and its various subcommittees, the State Control Committee and the Special Committee for the Transparency and

<sup>19</sup> [“Trading with the Enemy Ordinance, 1939”](#), Adalah website; [“Israel lifts ban on trade with Iraq”](#), Middle East Monitor, May 28, 2019.

<sup>20</sup> Shuki Sadeh, [“The Badly Kept Secret of Israel’s Trade Throughout the Muslim World”](#), *Haaretz*, January 19, 2012.

<sup>21</sup> Ben Hubbard, [“Israel and Lebanon Begin Talks on Sea Border, With U.S. as Mediator”](#), *The New York Times*, October 14, 2020,



Accessibility of Government Information, among others. Nonetheless, the Knesset also has an independent role in this regard both through its research center and as a sovereign entity maintaining ties with other parliaments around the world, hosting delegations and sending Knesset members to participate in international and regional conferences. Knesset members are entitled to form caucuses and lobbies devoted to specific issues, and over the years such groups have worked to improve ties with the states of the region and promote cooperation with them.

Knesset promotion of regional cooperation is limited these days in the absence of policy on advancing relationships with the states of the region and scant committee oversight in this regard. In fact, most of the discussions and meetings with visitors from states in the region stem from personal initiatives of lawmakers or of organizations dedicated to promoting regional peace.

### **A) The Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee**

Unlike many other parliaments that have two distinct committees, with one dealing with foreign affairs and the other with defense issues, in the Knesset the two are intertwined. The Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee consistently prioritizes security and defense issues at the expense of foreign policy ones, however. In the four-year term of the 20<sup>th</sup> Knesset, not a single debate was held in the committee plenary on ties with the Gulf States, although Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Netanyahu periodically underscored their importance in his briefings to the committee.

Activity of the Subcommittee on Foreign Affairs depends entirely on its chairperson. The subcommittee has also held few meetings on regional cooperation in recent years, with the participation of a handful of lawmakers and experts. Such discussions are mostly prompted by crisis situations. Not a single debate was devoted to the issue of Israel's future relations with these states in an effort to examine government policy and other channels of cooperation.

One can say that the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee did nothing in recent years to advance regional cooperation. It also abstained from any oversight of government action in this regard and in fact, took all its cues from the government.

### **B) Parliamentary friendship groups**

A parliamentary friendship group consists of lawmakers seeking to forge ties with foreign parliaments and like-minded groups in the parliaments of other nations. They operate through the Knesset Department of Foreign Affairs. Israel maintains ties with inter-parliamentary groups in some 80 countries, but there is not a single one with Arab states, mainly because of the reciprocity principle. A parliamentary friendship group cannot operate without a parallel group in another legislature. In general, the boycotts espoused by many Arab parliaments prevent ties between Israeli lawmakers and their counterparts in the Arab world, including parliamentary friendship groups.

### **C) Individual Knesset member activity**

Knesset members meet, sometimes secretly, with many visitors from states of the region. Such meetings and talks have significant value in forging personal ties and building bridges

that eventually lead to significant ties between states. Even the very meetings themselves convey an important message, although most are held far from the public eye in order to protect the other side.

Contacts between lawmakers and visitors from Arab and Muslim states are generally arranged by the Foreign Ministry, and sometimes by other entities such as research institutes. During the 20<sup>th</sup> Knesset, Iraqi parliament members and Syrian opposition figures secretly visited the Israeli legislature and several meetings were conducted with senior lawmakers from Saudi Arabia and Gulf States. In fact, in recent years, Israeli legislators have met with far more parliament members from Arab and Muslim states with which Israel does not have diplomatic relations than they did with their counterparts from Egypt and Jordan.

#### **D) Official Knesset visits and meetings with the Speaker**

Formal visits by heads of state and parliamentary delegations are of great public value, testifying to continuous and open ties between states. Given the hostility displayed toward Israel in the Jordanian parliament and the great concern of Egyptian lawmakers about displays of normalization with Israel, such visits do not take place. In recent years no ministers or parliament members from these two major Arab states have visited the Knesset. Other states in the region also prefer to avoid sending senior representatives to the Israeli parliament.

#### **E) Membership in international organizations**

Knesset members often represent Israel at conferences of international organizations, such as the Parliamentary Assembly of the Union for the Mediterranean (PA-UFM), the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean (PAM) and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) consisting of all the parliaments of the Middle East. These frameworks create a rare opportunity for Israeli lawmakers to meet colleagues from Arab states, exchange views, argue and identify common denominators that could advance cooperation in the region. The Knesset Department of Foreign Affairs briefs members before they head for such meetings but often focuses more on preparing them to defend Israel's reputation than on identifying channels for cooperation. Occasionally attempts are made to promote cooperation, but plans generally fizzle out following initial meetings, probably due to lack of coordination between the Knesset members and the government and the absence of a guiding hand to link together the different pieces of the puzzle.

### **C. Discussion and Summary**

Several insights can be gleaned regarding the nature of the cooperation that Israel's executive and legislative branches maintain with the states of the Middle East. This section will first list the key factors enabling Israel to maintain cooperation in the Middle East and then present conclusions about the strengths and challenges of Israel's practices in leveraging opportunities for cooperation.

#### **1. Structural factors and practices facilitating regional cooperation**

*Unique geopolitical situation, Iran as a common enemy*

Israel enjoys a warming of relations with several countries in the Middle East in the wake of the rising threat of common enemies, mostly Iran and radical Islam, and a congruence of interests in response. The potential for cooperation in the region is enormous in economic, security, diplomatic and cultural fields.

### *The road to Washington goes through Jerusalem*

Beyond the interest of Middle Eastern states in Israeli defense technology and intelligence, most have realized that a key conduit for US support and aid passes through Jerusalem. What is more, the US is assiduous in coordinating its arms sales to Arab states with Israel based on its commitment to maintain Israel's Qualitative Military Edge (QME). This was evidenced when ties being forged with the UAE were established, as the US asked Israel for its blessing prior to the US sale of F-35 stealth combat jets to the Emirates.<sup>22</sup>

### *Inherently covert ties conducted by security agencies*

The Defense Ministry, IDF, Mossad and NSC, as well as additional defense agencies, are the key Israeli bodies to have successfully forged and maintained relationships and cooperation in the Middle East. Many current and former officials who interviewed for this research testified that the security, military and intelligence relations with the security apparatus in Arab states are strong and stable. The success of these relations are largely due to their ability to operate covertly, an ability desired by the other side. Security cooperation has growth potential and presents Israel with an opportunity to deepen its inroads into the Middle East. However, the security agencies in themselves cannot leverage these relationships for change in other fields, especially in the diplomatic arena.

### *Cooperation under international umbrellas*

The concrete, immediate potential lies in international multilateral cooperation, which provides states that do not maintain formal ties with Israel with a framework for cooperation under an international umbrella and gives them an "excuse" of sorts for open ties with Israel. Such activity is also usually accompanied by international economic aid.

### *Immediate security or economic benefit*

Immediate security or economic benefits, backed by agreements and actions of the Israeli government, yield relative achievements for both sides. The Qualifying Industrial Zone (QIZ) with Egypt and Jordan are a good example of this. The benefits create a mutual dependence that makes it hard to undo partnerships or erode them. Israel has broad expertise in many areas which the Arab world can benefit from beyond defense technologies and weapons, and it can use this to advance cooperation.

## **2. Challenges to Israeli regional cooperation practices**

In recent years, due to increase in regional conflicts, the weakening of the "nation state" concept in the region, the rise of radical Islam and the Iranian threat, the Palestinian cause have lost much of its prominence. Yet, despite all of the above and the progress with the UAE and Bahrain, the lack of progress towards resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

<sup>22</sup> Thom Shanker, "[U.S. Arms Deal With Israel and 2 Arab Nations Is Near](#)", *The New York Times*, April 18, 2013.

continues to hamper regional cooperation with Arab countries. However, this review has also identified weaknesses in the manner in which Israel operates which pose substantive challenges to development and bolstering cooperation.

#### *Absence of an integrating body and unclear division of labor*

The division of labor and responsibilities among the various government bodies and security agencies working to advance regional cooperation is vague and unclear. It relies largely on the identity of a handful of office holders which generates unnecessary turf wars and competition. The epitome of this nebulous structure is that the NSC, a strategic body, is in competition with the Mossad, an intelligence agency. Other players in the arena, including the Prime Minister's envoys, the Shin Bet, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other ministries involved in various aspects of regional cooperation do not coordinate effectively. Furthermore, there is no one body in charge of integrating and synchronizing Israel's efforts for regional cooperation. The result is the absence of a coherent Israeli strategy to guide the aforementioned ministries and agencies. There is a need to designate "responsible adult" to oversee the Israeli relations with Arab states – whether Israel has or does not have formal relations with – in a holistic and systematic way; that will encompass all the information coming from the different sources, analyze the challenges and understand policies succeed and when there is a need for a policy shift. This is one of the reasons that in some cases (most notable with Jordan) Israel was unable to leverage its productive security cooperation to reach cooperation in diplomatic, economic or civilian areas.

#### *A weakened and excluded Foreign Ministry*

Although the extent of the Foreign Ministry's activity in the Middle East is broad and complex, the Ministry is still weak and excluded from many processes. While the security and intelligence communities receive the tools and authority needed to advance their policies, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs suffers from repeated cuts to its budget and area of responsibility. Other ministries and security agencies often do not share vital information with their diplomatic counterparts. Other countries may realize this weakness and prefer to conduct ties with stronger, more influential government bodies.

#### *Challenges in relying on personal envoys*

Over the past decade, Netanyahu's envoys have conducted direct ties with leaders and key figures in a number of Arab states. A personal envoy has the distinct advantage of faithfully representing the Prime Minister's position and therefore enjoys reciprocated trust. Such envoys are sometimes senior officials but most are associates of the prime minister who are not officially a part of the government. That prevents public scrutiny and oversight by the Knesset over individuals who, despite not holding a formal role, are given great responsibility.

#### *Security bureaucracy*

There is a growing number of economic, civilian and diplomatic entities and individuals in the Middle East that are interested in cooperation with Israel in various fields. Often Israeli security agencies are slow to examine these opportunities in depth, posing bureaucratic obstacles that eventually prevent realization of the potential for cooperation. That is apparent particularly in the case of the approval process for people from the region to enter into Israel.

This approval process is long and bureaucratic and involves the consent of the Ministry of Interior, the Shin Beit, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Even after the approval is given the visitor might face fierce interrogation in Ben-Gurion Airport, which could be unwelcoming and discourage from pursuing cooperation with Israel. There is a need for a fast track mechanism that will make this process more efficient.

#### *Limited ability to leverage security cooperation*

The covert nature of Israel's security and intelligence ties in the region largely exempts them from public oversight and related political and social pressure. However, this advantage is also a drawback. Because of their secretive nature, security and intelligence ties are hardly ever transmuted into cooperation in other fields if not accompanied by additional reach out and strategy and therefore do not necessarily strengthen cooperation between Israel and Arab states.

#### *Knesset weakness in leading regional cooperation and overseeing government activity*

The Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee rarely conducts debates on significant developments in regional cooperation, and the lack of a clear distinction between "foreign" and "security" affairs undermines in-depth discussion of regional issues that are not of a security-related nature. In addition, there is scarcely any follow-up and continuity to activities by lawmakers representing the Knesset in international conferences or promoting regional cooperation.

#### *Opportunities*

Along with all the above-mentioned challenges, Israel has opportunities to leverage existing cooperation and create new cooperation, especially given the global economic crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic is intensifying regional processes that create opportunities for cooperation, and the installation of the 35<sup>th</sup> government in Israel raises hopes of renewed and improved practices that Israel could employ to develop and advance regional cooperation, as economic recovery and increased employment are at the top of the Arab world's and Israel's agenda these days.

Israel, for its part, has much to offer the regional economy in terms of tourism, energy, water, agriculture and, of course, medicine and healthcare. Opportunities have also presented themselves for joint action on controlling the epidemic and confronting natural disasters and other emergencies.

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This document presented recommendations for improving the Israeli government's regional cooperation practices. It is important to realize that the opportunities available to Israel at any given moment could disappear in an instant as a result of one event or misstep – for example, Israeli annexation, the collapse of the Palestinian Authority, a regional conflict or a regime change in Iran. Israel should therefore act now to take advantage of current opportunities to become an integral part of its neighborhood. Israel can and should build bridges so that it is less isolated in the Middle East. To that end, progress on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process is essential. In the meantime, however, Israel can and should undertake improved and increasingly coordinated, effective, creative and monitored governmental action to lay foundations for normal relations with its Arab neighbors.