

## How to Improve Israel's Regional Foreign Policies?

### *Summary of the Mitvim Institute's Pre-Election Conference*

March 2021

Ahead of the general elections, the Mitvim Institute held a conference on March 9, 2021, which assessed Israel's current foreign policy and presented goals and directions for future action. The discussion focused on ways to empower Israel's Foreign Service, promote Israeli-Palestinian peace, and advance Israel's relations in the Middle East, Europe and the Mediterranean. Speakers included Emilie Moatti from Labor, MK Nitzan Horowitz, Chair of Meretz, MK Orna Barbivai from Yesh Atid, Dani Dayan from Tikva Hadasha (New Hope), and MK Aida Touma-Suleiman from the Joint List. The event was moderated by Dr. Nimrod Goren and Dr. Roei Kibrik from the Mitvim Institute, and this document includes its key points.

#### **Emilie Moatti, Labor:**

Since Rabin's assassination, the leadership of the Israeli left has internalized its own delegitimization perpetuated by the right, and it has tended to seek confirmation of its positions from the right-wing mainstream. People with liberal views generally refrained from expressing unpopular positions, and this has prevented the left's leadership from speaking out on the Palestinian issue, despite the fact that the majority of the Israeli public supports negotiations and the two-state solution. Despite the delegitimization against the left, the majority of Israelis still believe that peace is the correct path and that conflicts are not resolved by war.



The pursuit of a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is first and foremost an Israeli interest, which concurrently pursues justice for the aspirations of our Palestinian neighbors. This is important both strategically and morally. The right's claim that the Palestinian issue can be ignored is childish and dangerous, despite the Abraham Accords. Even if Arab countries let go of the Palestinian issue, we must not do so. Labor has a clear interest in turning every stone to find a solution to the conflict, based on separation and the 1967 borders, to promote a vision of a secure Israel.

Labor has never abandoned the quest for a diplomatic solution to the conflict, and our entire list is in sync and share the same vision. In the next government, which hopefully will be an alternative to Netanyahu's rule, Labor will lead a return to negotiations. Today there is not much cooperation with Jordan and Egypt, hence we will cultivate our peace

with them, especially economically and culturally, as even a cold peace needs a nurturing hand and a caring shoulder.

We should stop claiming that the whole world is against us and that Israel's existence is in doubt. It is in Netanyahu's interest that we feel persecuted, but in practice, Israel is a significant player in the international arena and cooperates with many countries. Israel's global reach should be expanded, but without aligning with non-liberal leaderships, such as Brazil, Poland, and Trump. The Americans were able to say goodbye to a populist president, who was bad for both them and us.

The powers of Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) have been dispersed to countless other ministries, and in recent years more and more professional diplomats left the ministry. This requires change. Professional diplomats should be preferred over political appointees, especially in major capitals around the world. Israel's diplomats should represent the country, regardless of the political identity of the foreign minister, and feel part of an influential and meaningful Foreign Service.

### **MK Nitzan Horowitz, Chair of Meretz:**

The Israeli MFA is very weak as its powers have been stripped away for many years to form new, unnecessary ministries. This has ultimately harmed Israeli interests. The MFA has the knowledge and experience to lead Israeli diplomacy, and it needs to be strengthened. This can be done by passing the Foreign Service Act, which will solidify the status of the MFA and will prevent any political whim to weaken it. Israel's foreign relations must highlight democracy and human rights. Israel must be on the side of democracy, as democracies around the world are deteriorating. Israel should not prefer countries that erode democracy, as Netanyahu does.



The Israeli-Palestinian issue is very relevant and the recent decision by the International Criminal Court's (ICC) shows how crucial solving the conflict is for Israel's future. Meretz opposes the prosecution of Israeli soldiers and we are in favor of Israel and Israelis, but it is the right-wing government's policy that drags Israel to the ICC. It is impossible to control millions of Palestinians, deny them basic rights, reject any international involvement, and then say that anyone who criticizes Israel is anti-Semitic and an enemy of Israel. Israel has a responsibility. We must take our destiny into our own hands and make a change in Israel's policy that works towards solving the conflict. This will resolve the issue of the ICC.

The Israeli-Palestinian peace process is frozen and the situation on the ground is getting worse. We need to return to dialogue and negotiations, and leverage the renewed American support for a two-state solution under President Biden. The two-state solution will lead to breakthroughs in Israel's relations with other actors, including in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean. This is in Israel's best interest. To realize and maximize the potential of normalization with Arab countries, we must concurrently move forward with the Palestinians. As long as there is a stalemate in the peace process, relations with the region will remain limited.

The situation in the Gaza Strip is severe. It is in our interest to allow the Gaza Strip to be developed and promote political unity between Gaza and the West Bank, under the Palestinian Authority's rule. The Palestinian Authority is an ally of Israel and anyone who says that Palestinian President Abbas is a terrorist is detached from reality. The Israeli right has not repealed the Oslo Accords, which it likes to slander, because the accords serve Israel. It would be good if there were elections in the Palestinian Authority and if a democratic society prevails there. Palestinians living in East Jerusalem should also participate in the elections if they wish to, and the decision as to which parties will participate and in what way is an internal Palestinian matter.

The EU is a friend of Israel and is enormously important to Israel, also because of its commitment to democracy. The political right's claim that the EU is hostile to us and persecutes us, just because it criticizes the settlements, is simply not true. The EU is a strong ally, and relations between Israel and European countries, such as France and Germany, are a tremendous asset to Israel.

### **MK Orna Barbivai, Yesh Atid:**

The MFA is significant to Israel's national security, as diplomacy is a strategic tool for maximizing Israel's qualitative edge. Our national resilience lies not only in security, but also in foreign affairs. The erosion of Israel's democracy also affects our diplomacy, as the latter has become synonymous with populism because of one man's monopoly to determine with whom we build relations and with whom we destroy. Legislation is needed to regulate the status of the MFA and give it more legitimacy to influence policy.



Israel must strive for normalization and peace. Israel's power, which occasionally needs to be demonstrated, is meant to be used to achieve peace with our neighbors. The discourse on peace and the two-state solution must be returned to the agenda. The normalization agreements with Arab states must be leveraged in favor of promoting dialogue with the Palestinians. Leadership is the ability to analyze risks and identify potential collaborations.

I welcome the normalization agreements, but they lacked transparency, which is not how foreign relations should be conducted. The accords were brought to the Knesset's approval before Members of Knesset even knew what they included. The Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee needs to deal more with foreign affairs. The parliaments of many countries separate between security and foreign issues, and Israel should take a similar approach to increase the importance of foreign affairs.

In my opinion, the ICC's investigation has no legitimacy. Israel does not, in any way, commit war crimes. It makes a great effort to distinguish between combatants and non-combatants. Every effort should be made to repel the investigation, beginning with leading a transparent procedure that will legitimize the Israeli position.

The EU is a friend of Israel and it preserves Israel's interests. One-third of Israel's trade is with the EU. We need to improve our dialogue with the EU, and advancing these ties should be defined as a policy objective. There are many differences of opinion between

Israel and the EU, including on the lack of European condemnation of the BDS movement, which require change. But in order to bring change there is no escape from having a dialogue with Europe and promoting cooperation with it. A different approach is harmful to Israel and reinforces negative perceptions of Israel.

The Iranian threat is vital and Israel's deterrence is an important tool for dealing with it. Iran is making a great effort to harm us. It should be shown to Iran that it is not worth provoking Israel. Israel must be involved in formulating the new nuclear agreement and ensure that the agreement addresses its interests. This requires a well-oiled decision-making system that is not based solely on Netanyahu's interests. We will also have to work hard to rebuild the bridges Netanyahu burnt and the damage he has done to Israel's relations with the Democratic Party.

### **Dani Dayan, Tikva Hadasha:**

Netanyahu clipped the MFA's wings due to a fundamentally wrong assumption that the ministry serves a political agenda. When I was appointed by Netanyahu to serve as the Israeli Consul-General in New York, I found a financially depleted ministry with very professional and stately staff. Crucial information should not be hidden from the MFA, which must also be empowered by abolishing unnecessary ministries.



It is blatantly irresponsible and inconceivable to me that we have a part-time ambassador in Washington DC, who simultaneously acts as Israel's ambassador to the UN. It is an impossible task for one person and disrespectful to both the US and the UN. It is another symptom of a political system that has a state, and not a state that has a political system.

During my tenure in New York, I felt that Netanyahu did not back me on the three issues I devoted most of my time to, and which in my view were the most important to Israel's foreign policy: (1) the need to maintain bipartisan support in the US. The spirit coming out of Netanyahu's office, and of our embassy in Washington DC, was one of complete identification with a single party, not just with their president. Many ties were severed, and unnecessary rivalries were created; (2) We greatly missed an opportunity to address minorities in the US. We demand that the Americans understand us, but we did not make an effort to understand the Democratic Party. This requires a comprehension of the African-American narrative and the issue of immigration. If we continue this path, we will lose the Democratic Party; (3) We neglected the Jewish community and acted indifferently, or even worse, towards them. For five years, there has been no meeting between Netanyahu and the president of the US Reform Movement. Gideon Sa'ar [the chair of Tikva Hadasha] will take a fundamentally different approach and will welcome all Jews with open arms.

We do not see eye-to-eye with the Biden administration regarding the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Most of the disagreements revolve around the settlement issue, but it is still important to maintain a dialogue with the administration. The Biden Administration is the friendliest Democratic administration we could expect, and it will not force us and the Palestinians into a peace process. Everyone realizes an agreement is not feasible at the moment. On the Iranian issue as well, we can reach a



fruitful dialogue with the White House. The administration wants to return to the nuclear deal. Dialogue with the administration can influence the way things are done, and perhaps it could even prevent a return to the nuclear agreement altogether.

Lastly, I am glad that we have recently forged diplomatic relations with three countries in Latin America, with which we have not had diplomatic relations before. I believe that we should now try to renew relations with Cuba as well.

### **MK Aida Touma-Suleiman, Joint List:**

Israel does not conduct its foreign relations as a state of nine million people, but as a superpower because of its relationship with the US, which also affects other regional states' foreign policy towards it. Israel will not integrate into the Middle East as long as the occupation continues. The prolong occupation impacts Israel domestically and diplomatically, especially with Europe, the US, international bodies, and the Middle East. If Israel is interested in normalizing its foreign relations, it must end the occupation and treat its Arab minority equitably. Thereafter, Israel will be better accepted in the world.



The Joint List's attempt to explain to the world what is happening in Israel from our experience, as those who are fighting the occupation, is often considered in Israel as sabotaging its foreign affairs. In fact, the Israeli government wants to hide what is happening in Israel. When this is revealed to the outside world, it is considered sabotaging and a crime according to Israeli law. Only countries that have something to hide legislate such laws. Israel must not base its international relations on lies and lack of transparency.

We are asked "why have you not joined Israel's Foreign Service?" First of all, until recently there was not a single Israeli political leader who said that the Arabs were legitimate partners in the government. Indeed, most Arab citizens have a problem representing Israel abroad, as Israel continues to occupy our people. A person with opinions like mine cannot fit into the Israeli Foreign Service and be happily accepted. The Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee already had Arab members, but I do not see myself sitting in a committee that almost completely discusses security issues. If we do participate, it will be a game of cat and mouse, as they will surely move the important issues to be discussed in subcommittees to avoid us.

Israel's agreements with Gulf states are part of a power struggle in the Middle East. Israel instils fear in everyone regarding Iran, to preserve its hegemony and nuclear supremacy in the region. The agreements are meant for bilateral cooperation and have nothing to do with the Palestinian cause. They were promoted as part of the Trump plan, which did not promote peace. On the contrary, the agreements exclude and isolate the Palestinians. They are an attempt to impose a process and decisions on the Palestinians, to suit Israel's goals. The normalization agreements do not contribute to peace but rather distance it.