



**MITVIM**

The Israeli Institute for  
Regional Foreign Policies

# The Mitvim Institute 2020 Annual Report



## The Mitvim Institute 2020 Annual Report

This report highlights the Mitvim Institute's activities in 2020. These activities were centered on our three program areas: improving Israel's foreign policy; promoting Israel's regional belonging in the Middle East, Europe and the Mediterranean; and advancing Israeli-Palestinian peace.

2020 was a year of tremendous disruption. Israel, like the entire world, was shut down by the coronavirus pandemic. Elections were held, the new government weighed the possibility of pursuing annexation of Palestinian territories in the West Bank, only to pivot towards signing normalization agreements with the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco.

Throughout the year, Mitvim generated new progressive foreign policy knowledge for fast-developing situations. Mitvim applied this knowledge to foster change in the policy world by engaging with Israeli and international actors in politics, diplomacy, and civil society. Mitvim executed its mission by producing original research, developing policy recommendations, organizing public online events, participating in regional and international policy dialogues, conducting Israeli public opinion polling, and giving briefings to Members of Knesset (MKs), government officials, and foreign diplomats. In addition, Mitvim experts regularly appeared in leading media outlets to provide commentaries and spell out possible paths forward regarding a variety of foreign policy issues.

**To improve Israel's foreign policy**, Mitvim worked in 2020 to highlight foreign policy issues throughout the general elections, impact the new government's foreign policy priorities and conduct, monitor developments and assess trends in Israel's regional foreign policy, study Israeli public opinion, convene its fourth annual conference, strengthen the democracy component in Israel's foreign policy, and empower Israel's Foreign Service after several years in which it was constantly marginalized. Mitvim regularly engaged with Members of Knesset (MKs), ministers, and senior government officials, and its experts appeared before relevant Knesset committees.



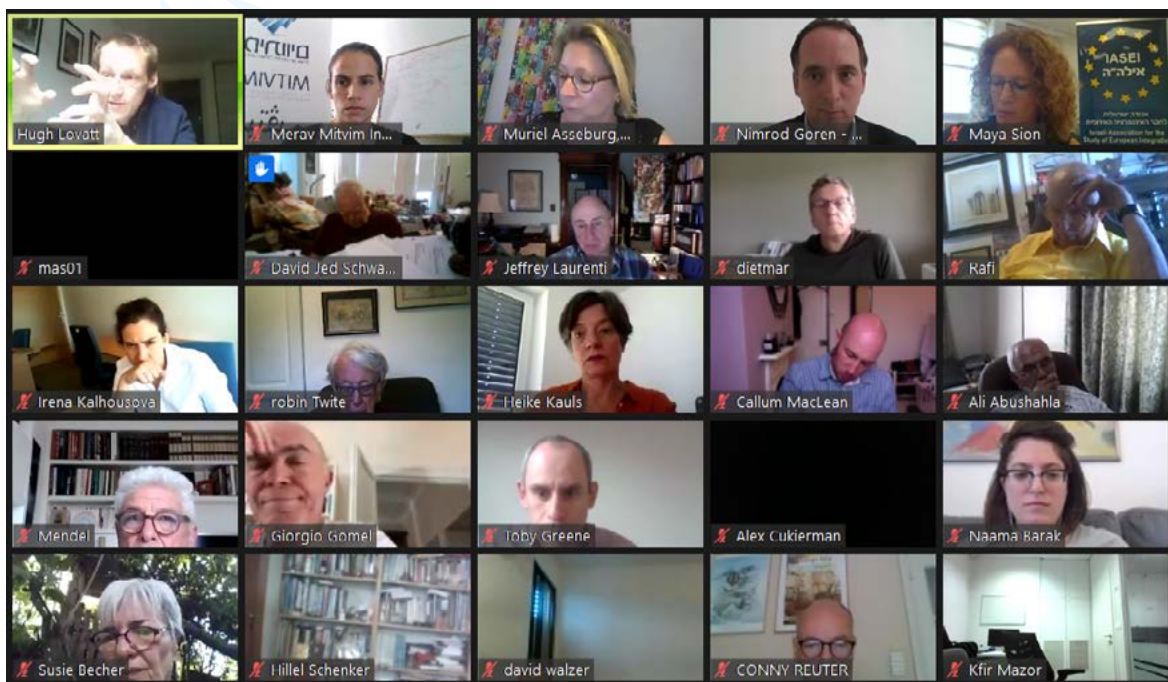
### Israel's Regional Foreign Policies: An Annual Assessment

The 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Mitvim Institute

**To promote Israel's regional belonging,** Mitvim leveraged Israel's newfound normalization agreements with several Arab countries by launching partnerships with think tanks in the Gulf and providing expertise to Israeli policy, political and civil society actors on the normalization process and ways to fulfill its potential. Mitvim carried out policy dialogues with Jordanian counterparts to help improve bilateral relations, and monitored and assessed US policies towards the Middle East in the context of an election year and the impending inauguration of a new US administration. Mitvim also worked to improve Israel's policies towards Europe, as well as analyze geopolitical and energy developments in the Eastern Mediterranean. Mitvim contributed to the growing discourse on Israel's policies towards the Mediterranean by stepping up its Israel-Turkey policy dialogue and participating in meetings with other actors in the region.

**To advance Israeli-Palestinian peace,** Mitvim worked together with partner organizations and coalitions against annexation in the West Bank by emphasizing the negative diplomatic consequences. Mitvim also convened Israeli and Palestinian policy experts to produce joint policy recommendations, including on an international incentives package for peace, and to discuss how to leverage Israel-Arab normalization to advance Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking. Mitvim regularly consulted pro-peace Israeli civil society organizations, and shared insights and recommendations with politicians and foreign diplomats seeking to jump start the peace process. Following the US elections, Mitvim convened a task team to develop recommendations for the Biden administration on how to advance Israeli-Palestinian peace.

This year, the University of Pennsylvania Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program's annual global index ranked Mitvim 20th in the world in "Think Tanks with the Most Innovative Policy Ideas/Proposals"; 23rd in "Best Regional Studies Centers"; 31st in "Top Think Tanks in Middle East and North Africa"; and 64th in "Think Tanks to Watch".



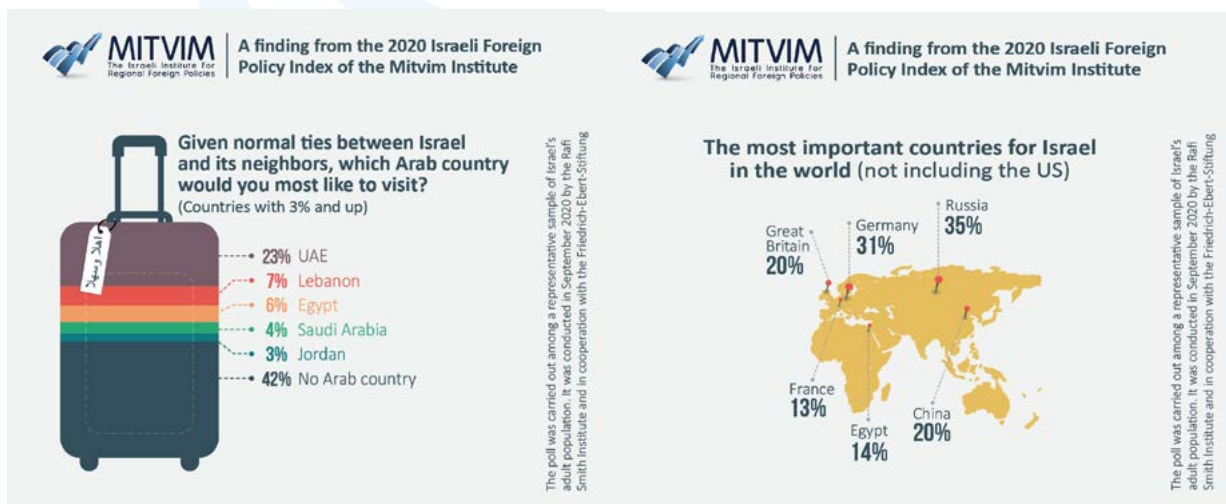
## A. Improving Israel's Foreign Policy

### 1. Monitoring Developments and Assessing Trends

Each month, Mitvim published the Diplomatic Report edited by its Director of Research Dr. Roei Kibrik. It tracks monthly developments in Israel's foreign policy, with an emphasis on Israeli-Palestinian relations, Israel's relations with the Middle East, Europe, and the Mediterranean, and the conduct of Israel's Foreign Service. It is the only publicly available tool that provides a comprehensive overview of foreign policy developments on a regular basis. Additionally, every six months, Mitvim published a semi-annual trends assessment based on the monthly reports and deliberations with former senior Israeli diplomats. These reports are targeted to an audience of policy experts, researchers, and government officials. They collect and contextualize major events, leaving their audience better informed about the structure and trends shaping Israel's foreign relations, and more capable of engaging on these issues.

### 2. Studying Israeli Public Opinion

In September 2020, Mitvim conducted its eighth Israeli Foreign Policy Index. Based on a public opinion poll among Israel's Jewish and Arab adult population, it provided insights into views on Israel's foreign relations, Israel's Foreign Service, Israel and its surrounding regions, and Israel and the Palestinians. The index generated specific findings on foreign policy priorities for Israel's government, including insights on relations between Israel and Arab countries in the wake of the Abraham Accords, perceptions towards the EU, ways to prevent another war in Gaza, the status of Israel's Foreign Service, Israel-US relations, the most important countries for Israel, and Israel-Turkey relations. The poll garnered extensive media coverage in Israel and the region, and its findings were presented and discussed at an exclusive briefing to Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA).



### 3. Providing a Public Annual Assessment of Israel's Foreign Policies

Towards the end of the year, Mitvim convened its fourth annual conference, providing an annual assessment of Israel's regional foreign policies. In the past, this event was available for only an Israeli audience, but because of the country-wide lockdown Mitvim shifted to a virtual format and was therefore able to invite an international audience to join the event. The conference featured panels that included Mitvim experts, senior officials from Israel's MFA, three MKs (among them Meretz party chair Nitzan Horowitz), and Minister of Strategic Affairs and Tourism Orit Farkash-Hacohen. The discussion ranged from assessing the dramatic regional developments over the past year to offering pathways for Israel to maximize current opportunities.



### 4. Advancing Mitvim's Policy Recommendations and Insights

In 2020, Mitvim conducted outreach to ministers, parliamentarians, government officials, and foreign officials. As the Israeli government contemplated annexing territories in the West Bank, Mitvim – together with other civil society organizations – engaged parliamentarians on the potential negative international consequences of such a move. Mitvim's relationship with the MFA continued to deepen in 2020, including engagement with Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi and his senior staff. However, Israel's normalization process with the Gulf states compelled other ministries to seek out the perspective of Mitvim's experts. Meetings were held with Minister of Agriculture Alon Shuster, Minister of Strategic Affairs and Tourism Orit Farkash Hacohen (both from the Blue & White party), Minister of Higher Education Ze'ev Elkin (Likud party), and Minister of Welfare Itzik Shmuli (Labor party) to discuss the potential for cooperative initiatives with the UAE, how to approach the normalization process and how to advance change in Israel's foreign policy. Representatives of several ministries and governmental agencies also participated in Mitvim webinars over the course of the year.



## 5. Empowering Israeli Diplomacy

With the establishment of a new government, Mitvim experts developed recommendations for Foreign Minister Ashkenazi on how to improve Israel's foreign policy. Mitvim experts also advocated the need to empower Israel's Foreign Service after years of marginalization. Mitvim supported and consulted the State Comptroller's report on Israel's Foreign Service, held an internal roundtable on the findings, and initiated a formal discussion on the issue at the relevant Knesset committee. Mitvim was invited to participate in internal MFA discussions and was consulted on various foreign policy issues. Senior MFA officials participated in Mitvim events on regional affairs. Mitvim continued to assist former diplomats who seek avenues to influence Israeli foreign policy, in addition to the institute's regular work monitoring and analyzing diplomatic activities and developments.



## B. Promoting Israel's Regional Belonging

### 1. Israel and the Middle East

#### A) Fulfilling the Potential of Israel-Arab Normalization

Over the last few years, Mitvim followed the evolving bilateral relations between Israel and key Arab states, and assessed their potential and linkage to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The announcement that Israel and the UAE would launch a full normalization process was therefore an opportunity to not only showcase Mitvim's work in this area, but to also provide critical insights in the nature of Gulf politics and motivations, establish relations with potential partners in these countries, and present a progressive case for supporting these developments. This included hosting public events with area experts, engaging in dialogue with multiple government ministries to discuss the potential for cooperation with the UAE, publishing opinion columns and appearing on Israeli and international

media, establishing cooperation agreements with think tanks in the UAE and Bahrain, and seeking how to leverage the Abraham Accords to advance Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking. This multi-tiered engagement demonstrated the different ways that Mitvim's work can be utilized to shape public discourse and the development of government policy, as well as the importance of understanding foreign policy developments and their implications for Israel and Israel's place in the region. As normalization expanded from the UAE and Bahrain also to Morocco, Mitvim continued to share policy insights and recommendations to government ministries, politicians, and the Israeli public, and expand its engagement with counterparts in Morocco.



### **B) Supporting Israel-Jordan Relations**

Mitvim emphasized that while Israel advances the normalization process, it should also invest in broadening and improving ties with its more immediate neighbors – Jordan and Egypt, while not ignoring the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As tensions between Israel and Jordan were on the rise, Mitvim worked to contribute to their improvement. This was done via meetings with senior Jordanian diplomats based in Israel, and in a series of virtual policy dialogue meetings with leading Jordanian political figures, journalists, and analysts. The policy dialogue resulted in a policy paper and a series of opinion pieces, highlighting the need to enhance Israel-Jordan relations, and pointing to possible ways of doing so. Mitvim also conducted meetings with senior MFA officials about the state of bilateral ties with Jordan.



## **C) Monitoring and Assessing US Policies Towards the Middle East**

Each month, Mitvim published a report on US policies towards Israel and the Middle East, edited by Amb. (ret.) Barukh Binah. In 2020, the reports focused on events related to the bilateral US-Israel relationship, US policies towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the broader Middle East, and the Iran deal and its aftermath. The report is targeted towards an Israeli, American, and international audience of policy experts, researchers, government officials, diplomats, and researchers. Towards the US elections, Mitvim experts published a series of commentaries and policy papers spelling out possible implications of a change in US leadership on the US' foreign policy in the region.

## **2. Israel and Europe**

### **A) Helping Reshape Israel's Policies Towards Europe**

In the first half of 2020, Dr. Maya Sion-Tzidkiyahu joined Mitvim as director of the program on Israel-Europe relations. The addition of Dr. Sion-Tzidkiyahu enabled Mitvim to map Israel's engagement with the EU and identify key trends that forecast the relationship's future. Mitvim supported the establishment of a Knesset Caucus to advance Israel-Europe relations, and engaged with Israel's MFA (and other branches of government) on how to better relate to the EU. A Mitvim report on the relationship between Israeli annexation intentions and the EU's research and development program ("Horizon") was shared with the Knesset Committee on Education, Culture, and Sport as well as with other relevant political actors. Dr. Sion-Tzidkiyahu authored a report that highlighted the difference between European differentiation policies and the BDS movement.



In the second half of 2020, Mitvim published media articles on the importance of Israel-Europe relations, developed policy recommendations for Israel's foreign minister regarding Israel-Europe relations, and increased our engagement with European partners – think tanks, diplomats and politicians – as well as with Israeli government officials dealing with ties with Europe. Towards the end of the year, Dr. Nimrod Goren was invited to speak on the future of Israel-EU relations on the occasion of the outgoing Germany Presidency of the European Council, and Mitvim published an assessment of what has been achieved in



Israel-EU relations during the German Presidency. Together with PAX (The Netherlands) and SWP (Germany), Mitvim launched a research project exploring the interlinkage between democracy and foreign policy in Israel and Europe.



### ***B) Enhancing Europe's Role in Israeli-Palestinian Peacemaking***

Annexation was a main topic in discussions about the future of Israel-Europe relations. During the first half of 2020, much of Mitvim's activities focused on presenting a clear picture of Europe's interest in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and why European states overwhelmingly favored direct negotiations over unilateral action in the West Bank. Mitvim was heavily engaged in consulting with European actors about Israel's annexation debate, as well as with Israeli government actors who sought to understand Europe's potential response to unilateral Israeli action. Mitvim held briefings with European diplomats and parliamentarians on the Trump Plan and on annexation, and convened an online international conference, in which Israeli and European politicians and experts discussed possible European reactions to an Israeli annexation.

Mitvim also hosted a virtual event, together with the Israeli Association for the Study of European Integration and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, entitled "EU Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: How Can Europe Effectively Promote Peace?" The event centered on a new book by Dr. Anders Persson of Linnaeus University in Sweden, and featured European, Israeli, and Palestinian experts. Mitvim also took part in a meeting with EU Special Representative to the Middle East Peace Process Susanna Terstal to discuss the roles of the EU and civil society in Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking.

## **3. Israel and the Mediterranean**

### ***A) Shaping Israel's Policies Towards the Mediterranean***

In 2020, the Mediterranean became a hotbed of geopolitical tension, however this also presented a variety of diplomatic opportunities. Mitvim, the Leonard Davis Institute at Hebrew University, and the National Security Studies Center at Haifa University continued to lead a unique policy and research group on Israel's foreign policy towards the Mediterranean, which was launched in 2019.

The group convened on a bi-monthly basis, with approximately 40 experts from academic, business, politics, and diplomacy participating in each of the meetings. In 2020, the group focused on issues related to conflict resolution, the environment, energy and the impact of coronavirus. It sought to devise improved Israeli policies towards these issues. Israeli government officials from multiple ministries also participated in the meetings, which led to the publication of a series of policy papers.



### ***B) Supporting Israel-Turkey Relations***

Relations between Israel and Turkey continued to be problematic in 2020, although prospects for improvement increased towards the end of the year. With the goal of improving bilateral relations and deepening ties with Turkish think tanks, Mitvim stepped up its Israel-Turkey policy dialogue and established a series of bi-monthly workshop with two Ankara-based institutes. These workshops served as a forum for conversation between Israeli and Turkish scholars and analysts and a mechanism for improving mutual understanding on bilateral relations and regional developments. Mitvim also participated in discussions with Turkish experts and other regional actors on developments in the Eastern Mediterranean, and the nexus between energy cooperation and maritime disputes, and Mitvim experts supported the work of the Turkey-Israel Civil Society Forum.

### ***C) Analyzing Developments in the Eastern Mediterranean***

The Eastern Mediterranean is becoming increasingly central to Israel's foreign policies. Key developments in this region in 2020 included the concretization of the Cairo-based Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum, which includes both Israel and the Palestinian Authority; the strengthening of the trilateral alliance between Israel, Cyprus and Greece; US attempts to mediate between Israel and Lebanon about their maritime border dispute; and the ebb and flow of tensions with Turkey.

Mitvim participated and organized a host of activities related to Eastern Mediterranean relations. Mitvim and the University of Haifa convened a joint event on Gaza and the Eastern Mediterranean. Director of External Relations Gabriel Mitchell participated in a webinar series hosted by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung on the role of energy policy in the Eastern Mediterranean. Dr. Kibrik joined the steering committee of an Eastern Mediterranean forum dealing with climate change. Mitvim Policy Fellow Amb. (ret.) Michael Harari and Gabriel Mitchell monitored these developments, and shared their analysis via briefings, commentaries, research, media interviews and policy papers. Mitvim experts were also invited to deliver lectures on Mediterranean issues at local and regional conferences.

## C. Advancing Israeli-Palestinian Peace

### 1. Highlighting the Deficiencies of the Trump Plan

In the weeks following the Trump administration’s announcement of its vision for Israeli-Palestinian peace, Mitvim organized meetings with foreign diplomats in order to understand how the international community was planning to respond. Mitvim also gathered Israeli and Palestinian analysts together to discuss the plan, how the Israeli government and Palestinian Authority would likely respond, and what recommendations should be put forward to maintain the prospect of a two-state solution. Mitvim staff gave briefings to various organizations (including the New Israel Fund and J Street), as well as foreign embassies and journalists in order to provide assessments and recommendations on how best to advance Israeli-Palestinian peace. Board member and former Israeli diplomat Nadav Tamir presented his perspectives at the Jerusalem Press Club, and Dr. Nimrod Goren wrote an article for the Israel-Palestine Journal. Finally, Mitvim produced a series of publications that analyzed and critiqued the language of the plan, and highlighted alternative pro-peace policy directions.



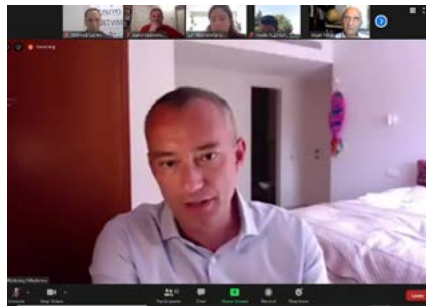
### 2. Emphasizing Negative Consequences of Annexation

Mitvim has cooperated for years with like-minded institutes and civil society organizations in Israel that support the two-state solution and seek to advance Israeli-Palestinian peace. This coalition was challenged in the summer of 2020 when the Israeli government announced its deliberations to annex territories in the West Bank. Working together with our local partners, such as the Geneva Initiative, Women Wage Peace, Shatil and the Two-State Coalition, Mitvim vocally opposed unilateral Israeli actions that would undermine the prospects of peace and would harm Israel’s position in the international community. In addition to writing articles published in the Israeli press, Mitvim held meetings with Israeli government officials and MKs to reiterate the consequences of such a move.



### 3. Advancing Innovative Israeli-Palestinian Policy Proposals

In 2019, Mitvim established a working group of Israeli, Palestinian, and international analysts and civil society actors, led by Dr. Lior Lehrs and Moien Odeh and in cooperation with Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, that sought to develop a proposal for an international package of incentives for Israeli-Palestinian peace. This working group continued to meet in 2020, discussing the implications of regional developments and developing the language of a report that outlined the international incentive package. Mitvim, together with other pro-peace Israeli and Palestinian NGOs, took part in a special initiative of UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Nickolay Mladenov, which aimed at elevating the voice of civil society in efforts to advance peace.



### 4. Devising Recommendations for the Biden Administration

Though 2020 was dominated by a number of major headlines, including the global pandemic and Israel's normalization with Arab states, the second half was also a countdown to the US presidential election. Prior to the election, Mitvim experts crafted opinion columns identifying potential policy areas that could be impacted in the event of a Biden presidency versus a Trump presidency. Following the elections, Mitvim co-hosted an online event with the Alliance for Middle East Peace (ALLMEP) that discussed how a Biden presidency would likely approach Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking. The event was a rare moment where American, European, Israeli, and Palestinian perspectives were shared. Once the election results were determined, Mitvim assembled a team of experts to develop a list of recommendations articulating how to advance Israeli-Palestinian peace in the opening months of the Biden administration. The task-team also consulted with Palestinian experts in order to find the right tenor for the document.



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