

The 2021 Israeli Foreign Policy Index - Commentaries by Mitvim Institute Experts

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The Mitvim Institute's Ninth Annual Public Opinion Survey on Israeli Foreign Policy was conducted in September 2021. The survey was conducted by the Rafi Smith Institute and in collaboration with the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, among a representative sample of the adult population in Israel (700 men and women, Jews and Arabs) and with a sampling error of 3.5%. This paper presents brief responses from the Mitvim Institute staff concerning some of the most pertinent survey findings.

Dr. Nimrod Goren, Founder and President of the Mitvim Institute: The new Israeli government has been highly active on foreign policy issues in its initial months in office. It sought to repair relations damaged under Netanyahu (with Jordan, the European Union and the US Democratic Party), to deepen the normalization process (with the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco) and inject it with substance, to restore the Israeli commitment to liberal democratic values, and to renew the dialogue with senior Palestinian Authority officials. However, according to the Mitvim Institute poll, this activity, accompanied by moves to strengthen Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) after lengthy deliberate neglect – has not trickled down to the public, which perceives a certain decline in Israel's international standing, in the MFA's performance, in the quality of the government's foreign policy, and in the level of relations with the US. In light of these findings, and the growing affinity between domestic and foreign policy issues (for example in the areas of democracy and the environment), it is important for the MFA to invest greater efforts in sharing information and engaging with the Israeli public on foreign policy related matters. At the same time, the findings also provide decision makers with a tail wind for specific diplomatic steps. The public displays significant support for improving relations with Turkey, for a return of the Palestinian Authority to Gaza, for establishing regional frameworks to deal with the climate crisis, for leveraging Israeli-Arab normalization to advance peace with the Palestinians, and for banning the sale of advanced technologies to regimes violating human rights. The government can rely on this public support and take advantage of it to achieve new diplomatic breakthroughs and improve Israeli foreign policy.

Dr. Gil Murciano, CEO of the Mitvim Institute: The Israeli public's attitude to foreign affairs is often described as largely self-absorbed, viewing the world only through the narrow prism of the threats affecting it directly and uninterested in events beyond its borders. This survey presents a different picture – an Israeli public that thinks globally and realizes the impact of global developments on Israel's future. Thus, Israelis graded the need to cooperate on the international level in order to confront the climate crisis higher on the foreign policy priorities set than other important tasks, such as developing relations with the states of the Middle East. The support for such cooperation cuts across political affiliations. The Israeli public demonstrates a high level of awareness regarding the negative repercussions of Israeli weaponry and spyware exports to regimes violating human rights – a decisive majority (64%) of respondents supports a ban on the sale of such items. This new global mindset is also expressed in the public's growing understanding that Israel cannot resolve its strategic challenges entirely on its own and needs to cooperate with regional and international actors. Thus, for example, over a year after the outbreak of the pandemic, there was a shift regarding the handling of Covid-19, with 45% supporting aid to other countries as the preferred method

for dealing with the pandemic, compared with 28% who supported such a move last year (the rate of those who support focusing on fighting the pandemic in Israel alone plunged from 63% to 42% this year). This trend is also reflected in the core issue of dealing with Iran. When asked about the best way to handle the Iranian threat, a majority (51%) opted for regional and international cooperation in comparison with 31% who supported independent military action. These findings call for the government and Foreign Service to integrate into the international agenda. The government should invest resources in Israel's standing as a world leader in confronting the climate crisis, take a leading role in the global battle against the coronavirus epidemic, and adopt the UN's sustainable development goals as guiding principles of its foreign policy. Israeli participation in the global "game" will improve its international standing and support the strengthening of its cooperation with the regions around it and with the Palestinians.

Merav Kahana-Dagan, COO of the Mitvim Institute: This year's Mitvim Institute survey reflects a decline in satisfaction with the government, its performance, the condition of the foreign ministry and Israeli relations with the US. Most of these measures indicate the first decline following a period of continuous improvement since 2016. Examination of the data distribution behind these figures reveals a high degree of correlation between political views and the grading of the government's foreign policy performance. In other words, those who voted for the Likud and other opposition parties gave the government relatively lower grades than those who voted for Lapid's Yesh Atid and the other coalition parties. **One can therefore cautiously assess that the decline in the various measures related to the government's performance stems more from the respondents' political views than from the success or failure of the Israeli Foreign Service. The same applies to the relatively low grade Lapid received. We asked about his performance as foreign minister, but one can reasonably assume that the respondents answered according to their political positions.** This assessment should be kept in mind when analyzing the results and drawing conclusions. The grading of the government's performance this year reflects the political and party distribution of the Israeli electorate more than it does the government's actual performance.

Dr. Lior Lehrs, Director of Mitvim's Program on Israeli-Palestinian Peacemaking: The annual Mitvim Institute poll points to a continuing decline in public interest in Israeli-Palestinian peace, with respondents ranking the importance of advancing peace with the Palestinians lower than other goals. Nonetheless, the public clearly prefers restoring control of the Gaza Strip to the Palestinian Authority (PA), a position supported by right-wing respondents, too. This finding expresses support for a policy change on Gaza and a desire to work for the integration of the PA and the international community in the Strip rather than Netanyahu's Gaza policy (which only 9% still support). A slight minority views the meetings between Israeli ministers and Palestinian officials in a negative light, and a similar minority favors a weakening of the PA. **These results attest to the fact that while Israeli public opinion does not favor immediate resumption of the peace process, most of the public supports efforts to advance Israeli-Palestinian cooperation and strengthen moderate elements in the Palestinian arena over the policy of bolstering Hamas.** This approach fits calls by some in the new Israeli government and in the international community to strengthen the PA and weaken Hamas. While the government faces domestic political challenges, it is incumbent on it to advance dialogue and cooperation with the PA in various fields, and to initiate confidence-building measures, halt measures that preclude a future solution, and use its ties with regional actors to advance Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy. Regarding this last point, the poll reflects significant support for mobilizing the help of the Arab states that signed normalization agreements with Israel to promote Israeli-Palestinian peace (52% in favor, 27% against), signaling that a policy

of linking the two channels could also help mobilize public support for progress in the Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking.

Dr. Maya Sion-Tzidkiyahu, Director of Mitvim's Program on Israel-Europe Relations: The perception of the European Union (EU) as a foe of Israel rather than its friend is backed by 46% of the respondents, compared with 24% who say it is a friend. This is the fourth straight time this question has been put to participants in Mitvim's foreign policy index, with similar results. Foreign Minister Lapid's vigorous outreach to the Europeans is not reflected in the poll, perhaps because it has yet to yield tangible results. The findings reflect the gap between the EU's political criticism of Israel's policy in the conflict with the Palestinians on the one hand and the economic and business reality in many other fields such as trade, government funding of R&D programs, aviation, tourism, agriculture and more on the other hand. For Israelis to change their perception of the EU following a decade of deteriorating diplomatic relations between the sides, the Europeans should respond to Lapid's welcome outreach and convene the Association Council. The Israelis will respond favorably once they see tangible achievements. The Bennett-Lapid government would then also have to put into play the pragmatic aspects linking its coalition partners and approve agreements and Israeli participation in EU programs even though they exclude the settlements, and although 47% of respondents oppose this (only 34% supported participation in EU programs even if they exclude the settlements). Israeli decision makers know the EU's great importance for Israel's economy and the well-being of its residents.

Former Member of Knesset Ksenia Svetlova, Director of Mitvim's Program on Israel-Middle East Relations: The poll findings clearly indicate that Israelis understand the importance of improving ties with Jordan and want the government to advance these strategic ties rather than neglect them. For over a decade, relations with the Hashemite Kingdom have sustained fatal blows and neglect, despite the invaluable importance of this ally that shares a long and calm border with Israel. The Bennett government has already started moving in the right direction to restore and strengthen relations with Jordan, but a broader policy is required that would include both improved bilateral relations and link Jordan to the regional measures of the Abraham Accords.

Prof. Elie Podeh, Board Member at the Mitvim Institute: The annual Mitvim survey raises some interesting findings. First, regarding the Palestinian issue, 38.2% of Israelis think Israel should not intervene in internal Palestinian Authority (PA) matters, 20.9% have no opinion on the subject, while 13% even recommend that Israel try to undermine the PA. Less than one-third think Israel should help strengthen the PA, pointing to the public's indifference and poor understanding of the importance of the PA's continued stability, especially in light of the current alternatives. A strong PA is in Israel's best interests. The findings also indicate that surprisingly many Israelis do not regard the Abraham Accords as a turning point, with 30.9% saying the agreements have not brought about change, while 34.7% have no opinion on the matter. What is more, almost half of those surveyed (48.4% of Jewish and 41.4% of Arab respondents) is not at all interested in visiting Arab countries. Whereas 29% of those polled last year expressed a desire to visit the Emirates, this year only 9% said they would like to go there. These findings illustrate that once the initial euphoria over the signing of the agreements dissipated, the enthusiasm of both Jewish and Arab Israelis has cooled and Arab states do not constitute a preferred destination of the Israeli tourist.

Dr. Moran Zaga, Policy Fellow at Mitvim: The Abraham Accords prompted immediate interest in economic, diplomatic and civilian ties between Israel and the UAE, with the

economic and business links attracting most of the attention. The Mitvim poll also reflects a preference for economic ties with most of the respondents saying they would rather see a strengthening of the economic channels in relations between the sides (38.2%), while respondents ranked the importance of security ties, including cooperation against Iran, in second place (27%). These data suggest that opportunity is a greater motivator than threat. Notably, there is a wide gap between the Jewish and Arab respondents regarding the importance of the security channel. While 30.1% of Jews surveyed said Israel should prioritize security cooperation, only 9.5% of the Arabs shared that view, suggesting a difference in the sense of threat between these two groups and in the manner in which each sees Israel's role in the Middle East. It is also worth remembering that whereas both the economic and security areas are important to enhancing Israel's power, the diplomatic ties are those that dictate and enable the tapping of the potential in all other channels and therefore they are the ones that Israel should prioritize.

Former Ambassador Michael Harari, Policy Fellow: The Eastern Mediterranean Basin has established itself as a separate, distinct region of Israeli foreign policy. This is clearly expressed in Mitvim's recent annual surveys, with 22% of respondents viewing Israel as part of the Mediterranean Basin rather than of the Middle East or Europe. This foreign policy arena is based on the shared energy interests of the states in the region, as clearly defined in the recently created regional gas forum. While Israel has bolstered its relations with Greece, Cyprus and Egypt, and played a positive role in regional cooperation initiatives, Turkey found itself left out of the game and responded with aggressive foreign policy moves. Israeli foreign policy should continue to tighten this impressive cooperation with states in the region in a variety of fields, including energy. At the same time, seeking creative ways to integrate Turkey into this fascinating regional discourse is also of vital importance. Interestingly, some 60% of Mitvim survey respondents agree. This is obviously a complex challenge that does not depend only on Israel, but on an array of regional and international factors, as well as on Turkey itself, including its domestic political developments. Nonetheless, the impressive room for maneuver that has opened up for Israel in the Eastern Mediterranean Basin can and should provide a convenient platform for initiatives and cooperation, inter alia vis-à-vis Lebanon on the maritime border issue and the Palestinian arena on the Gaza issue.

Dr. Ilai Saltzman, Board Member: According to the findings of the annual survey, most Jewish Israelis believe the Biden Administration is far less favorably inclined toward Israel than the Trump Administration. Three main components affect Biden's lower standing in Israeli public opinion. First, Biden is completely identified with the Obama Administration, which many Israelis perceived as hostile to Israel especially given its difficult relationship with then-Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Second, unlike Obama with whom Biden is identified, President Trump knowingly chose to toe the line with Netanyahu's policy on the Palestinian and Iran issues. And finally, Israeli public opinion creates a direct parallel between domestic American and Israeli domestic politics in terms of the ideological rivalry between right and left. The Democrats are viewed as the left-wing camp, and the Republicans as the right. Given the dominance of right-wing views in Israel, as expressed in the Knesset elections of recent years, President Biden, who leads the Democratic Party is perceived as an ideological opponent by most of the Israeli public. In light of these opening positions, it is hardly surprising that most Israelis regard the Biden Administration in a less favorable light than it did the Trump one. Nonetheless, it should be noted that Biden has not completed even a full year in office, and his actions must be examined based on his commitment to Israel's security, his contribution to resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, advancement of the regional peace agreements, a solution to the conflict with Iran, and Israel's renewed positioning as the subject of bipartisan American support.

Dr. Roe Kibrik, Research Director: The Israeli public attributes great importance to confronting the climate crisis, understands that the state cannot do it alone, and wants the government to cooperate with regional and international efforts to deal with the challenge (79% expressed support for such course of action). Accordingly, a large majority (81%) supports the idea of forming a regional Mediterranean and Mediterranean Basin policy forum to confront the climate crisis. This issue crosses political stands and identities. It is incumbent on the government to advance climate crisis policies, to join the rest of the world in efforts to limit the environmental-climate damage, and prepare for the repercussions of the crisis. It is important to understand, and the Israeli public seems to have started doing so, that the only way to deal efficiently with the climate crisis is through regional and international cooperation. **Therefore, ahead of his participation in the Global Climate Conference in Glasgow, Prime Minister Bennett should know the public has high expectations on this issue.** But, as reflected in the survey results, the great importance Israelis attribute to the climate crisis and the understanding that regional cooperation is vital for dealing with it has yet to generate public interest in advancing Israeli-Palestinian peace. The realization that the conflict and the occupation must be brought to an immediate end in order to deal successfully with the climate crisis has yet to take root. Israel cannot provide its citizens with food or renewable energy unless it cooperates with the world around it, and this need will only grow progressively urgent. Israel must therefore advance peace and cooperation, first with the Palestinians who live with us in the same home, and then with the states of the region living in our neighborhood. There is no other way to deal successfully with the climate crisis.