



**MITVIM**  
The Israeli Institute for  
Regional Foreign Policies

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*The Mitvim Institute's 11th annual public opinion survey on Israeli foreign policy was conducted in late July 2023 by the Rafi Smith Institute in collaboration with the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.<sup>1</sup>*

**Dr. Nimrod Goren, Founder and President of the Mitvim Institute and Senior Fellow at the Middle East Institute:**

Domestic Israeli developments and the state of the country's foreign relations are currently closely linked. The policies adopted by the Netanyahu government since coming to power in January 2023 have led to a clear reversal in how the Israeli public assesses its country's standing in the world, the government's performance in the field of foreign policy, the status of Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the quality of Israel-U.S. relations. According to the Mitvim Institute's 2023 annual poll, the trend of increased public satisfaction with the above-mentioned foreign policy indicators, which was evident in recent years, has taken a U-turn. Within less than a year, ratings dropped almost to their low point of 2015, when Netanyahu formed his previous narrow, right-wing government. The impact of Israel's diplomatic achievements in recent years, as well as the empowerment of Israel's Foreign Service under the previous government – have been almost completely erased. Once again, Israel's foreign relations are facing a crisis, especially regarding ties with liberal-democratic allies in the West and the status of its foreign ministry. This decline will likely continue to worsen should the government keep going after Israel's democracy and provoking Israeli-Palestinian escalation. The poll indicates that concern of deterioration in ties with Western countries significantly impacts Israeli public attitudes toward the judicial overhaul. The findings also demonstrate that while Israelis call for democracy at home, they are also minded to the state of democracy abroad. There is greater Israeli support this year for establishing close relations with democracies, there is less importance attributed to Russia, there is a negative perception towards China's increased involvement in the Middle East, and there are fewer Israelis than before (although, still a plurality) who view the EU as a foe to Israel rather than a friend. According to the poll, the Israeli public also identifies a link between democratic backsliding in Israel and the government's policy of advancing de facto annexation of Palestinian territories. These are seen as two sides of the same coin. But, in parallel, on the 30th anniversary of the Oslo Accords, the Israeli public continues to attach relatively minor importance to promoting Israeli-Palestinian peace compared to other foreign policy issues that the government can promote, and this is a perception that requires change.

**Dr. Gil Murciano, Mitvim CEO:** The Netanyahu-Smotrich government boasts of being a "majority right-wing" government, frequently emphasizing the mandate it received from the public in the 2022 elections to advance not only the Judicial "Reform," but also "fully right-wing" foreign policy. However, the survey results indicate it is in fact a "minority

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government” in terms of foreign policy, as revealed by the significant gap between the general public’s positions and its core policies. The public's disagreement with government policy is reflected first of all in a very low assessment of its performance in the foreign relations field – a decline from 5.53 last year to 4.82, the lowest grade recorded in our surveys over the past seven years. In terms of issues, the gap between public positions and government policy (with an emphasis on extreme right-wing elements within the government) is particularly striking regarding the desired strategy vis-à-vis the Palestinians. While the government declared its commitment to the "exclusive rights" of the Jewish people between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River and is engaged in building the infrastructure for annexation in the West Bank, the public positions are far less decisive on this issue. The two-state proposal remains the leading option (36%) among respondents, while 25% have not yet decided what political strategy Israel should adopt. Only 13% support the view recently expressed by Minister Smotrich, that the continued existence of the Palestinian Authority (PA) runs counter to Israeli interests, compared to 43% who think the PA’s continued existence serves the State of Israel or is even crucial to its interests. In the face of the extreme right's aspirations to change the status quo in Jerusalem and erase Palestinian political presence in the city, an overwhelming majority (61%) of the public supports the formation of a coordination mechanism in cooperation with the Palestinians and Jordan to prevent escalation and reduce tensions at Jerusalem’s holy sites. While the Israeli government is trying to disconnect normalization with Saudi Arabia from the Palestinian issue, a large majority of the Israeli public (61%) supports leveraging normalization with the Arab world to promote Palestinian-Israeli peace. A considerable part of the public (41% support vs. 40% opposition) even agrees to stop construction in the settlements and evacuate outposts in return for normalization with Saudi Arabia. Finally, in regards to the Judicial "Reform", while the government emphasizes the issue as an internal Israeli matter and calls on the American administration to "mind its own business", a majority of the public (45%) noted that it has been influenced to a “great” or “very great” extent by international feedback in shaping its views on the "reform."

**Dr. Omer Zanany, Director of the Program for the Advancement of Israeli-Palestinian Peace:** The growing public support for a regional approach to promote positive and stabilizing steps in the Palestinian arena, including a change in the Gaza Strip status quo and formation of a de-escalation mechanism in Jerusalem are bright spots in Mitvim's annual survey. At the same time, there is a growing understanding of the Palestinian Authority’s importance to Israel’s interests. This is a necessary basis for stability and the realization of the two-state vision. On the other hand, support for the two-state solution continues to decline, and a small majority even supports some form of annexation in the West Bank. This stems both from the absence of a publicly presented relevant and updated alternative to the current situation, and from the marginalization of the entire issue, such that a quarter of the public (25%) has no opinion at all regarding the desired solution to the conflict. The public’s understanding, as reflected in the findings, of the link between the government-led regime coup and annexation processes is very important, but it does not necessarily indicate disagreement with these two moves.

**Dr. Maya Sion-Tzidkiyahu, Director of the Israel-Europe Relations Program:** The improvement in public attitude toward the European Union (EU), a trend evident since 2018, has stabilized. This year's results are similar to last year's, with the EU still regarded

more as an adversary than a friend of Israel (39% and 33%, respectively). In Jewish society, more think the EU is an adversary (42%) than a friend (31%), while in Arab society, the findings are reversed: 45% see it as a friend and only 21% as an adversary. Among Jewish respondents, the gap between the perception of the EU as friend or foe is narrowest among those defining themselves as secular. In contrast, among the traditional and religious, almost half (47%) see the EU as an adversary and only a quarter (26.5%) see it as a friend. Political belief is the most influential determinant in the adversary-friend dichotomy. Among those holding most right-wing views, only a quarter (24%) sees the EU as a friend, compared with 35% of those defining themselves as centrists and 39% of those on the left, but even among the latter a considerable portion sees the EU as an adversary. Respondents who identify the EU as a friend rely first and foremost on the EU being Israel's main trading partner (48%), but also on its liberal-democratic values (44%) and on cooperation with it in research and development (34%). Surprisingly, the EU's position on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process was only cited by 19% as an explanation for viewing it as a friend of Israel, despite the fact that most of those who see the EU as a friend define themselves as left-wing and center voters, who mostly support the two-state solution. This low figure may reflect the influence of the incitement waged by some in the political right against the EU due to its criticism of Israel's conduct in the occupied territories, impacting also the center and left. Among those who responded that the EU is an adversary of Israel, the main reasons were the EU's positions on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process (69%) and its positions on the settlements (42%), while the EU's attitude toward Iran (32%) and its funding of liberal civil society organizations (22%) were not central among the respondents.

**Nadav Tamir, Mitvim Board Member and J-Street Israel Director:** The Israeli public understands that the current government is severely damaging Israel's foreign relations and international standing. This also explains the limited effectiveness of Netanyahu's dire messages regarding threats to Israel's survival and of his manipulation of the existential fear that may be inherent among Israelis, but is completely anachronistic in a leading military power such as Israel. Accordingly, there is growing public recognition of the need for diplomatic solutions to both the Iranian and Palestinian issues and realization that the Foreign Ministry must be strengthened in order to achieve these goals. In short, the survey suggests that Netanyahu's toxic doctrine that we are doomed to life by the sword has a declining influence on the public, which is very encouraging news.

**Dr. Orni Livni, Mitvim COO:** The protest against the regime coup has successfully positioned the struggle for gender equality and women's rights as essential to the struggle for democracy. But while the streets and virtual space are filled with powerful women fighting for their positions, our annual survey shows that women still refrain from expressing their opinions on many issues. According to the survey, women, much more so than men, choose the "no opinion" option on current events and foreign policy questions. This is particularly evident regarding the Palestinian issue: more than a third of the women who responded to the survey (37%) have no opinion about Israel's interest in the continued existence of the Palestinian Authority; a third also refrained from expressing an opinion on strategy toward the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, as well as on questions about the connection between normalization of relations with Arab states and Israeli policy in the territories. The same applies to the link between the regime coup and annexation processes – about a third of women chose not to take a stand. Even on the question of

whether the EU is a friend or an adversary, 34% of women have no opinion, and the same applies to questions about China and Lebanon. It is a pity because those who did express an opinion on these and other matters presented more critical views of the government's foreign policy than the men. Fewer supported military solutions – for example, vis-à-vis Iran or Lebanon, while more supported civic issues and cooperation than men did, such as establishing a regional framework for dealing with the climate crisis. The mission of the pro-democracy movement is, therefore, not only to place the gender issue at the heart of the public debate but also to empower women from all walks of life to increase their political and public engagement, encourage them to believe in their power and make them see that their voice matters. Hopefully, fewer women will choose “no opinion” in responding to our next annual survey.

**Bar Rapaport, Coordinator of Political-Climate Sustainability Program:** The climate crisis, as reflected in the extreme summer heat experienced by participants in our survey, appears to have influenced their responses – as demonstrated by an increase in the number of those expressing an opinion on climate and foreign relations. There seems to be a growing understanding of the importance of improved cooperation with other countries in order to deal with the climate crisis, and of the need to establish a regional framework for such activities. The survey also examined the climate crisis, for the first time, as a tool for improving relations with other countries (for example, Turkey), while the understanding that cooperation on this issue with the Palestinians is necessary receives high and consistent support despite the declining trust between the sides as expressed in other survey answers. Notably, Israeli Jews and Arabs both agree equally on the importance of dealing with the climate crisis.

**Dr. Ilai Saltzman, Mitvim Board Member:** First, the 2023 Foreign Policy Survey indicates that Israelis identify a direct connection between the political and social response to the government's attempted regime coup and Israel's diplomatic stance and its ability to maneuver in the international arena. The internal dispute also has a decisive impact on the public's perception of Israel's international standing – a finding that is both interesting and troubling. Second, the plight of Israeli diplomacy appears to have convinced many Israelis of the vital need to strengthen the Foreign Ministry. The challenge, in this context, is the extent to which “hasbara” (public diplomacy) can improve Israel's international standing. This task appears impossible given the many controversial statements by certain government ministers. There is a limit to the rosy hues with which one can paint a polarized and divided society that has been imbued in unprecedented radicalized public discourse. It is important to note that the survey demonstrates the significant decline in the public's perception of the strategic partnership between Israel and the United States, which declined to a new low over the past year after certain improvements in bilateral relations were made under the Bennett-Lapid government.

**Dr. Roei Kibrik, Research Director:** The struggle between Jewish-religious-authoritarian forces and liberal-democratic ones is reflected in the current Mitvim survey. The findings clearly demonstrate that the Jewish-religious-authoritarian camp opposes any move that could advance peace with the Palestinians: it opposes leveraging normalization with Arab states to promote peace with the Palestinians, and promoting normalization with Saudi Arabia in return for stopping construction in the settlements and evacuating illegal outposts. It also wants to preserve the situation in Gaza as is. This camp opposes a

political process, with 28% of respondents favoring annexation of the West Bank and granting privileges to Jews, i.e., establishing an apartheid state. Only slightly more (36%) support a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Most of the traditionalist-religious bloc (84%) supports the establishment of an apartheid regime. This goes not only for Religious Zionism and Otzma Yehudit voters, but also applies to Shas and United Torah Judaism (UTJ) voters. The right-wing-religious-authoritarian bloc prefers continued conflict over attempts to seek and pursue peace. This position is more widely prevalent than the proportion of this camp in the population, given that between one-fifth and a quarter of the respondents chose not to express an opinion on these issues. Some one-third of Likud, Otzma Yehudit and Yisrael Beiteinu voters did not express a position, about a quarter of Shas and UTJ voters and about half of those who did not vote. This constitutes a significant chunk of the population and could change the perception of public preferences. Centrist, and even center-left, politicians have tended to set aside the Palestinian issue (despite their voters' unequivocal support for the two-state solution) and instead adopted Netanyahu's conflict management strategy. The result is a lack of public interest in this critical issue, while those who oppose the two-state solution continue to promote changes on the ground weakening the two-state solution and the belief that it can be achieved. The regime coup and deepening annexation now confront politicians and the public with the need to finally choose between the settlements, the occupation and an apartheid regime - and a democratic State of Israel. It would be better for those who have not yet formulated a position on the issue to do so.