

Mitvim Experts' Commentary on the 2024 Foreign Policy Index

September 2024

*The Mitvim Institute's 12th annual public opinion poll on Israeli foreign policy was conducted in late August 2024 by the Rafi Smith Institute in cooperation with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation.**

Dr. Gil Murciano, Mitvim Institute Executive Director: The 2024 Israel Foreign Policy Index, compiled almost a year after the outbreak of the Gaza war reveals broad public support for strategic decision and decisive steps. It illustrates an almost complete rejection of Israel's long-held conflict management approach and continued status quo. However, recognition of the need for such crucial decisions splits the public between two radically different camps regarding Israel's strategic and diplomatic future and the means to advance it. One view is represented by a moderate camp that constitutes a relatively small majority (40-50%), is characterized by a pragmatic approach to long-term thinking about Israel's relations with its enemies and allies. It espouses international and regional cooperation as a primary means of winding down the Gaza war, recognizes the limitations of military power in dealing with strategic threats to Israel, and is even open to the establishment of a Palestinian state when presented as part of a regional-American package deal. The second view is represented by a fundamentalist camp constituting a sizeable minority (about 30%) that adopts positions considered the domain of the radical right before the war. It advocates annexation and resettlement solutions in the West Bank and Gaza, supports a deliberate escalation of the conflict with Iran, and favors independent Israeli military measures, even at the cost of confrontation with the international system. The clear consolidation of these two polarized camps must serve as an urgent wakeup call to Israeli opposition leaders. Specifically, it calls on them to take advantage of the broad pragmatic camp whose thinking goes beyond their cautious positions on the Israeli-Palestinian issue and demands a clear and courageous vision for the future of the State of Israel. This is not only an opportunity for the opposition, but an imperative. The growing fundamentalist minority (not a small one) highlights the danger of opposition indecision that would allow the Netanyahu-Smotrich Government to claim a solid public basis for critical moves rejected by the majority of the Israeli public.

Dr. Nimrod Goren, President and Founder of the Mitvim Institute and Senior Fellow at the Middle East Institute: Israel has long feared what it depicted as a "diplomatic tsunami" – a situation in which the international community will turn its back on the country, leading to a collapse of Israel's global standing as well as to damage to Israel's vital interests and loss of important alliances. The war in Gaza and the harsh international criticism of Israel's actions throughout it indicate that the process may have already begun. However, the Mitvim Institute's 2024 annual survey indicates that the Israeli public feels the "diplomatic tsunami" is actually starting from home. Since 2013, the Mitvim Institute has been surveying public Israeli attitudes regarding Israel's global standing, the government's foreign policy

* The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect those of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. Commercial use of Mitvim Institute and Friedrich Ebert Foundation publications without written consent is strictly prohibited.

performance, and the status of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). The findings have always reflected a measure of dissatisfaction, but this year they point to a collapse. The rankings given to the government's foreign policy performance (3.84 out of 10) and to the status of the MFA (3.94) are the lowest since the measurements began. Israel's perceived standing in the world (4.31) is the lowest since 2015. Foreign Minister Israel Katz's performance was also ranked as particularly poor (4.02). These findings echo the Netanyahu government's stinging diplomatic failure, at a time when Israel needs effective, smart and professional diplomacy more than ever. The survey findings must serve as a wake-up call to members of Israel's Foreign Service and to those concerned about the country's diplomatic future. There is need for deep and rapid policy and political change, which will put Israel back on the path of peace and regional cooperation, and which will instill a diplomatic breakwater against the impending external "diplomatic tsunami."

Dr. Omer Zanany, Director of the Israeli-Palestinian Peacemaking Program at the Mitvim Institute, and Head of the Political-Security Unit of the Mitvim Institute and the Berel Katznelson Foundation: Despite the Oct. 7 disaster and ensuing war, as well as the government's deliberate ambiguity regarding plans for the day after, the Israeli public mostly supports diplomatic arrangements and reduced control over the Palestinians. According to the findings of the annual Mitvim survey, a majority of the public (55%) supports an arrangement leading to regional normalization and the establishment of a demilitarized Palestinian state alongside Israel. The result is even lower than the consistent results of Accord surveys indicating over 60% of Israelis favor an arrangement resulting in a Palestinian state. But while a majority of the Mitvim respondents (53%) supports a Palestinian or multinational alternative to Hamas in Gaza, 34% support Israeli control of the enclave. This finding presents a negative bias given the unlikelihood of Israeli control over Gaza without full occupation of the territory. Therefore, it can be assumed with a high degree of certainty that support for Israeli control of Gaza will diminish when it becomes clear that this entails a full Israeli occupation. Accordingly, when examining the public's long-term vision of the Palestinian issue, a relative majority support separation from the Palestinians (40%), with the preferred way option being implementation of the two-state solution, while only 23% support annexing the territories to Israel.

Dr. Maya Sion-Tzidkiyahu, Director of Mitvim's Israel-Europe Relations Program: The EU suffered a blow in Israeli public opinion during the war. The perception of the EU as a "friend" of Israel has declined (from 33% last year to 23%) while its perception as an "adversary" has increased (from 39% to 54%). A 6% gap between the EU as an opponent or friend in the 2023 survey has mushroomed to 31% this year. This shift in public opinion reflects the change from strong EU support for Israel after 7.10 to subsequently harsh criticism of its actions. Even in the center-left camp, it's hard to find many EU supporters this year. On the other hand, asked about the three countries most important to Israel (other than the US), the public ranked three European states at the top of the list - the UK (44%), Germany (41%) and France (30%). The public now attaches more importance to them than to Russia and China, both of which suffered a significant decline in Israeli public opinion (-20% and -18%, respectively). Russia dropped from first to fifth place in the public's rankings, below Egypt. A third finding regarding attitudes toward Europe emerges from questions regarding a role for the Europe in "the day after" Gaza and the West Bank following the war, with a majority not interested in a role for Europe in Gaza (41%) nor in the West Bank (50%). In other words, the public perceives relations with Europe's top powers as important, but views the EU as biased towards the Palestinians and hostile to Israel, and its involvement as detrimental to Israel's room for maneuver in the West Bank and its international standing.

The vast majority of the Israeli public also displays disinterest in the fate of Gaza's residents, being far more concerned with their own security: While 34% said Europe could participate in a civilian multinational force to replace the IDF for an interim period after the war, only 7% supports a role for the organization in providing humanitarian aid or participating in the reconstruction and rehabilitation of Gaza from its ruins (15%).

The public understands that whoever plays a role in the region can also influence the shaping of the day after, and most are not interested in providing the Europe with such a foothold. But despite the clear majority of Israelis who oppose European involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Europe and the EU will play key roles on the day after the war in stabilizing the Palestinian Authority, encouraging its reform, and serving as a major humanitarian aid provider in Gaza. Europe is committed to Israel's security and Israel would therefore do well to engage in constructive political dialogue with the organization and its member states on utilizing their experience and tools to improve the security and lives of Israelis and Palestinians.

Nadav Tamir, Mitvim Board Member and J-Street Israel Director: One of the most striking findings in Mitvim's annual Foreign Policy Index is the gap between the public's understanding of the importance of relations with the United States and its assessment that Donald Trump is better for Israel than Kamala Harris. Given the clear understanding that the Biden Doctrine seeks to turn the Oct. 7 tragedy into an opportunity to strengthen Israel's security through regional arrangements, the fear of Harris and support for Trump is, to say the least, bizarre. This stems from a combination of ignorance regarding the two presidential candidates, furthered by efforts from the political right in both the US and Israel to portray Harris as ideologically or politically aligned with extremists in the Democratic Party who regularly oppose Israel.

The reality could not be more different. Harris has demonstrated her commitment to Israel's security throughout her public career, and her foreign policy is likely to be very similar to Biden's. As reflected at the Democratic Convention in Chicago and in the party's platform, Harris has no intention of stepping back from a full US commitment to Israel's security, despite criticism from some Democrats. The Republican Party, on the other hand, is composed of evangelicals and isolationists. Evangelical beliefs in rebirth regard chaos as a necessary condition in our region, where many will die and the rest will convert to Christianity. Isolationists reject any policy that does not immediately and directly benefit the US and are therefore willing to abandon alliances with Ukraine, NATO, South Korea, Taiwan, and, yes, Israel. Equally bizarre is the overwhelming public support for Trump, despite the lack of understanding that his corruption, misogyny, racism, and narcissism make him untrustworthy. The Israeli public needs to recognize that Harris holds great promise for the State of Israel, while Trump presents a clear and present danger.

Orni Livny, Mitvim Deputy Director: Our annual survey reinforces familiar gender research findings. Women are more moderate than men, more critical of the current Israeli leadership, more likely to support political arrangements, more appreciative of the US's importance in ensuring Israel's survival, and slightly more optimistic about the future. As in previous surveys, while men tend to express strong opinions on all issues – even those they don't fully understand – women are less confident in their positions on foreign policy matters, preferring not to express an opinion when they lack sufficient knowledge on the subject. Women's stances are most surprising regarding their choice of US presidential candidate who would best serve Israel's interests. An overwhelming majority of women (77%)

expressed confidence in Donald Trump, while only a tiny minority (13%) saw Kamala Harris as a good candidate for Israel (10% said there is no difference between the two). On one hand, the lack of support for a female candidate is disappointing: if women don't promote women, men can't be expected to do so. On the other hand, this response reflects a political opinion regarding who women think is better for Israel, rather than support for a candidate solely because she is a woman. However, the fact that women prefer to see the world's most influential power led by a chauvinist who belittles women is disturbing, suggesting there is still a long way to go in changing Israeli gender perceptions.

Eitan Ishai, Director of Mitvim's Middle East and North Africa Program: The uncertainties of the war in Gaza and the flare-up in other Middle Eastern arenas have prompted the vast majority of the Israeli public to favor decisiveness. While the public is divided on the question of the necessary decisions on various issues presented in the survey, a large majority of Israelis clearly believe the status quo that preceded Oct. 7 is untenable. For example, only 8% support continuing with the limited fighting against Iran and its proxies and only 5% support maintaining the status quo with Hezbollah on the northern border. Even in the context of the "day after" in the Gaza Strip, only 2% expressed support for continued control by a weakened Hamas.

This trend flies in the face of government strategy over the past 15 years of "managing the conflict" with the Palestinians and engaging in an endless 'war between the wars' campaign against the Iran-led radical axis. The public disagreement over ways to resolve these issues largely embodies the division of Israeli society. One camp is guided by the principle of Israel as a "people alone will dwell". It supports military moves against Iran and its proxies and rejects a political settlement with the Palestinians, even at the price of increasing separation and ostracism from the international community. The other camp supports broad political moves, including normalization with moderate Arab states, an arrangement aimed at establishing a Palestinian state, and a US-led coalition to deal with the threat posed by the Iran-led axis.

Bar Rapaport, Coordinator of Mitvim's Political-Climate Sustainability Project: The public is divided on the issue of humanitarian aid to Gaza. Half of the respondents said Israel should act to prevent a humanitarian crisis, some guided by moral considerations (20%), others (32%) by Israeli self-interest in protecting its own public's health and the country's international standing. The remaining respondents (48%) said Israel should not have any interest in the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip. Stabilizing the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip is a critical issue for preserving Israel's moral character, its values as a democratic and liberal state, and its diplomatic relations with countries around the world. The war in Gaza exemplifies even more strongly the concept of "one health" – the need for environmental and human health on both sides of the border. The sewage, waste and living conditions in Gaza are breeding grounds for diseases that could affect Israel as well, and fertile ground for the forces of chaos and terror. Israelis must be made to understand that stability in Gaza means resilience in Israel and that a humanitarian strategy in the Gaza Strip also plays a significant role in shaping moderate Palestinian rule there and in harnessing regional and international partners in Gaza's reconstruction. As with the climate crisis, this is a challenge that Israel cannot face alone, requiring it to harness moderate regional forces to work together.

Dr. Ehud Eiran, Mitvim Board Member: Most of the public prefers to deal with the Iranian challenge within the framework of a US and regional coalition and/or diplomatic

efforts. About 32% of the public believes that creating a direct channel of communications with Iran will benefit Israel, and only 18% believe such a move would harm Israel's interests. At the same time, most of the public does not believe that an agreement with the Palestinians will advance Israel's goals vis-à-vis Iran. These positions appear to reflect a mature strategic vision and awareness of the complexity of the situation. For example, although one-third of the public prefers direct military action against Iran, the majority support for other means seems to reflect an understanding of the limitations of Israel's power in the face of this challenge. The most obvious exception is the lack of a link, in the view of most Israelis, between the Palestinian issue and the Iranian one.

Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's assertion that solving the Palestinian problem is an important tool in dealing with Iran holds true 30 years on. Resolving the conflict with the Palestinians will erode the legitimacy of the campaign by Iran and its proxies against Israel, pave the way for partnership with moderate countries in the region vis-à-vis Tehran, and free up Israeli resources to advance regional cooperation. Israel's strategic community must be seized with the imperative of inculcating public understanding of the inherent link between these issues and of the need to resolve the Palestinian issue as a strategic Israeli goal of the highest order.

Dr. Ilai Saltzman, Mitvim Board Member: Although Israeli society is the most polarized it has been since the state was founded 76 years ago, both due to the regime coup and the fallout of the Oct. 7 disaster, the survey appears to reflect broad public consensus, including between Jews and Arabs, in assessing Israeli foreign and security policies as being at a historic nadir. Moreover, the Israeli public gives poor grades to the foreign minister and the ministry he heads. This appears to reflect the view, also held by the US administration and other major allies, that the Israeli government is acting irresponsibly and without a sober strategic vision regarding the campaign in Gaza and other volatile sites in the Middle East. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the Israeli public believes that Israel-US relations are better today than they were last year, apparently due to the Biden Administration's overwhelming backing following Oct. 7. This position diametrically diverges from the rather critical attitude that the prime minister and some right-wing ministers are displaying towards Washington and President Biden, specifically.

The necessity of maintaining and improving relations with the administration and the American public is unequivocally reflected in the importance the Israeli public attributes to the relations with the United States that are vital to Israel's survival and restraining Iran through a political-security coalition. In other words, Israelis understand that without continued military, diplomatic, and economic support from the United States, Israel's survival over time is not at all guaranteed. This contrasts with the views of a significant and vocal part of the government, including the Religious Zionism party, whose international situational awareness, including in the context of increased Jewish terrorism in the West Bank and aspirations for annexation of the territory, reflects a very narrow and ideological worldview.

Former Ambassador Michael Harari, Mitvim Research and Policy Fellow: One of the main and frightening consequences of Israel's "Iron Sword" war against Hamas is its potential transformation into a pariah state. The expressions of shock and solidarity with Israel over the barbaric Hamas attack on Oct. 7 have been replaced by condemnations and a steady deterioration in global support. The survey findings appear to reflect an understanding of this process and concern among most of the public (57%). Still, many are not worried or only slightly worried (38%), reflecting the difficulty in proving to the general

public that we are nearing the edge of a slippery and dangerous cliff. Convincing Israelis of this threat is a rather long process, with no clear milestones that can be used to illustrate the danger. Israel's position as a defendant in international courts (the ICC, ICJ) is no small matter, regardless of what we might think of their objectivity and fairness. The stubborn question of how to resolve the conflict with the Palestinians is equally alarming. Even those who support a package deal that includes agreement with the Palestinians and Saudi normalization do not necessarily realize the severity of continued occupation in terms of the Western-liberal arena to which Israel should aspire to belong. The survey findings that only half (52%) support an Israeli effort to prevent a humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip, and many (48%) believe "the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip should not concern Israel" call this aspiration into question.

Israel has embarked on a "leper track". The only way to halt and reverse this process is by convincing Israelis that occupation of the territories is the root of many of the country's problems, and that accommodation with the Palestinians is vital to maintaining Israel's democratic and Jewish character. It is still possible to reach an agreement safeguarding Israel's vital interests, albeit while taking calculated risks with which Israel, a regional military and technological powerhouse, can deal. This reality reflecting mirror must be held up to the Israeli public, long held captive by the conviction that Israel does not have a Palestinian partner. To the extent that the political opposition fails to present and advance an alternative vision and policy on the Palestinian issue, we will continue to deteriorate.

Prof. Arie Kacowicz, Mitvim Research and Policy Fellow: The most striking finding of this Index is the relatively broad support (55%) for an international diplomatic initiative, which includes the United States and moderate Arab states such as Saudi Arabia, to reach a regional agreement that includes the establishment of a demilitarized Palestinian state in the not-too-distant future. In the same context, 42% of Israelis prefer the replacement of the Hamas government in Gaza with an alternative Palestinian one, in contrast to Prime Minister Netanyahu's unrealistic position regarding "total victory" and the full military occupation of the Gaza Strip. Moreover, 46% of the Israelis who responded to the survey believe that in the immediate term, a multinational peacekeeping force involving moderate Arab states should be established to replace both Israel and Hamas in ruling Gaza (whereas only 38% of the Israelis believe that the IDF will effectively control Gaza in the coming years). Thus, most Israelis express a far more nuanced, complex, and sophisticated position than the simplistic and erroneous choice of "either Israel or Hamas" regarding the future of the Gaza Strip. Even if direct Israeli support for the establishment of a Palestinian state remains relatively low (only 31%), it is higher than any other alternative; i.e., annexation, status quo, unilateral separation, or a one-state solution. Hence, it should be reiterated that most Israelis are ready to contemplate the establishment of a Palestinian state, within the framework of a "package deal," the main components of which include normalization (i.e., peace and diplomatic relations) with Saudi Arabia, and the establishment of a US-led regional alliance against Iran.

Dr. Roei Kibrik, Mitvim Research Director: Mitvim's annual Foreign Policy Index indicates that the Israeli public believes Israel has reached a period of inevitable decisions. Beyond the polarization that emerges between a (not large) majority of the public that seeks pragmatic solutions to problems while understanding the complexities and searching for partners, and a (not insignificant) part of the public that supports a religious-messianic view of an isolated and independent Israel, there is also a return to conventional wisdom. The public understands, for the most part, the importance of the United States and of other

Western democracies (Germany, the UK and France) to the country's survival, more so than the importance of either China or Russia. The normalization of relations with several moderate regional states, portrayed as proof that Israel can integrate into the region without resolving the Palestinian problem, has given way to the understanding that Israel cannot ignore the bloody local conflict. On this issue, and on the matter of Israel's security, the public attributes importance to relations with Egypt and Jordan.

Nevertheless, despite public desire for membership in the liberal-democratic world that has its back, Israelis also reject its values to a great extent and are unwilling to accept normative criticism of their country. These views are evidenced in answers regarding relations with the European Union and rejection of an Israeli and European role in easing Gaza's humanitarian crisis (43% say Israel should have no interest in the problem, and only 18% adopt a moral argument in favor of Israeli involvement). Beyond the normative rejection that calls into question Israel's belonging to the liberal-democratic world, the Israeli public has yet to recognize that even pragmatic considerations should dictate an end to the occupation as the only way to achieve security, successfully deal with threats from Iran and its proxies, and lead a process of de-radicalization in the region in cooperation with moderate regional forces. Respondents tend to sever and distance the connection between the conflict with the Palestinians and the country's other challenges. In other words, while professing to demand strategic and binding decisions, the Israeli public is unwilling to pay the necessary price – the evacuation of settlements and the establishment of a Palestinian state.

Thus, Netanyahu's long-held conflict management approach rather than its solution is now being promoted under far less advantageous conditions. Israel is engaged in fighting in the south and north, refuses to discuss an alternative to Hamas, continues annexing the West Bank in order to prevent negotiations on a future Palestinian state, faces limited effectiveness of its struggle against Iran and its proxies and allows the Iranian nuclear program to advance – even as it continues to distance itself from the democratic-liberal camp. This is reflected both in the public's view of Israel's relations with the world and of its domestic identity.