

Building Networks in the Shadows of War: Mapping Challenges and Opportunities

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A. Introduction

On September 22, 2023, a joint project between the U.S. Department of State (through the U.S. Embassy in Israel) and Mitvim – The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies – officially began. The project's goal, as outlined in the signed contract, was:

“To build a new civil-society-based network of regional thinkers and policy experts who will cooperate in strategic dialogues, roundtables, training seminars, and joint policy proposals involving a new generation of think tanks and experts in the region.”

The project was not merely wishful thinking but rather a continuation of, and response to, regional developments in the preceding years. During this period, a gradual and ongoing process emerged, seemingly dismantling long-standing barriers between Israel and various actors in the Arab and Muslim worlds. Beyond shared political, economic, and security interests, another type of rapprochement appeared – one that could be described as conceptual – manifesting in the growing acceptance of Israel as an organic and integral part of the Middle East. This process culminated in the Abraham Accords and the formal normalization of relations between Israel and several Arab states.

In this context, fostering a network of regional research institutes and think tanks aimed to support the promotion of peace processes and cooperations, and to deepen and expand normalization, making it “more profound, multilayered, and resilient, capable of withstanding political turmoil.”

Unexpectedly, such turmoil erupted almost immediately. Exactly two weeks after the project's official launch, on October 7, 2023, Hamas launched a deadly attack on Israel, triggering a devastating war that quickly reverberated across the Middle East. This war,

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which remains unresolved at the time of writing, has significantly impacted nearly every aspect of Israeli-Arab relations.

In fact, the stark contrast between the project's goals and the ensuing destruction, violence, and widespread shock was almost unimaginable.

This paper serves as an initial preparatory report within the framework of the joint State Department-Mitvim project. It outlines the challenges we faced due to the war, the ways we attempted to address them, and the opportunities that, to our surprise, ultimately led to real connections and a public Israeli-Arab dialogue.

B. Going into “Silent Mode”

As an Israeli institute committed to improving Israel's foreign policy, strengthening its regional integration, and advancing Israeli-Palestinian peace, Mitvim suddenly found itself in a complex reality.

For years, Mitvim has maintained diverse contacts across the Middle East – some discreet and confined to closed discussions, others open and public. At the same time, we continuously worked to expand these circles of dialogue and cooperation.

The first months of the war marked a significant setback. Planned meetings and forums were cancelled, and existing ties were put on hold. Suddenly, a cloud of uncertainty loomed over many of our programs and projects, and indeed, over our fundamental mission of integrating Israel into the region.

Notably, we did not experience direct hostility from individuals or institutions, nor did we encounter outright declarations of severed ties. However, the tone of our partners' responses made it clear that maintaining ties with us had become uncomfortable for them, to say the least.

This realization led us to understand that we were facing what we termed a “silent mode.” The war had fundamentally altered the regional order within which we had operated. We heard similar accounts from our Israeli colleagues – many Arabs were hesitant to engage with Israelis at this time. While they did not necessarily sever existing relationships outright, they were stepping back. This uncertainty posed a serious challenge: Was this a temporary situation, or had the war inflicted a lasting setback on years of relationship-building?

Faced with this new reality, we sought to map out the changes that had taken place and the challenges confronting Israelis in maintaining regional ties. We also recognized that Mitvim was not alone – other Israeli researchers and institutions were facing similar difficulties. As a result, we initiated a series of meetings with Israeli colleagues from research institutes, academia, and individual experts, all of whom had maintained relationships with regional actors before the war.

These meetings had two primary objectives: First, to better understand the challenges, difficulties, and potential opportunities. Second, to explore avenues for collaboration among Israelis to counteract this silent mode.

We posed several key questions: What feedback were they receiving from their regional counterparts? Had attitudes shifted? Had they encountered resistance? What successes or failures had they experienced? And critically – how could we break this imposed silence?

Their responses varied in certain details – some more troubling, others more encouraging – but also revealed shared experiences. Like us, our colleagues reported a significant decline in the frequency and depth of their interactions with Arab and Muslim partners.

Some encountered explicit hostility. One Israeli researcher working at an institute abroad recounted how an Arab colleague publicly resigned in protest over the institute's ties with Israelis – only to later return.

However, most accounts resembled our own experience at Mitvim. Rather than outright hostility, the prevailing sentiment was caution. Even in cases where governments or institutions had not formally severed ties, the public mood, fuelled by distressing images from Gaza, had solidified around support for the Palestinians and a perception of Israel as the cause of their suffering. In such a charged atmosphere, our Arab colleagues – directly or indirectly, and usually politely – indicated that engaging with Israelis had become too sensitive. As one interviewee put it, “They have entered silent mode, and neither they nor we know when they will come out of it.”

Through these discussions, we realized that while the challenges were significant, they were not insurmountable. Despite the silence, no regional partner had officially cut ties with us or our Israeli colleagues. In many cases, private conversations continued, often expressing concern over the war and hopes for its swift resolution.

Moreover, many of our partners appeared eager to resume engagement when circumstances allowed. They recognized the shifting geopolitical landscape and viewed Israel as an essential player in shaping the region's future. Beyond mere curiosity about Israel and Israelis, many saw Mitvim as a valuable source of expertise that aligned with their interests. Notably, some even considered our partnership more important than before. As repeatedly mentioned in our meetings and conversations, they saw us as speaking "their language."

These insights helped us understand that we were dealing with a delicate and complex situation – but not a boycott, which initially raised our concerns. We were pleased to discover that our regional partners had no interest in severing ties with us, let alone boycotting us. Instead, they preferred to proceed with caution and wait for political conditions to enable a return to relations – and potentially create stronger ones.

C. "From Think Tanks to Thinkers" – Speaking to Individuals

Throughout this period, we have made a concerted effort to maintain existing connections and, where possible, establish new ones with regional actors. Our experience, along with insights gained from discussions with Israeli colleagues, made it clear that one potential way to overcome the "silent mode" was by forging direct connections with individuals rather than institutions.

This shift in approach – what we came to call "from think tanks to thinkers" – was driven by necessity but also by opportunity. While institutions and organizations often face political and structural constraints, individual intellectuals, researchers, and professionals have greater flexibility in choosing whom they engage with. By reaching out to Arab scholars on a personal level, we found that many were still open to dialogue, even if their institutions remained officially disengaged. Some were hesitant to speak publicly, but in private conversations, they expressed a willingness to maintain and even deepen their intellectual exchange with Israelis.

Engaging with individuals rather than formal institutions also allowed for more nuanced and meaningful discussions. In these one-on-one interactions, conversations were less constrained by official positions and more reflective of personal curiosity, shared academic interests, and mutual recognition of the region's complexities. These direct dialogues have not only helped sustain connections during this difficult period but may also serve as a

foundation for rebuilding broader institutional ties in the future. If anything, this experience reaffirmed that while politics may shift, intellectual curiosity and the pursuit of knowledge remain powerful forces that can bridge even the widest divides.

D. Questions and Dilemmas

As we navigated this challenging landscape, we faced several strategic dilemmas in our engagement with regional actors. One of the most pressing questions was whether to address the overarching political issues head-on or shift focus to "softer" topics such as climate change, technological collaboration, and economic development. While discussing major political conflicts carried the risk of further entrenching divisions, sidestepping them entirely could render our conversations superficial or disconnected from the core concerns of both us and our partners. Striking a balance between acknowledging political realities and identifying shared, less contentious areas for dialogue became an ongoing challenge – one that required flexibility and a deep understanding of our counterparts' sensitivities.

Another critical consideration was the structure of our meetings and whether multilateral or bilateral formats were more effective. Direct one-on-one discussions might foster trust and candor, but they might also risk isolation, as regional actors hesitated to be seen engaging with Israelis alone. In that sense, introducing a third-party mediator could perhaps help creating a sense of neutrality, allowing for more open exchanges. Yet, even when dialogue is successful, another dilemma emerged: Should these interactions remain private to protect participants from backlash, or should we publicize them to counter the narrative that Israeli-Arab engagement had collapsed? While discretion could allow relationships to continue under the radar, the lack of public visibility risked reinforcing the very silence we were trying to overcome.

E. Initiating Talks and Meetings

Despite the initial silence and uncertainty, our efforts to reestablish dialogue gradually revealed an encouraging reality: our regional partners remained deeply interested in discussions on regional de-escalation and integration. Even amid the ongoing war, these topics resonated as shared concerns that transcended immediate political divisions. Time and again, we encountered a recurring sentiment – our partners viewed Israel not as an external player but as an essential stakeholder in shaping the region's stability and future.

This recognition extended beyond mere pragmatism; many saw engagement with Israelis as a necessary step in addressing broader regional challenges. The understanding that no lasting regional framework could be built in Israel's absence offered a vital opening for renewed conversations. In that sense, another key point was the understanding among regional partners that the Israeli landscape is not monolithic. They could distinguish between the Israeli government and the State of Israel, as well as between Mitvim and other Israeli entities.

This realization translated into concrete actions. As our outreach efforts expanded, we saw increasing openness among regional partners to not only maintain private discussions but also initiate new frameworks for structured dialogue. Some of our counterparts, who had initially stepped back in the early days of the war, began to reengage, signalling a readiness to speak more openly and consider long-term cooperation. While some conversations remained cautious, there was a noticeable shift – a willingness to move beyond passive observation and actively explore ways to rebuild channels of communication. These developments reinforced our belief that despite the war's immediate setbacks, the long-term trajectory of regional integration remained intact, and in some cases, even gained new urgency.

F. What We Realized

Following these initial discussions, several key insights emerged that helped shape our approach moving forward. While the prospect of open, public dialogue remained a long-term goal, we recognized that starting with closed discussions was the more practical and strategic path. These private exchanges provided the necessary space to establish trust, define a shared framework, and move forward gradually – laying the groundwork for eventual public engagement when the time was right.

Additionally, we came to appreciate the importance of flexibility in shaping the agenda. Rather than imposing predefined discussion topics, we found value in letting our partners steer the conversation, identifying subjects that resonated most with them. This openness allowed for more organic and meaningful exchanges. Perhaps most significantly, we realized that our initial caution had been somewhat excessive.

The reactions we received indicated that we could afford to be more assertive in our outreach – proactively seeking collaboration rather than waiting for an invitation. Far from

being deterred by our engagement, many regional partners appeared receptive, reinforcing the notion that Israeli participation in regional discourse remained not only viable but, in many cases, essential.

G. A Significant Step Forward in Regional Dialogue

Our persistence in fostering dialogue bore tangible results. Not only did we succeed in reestablishing meaningful conversations with regional partners, but we also managed to take a significant step forward – bringing these discussions into the public sphere. This breakthrough materialized in a regional panel at the Mitvim Annual Conference, where Israeli-Palestinian peace-making was discussed within a broader regional framework (available in this link). The panel featured a diverse lineup, including Palestinian, Saudi, Emirati, Egyptian, and Jordanian participants, all of whom engaged in an open and constructive exchange of perspectives. This moment was not only symbolic but also substantive, demonstrating that despite the political turbulence, there remained a willingness – both regionally and internationally – to explore pathways for peace and cooperation. An important realization emerged during our outreach efforts: the involvement of Palestinians was a crucial step in unlocking broader regional engagement. As soon as a Palestinian representative agreed to participate in the discussions, it signalled legitimacy to other regional players, prompting them to agree to participate. This reaffirmed a central truth: the Palestinian issue cannot be bypassed in regional conversations. Efforts to foster broader Israeli-Arab cooperation must always recognize and address the Palestinian cause as an integral component of any future framework for peace.

The panel's public nature underscored a crucial shift: what had begun as cautious, behind-the-scenes discussions had evolved into a visible, forward-looking dialogue, reinforcing the idea that regional integration and Israeli-Palestinian peace-making are interconnected and must be pursued in tandem. Building on this success, we are now working to use this panel as a launching point for further discussions in the coming months, creating additional platforms for engagement and expanding the scope of regional participation.

H. Conclusion

The journey of rebuilding and expanding regional dialogue in the wake of war has reinforced four key insights. First, despite initial setbacks and a period of silence, the fundamental

interest in Israeli-Arab engagement remains intact, particularly when framed around shared regional concerns such as de-escalation, stability, and integration. Second, flexibility and strategic patience are crucial – while public discussions may be the ultimate goal, starting with discreet, trust-building conversations has proven to be the most effective approach, allowing dialogue to evolve organically.

Third, the dilemma of whether to keep contacts private or public remains a delicate one. As we navigated this decision, we came to an understanding – the very act of making these contacts public held strategic value. Publicizing these dialogues was not intended to legitimize relations with Israelis prematurely, but rather to validate the joint struggle to end the war and address the Palestinian issue. By putting the issue front and centre, we created a space where both the Israeli and Palestinian causes could be represented in the pursuit of a broader regional solution. This not only highlighted the importance of the Palestinian issue in forging peace but also provided a platform for presenting an alternative reality to the Israeli public, one where collaboration and dialogue could lead to tangible outcomes.

Finally, our experience has demonstrated that persistence pays off; by actively reaching out, being active in our engagement, and adapting to new realities, we were not only able to sustain connections but also bring them into the public sphere. The regional panel at the Mitvim Annual Conference serves as a testament to the enduring potential of constructive dialogue, laying the groundwork for further collaboration in the months ahead.