



A Pro-Peace Israeli Foreign Policy



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This article is part of a publication series that introduces guiding principles for a new Israeli foreign policy paradigm, based on recommendations by a Mitvim Institute task-team. To read the summary of this paradigm, [click here](#).

A resolution to the Arab-Israeli and Palestinian-Israeli conflicts is a vital national interest of Israel and must be a central goal of its foreign policy. The status quo is unstable and time is not on Israel's side. Thus, Israel must take the initiative to change it, by promoting the two-state vision, honoring previous obligations towards it, refraining from unilateral measures, and working to determine borders that are defensible and recognized by the international community. Such a resolution will foster cooperation with moderate Arab states, improve Israel's global standing and its ties with the West, and reduce anti-Semitism worldwide. As long as the conflict lasts, Israel must minimize the damage created by its continued control over the Palestinians, primarily by strengthening the Palestinian Authority and promoting Israeli-Palestinian cooperation. Israel's foreign policy should emphasize that peace is both a strategic and moral issue.

A. Introduction

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a unique phenomenon in Israeli foreign policy that impacts significantly upon Israel's security, social cohesion, international standing

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and ability to operate in the international arena. The conflict is the hurdle that confronts Israeli diplomacy. On one hand, it is central to Israeli domestic politics. On the other hand, its resolution is a national-security interest of many countries around the world, including Israel's greatest ally, the United States. In the eyes of the international community, Israel's policy towards the conflict and the Palestinians is a litmus test of its democratic nature and thus pivotal to its legitimacy in the eyes of the world. Simultaneously, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict prevents Israel from establishing its borders and formulating a sustainable policy towards the Palestinian National Minority that resides in its midst. Finally, Israel's policy towards the Palestinians impacts significantly upon Jewish communities in the Diaspora, both in terms of how they conduct themselves internally and in terms of how they relate to their surroundings.

Therefore, one would expect that the conflict and its resolution will be prominent features in Israeli foreign policy; however, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), in its capacity as the governmental organ that "formulates, implements, and presents the foreign policy of the Government of Israel,"² generally categorizes the Palestinian issue among its "national security" objectives, which requires an ad hoc response to events as they unfold, such as "deterrence against steep trajectory rocket fire" or "minimizing the damage of Palestinian efforts in the international arena." It is important to note that these goals are not necessarily guiding principles for the ministry's diplomats, however they do point to the prevailing winds within its walls. Thus, it can be understood that current Israeli foreign policy treats the conflict with the Palestinians as a situation that must be managed rather than resolved.

This essay presents the argument that Israel should consider the Palestinian issue and its relations with the Palestinians among the central factors that impact upon the development and implementation of Israel's foreign policy. It will be recommended that in formulating Israel's main foreign policy goals the aspiration for peace and the commitment to resolving the Israeli-Arab and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will be key objectives; conflict management should not be a *gola* but a temporary situation which consequences should be taken into consideration and accordingly suggest the right *modus operandi* in the absence of a peace process.

In reality, there is no need to reinvent the wheel. All that is required is to adopt the principles that Israel already laid out in 1969: "The government will steadfastly strive to attain a lasting peace with Israel's neighbors founded on peace and treaties resulting from direct negotiations between the parties, agreed, secure and recognized borders will be laid down in the peace treaties."²

² From the Annual Reports of the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2011, 2012, and 2013. ² "[Basic Foreign Policy Principles of the Government of Israel](#)," *Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, 15 December 1969.

B. A Historic Right and International Legitimacy: The Unbreakable Connection between the Jewish State and the Division of the Land

The Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel states that Israel was founded “by virtue of our national and historic right and on the strength of the resolution of the United Nations General Assembly.”³ The Zionist aspiration for a national homeland that would be both a home and a shelter for the Jewish people received international affirmation on 29 November 1947 in United Nations Resolution 181, which paved the way for the creation of the Jewish state on part of British Mandatory Palestine. The Partition Plan was based on the facts on the ground in 1947 – the existence of two peoples and two national movements – and on the assumption that both the Jewish and Arab claims to the land have merit, but cannot be reconciled. Therefore, dividing the land was the most practical solution, allowing these contradictory national aspirations to be realized and for both peoples to take their respective place amongst the family of nations and in the United Nations.⁴

While the Jewish community, the *Yishuv*, accepted, in principle, the idea of partition and declared the creation of its own state, the Arab countries and the Arab Higher Committee (the representative of the Palestinians) made every effort to oppose the Partition Plan and, once it was accepted, openly resisted and declared war against Israel. The results of Israel’s War of Independence increased the amount of territory given to the Jewish state, but did not alter the decision that the Jewish state would exist only on part of Mandatory Palestine, and that the future of the Palestinian Arabs in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip would not be determined by Israel. To this day, both left wing and right wing Israeli governments have avoided officially annexing these territories.

Over the years, Israel has debated the future of these territories at length and has examined various alternatives to deal with them. Three main options stand out: The first, is the annexation of the West Bank by Jordan and the annexation of the Gaza Strip by Egypt. The second, is the annexation of these territories by Israel (including the granting of some level of autonomy to the inhabitants). The third option is the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. Whether they believed in the territorial integrity of the land of Israel ('Greater Israel') or in a territorial compromise with the Palestinians, all Israeli governments refused outright the option of a peace agreement or negotiations with any Palestinian organizations until the Oslo Accords. This position embodied a complete disregard for the moral dilemmas and the grave dangers that stem from the military

³ [Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel](#), 14 May 1948.

⁴ Alexander Jakobson and Amnon Rubenstein, *Israel and the Family of Nations: Jewish Nation State and Human Rights* (Tel Aviv and Jerusalem: Schocken Publishing House, 2003).

occupation, even if it is temporary, of a foreign, hostile population that lacks any rights.

A significant change occurred in 1988 when, during his speech before the United Nations General Assembly, Yasser Arafat officially and explicitly announced the Palestinian Liberation Organization's (PLO) willingness to reach a peace agreement with the State of Israel and to establish a Palestinian state in the land conquered by Israel in 1967. This was the breakthrough that led to the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993. The Accords set out two new foundational principles for the relations between Israel and the Palestinians: mutual recognition between the two national movements and an agreement on the principle of "land for peace." The Oslo Accords were the cause of great controversy within the Israeli public, but every Israeli prime minister from then until this day has accepted its principles and its core idea of a two-state solution.

The existence of a Jewish state and the division of the land are, indeed, two sides of the same coin, which lay at the foundation of the broad national agreement around resolving the conflict based on the principle of two-states for two peoples. Among the public and the political leadership – and even among the extremists that would forgo the country's democratic nature – there is an understanding that a Jewish state cannot be sustained without the division of the land between the two peoples. As such, annexation without the granting of citizenship as well as the perpetuation of military occupation, are not realistic options. In addition, international support for Israel is based upon the assumption that an agreement resulting in the division of the land will be reached. Therefore, promoting a political agreement with the Palestinians and reaching an understanding regarding the status of the Territories (separate from Israel) are vital and central Israeli interests.

C. Conflict Management or Conflict Resolution

The developments since the signing of the Oslo Accords, notably the failure of the Camp David Summit of 2000 and the outbreak of the Second Intifada, delivered a significant blow to the belief that the conflict can be solved based on the two-states for two people paradigm. Years of Israeli control of the Territories on one hand, and violent Palestinian struggle on the other, deepened the animosity, suffering and the conflict between the parties, and created a reality of overwhelming distrust.

Since then, the notion that the conflict is unresolvable and thus Israel must do its best to manage it is gaining weight. This idea is at the core of the unilateral approach, which led to the disengagement from the Gaza Strip in 2005. It also contributed to the schism between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, which manifested itself in the Hamas takeover of Gaza in July 2007 and the rift between the PLO and Hamas.

One cannot ignore the fact that the past is replete with failed efforts to resolve the conflict through a regional approach, whether through initiatives led by external actors (i.e. the United Nations or the United States) or those of regional actors (i.e. the Arab League). Nonetheless, the Palestinians' actions at the United Nations, as well as the international support they have garnered, prove that the status quo is unstable and that time is not on Israel's side.

The conflict management approach, which does recognize the dangers that stem from stagnation in the peace process, damages Israel's international standing. Through promoting negotiations, it is possible to minimize the friction between Israel and the Palestinians. Negotiations will also sideline unilateral diplomatic efforts to force a resolution on the parties, as well as diminish the likelihood of any escalation and outbreak of violence. Any measures taken must be a sincere attempt to move towards a final-status agreement and should be supported by both the Israeli and Palestinian peoples, as well as by the international community.

D. The Centrality of the Conflict in Israeli Foreign Policy

Thus far, the justification has been laid out as to why an advancement of the peace process is a vital Israeli interest; however, it is also an international interest. The issues of conflict management and resolution, as well as Israel's policies in the Occupied Territories are at the center of Israel's relations with its allies, other countries in the region, and with the rest of the international community.

The **United States** views the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a key to reducing the Arab and Muslim world's hostility towards the United States, as well as a tool to achieve other geopolitical and strategic goals, such as the American withdrawal from Iraq and its strategy for dealing with Iran. The American government's desire to promote a resolution to the conflict and bridge the divide between Israelis and Palestinians recently manifested itself in Secretary of State John Kerry's diplomatic efforts in 2013-14. During these negotiations, it was evident that Israel's positions significantly affected the relations between the United States and the State of Israel.

Moreover, in recent years, specifically following the latest round of violence in Gaza and against the backdrop of the rise of radical forces in the Middle East, there is a clearer alignment of interests between the United States and its moderate Arab allies – Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, and the Palestinian Authority. The Israeli-Palestinian peace process significantly impacts upon the ability of this alignment of interests to function adequately on the ground. The peace process has the capacity to bolster the United States' regional standing and to deepen its strategic relationship with its allies in the region, including Israel.

Since the 1970's, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has increasingly impacted Israeli-European relations. During the recent negotiations, the European Union

offered to upgrade Israel to a special status if they succeeded in reaching an agreement with the Palestinians. Yet, following “Operation Cast Lead,” which received fierce criticism in Europe, the European Union froze its 2008 decision to upgrade its relations with Israel.

Recently, Israeli policy in the Occupied Territories has been the subject of increased criticism by **European** countries. Europe’s desire to differentiate between the “legitimate” Israel, which is situated west of the Green Line, and “illegitimate” Israel, situated east of the Green Line, is evident in its actions. Specifically, the labeling of products from over the Green Line and the condition that European Union funds may not be provided to Israeli entities operating in the Territories.

Israel’s diplomatic relations with **Latin America** are also directly impacted by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This is a result of the large Arab communities in these countries, as well as the fact that criticism of Israel fits well with anti-American trends that are prevalent in these countries. Evidence of the impact of the conflict was clearly seen during “Operation Protective Edge,” when a number of Latin American countries recalled their ambassadors to Israel as an act of protest.

Israel’s status at the United Nations is quite low because it is not formally included in any regional groups. Over the years, Israel has devoted most of its attention to the essential task of trying to minimize the impact of the automatic majority that exists against the State in nearly every United Nations institution and framework, with the exception of the United Nations Security Council, in which the United States, Israel’s main ally, maintains veto power. The majority against Israel is evident in several votes taken by various United Nations agencies to grant the Palestinian Authority observer status, despite the risk that such decisions could affect these agencies’ United States funding. Israel, which opposed the Palestinian petitions for upgraded status, lost this battle time and time again

The Jewish communities in the Diaspora – in the United States, Europe and Latin America – are also affected by the conflict. Israel’s rule over the Palestinian people is the cause of polarization within Jewish communities. Moreover, the escalation of the conflict, particularly military operations, leads to an increase in anti-Semitic attacks against Jews in the Diaspora.

The last round of hostilities in Gaza gave light to the extent to which Israel is vulnerable to international attacks and other efforts to erode its legitimacy. The armed struggle between two parties with staggeringly unequal military strength makes it very difficult for Israel to explain its position and the basis of an Israeli operation’s legitimacy. During “Operation Protective Edge,” events in Gaza spilled over to other countries and resulted in anti-Israel protests that shaped both public opinion and the political leadership’s view of the situation.

Therefore, the conflict cannot be separated from Israel's bilateral relations with other countries or from its multilateral ties with regional and international bodies. The improvement of Israel's ties with the Palestinians will undeniably lead to an improvement of Israel's broader foreign relations, especially with the United States and its European allies. Conversely, increased Israeli control over the Occupied Territories, especially the expansion of the settlement enterprise, will undoubtedly lead to the further deterioration of Israel's relations with its allies - it is unavoidable. It is important to emphasize that the resolution of the conflict will not inevitably bring about an end to anti-Semitic trends or the opposition to the existence of the State of Israel; however, it will certainly contribute to the significant decline of such sentiments and to Israel's ability to operate within broad coalitions in order to eradicate these phenomena.

E. Guiding Principles for a Pro-Peace Israeli Foreign Policy

1. Peace as a Vital Component of Israeli Security

The diplomatic arena and foreign policy initiatives can play a critical role in preempting strategic threats. Israel's diplomatic and national security interests require a constant and consistent effort to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and sign peace accords.

Israel should see the Israeli-Palestinian conflict not only as an existing threat, but also as an obstacle to achieving security and to safeguarding its future. Israel must abandon the traditional "zero sum game" approach and adopt a proactive stance that advocates more "win-win" scenarios between Israel and the Palestinians, based on the premise that the achievements of one side would not come at the expense of the other. This approach takes into consideration the fact that Israel's position of strength allows her to act accordingly. A good example of this approach is the ongoing security cooperation between Israel and the Palestinians in the West Bank.

A) Peace as a Means to Establish Recognized and Secured Borders – The lines that delineate Israel's borders (whether they are recognized by the international community or not) are the result of ceasefire agreements, peace accords, and a reality on the ground that was dictated by Israel (through annexation or unilateral withdrawal). Two peace agreements stand out among others: The first is the peace agreement with Egypt, which determined Israel's southern border with the Sinai Peninsula. The second, is the peace agreement with Jordan, which set Israel's border along the eastern bank of the Jordan River. Yet, the status of the Occupied Territories – the West Bank and the Gaza Strip – has not been determined since the 1949 Armistice Agreement. From the 1967 Six Day War until today, these territories have been under Israeli military occupation.

The establishment of recognized borders is the primary means in defining the State's defensible territory. Israel must work to establish defensible borders that are recognized by the international community. Such borders can only be set through arrangements and agreements with those that sit on the other side of these boundaries. Considering the fact that Israel is a small country, surrounded by enemies and lacks strategic depth, these agreements and arrangements, which are based upon mutual interests, have great importance. In times of need, they can be used as defense alliances. Thus, for example, the Israeli peace agreement with Jordan established Israel's eastern line of defense on the border between Jordan and Iraq. Additionally, the establishment of borders through an agreement with the Palestinians would ensure that Jerusalem is recognized as the capital of Israel.

B) Peace as a Means to Counter Iran and Other Security Threats – Iran's hegemonic aspirations in the region, including the aspiration to attain nuclear weapons, as well as the support for its proxies, Hezbollah and Hamas, pose a significant strategic threat to Israel.

Containing the Iranian threat relies upon the ability to maintain a strong coalition led by the United States in partnership with countries in the region, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

The peace process plays an important role in bolstering the United States' regional standing and strengthening its strategic relations with its allies in the region, including Israel. There is no guarantee that a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians will prevent radical forces from taking over a future Palestinian state, but through cooperation with moderate powers it is possible to mitigate such threats.

2. Peace as a Value

Israel's foreign policy, much like that of other countries around the world (especially in the West), should be derived from the values underlying its political partnership, that are reflected in Israel's self-definition as a Jewish and democratic state. In 1969, the value of peace secured a meaningful role among Israel's foreign policy principles, and it appears as part of the country's second foreign policy principle: "The government of Israel will support any step likely to further peace and bring about general and complete disarmament and the complete abolition of armies under agreed international control."⁵

Peace, therefore, is both a universal and democratic value – the preference of peace and diplomacy characterizes the democratic worldview, as well as a paramount core Jewish value – "Seek peace and pursue it" (Psalms 34:15).

⁵ "Basic Foreign Policy Principles of the Government of Israel," *ibid*.

3. A Commitment to Reach an Agreement with the Palestinians

As the advancement of a political solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a vital national interest of the State of Israel; Israel must show an ongoing commitment to the promotion of such a solution, even if the chances of achieving it are low. This commitment must manifest itself in word and deed, to the furthest extent possible. The aim of such measures is to change the reality on the ground and send a clear message to the world that Israel seeks to alter the status quo, bringing about peace and an agreement with the Palestinians.

A) Taking the Initiative – Israel must take the initiative and show how it is working towards the realization of the two-state solution and not hide behind public diplomacy efforts to present all its actions as self-defense. At the same time, Israel must cease any efforts that signal its insincerity to reach an agreement - first and foremost, the ongoing expansion of settlements.

B) Promoting Measures on the Ground – Israel must abide by its commitments under previous agreements, primarily according to the framework of the Road Map. It must transfer territory to the control of the Palestinian Authority and evacuate illegal outposts in coordination with the Palestinian Authority and subject to security considerations. Additionally, Israel must also reconsider its policy vis-à-vis the Gaza Strip. The continuation of a blockade or siege does not contribute to the state of Israel's security.

C) Avoiding Unilateral Steps – Israel should refrain, as much as possible, from unilateral actions, such as the disengagement, and strive to promote diplomatic steps in coordination with officials from the Palestinian Authority. Such efforts would help preserve Israel's standing and bolster moderate Palestinian forces.

4. Establishing Special Relations between Israel and the Palestinian Entity

No other entities in the world share as unique and complex a relationship as the one between Israel and the Palestinians. First and foremost, the parties are engaged in a violent conflict over the division of a shared resource – the land. Even if they reach arrangement regarding the land, Israel and the Palestinians will have to share water and energy resources, and cooperate on matters of trade and economy. The relationship with the Palestinians is unique, in that Palestinians affect Israel as internal and external stakeholders. Accordingly, since the relationship between Israel and the Palestinian is interdependent, any agreement between the parties should aspire to solidify a special relationship status between the two sides that will address their unique reality.

A) Strengthening the Palestinian Authority as a Separate National Entity and Assisting in the Development of the Palestinian State – Israel has

recognized the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people as well as their national claims for self-determination. As a result, Israel must recognize the fact that the Palestinian Authority is a state like entity and accordingly should maintain diplomatic relations (and not just through security institutions) with the Palestinian Authority's national institutions (i.e. the Palestinian Legislative Council). Therefore, Israel must define its relations with the future Palestinian state as part of its diplomatic relationships rather than internal, domestic politics, and should strengthen the Palestinian Authority and assist in the building of the Palestinian state.

B) Bilateral Cooperation – It is essential for Israel to enable, and even initiate Israeli-Palestinian cooperation in international forums that deal with issues of mutual interest. This includes civil, social, and economic cooperation, as well as collaboration on all other areas of mutual agreement.

C) Trilateral Cooperation – Many international actors will be interested in partaking in the establishment of relations with the future Palestinian state. Therefore, it is necessary to create win-win situations in which both Israel and the Palestinians benefit from this cooperation. Furthermore, the sides should work to promote trilateral collaboration (Israeli-Palestinian-third party), as well as Arab-Palestinian or Palestinian-international cooperation. This would strengthen Israel's international standing and improve its relations with these countries.

D) The Palestinian-Arab Minority in Israel – Special attention must be paid to the large Arab-Palestinian minority that lives in Israel (and holds Israeli citizenship). Due to its unique characteristics, this minority has not had any real representation in Palestinian national institutions (with the exception of individuals who as a result of their displacement, emigrated abroad and secured key roles within the Palestinian national movement). Israel must respect the fact that the Arab-Palestinian minority in its midst is an inseparable part of the Palestinian people and thus, recognize the special relationship between this minority and the Palestinian national movement and its institutions. Accordingly, Israel should take steps to normalize relations between the Jewish majority and the Palestinian-Arab minority that reside within its state lines.

E) Good Neighborly Relations and Reconciliation – A conflict that lasts for several years leaves its mark, creating new wounds without letting old scars heal and disappear. With the hope of normalizing relations between the parties, Israel must make concrete efforts to promote good relations between the Israeli and Palestinian societies. They should jointly invest in projects that will encourage each side to get to know the other, as good neighborly relations and meaningful reconciliation are imperative for the future relations between the two entities.