

Alternative Directions for Israeli Foreign Policy on the Eve of an Election Year

Summary of the Mitvim Institute's Second Annual Conference

January 2019

The Mitvim Institute's second annual conference took place in Tel Aviv on December 30, 2018. The conference explored alternative directions for Israeli foreign policy towards the April 2019 general elections. In recent years, Mitvim has formulated a series of guiding principles for a new Israeli foreign policy paradigm – a pro-peace, multi-regional, internationalist, modern and inclusive foreign policy. The conference sought to translate these principles into concrete policy directions, which will enable Israel to improve its foreign policy, increase its regional belonging in the Middle East and Europe, and make progress towards peace with the Palestinians. The conference featured Members of Knesset (MKs) Ofer Shelah and Merav Michaeli, Dr. Nimrod Goren, Dr. Ronen Hoffman, Zehava Galon, Nadav Tamir, Yohanan Plesner, Dr. Maya Sion-Tzidkiyahu, Zouheir Bahloul, Prof. Elie Podeh, and Einat Levi. It was moderated by Nitzan Horowitz and Merav Kahana-Dagan of Mitvim. The conference was held in cooperation with Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, and can be watched (in Hebrew) on Mitvim's [YouTube channel](#).

The vital necessity of developing foreign policy alternatives for Israel

Dr. Nimrod Goren, Head of the Mitvim Institute

Dr. Nimrod Goren opened the conference with an overview of the vital need to develop alternatives for Israeli foreign policy. Goren noted that despite Israel's complex diplomatic standing on many fronts, the domestic public and political discourse on the contents, strategy and implementation of Israeli foreign policy is woefully inadequate. Goren attributed this to the absence of a cohesive, national foreign policy paradigm that sets out clear goals and targets to which one can suggest alternatives. This, in turn, stems from political considerations dictating the focus of opposition criticism on the style of the government's foreign policy, rather than on its contents. The opposition also views those at the helm of Israeli foreign policy, led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, as reaching certain diplomatic achievements. It therefore prefers to criticize the government on other issues and to refrain from investing political capital in putting forth foreign policy alternatives.

Goren stressed that Israel's foreign service could be much improved. He pointed to the pre-eminence of the defense discourse and Israel's defense establishment at the expense of foreign policy aspects in advancing national security, even as the challenges Israel is facing are increasingly diplomatic ones. He pointed to the troubling weakness and weakening of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and to Israel's growing affinity for anti-liberal regimes that distance it from democratic states and exacerbate the crisis with liberal Jewish communities in the US and Europe.

According to Goren, foreign policy alternatives are vital given that Israel's current policies have resulted in a freeze of the peace process and distanced the two-state solution. Israel's current foreign policy also seeks to preserve the Palestinian divide between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, ignores the Arab Peace Initiative and the European offer of a Special Privileged Partnership, attacks and weakens the EU, labels criticism of the settlements as anti-Semitism and an attack on Israel, and turns Israel into a controversial partisan issue in the US. Israel's foreign policy can and should be different. It should put an emphasis on strengthening Israel's foreign service, deepen and improve ties with the Middle East and Europe, and promote Israeli-Palestinian peace.

Recognizing the importance of foreign policy for Israel's resilience

Nitzan Horowitz, *Journalist, Policy Fellow at the Mitvim Institute, and former MK*

Nitzan Horowitz stressed that a strong and significant foreign service is a central component in the governance of world-leading nations, but is non-existent in Israel, where the discourse on defense and security issues takes precedence. Foreign policy is further hamstrung by the mistaken, deeply embedded perception that "the whole world is against us" (a claim that is patently absurd given the ultimate proof of the state's very existence and international relations). This state of affairs, Horowitz argues, has a far-reaching impact on Israeli foreign policy, which avoids integration in world affairs and involvement in dealing with global issues, and persists in perceiving foreign criticism as an existential threat.

Horowitz reminded participants how the shrinking democratic space within Israel influences its foreign affairs. In his view, the exaggerated struggle against anti-Israel boycotts and delegitimization, the crisis with Diaspora Jewry, the growing disregard for democratic values and inability to deal with criticism by friendly democratic states are all foreign policy issues stemming from domestic policy trends and measures, and affecting them. Therefore, the issue of Israeli foreign policy is relevant not just for diplomats and experts, but for anyone who holds dear the image and nature of Israeli society. Affecting change in Israeli foreign policy requires a shift in the trends and processes within Israel, not just in its relationship with its neighbors.

The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs should be empowered

Dr. Ronen Hoffman, *Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya; Former Member of Knesset*

Dr. Ronen Hoffman underscored the centrality of foreign policy in Israel's national security. He came out against the dominance of the security discourse within Israel and the public indifference to the absence of a systematic Israeli foreign policy, which he views as a deep cultural and conceptual flaw. According to Hoffman, the voices of diplomacy and foreign policy must be heard around the decision-making table, and have a much larger impact. According to Hoffman, Israel needs a strong foreign service capable of coping with the many challenges it faces, and the authority of the MFA must be enshrined in legislation, especially given its current deliberately weakened state. Israel must also identify and operate within arenas of influence relevant to modern diplomacy, which include religious organizations, social networks and corporations.

Hoffman urged turning Israel's Agency for International Development Cooperation (MASHAV), which operates as part of the MFA, into the spearhead of Israeli public diplomacy and increasing the level of Israeli foreign aid. He also suggested moving the Foreign Trade Administration from the Ministry of Economy to the MFA and establishing additional units within the MFA, including one that will focus on leading international

negotiations. Foreign policy management should be based on more innovative and dynamic data systems, the MFA budget allocation should be significantly increased, and a proper interface must be established between the MFA and other agencies relevant to foreign policy, he said. Hoffman argued that in addition to boosting the MFA, Israel should enhance its diplomatic activity in other important arenas, such as the parliamentary sphere where diplomatic activity is conducted (including with lawmakers from other countries) and where legislation bearing diplomatic implications is enacted.

Israel's foreign relations should include a strong democracy component

Yohanan Plesner, President of the Israel Democracy Institute

Yohanan Plesner spoke of a global crisis of democracy, as reflected in the fact that some 25 once-democratic states are no longer so, that authoritarian states are bolstering centralist control and that even in democratic states, populism is on the rise and the values of liberal-democracy are regressing. The global foreign relations system was built on democratic liberal principles, as were its international institutions. These are all in a state of crisis. The democracy component of Israel's foreign relations should be examined against this backdrop, with the understanding that Israel is not a super-power shaping world order, but is affected by it. The role of democratic values in foreign policy management has given way to a more realistic approach in which values play a less significant role and the impact of educated, professional elites in shaping it is declining. Instead, foreign policy is increasingly influenced by leaders' independent decisions.

The democracy component appears to be of less importance to Israeli foreign relations. This could manifest itself in reduced international pressure on Israel over its undemocratic activity in the Palestinian territories, leaving the issue to be resolved domestically without significant outside intervention. However, one must remember that Israeli foreign policy relies primarily on its relationship with Western democracies, led by the US, and the principles of democracy provide a bridge to those countries and to the American Jewish community. If Israel is no longer perceived as an inherently democratic ally, it risks its special relationship with the US and the strategic relationship with US Jewry, both of which constitute a guarantee of Israel's survival.

Criticizing Israeli policies towards the Palestinians is legitimate

Zehava Galon, former MK and Chair of Meretz

Zehava Galon pointed to the continued occupation, military rule over the Palestinians, and settlement construction as the key issues influencing Israel's character and global standing. She described how the Netanyahu government avoids a substantive debate on resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – whether the future holds one or two states, whether a Palestinian state will be democratic – and focuses instead on preventing any criticism of its policy on the Palestinians. The government does so by discrediting the very act of criticism, dividing Israelis according to their loyalty to the occupation and depicting opponents of the occupation as traitors. The government seeks to delegitimize civil society activists who are in contact with foreign governments, groups and activists, and to discredit any international intervention in its domestic affairs as long as it is critical of Israel. This substantive change is inherently contradictory to the idea of liberal democracy and in tune with regimes that attack civil society organizations and oppose basic human rights.

In order to maintain its policy in the Palestinian territories and repulse all criticism of its actions, the Israeli government attacks anyone who might oppose its policy on the

Palestinians, be they gatekeepers, the media, academia, the cultural sphere, and peace and human rights organizations. Israel's greatest public diplomacy asset – its democratic rule – is becoming less and less relevant. The very presentation of alternatives to Israeli foreign policy becomes a domestic act of opposition to the measures damaging Israeli democracy. Galon urged strong opposition to international alliances that Israeli is forging with those willing to refrain from criticizing its policies or to transfer their country's embassy to Jerusalem, some of whom are dubious characters or outright tyrants. The clearest alternatives to Israel's current foreign policy are disassociating from the occupation, providing hope that the bloody conflict is not here to stay, and proving that Israel can be an enlightened democratic state that enjoys normal foreign relations.

Israel should resolve its crisis with Diaspora Jewry

Nadav Tamir, *Former diplomat and policy advisor to President Shimon Peres; Board Member at the Mitvim Institute*

Nadav Tamir described the growing divide between Israel and world Jewry as a key strategic issue linked to the basis of Israel's self-determination and threatening its very existence as the democratic nation state of the Jewish people. Tamir underlined the fact that anti-liberal trends within Israel are nurturing the divide between Israel and world Jewry, and that Israel and Israelis have long regarded Diaspora Jews as an instrument of financial aid and lobbying activity or as a potential *Aliya* (immigration to Israel) pool. He added that one cannot create a relationship of "Jewish peoplehood" when adherents of liberal Judaism, who constitute the majority of the Jewish people, are treated as second-class Jews. The State of Israel must become a place of inclusion that accepts every Jew whoever and wherever he is, and it must dismantle the ultra-Orthodox monopoly on decisions that affect Israeli-Diaspora ties.

The attitude that regards the political opinions of world Jewry as a test of their allegiance makes Israel a divisive factor rather than a unifying one. Israel must be open to criticism and embrace those among the Jewish people who disagree with its government's positions, too. Israel must change the paradigm of its relationship with the Diaspora. Such change requires actions that connect people, especially those on the liberal side of the spectrum, through work on joint "Tikun Olam" (loosely translated – building model societies) projects. This ancient Jewish ideal speaks to all Jews in their relationships with each other and with the rest of the world, and could be attractive for the younger generation. According to Tamir, Israel must also create a national project enabling every Israeli high school student to join a Jewish community abroad for a week or two and experience direct contact with its members. Despite the importance of the annual visits by Israeli high school students to the concentration camps in Poland in order to understand Israel's national trauma, meeting living Jews is no less important. For the sake of our joint future, the living are no less important than the legacy of those who are dead.

Foreign policy is a key element of Israel's national security

MK Ofer Shelah, *Yesh Atid, Member of the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee*

MK Ofer Shelah focused his comments on Israel's need to develop a national security paradigm, which is currently absent. According to Shelah, the synergy between diplomacy and defense must serve as a foundation stone of such a paradigm. Shelah provided a concrete example of the problem, saying some 95 percent of the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee's meetings are devoted to defense issues and only about 5 percent to foreign policy. Currently, he said, military and diplomatic activities occur concurrently and

serve each other, unlike times past when diplomacy only kicked in toward the end of military operations. Therefore, Israel needs a strong foreign service, which is perceived as an inherent part of the national security structure, and has an assured public standing and guaranteed role at the decision-making table. This, of course, is very far from the current state of affairs. Shelah believes a Foreign Service Bill, such as the one he introduced in the Knesset, could address some of these shortcomings.

Shelah proposed an additional foundation stone in the national security paradigm – the relationship between Israel and Diaspora Jewry. These ties must not be based on purely practical considerations, but rather on Israel's very definition as the nation state of the Jewish people, committed to the safety and wellbeing of all Jews around the world. Thus, when Israel undermines its relationship with the Diaspora, it is in effect undermining its national security. The interests and positions of the Jewish communities around the world must also be configured into Israeli policy. Finally, in light of the new geopolitical reality in the Middle East since the Arab Spring, which placed Israel alongside many Arab states seeking stability in the region and confronting radical Islam, Shelah identified an opportunity for Israel to reshape its standing in the region and the world. According to Shelah, Israel will not be able to take advantage of this opportunity and to obtain a legitimate standing in the Middle East unless it makes progress with the Palestinians. Separation from the Palestinians is essential to Israel's future as a democratic state, and as a legitimate and recognized actor in the Middle East. However, realization of Israel's potential in the region will only be possible when security and diplomacy will be intertwined, Shelah said.

Israel should improve ties with the EU, and stop viewing it as a foe

Dr. Maya Sion-Tzidkiyahu, President of the Israeli Association for the Study of European Integration; European Forum, The Hebrew University

Dr. Maya Sion-Tzidkiyahu described the EU as Israel's second most important strategic partner (after the US), sharing with it a values-driven, normative and moral world-view based on the principles of liberal democracy. This is a stronger relationship than the cooperation stemming from shifting interests and political circumstances, of the type Israel has with several Sunni Arab states. The EU is also Israel's largest trading partner. According to Sion-Tzidkiyahu, Israel's foreign policy should reflect this importance in the way it conducts itself vis-à-vis Europe, in its approach toward the EU and in the resources allocated to boosting ties with it. She pointed to the challenges posed to this relationship by the different manner in which the sides relate to their common values as a result of differing interpretations of the same historic events and different geopolitics. While Israel sanctifies the values of security and national independence, the EU promotes the values of peace and regional cooperation. These differences are at the root of the European criticism of Israel's occupation and settlement enterprise. This criticism, against the backdrop of the Jews' harsh historical experience in Europe, fans Israel's suspicions of the EU, in general, and specifically on the part of right-wing governments.

Israel's current policy exploits the rifts within the EU in order to forestall criticism of its policy or the measures it takes in the territories. Political ties with the EU have deteriorated over the past decade. However, progress has been achieved in other fields, highlighting Israel's stake in upgrading its agreements with the EU in order to improve and utilize to their fullest its economic and functional ties with Europe. Israel also has a strong interest in renewal of the EU-Israel Association Council (which has not been convened since 2012) and in strengthening ties with the EU's core democratic states, such as France and Germany. Its interests also lie in strengthening the link with Jewish communities in Europe and in being

attentive to their needs, given the threats they face from the very same populist forces that the government of Israel chooses to embrace. Israel should also allocate sufficient resources to strengthening ties with EU institutions; it should strengthen the EU rather than weaken it and, accordingly, halt incitement and activity against it. If Israel's next government returns to the negotiating table with the Palestinians, Israel should respond to the EU's offer to upgrade relations once Israeli-Palestinian peace is achieved.

Peace negotiations with the Palestinian Authority should be launched

Zouheir Bahloul, *Journalist and former Labor party MK*

Zouheir Bahloul described Israel's intense efforts to block the establishment of a Palestinian state, to conceal the occupation and bury the Palestinian issue and even the hope of future peace. According to Bahloul, the government of Israel sought to bypass the Palestinian issue, with Netanyahu "skipping over" it in order to forge ties with the Sunni Arab world. These attempts, he said, are useless. Broad change has not occurred in the relations between Israel and the Arab states, and only mutually beneficial ties between the rulers themselves have been developing. The way to promote Israeli-Palestinian peace, and broader Israeli-Arab peace, passes through direct talks with the Palestinians. The government of Israel even talks with Hamas, but not with Mahmoud Abbas, because in talks with Hamas there is no "risk" of impending peace.

Bahloul argued that Israel should talk with Hamas, given that the Gaza Strip is not only on the other side of the Israeli border but affects the whole region and its problems must therefore be resolved. Nonetheless, Bahloul highlighted the necessity and importance of renewing talks with Abbas, especially given the short-term window of opportunity while he is still in power and the fact that his views are even more moderate than those of Arab politicians within Israel. Israel must enter into talks with the Palestinians in order to work together to prevent a further, dangerous deterioration. The continued occupation of the Palestinian people and the attempts to conceal it are not viable. The current state of affairs cannot be frozen in place because in the absence of any alternatives, the Palestinians will turn to violence born of despair and a desire to affect change. The current situation also corrupts the moral code of Israel's soldiers since they are not deployed in the territories to defend their country but to terrify the Palestinians, to preclude any arrangement with them and to advance the de facto annexation of the land. Israel must stop the annexation process and the occupation, and prevent the next round of violence and the chaos that will ensue. It should find inroads into the heart of the Palestinian people and embark on direct negotiations with the Palestinian Authority.

Israel should acknowledge the linkage between progress in the peace process and its ties with the Arab world

Prof. Elie Podeh, *Board Member at the Mitvim Institute; President of the Middle East and Islamic Studies Association of Israel; Lecturer at the Hebrew University*

Prof. Elie Podeh argued that Netanyahu is promoting a discourse according to which a process of normalization is under way with the Sunni Arab states – even without progress in the peace process with the Palestinians, and that this will eventually help advance peace with the Palestinians. He underscored that in fact, there is no normalization with the Arab states, saying history shows that the Palestinian issue cannot be severed from Israel's relationship with the Arab world. Real progress – not to mention the establishment of diplomatic relations – is not likely unless there is a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or at the very least significant progress in reaching one. Podeh reiterated that the Palestinian

issue still plays an emotional and ideological role in Arab politics and on the Arab street. Arab rulers, hampered by legitimacy problems, are unable to conduct an open relationship with Israel given the public opposition this could incur. In any case, they obtain what they want from Israel in secret, and are not motivated to expose the relationship.

According to Podeh, Israel's ties with the Arab states are characterized by secrecy, they are ad hoc in nature, they take place between governments and not between people, and they are based on having mutual enemies rather than on deep interests or shared values. Israel would like to change the character of these ties and make them more public, so that they involve not just governments but also people, become resilient to changing geopolitical circumstances, and based on shared, long-term goals. However, progress in that direction depends on Israeli recognition of the "glass ceiling" hovering over its ties with the Arab world, placed there by the continuing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Podeh warned that time plays a significant role in resolving the conflict. With the passing of time, those in Israel opposed to the peace process deepen their hold on the occupied territories, while the window of opportunity provided by Abbas' stability and moderation is gradually closing, given that his time is limited. Only a breakthrough with the Palestinians will pave the real, correct and safe way to the Arab world and to recognition of Israel as a player in the Middle East.

Israel should diversify and broaden regional cooperation, as to also include civil aspects and North Africa

Ms. Einat Levi, Researcher at the Mitvim Institute; Strategic consultant specializing in developing partnerships between Israelis and Moroccans

Einat Levi pointed out that Israeli foreign policy in the Middle East has focused in recent years mostly on defense issues and the Persian Gulf region. This policy yields only limited cooperation achievements, most of them clandestine, occurring between politicians and generals and failing to deepen the relationship between people. According to Levi, regional developments in recent years suggest that diversifying and expanding this cooperation to civil matters and directing attention westward toward the Maghreb, could serve all sides.

Levi described the relationship fostered between the people of Israel and Morocco, as reflected in a wide array of joint initiatives, including tourism, culture and music, film, academia, sports, preservation of Moroccan Jewish heritage, exchange of delegations, and education. She listed four main conditions that enabled these developments: The advent of the internet and social networks that opened up digital, cross-border channels and enabled direct contact and discourse between the two people; the strengthening of civil society in the Middle East; Morocco's recognition of Moroccans living in Israel as its second largest diaspora in the world; the existence of a "routinizing effect" as civil exchange between the two countries became routine with the frequent movement of people back and forth and its coverage in the media and on social networks.

Based on the Moroccan experience, Levi proposed five policy recommendations for the immediate advancement of civil cooperation between Israel and Arab countries. These include promoting cultural diplomacy channels based on shared values and identity; nurturing the routinizing effect; establishing an organization to coordinate and lead contacts between civilians in Israel and the Arab states; taking advantage of international frameworks and forums as a space for meetings, dialogue, and joint action; digital diplomacy through social networks and internet platforms. The cooperation created between Israel and Morocco on civil matters is an example of the potential for deep ties with an Arab state. Levi argued that realization of this potential depends on the ability of Israeli society to recognize

its own Middle Eastern characteristics, and on Israel's recognition of the importance of civil ties and willingness to give them added weight in its diplomacy.

Peace with the Palestinians is key to realizing Israel's strategic interests

MK Merav Michaeli, Labor party, Chair of the caucus for regional cooperation

MK Merav Michaeli stressed that Israel has a paramount stake in reaching a peace agreement with the Palestinians, certainly if accompanied by regional cooperation. She described the tremendous potential of the Arab Peace Initiative, adopted by the Arab League in 2002 and repeatedly ratified since then despite the far-reaching changes the Middle East has undergone. Michaeli argued that the Arab Peace Initiative, with its promise of normalizing ties between Israel and Arab nations in return for the establishment of a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders and agreed land swaps, and resolution of the Jerusalem and refugee issues – can and should constitute the basis for negotiations with the Palestinians. A majority of Israelis support achieving peace with the Palestinians based on these principles, she said.

According to Michaeli, striving for that goal is the right public, diplomatic, economic and security path, especially given the broad international support for such a move. Many in Israel would like to have peace in the Middle East and support a two-state solution, but express doubt as to the feasibility of these goals. Michaeli argued that such developments are definitely possible given Israel's defense and economic capabilities, and that such moves would even strengthen Israel in all aspects, including the boosting of democracy and consolidation of identity. There is no lack of capability, possibility or opportunity, only of political will, Michaeli stated. Israeli supporters of peace must mobilize political might and will in order to attain these goals. This is the most pressing and significant necessity for the future of the State of Israel.