

Key Elements of Israel's Foreign Policy

Symposium Summary
Tel Aviv University, 25 March 2014

An event of Mitvim - The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies, the Frances Brody Institute for Applied Diplomacy, and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

The symposium, which was held as Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs was on strike, examined **how Israel facilitates its foreign policy**, what the pros and cons of its policy are, and how it can be improved. The discussion centered on a [research paper](#) written by Dr. Yuval Benziman and Lauren Romm, and published by the Mitvim Institute.

The keynote speakers at the symposium were **MK Dr. Ronen Hoffman** (*Yesh Atid*), Chairman of the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee's Subcommittee on Foreign Affairs and Public Diplomacy; **Dr. Yuval Benziman** of the Mitvim Institute, the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya, and Tel Aviv University; and **Prof. Joel Peters** of Virginia Tech University and the Mitvim Institute. .



MK Ronen Hoffman claimed that there are conceptual and cultural failures in how foreign policy is being dealt with in Israel, and criticized the dominance of security over diplomacy in Israeli decision-making.

Israel's foreign policy is not seen as a key component in Israel's national security. In fact, the country's security apparatus dominates the decision-making process. Intelligence and defense come at the expense of diplomacy. Generals are often the ones who shape and implement foreign policy. They are suspicious of the Foreign Ministry, and refrain from sharing information on sensitive issues with Foreign Ministry employees for fear of possible leaking.

Israel's Foreign Ministry needs to lead the way in coping with the dangers of isolation and international sanctions, which could seriously damage Israel's global standing. Security and intelligence officials should not and cannot be the ones who are involved in this process. It is not the right solution.

But for all intents and purposes, Israel's Foreign Ministry barely exists. It is a weak office on the verge of collapse. It does not design or facilitate foreign policy. Even most of our country's foreign ministers were never really involved in creating foreign policy. Only a very limited number of people shaped Israel's foreign policy over the years, and they were able to do as they pleased, without adhering to any guiding principles or fear of repercussions.

There has been significant demoralization in the Foreign Ministry. This is because of the current working conditions, but also because of how its responsibilities are parceled to other ministries, and the dismissive attitude that security officials occasionally have towards Israeli diplomats. Today, about a third of those who graduate our diplomatic cadets course retire from the ministry after several years rather than becoming lifelong diplomats.

The Arab-Israeli conflict is another heavy millstone around the neck of Israeli foreign policy. We need to reduce the link between our foreign policy and the conflict. Yet, it is imperative that we reach a two-state solution with the Palestinians. The conflict impedes Israel's foreign policy maneuverability, not to mention its domestic impact. The price of cottage cheese is very much dependent on Israel's international status.¹

There is need to pass legislation regarding Israel's foreign policy apparatus (just like there is legislation regarding the National Security Council), to put into place effective parliamentary supervision on foreign affairs, and to encourage broad public debate on issues related to Israeli foreign policy and its implementation.



Dr. Yuval Benziman outlined seven main characteristics of Israeli foreign policy:

1. A preference for domestic political considerations over foreign policy considerations.
2. Decentralization of powers across different government ministries, which weakens the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, damages its professionalism, makes it difficult for it to possess a coherent policy, and hurts the ability to create an organizational memory.
3. Suppression of diplomatic considerations in favor of security considerations.
4. A mistaken tendency to see the relationship between Israel and the Arab world as a zero-sum game, in which any Arab success is perceived as an Israeli loss.
5. A foreign policy which tends to be reactive rather than pro-active.

¹ MK Hoffman's statement about cottage cheese refers to the start of Israel's 2011 Social Protest Movement, where thousands gathered to protest the rising cost of dairy products.

6. An overreliance on Israel's relationship with the United States.
7. A historical-cultural perception which precipitates a belief that even an unrealistic policy will in the end succeed against all odds.

Benziman provided contemporary examples for each of the seven principles, such the diversification of foreign policy decision-makers (the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of International Relations, special envoys of the Prime Minister, Ministry of Public Diplomacy, and the allotment of negotiations with the Palestinians to the Minister of Justice, MK Tzipi Livni), ideological and conceptual differences between prime ministers and their foreign ministers, Israeli rejection of the Arab Peace Initiative, and its own lack of initiative.

From a historical perspective, Israeli foreign policy has witness many successes, such as the daring underlying concept of Herzl's "if you will it, it is no dream", and the relationship with the United States that put Israel where few could have predicted to find it several decades ago. But Israel has also experienced quite a few setbacks and cannot continue to manage its foreign policy in the same manner in which it has been conducted so far.

According to Benziman, changes in Israel's foreign policy management will not be enough as long as it is not clear what Israel's end goals are. Even if the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was strengthened, domestic political considerations muted, the security prism weakened, and Israel establishes robust relationships with other countries - none of this will bring about any fundamental change while leaders and citizens do not know where they are heading. Whether Israel's policy is one of "two states for two peoples", one state, regional peace or a great war - the end goal must be clear in order to implement a policy that will lead to it.



Prof. Joel Peters claimed that it would be false to attribute the weakness of contemporary Israeli diplomacy solely to structural factors. What is lacking is a vigorous public debate over Israel's foreign policy orientation, and the lack of a strategic vision of Israel's place in the world.

Foreign policy is not simply an instrument designed to secure a state's national interests, however narrowly or broadly they are defined. It is also about identity. A state's foreign policy reflects the balance between acquiring security, economic and other material needs with the promotion of core values on the global stage. It is the outcome of an ongoing narrative over values, identity and location and the outcome of an ongoing debate on how a society sees itself, and its place in the world and its immediate surroundings.

Israeli society needs to address four interrelated questions: Who we are? Where are we located? Where and who we would like to be? How we see the world and our role on the global stage? It can be argued that such a debate is the luxury of societies at peace, and is one that Israel can hardly afford and that given the direct and immediate threats it faces, Israeli society has neither the time nor the space to engage in such discussions.

Yet in the absence of such a debate, a common, unchallenged narrative has emerged over the nature of Israel's foreign policy. That narrative comprises four components.

First, Israel sees itself as living in an hostile local environment, as 'a villa in the jungle' surrounded by enemies, and constant threats and danger.

Second, at the global level, Israel sees a world where power and force dominate, and whereby security is only assured through self-reliance and the projection of force. Israel decries the use and projection of normative power as a sign of weakness and a lack of capacity to protect ones strategic interests.

Third, Israel regards itself as having few foreign policy choices and thus seeks out friends and allies wherever they present themselves, even if these choices contradict its moral compass (i.e. the close support and collaboration with apartheid regime in South Africa).

Finally many in Israel project the idea an Israeli exceptionalism on the global stage, and that the rules of international affairs do apply for Israel. In this vein, although Israel craves legitimacy and normalization in its relations with other countries, there is strong current for an autarkic, autonomous foreign policy, a modern day Israeli version of 'splendid isolation'.

Those who care about Israel's place on the global stage cannot focus their efforts to bring about the structural factors that weaken the Israeli foreign policy system. They need to engage in a vigorous debate about the key content issues related to Israel's foreign policy orientation. Such a debate cannot await the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Indeed the absence of such a debate contributes to an Israeli impasse in the efforts to resolve its conflict with the Palestinians.