

Democracy and Foreign Policy in Israel

Summary of a conference organized by Mitvim - The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies and the Leonard Davis Institute for International Relations at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 11 June 2019

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On 11 June 2019, the Mitvim Institute and the Davis Institute held a conference at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem on democracy and foreign policy in Israel. It included sessions on democracy, international relations and the challenges to the liberal world order; the erosion of democracy in Israel and its impact on foreign relations; and the democracy component in Israel's relations with surrounding regions. Speakers included scholars, former diplomats, activists, journalists and politicians. This document sums up the main points of the conference.¹

A. Opening Remarks

Prof. Dan Miodownik, Davis Institute, Hebrew University: Past research in the field of international relations generally attributed little importance to democracy and domestic issues in analyzing foreign policy. The public was said to be uninterested in foreign policy issues and lacking knowledge about them. A shift began in the mid-1980s, with growing interest in the impact of domestic processes on foreign policy and the resulting development of the “democratic peace” theory, which posits that democratic states are reluctant to engage in conflict with other democratic states. This concept generated a spirited debate, which dealt, among other issues, with the argument that democratic states make more responsible foreign policy decisions due to public opinion considerations and reliance on lengthy decision-making processes. On the other hand, the question remains of whether the public cares about foreign policy and where it gets its information on the subject from. These questions are increasingly relevant these days in light of developments in the media arena, the multichannel information flow and the advent of the “fake news” phenomenon.

Dr. Nimrod Goren, Mitvim Institute: The issue of democracy in Israel comes up frequently in Mitvim Institute discussions with international partners in recent years. Initially, this appeared to be a domestic issue, unrelated to the diplomatic arena; over time, it has become a distinct foreign policy issue, such as the question of how the erosion of Israeli democracy impacts Israel's standing in the world and its array of international alliances. This conference will deal with the interface between domestic and foreign policies, not only in the Israeli context but also as a global issue. Populism and democratic erosion are challenging states the world over. The 2019 election campaigns in Israel featured visits by foreign leaders, attesting to the partnership forged among right-wing leaders throughout the world – in Israel, Brazil, Hungary, the US and more. There are no commensurate alliances within the liberal-democratic camp to counter these strengthening pacts among populist right-wing forces, except, perhaps, in the civil

¹ The conference can be watched, in Hebrew, on [Mitvim's YouTube channel](#).

society. This conference will also deal with the place of democracy in Israel's Foreign Service and with its past and current foreign policy, and it will examine how issues such as the Nationality Law, Israel's struggle against the boycott movement (BDS) and the delegitimization of civil society organizations affect its foreign relations. Additionally, discussion will focus on the role of democracy in formulating Israel's ties with countries in its adjacent regions – the Middle East, Europe and the Mediterranean.

Dr. Lior Lehrs, Hebrew University and Mitvim Institute: New fault lines are dividing states and societies everywhere, as well as the entire international arena. The arguments focus on the issue of democracy, touching on issues such as judicial independence, civil society, the media, migrant and refugee policies, populism and “strong leaders”. The struggle is taking place in different though clearly inter-connected arenas. Two distinct types of tensions between democracy and international relations can be discerned. One is the tensions between “real-politik” interests and values, including democratic values. On the one hand, there are those who argue that states must protect their interests in order to survive, even at the expense of undermining democratic values; on the other hand, the distinction between values and interests is blurred and democratic values are often a source of power that serves interests. The other kind of tension is the one between the international order (inter-state) and the global order (between people). This tension manifests itself in the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs, which is vital to the international order but often undermines the global order. The link between democracy and international relations has been coming up frequently in Israeli discourse recently in the face of the country's growing ties with regimes that challenge the liberal order. The discussion of this topic also relates to the unique context of the Jewish people, with its yearning to serve as “a light unto the nations” and its searing memories of the past.

B. Democracy, International Relations and Global Challenges to the Liberal Order

Prof. Benny Miller, Haifa University: Expectations that the post-WWII liberal order in the West would expand into a global liberal order once the Cold War ended, failed to materialize. It was assumed a matter of time until the liberal order would prevail throughout the world, comprising strong international institutions, free trade, economic globalization, human rights and liberal democracy. Instead came the resurgence of the revisionist states of China and Russia, the increased impact of failed states on the West, as well as rising national right-wing populist sentiment both in the heart of the liberal West and elsewhere, for example in India and Brazil. The strategy of the West, led by the US, was to advance the liberal order through a free market, mostly vis-à-vis China, with the expectation that economic prosperity would result in democratization as it did in Europe. The strategy on Russia in the 1990s focused on its inclusion in the forum of leading industrialized states, the G8. In the Arab and Muslim world, the West aspired to promote democratization through economic development, occasionally with force, as well. As for other democratic states, the prevailing concept was that once civic nationality developed, it would be easier to hook these countries up to the liberal world order. In fact, China is less democratic than in the past and more aggressive and revisionist; there is no democratization in Russia and its foreign policy is revisionist; and the emerging trends in the Muslim world have proven disappointing, too. Democratic states have seen a rise in identification with local national sentiment and populism. The ascendancy of populism in the West stems from globalization, people's desire for strong leadership and a sense by some that they are losing their country in terms of its identity, values and demography.

Prof. Piki Ish-Shalom, Hebrew University: We are witnessing the decline of democracy in various countries, resulting from the loss of our faith in democracy and the sense of partnership that enables us to integrate and influence developments. When we adopt populist stands and practices, democracy dies. Democracy is important within not only the state, but also in foreign policy and the international order. This assumption is not a foregone conclusion in the study of international relations. For example, international relations scholar Hans Morgenthau was a refugee from Nazi Germany, and while he attached importance to democracy, he argued that democracy, with all its importance, is problematic in conducting foreign policy. He believed civilians are ignorant of foreign policy issues and that public opinion could make leaders veer away from rational foreign policy. On the other hand, research teaches us that democracy can be beneficial in foreign relations, too. For example, the theory of “democratic peace” that argues that democratic states are disinclined to fight each other. They also tend to win wars and pay a relatively low cost for them. Democracies tend to resolve their conflicts with non-violent measures. They are advanced in term of technology, their economy and security, as well. Democracies do not conduct genocide and do not harm their citizens. This whole goody bag constitutes the global order. Despite the weaknesses and flaws of democratic regimes, politics is the comparison of alternatives, and currently, democracy and the existing global order are better than the alternatives. We are gradually losing liberal democracy to populism and a disordered order, and we must work to restore democracy within Israel and beyond.

Noa Landau, *Haaretz*: In academic circles, one often hears the saying that Israel does not have a foreign policy; it only has a domestic one. Nonetheless, Israel does have a foreign policy. Its name is Benjamin Netanyahu. Netanyahu took over the foreign minister’s portfolio; he is deeply vested in the issue and represents Israel’s foreign policy in systemic and strategic terms. According to his worldview, Israel has two types of power – military and intelligence, and these create its diplomatic power. Often, especially when his audience are observant Jews, Netanyahu adds another component – spiritual power. Indeed, Israel is enjoying a certain diplomatic flourishing, stemming from these powers. Israel’s foreign relations are intertwined with its branding as a mega-exporter of defense technologies. Its defense exports, details of which are usually classified, are not always in keeping with liberal values. More recently, Israel has also been leveraging its energy and gas market. Its natural gas discoveries have been translated into stronger ties with Greece, Cyprus and Egypt. The spiritual power of which Netanyahu speaks is just as important. Israel’s right-wing government profits from the rise of conservatism in the world as well as from the growing influence of evangelical communities. The fact that the world is fed up with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict helps Netanyahu surmount obstacles to his policy. In the Arab world, the conflict still constitutes an obstacle, but Netanyahu presents the other side of the coin that holds out prospects for advancing relations with the Arab world even without resolving the conflict with the Palestinians. As for Europe, Netanyahu’s policy is based on exploiting internal European divisions, and relies on the anti-Semitism issue to avert criticism of Israel.

Yigal Palmor, Jewish Agency and former MFA Spokesperson: Does Israel have a foreign policy? If the question refers to planned measures based on in-depth thinking and organized staff work designed to achieve targets leading to a strategic goal, the answer is that Israel does not have a foreign policy and probably never had one since its founding. If we are talking about taking advantage of various situations to advance policy, then the answer is “yes”. There was no foreign policy because Israel arose from war, was forced to survive at all costs and the need for an army and security overcame diplomacy. Israel operated out of inertia like any small country under existential threat. Following the establishment of the state, the democratic component was not part of Israel’s foreign policy considerations. The goal was to achieve what it needed in the international arena, from whomever it could. This all changed in 1967 – the

Soviet Union cut off ties with Israel, as did about half the world; Israel found itself a member of the democratic club and, born of necessity, the world's democratic regimes became our good friends. Prior to that time, Israel had no trouble forging links with non-democratic states. Starting in the 1970s, Israel focused on highlighting its ties to the world's democracies, and this became the motif of its public diplomacy. However, no attempt was made to imbue Israeli foreign policy with democratic concepts and Israel had non-democratic friends, too. Weapons exports considerations dictated relations with them (for example, with South Africa) as did concerns for Jewish Diaspora communities (for example, with Argentina). After the Cold War, the importance of the emphasis on democratic values became more significant in attempts to forge closer ties with the democratic axis and the EU. These days, many in Israel view the EU as hostile, although it is not. It is most important to invest in building democracy at home, rather than to preaching to other states.

C. The Democratic Deficit in Israel and its Effect on Foreign Relations

Former MK Nitzan Horowitz, Journalist and Mitvim Policy Fellow (currently Chair of the Democratic Union): A domestic discourse on foreign policy is of great importance for Israel. The Knesset does not engage in such discourse. I was a member of its Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee and I barely remember a single discussion on foreign policy. One school of thought in the study of international relations views foreign relations as dictated solely by a country's interests. I have no argument with that, but the question is what kind of relations and what are the implications. What are the implications of Israel's ties with radical right-wing politicians in Hungary, France, Holland and Austria for the Jewish communities there? We must listen to their views and concerns. The anti-democratic trends in Israel and Europe link right-wing elements on both sides, as clearly manifested in the recent European Parliament elections. There are substantive and ideological links between developments in Europe and certain elements in Israel. There are political actors in Israel who view liberal democracy as an abomination and whose goal is to tie the hands of the EU and deepen its internal divide to block its criticism of Israel. However, this is a short-term view that creates an alliance of values with dark forces and is hostile to Israel's best friends. This is a result of the domestic political situation. I recently decided to go back into politics in order to affect change in Israeli policy. We need a domestic political change in order to be on the side of "the good guys". The government went too far in its links with dubious elements, reflecting a global populist wave. We must not stand by idly; we must change this.

Prof. Tamar Hermann, Open University and Israel Democracy Institute: I attended many academic conferences recently dedicated to discussion of the erosion of democracy, as if it were an irrefutable fact. However, it turns out there are many who disagree that this is the case; on the contrary – they believe many moves are underway to compensate for the damage inflicted on Israel's democracy in the past. In fact, we in academia are known to be living in a conceptual bubble, reluctant to leave it and confront reality. If we want to deal effectively with what we view as destructive processes, I call on everyone to get off their comfortable, pleasant perches of "we know what is right" and listen to what the public feels. Public opinion surveys indicate that since 2010, a growing number of Israelis object to the claim that Israel was more democratic in the past. In fact, in 2019 most of those polled expressed disagreement with this claim. Although 70 percent on the left agree that Israel used to be more democratic, 74 percent on the right disagree. This is likely linked to the historic fact that the left was in power in the past and the right was a minority, whereas now, the opposite is true. Most of those polled (57 percent) also reject the claim that control of the territories prevents Israel from being a democracy. On the question of the future of Israeli democracy, one can discern a clear influence of the left-right dichotomy: The right is optimistic and the left, as well as the Arab

population, is very pessimistic. Most Israelis, both Jews and Arabs, believe Israel's international standing is strong, but once again there are deep differences between right and left wing voters. On the right, 74 percent believe Israel's standing is strong, whereas 60 percent on the left claim Israel's standing is weak. In short, history will judge whether our democracy is undergoing a process of erosion, indeed. What is clear is that not only is there no public consensus on this claim but that the fault lines between the various opinions often run parallel to the line delineating the two ideological camps – in Israel, between left and right; in the US, between Democrats and Republicans.

Amb. (ret.) Arthur Koll, former MFA Deputy Director-General: Among leaders of the BDS movement, there are many who talk about objecting to the Israeli occupation, but there are other reasons, too, and they include objections to Israel's very existence. Therefore, we must vehemently oppose this movement. I was ambassador to Serbia, and the democratic forces that brought down Milosevic were strongly opposed to the international boycott of their country. They argued that without the boycott, they would have toppled him sooner. The question of what BDS stands for is also unclear. There are those, for example, who call for a boycott of goods manufactured by companies active in the territories, but there are firms that operate both inside and across the Green Line, such as banks. Does BDS oppose them? There are other moves, for example a call to boycott companies that provide Israel with weaponry or defense expertise, as well as to label goods made in the settlements. This is actually a quasi-boycott. This blurring helps certain elements within Israel. Since the fight against BDS was entrusted to the Ministry of Strategic Affairs, we have been hearing a lot about it. The government has allocated large sums to this end, without knowing what the ministry does with them and without any reporting on their use to the Knesset and the public. The activity of the Ministry of Strategic Affairs is harmful and undemocratic. When one uses vague criteria to ban or delay journalists or pro-BDS activists from entering the country – that is undemocratic. When the General Security Agency (*Shabak*) is mobilized to that end – this is undemocratic. Israel must confront the BDS movement, but this threat must not dictate the country's political discourse. The boycott movement has not succeeded in undermining Israel's economy and it is virtually lacking in influence. However, Israeli politicians exploit it in a way that results in undemocratic measures that limit democracy.

Dr. Roe Kibrik, Mitvim Institute: Democracy is an entire set of values, norms and practices. Is Israel paying a price for distancing itself from it? There are many concrete examples attesting to the link between democracy and Israel's foreign relations, as manifested in the monthly reports that I edit for Mitvim. The occupation, for example, runs counter to democratic norms and values and does exact a price from Israel, as reflected in resolutions by the UN General Assembly, the UN Human Rights Commission and UNESCO, in EU resolutions on settlement product labeling and in parliamentary debates around Europe on Israel's activities in the Palestinian territories. Israel's handling of the BDS movement and its practices at border crossings are also undemocratic, as are its defense emergency regulations and military censorship. Examples can also be found in other fields, such as Israel's embrace of far right-wing parties and populist governments. Other troubling Israeli measures include the seal of approval that Prime Minister Netanyahu has given the racist, radical Israeli right, and government policies on African asylum seekers, which have been condemned by countries around the world as well as by Jewish communities abroad. The price Israel is paying for its undemocratic actions is particularly obvious among democratic forces in the world and the Jewish community in the US, as is the benefit it derives from strengthening its democracy. However, Israel does not always pay a price for distancing itself from democratic norms, and the price it does pay is usually low. Beyond the utilitarian cost debate, it is important to focus on the values test that asks in what kind of state, society and world we want to live.

D. The Democracy Component in Israel's Regional Foreign Policies

Amb. (ret.) Daniel Shek, Former Israeli Ambassador to France: I spent most of my diplomatic career in Europe. At the Foreign Service cadet training, I learned that the path to the hearts of the Europeans is based on the simple argument that we are similar, both in diplomatic discourse and in public diplomacy. Over the years, I saw that our most important diplomatic tool is Israel's entry ticket to the club of liberal democracies, which opened doors for us in the European arena. It created a common language and helped us overcome unpleasant things with which we had to deal in our ties with Europe. This is an elite club that grants rights but is also demanding of its members, and membership is not renewed automatically. In recent years, the foundations of Israeli democracy have been eroded, both in fact and in perception. Right-wing governments do not tend to identify with the pillars of liberal democracy and are less willing to pay the club membership dues. The Israeli right, and Netanyahu especially, supports the growing populist regimes in Europe. In the past, Israeli foreign policy efforts focused on attempts to influence the European consensus in our favor, but these days, Israel's government has adopted a different tactic – of dismantling that consensus altogether. This is a legitimate diplomatic move, but it has disadvantages. While liberal values are no longer the accepted consensus by all European governments, they still control public awareness in the European arena and therefore, regimes that deviate from them are unlikely to last long. In addition, we are giving our new European friends a generous pass regarding anti-Semitism, simply in return for their determined support of the government of Israel. We are abandoning the Jewish communities in Europe to the suffering under these a-liberal regimes and forces.

Former MK Ksenia Svetlova, Mitvim Institute and IDC Herzliya: In 2018, reports emerged of secret contacts between Israel and Sudan, and Netanyahu publicly referred to them. In the Knesset, we demanded a discussion of the matter in the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee's subcommittee on foreign relations, but our demand was ignored. At issue were diplomatic contacts with a leader regarded as a war criminal under international law. The explanation was that flights from Israel to Brazil would overfly Sudan, making them shorter and cheaper, but should we agree to compromise for that on moral issues such as war crimes, genocide and slavery? There was no one to whom we could refer questions, and no discussion was held. The only opportunity to hear any reference to the matter was in the overview of Israel's foreign relations delivered by the Prime Minister to the Knesset, but lawmakers were not given an opportunity to pose questions then. That points to a one-way link between the government and the Knesset on foreign policy that has been in place since 2009 when Avigdor Liberman was appointed foreign minister. There has been little dialogue since and there is no parliamentary oversight of the government on foreign relations. In addition, for a long time, until early 2018, Netanyahu's associate Yitzhak Molcho ran Israel's foreign relations with Egypt and some Gulf States despite being a private envoy who does not answer to anyone. Eventually, a decision by the Attorney General led to Molcho's job termination. Israel does not have to preach to the region and to push for democracy in the Middle East. That is not our job. However, foreign policy objectives do not justify our silence in the face of horrific crimes committed in various parts of the Arab world. This is an ethical and diplomatic issue at the same time.

Dr. Ehud Eiran, Haifa University and Mitvim Institute: How can democratic elements be injected into the alliance taking shape among Israel, Greece and Cyprus? This alliance has developed against the backdrop of natural gas discoveries in Israeli and Cypriot waters, a shared fear of Turkey and a desire for defense cooperation, and in the broader context of the global assault on democracy and various regional developments. Corruption is on the rise in

the three alliance member states, as are challenges to democratic rule. In two of the states, Israel and Cyprus, these difficulties are linked to ethnic conflicts. Both Israel and Greece are experiencing a resurgence of radical right forces. Integrating democratic components into this trilateral alliance would help infuse these states with democratic values and ideology, and help in realistic-utilitarian terms to emphasize that the underpinning of the alliance is ideological rather than religious-ethnic/anti-Muslim. Along with the trilateral pact with Israel, Greece and Cyprus are also engaged in trilateral alliances with Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinians. If the point is to unite the alliance with Israel and the alliance with the Arab states eventually, the democratic aspect is not an appropriate common denominator. However, it is a necessary component of the Israeli-Greek-Cypriot triangle. The challenges to democracy in all three states stem from anxieties over matters of security, the economy and national identity, and injecting democratic components into the alliance will help its members deal with them. This trilateral alliance could be taken in directions that would ease the conflict with the Palestinians, for example, the establishment of a Palestinian port in Cyprus from which goods could be shipped to Gaza. Establishing a robust joint economic foundation to fund welfare state elements is also possible. Israel's growing integration in the Mediterranean could also develop a new regional identity component that would ease the prevailing sense of Israel's isolation among many Israelis.

Nadav Tamir, Peres Centre and Mitvim Institute, former diplomat: Israel-US relations are built on three components – values, politics and interests. In terms of values, the founding fathers of the US emphasized the link with the biblical Prophets, and the two sides built their relations on democratic values as well as religious elements. In terms of mutual interests, Israel “fell into the lap” of the US-led camp as a matter of necessity and stayed there, on the side of the “good guys”, both during the Cold War and subsequently during the war on terror. Politically, Israel has been careful to ensure that US support remains a bipartisan issue, but Israel under Netanyahu moved from a bipartisan policy to support for the Republicans, even before Trump assumed office. There are currently troubling trends in all three components. The value-based link still exists, but Israel is distancing itself from the democratic values on which it was founded. Demographic trends in the US are working in favor of the liberals; in Israel, they favor the conservatives. In terms of mutual interests, the US is losing interest in the Middle East and there is no significant difference on that score between Presidents Obama and Trump. The US is no longer dependent on Middle Eastern oil, and its attempts to install democracy in the region have failed. US Jewry has an important role in the relationship between the two states and it holds dramatic sway over American politics. That makes Israel a domestic issue in the US as well as a foreign policy one. Israel must not ignore American Jews – the largest Jewish community in the world – and treat them in an instrumental fashion. Minority rights and democracy in Israel are important to American Jews, who would like Israel to serve as an example in both cases. Israel's growing alienation from US Jewry harms the relationship with the US as well as Israel's ability to fulfill its role as the state of the Jewish people.

E. Political Viewpoints

MK Stav Shafir, Democratic Union: Netanyahu's biggest success over the past decade has been killing Israeli politics. A sense of impotence and despair prevails among Israeli citizens, who feel contempt for politics and view it as an uninspiring exercise in cynicism. That helps the corrupt and most radical populists to remain in power. There is close cooperation among anti-democratic forces in the world: Orban from Hungary and Bolsonaro from Brazil are friends of Netanyahu; Likud representatives work with Austrian neo-Nazis, and Steve Bannon is setting up a school for nationalists in Europe. In the face of the alliance among nationalists and

populists, an international alliance of progressives is needed to strengthen democratic and liberal values. If the problems we face are global, a solution can and should be found in the international arena, learning how to use ideas and proposals from different parts of the world. Israel has turned from being a legitimate member of a closed club of progressive liberal democracies into a member of the right-wing populist club. We do not want to be members of such a club. We cannot continue to take part in the crumbling of Israeli democracy. The situation is urgent and demands immediate solutions. Just as anti-democratic forces in Israel are waging a struggle, so should we be fighting fearlessly, without being scared of polls and with a belief in our public, our path and Israeli society's ability to overcome any challenge.

MK Aida Touma-Sliman, Joint List: It is very important to talk about the issue of democracy at this time. We have recently witnessed the Prime Minister's attempts to legislate laws (for example, the override clause and the immunity legislation) that inflict lethal damage on the judiciary and on the democratic foundations that still exist here. Netanyahu seeks to enact those laws in order to both escape indictment but also to realize a political vision of annexation. Netanyahu has identified a historic window of opportunity as long as Trump is in power and he enjoys the support of right-wing racists around the world. Others have proposed annexation laws in the past, but this time the Prime Minister is the one promoting such a measure, with US support and in violation of international law. The political struggle within Israel is not only over the remnants of democracy but also over the nature and substance of the state. Will Israel be a state that tramples all democratic principles in order to preserve the occupation? Netanyahu understands that there are still groups in Israel opposed to this vision. The continued occupation of another people contradicts democratic rule, a fact that must be recognized. Continued occupation means apartheid, and a crushing of the legal system and Israeli civil society. Our political struggle revolves around these issues and it should unite all those who cherish such values and encourage them to present a joint alternative approach.

MK Zvi Hauser, Blue and White: The struggle being waged in Israel in recent months is not only political, but also a struggle over the rules of the game and the tradition of politics in Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. We should be extolling the practice of national dignity, anchoring and protecting the formula of consensus and maintaining a semblance of democracy grounded in equality before the law. By analyzing Israel's strategic conduct of the past three decades, we can try to challenge the existing paradigm. In recent decades, Israeli actions were based on a formula of territorial concessions in return for peace and normalization with the Arab world. Israel withdrew from territories in agreements with Egypt and the Palestinians, pulled back from southern Lebanon, conducted negotiations on withdrawing from the Golan Heights, Judea and Samaria and Jerusalem. At the same time, sweeping developments occurred in the region: A revolution in Iran, Erdoğan's rise in Turkey, the Arab Spring and the changes in the Gaza Strip. This turbulence has posed complex challenges to the peace strategy, making it irrelevant. The borders in the Middle East will change. This is a necessary process, and the US recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights is a first step. Israel must adopt the principle of ridding the region of missiles, and understand that any agreements that include the transfer of populations are not viable in the 21st century. We must conduct the conflict wisely, at the same time fighting for the image of our society and maintaining our international standing, but recognizing the difference between reality and aspirations and between truth and lies.