

Israel's Regional Foreign Policies: An Annual Assessment

November 2020

The Mitvim Institute presented its annual assessment of Israel's regional foreign policies at its fourth annual conference on October 28, 2020. The conference was held in cooperation with the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and with the participation of experts, government representatives and Members of Knesset (MKs). The first session, devoted to Israel's relations with the Middle East, Europe and the Mediterranean, featured Prof. Elie Podeh, Dr. Moran Zaga, Dr. Maya Sion-Tzidkiyahu, Gabriel Mitchell, and Dr. Roe Kibrik (moderator). The second session, devoted to Israeli diplomacy in Arab and Muslim states, featured senior Foreign Ministry officials Haim Regev and Yael Ravia-Zadok, former MK Ksenia Svetlova, Dr. Ehud Eiran, and Dr. Nimrod Goren (moderator). Minister of Strategic Affairs and Tourism Orit Farkash-Hacohen, as well as MKs Nitzan Horowitz, Ofer Shelah and Aida Touma-Suleiman delivered keynote addresses at the conference.

A. Opening Remarks

Merav Kahana-Dagan, Deputy Head, Mitvim Institute

The year 2020 will be remembered as a particularly strange one. On the one hand, Covid-19 seemed to bring the world to a stop and freeze everything in place; on the other, it was a year of change and development, both globally and regionally. Despite and along with all the challenges, we at the Mitvim Institute continued to advance a fix in Israel's regional foreign policies. We saw progress and positive developments on some issues, while on others, progress is yet to be seen. We were successful in promoting joint action with government representatives and MKs to improve Israel's foreign policy and strengthen the Foreign Service. We conducted regional dialogues with think tanks and experts from Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Turkey. We sought to underscore the importance of relations with the EU and aided Israeli efforts to improve these ties. Just recently, we released the 2020 Israeli Foreign Policy Index of the Mitvim Institute, an annual survey conducted for the eighth straight year in cooperation with the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, providing information and insights into the Israeli public's views on a variety of foreign policy issues.

Dr. Paul Pasch, Israel Director, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

The Mitvim Institute and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung have been strategic partners since Mitvim was established in 2011. We are especially proud of the fact that the Mitvim Institute is one of the few Israeli organizations that still conducts policy dialogues with a variety of regional partners – Turks, Palestinians, Jordanians, as well as research institutes and organizations engaged in discourse about the Mediterranean. The Mitvim Institute, with its modest means, is ranked in a high and respected place on the University of Pennsylvania's global think tank index, and this is certainly a source of pride. The Mitvim Institute plays an

important role in preserving and improving the dialogue between Israel and the governing institutions of the EU. It currently appears there is an opportunity to renew and strengthen the significant Israel-EU relations, which have suffered over the last few years. In recent months, against the backdrop of the agreements between Israel, the UAE, Bahrain and Sudan, the Mitvim Institute helped us see beyond the sense of public euphoria and understand the process in a more nuanced perspective.

B. Israel's Relations with the Middle East, Europe and the Mediterranean

Dr. Roei Kibrik, Director of Research, Mitvim Institute

It is hard to pin down Israel as belonging to just one regional system. The State of Israel is somewhere in the middle, between and betwixt, inside and beside, and often outside several regions. That explains why respondents in the Mitvim Institute's annual surveys, when asked "to which region does Israel primarily belong," are usually rather evenly divided among the Middle East, Mediterranean and Europe. Israel seeks to advance its interests in all three, as part of the regional fabric and balance of power. We must remember that these regions are not separate from each other and are closely interlinked.

Many significant developments have occurred over the past year, some surprising, some initiated by Israel, some led by other players, and some the result of external circumstances. These developments present Israel with many challenges as well as opportunities. Israel is no longer the isolated, enemy-encircled island that it perceived itself as for many years. Israel is discovering that it has much to gain from cooperation and that it can conduct ties with various countries, even those in conflict with each other or with Israel.

Israel has adopted a complex and more nuanced regional foreign policy. While it appears that external circumstances led Israel to adopt this approach, rather than a reasoned, thought-out internal decision, Israel could benefit greatly if it develops a more sophisticated foreign policy in accordance with these changes and adapts its tools accordingly. To that end it must also transform its Foreign Service into a well-funded, effective and coordinated body that plays a significant role in Israel's decision-making processes.

Prof. Elie Podeh, Board Member, Mitvim Institute

This was a difficult year, but it had some positive parts, and was clearly an unexpected one. Despite the heavy shadow of Covid-19, Israel signed three normalization agreements, with the UAE, Bahrain and Sudan. These contradict to a certain extent the accepted thesis that progress in Israel's relations with the Arab world cannot occur without progress on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Perhaps we failed to correctly assess the shift in parts of the Arab world, the extent of the Arab world's impatience with the Palestinians, the level of US determination and the pandemic's repercussions.

The biggest change stemming from the signed agreements is a tremendous improvement of Israel's strategic position vis-à-vis its enemies. The second significant change is the benefit for Israel's economy. What is more, Israel's image in the media and civil society in some of the region's states has been enhanced. This was no dramatic, immediate shift; we are talking about a gradual change. The Arab media's attitude toward Israel is fundamentally negative, but the manner in which Gulf media views Israel has improved. There has also been a shift in the Arab attitude toward the concept of normalization. The peace with the UAE and Bahrain is a different kind of peace. It is substantially different from the peace with

Egypt and Jordan, signed primarily with the regimes in those states. With the UAE and Bahrain, the change is also occurring from the bottom up, not just from the top down. This is another kind of peace.

However, we must not be lulled into euphoria, as we have been in the past. These are significant achievements, but they are taking place on the periphery of the Middle East and do not necessarily have a dramatic effect on some of the conflicts and problems plaguing the region. Ultimately, the Palestinian issue is the heart of the conflict and we cannot divert attention to the periphery and assume that this will resolve the conflict. We may have even distanced a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A political shift in the US could result in the hoped-for change that would place the Palestinian issue higher on the US agenda.

Dr. Moran Zaga, Research Fellow, Mitvim Institute

The agreement between Israel and the UAE is a groundbreaking event within a broader process. In recent years, the UAE has positioned itself as a regional power active on the regional and international level. The normalization with Israel signals another milestone in its quest for influence and its efforts to adopt courageous and reality-changing measures. The UAE has strategic and ideological motivations in this regard. Israel, for its part, has an interest in facilitating a significant role for the UAE in the Middle East because it holds regional views similar to our own and wields influence in places that Israel does not, such as in Syria and Iraq.

Israel has invested significant resources in developing ties with the UAE through government and civil society channels. The change in relations that will take place will find its expression not only in the openness of ties, but also in their extent, capacities, and wider array of cooperation – in research, culture, tourism and diplomacy. The two states have shared interests and potential for cooperation in additional fields, such as climate change, food security, energy, technology, regional security and the Iranian threat. The building of the joint platforms we are currently witnessing that encompass government ministries, dedicated task teams, civilian forums and Memorandums of Understanding is an encouraging signal of a firm foundation with continuity potential.

Maintaining the special fabric of relations woven between Israel and the UAE is important, as is expanding the ties created between a narrow stratum of decision makers into broader connections. Since the UAE is a federative state, it is worth trying to link up various local leaders to the process. Some of the emirates in the federation have yet to express their views on normalization, and it is important to monitor their attitude. The UAE needs additional legitimacy for the step it took, and it therefore hopes that other Arab states will follow. That is why the ties that it seeks to forge with Israel are regional and not just bilateral in nature. The two sides have a mutual interest: strengthening the Emirati move towards Israel and expanding Israel's network of ties in the Middle East.

Dr. Maya Sion-Tzidkiyahu, Director, Europe-Israel Relations Program, Mitvim Institute

Israel-EU relations started off in 2020 under the shadow of the Trump plan, deteriorated into threats of European punitive measures if Israel went ahead with its unilateral annexation intentions, and significantly improved under Gabi Ashkenazi as Israel's foreign minister.

The EU is Israel's biggest trade partner, providing it with a stick it can use against Israel with varying degrees of force that could all be harmful (for example, the possibility that was raised not to renew the EU's research and innovation agreement with Israel for the 2021-2027 period). The suspension of the annexation plan paved the way for better relations, and Ashkenazi enjoys respect and a warm European embrace, not the least of which stems from European dislike of Netanyahu and Ashkenazi's clear differentiation from him. Officials in Jerusalem, Berlin and Brussels are trying to leverage the archiving of the annexation plan in order to reconvene the Israel-EU Association Council, which has been suspended since 2012 and to which certain European states have objected in recent years.

Israel's normalization agreements with Arab states is forcing the EU to recalibrate its course on a two-state solution, given that non-resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict no longer poses an obstacle to normalization with some Arab states. In addition, in order for Israel to be more attentive to the EU, the organization would do well to undo the ineffective linkage it makes between progress on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and the upgrading of Israel-EU ties. The government of Israel, for its part, must stop its incitement that depicts the EU as a foe rather than friend, and that encourages a negative attitude toward the EU in Israeli public opinion, which is without justification or foundation and is damaging to the relationship. The government of Israel must promote ties with the EU, which is a strategic partner of the State of Israel. We must base our relations on dialogue, even if a critical one, and manage to once again distinguish between politics and interests.

Gabriel Mitchell, Director of External Relations, Mitvim Institute

The combination of Israel's economic and strategic capabilities has created many opportunities in the Mediterranean. The discovery of natural gas has allowed Israel to dialogue with its neighbors and expand contacts with them. This past year, Israel signed the convention that anchors the status of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) as an internationally recognized organization, signed agreements with the governments of Cyprus and Greece on gas exports via the planned East Med pipeline, and worked together with Greece and Cyprus to stem the spread of Covid-19 and maintain open skies for tourism. Israel also offered Lebanon humanitarian aid following the Beirut port explosion, named Amira Oron as Ambassador to Egypt, maintained open dialogue and cooperation channels with Turkey, and coordinated with Egypt, Qatar, the UN and other international players to allow goods into Gaza and avoid eroding the status quo.

Israel currently faces three significant challenges in the region. It can no longer rely solely on the US, which is in the process of withdrawing from the region, and it must therefore look out for its own strategic interests and find additional pathways to advancing its goals in the region. The two other challenges stem from the collapse of global energy prices and the freeze placed on gas exploration in the Mediterranean as a result of the Covid-19 crisis, and Turkey's challenge to the regional order with an aggressive foreign policy in a bid to expand its sphere of influence. In order to advance its interests in the Mediterranean, Israel could bolster ties with its EMGF partners, expand cooperation with them on issues such as the environment, renewable energy, tourism, cyber and maritime security. Israel could also strengthen ties with European states invested in the region's future, encourage US participation in the EMGF and expand joint Israeli-American research projects to additional states, display willingness to resolve the maritime border issue with Lebanon, find a solution to the Gaza energy crisis, and maintain open communication channels with Turkey.

C. Israeli Diplomacy in Muslim and Arab States

Dr. Nimrod Goren, Head of the Mitvim Institute

New opportunities have opened for Israel in the Middle East in recent years. Relationships with Arab states are changing, facilitating new and expanded cooperation. The ties are no longer mostly clandestine and security-focused as they were previously; they are increasingly open and also include civilian, economic and diplomatic aspects. The Israeli public and decision makers have identified this shift and are increasingly viewing the Middle East as a region with potential for cooperation and not just as an arena in which Israel must defend itself from its neighbors. The realization of the full potential of Israel's relations with the Arab world requires progress on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. That is true even as some Arab states are willing to normalize ties with Israel in return for suspension of Israel's annexation intentions, even without concrete progress toward peace with the Palestinians. However, other factors are also delaying the realization of the potential in Israel-Arab relations, among them the Israeli government's domestic conduct.

The State Comptroller's report issued this year pointed to serious shortcomings in Israel's Foreign Service. Other than the Foreign Ministry, which has been significantly and deliberately weakened in recent years, over 30 other government ministries and agencies are active in the foreign policy arena, without a central body to coordinate their activities. This is apparent in the management of Israel's ties with Arab states, and examples of the issues that arise due to this lack of centralization have emerged over the past two months since the announcement of normalization with the UAE. Key examples include tensions between the security and diplomatic echelons and the continued dominance of security officials on foreign policy issues; the rivalry and lack of cooperation among various government ministries operating vis-à-vis Arab states; the absence of effective Knesset oversight, particularly by the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, over the government's implementation of foreign policy; and the need for a more effective interface between government agencies and the business and civil society sectors.

With Israel facing new opportunities and forging new ties in the region, a greater synergy must be created among the various elements involved in Israel-Arab relations, and their friction and rivalry must be set aside. Management of the evolving ties with our neighbors must be entrusted to the professionals most equal to the task, with a leading role for the Foreign Ministry and its diplomats. The emerging new period in the Middle East opens a window of opportunity to re-examine Israeli diplomacy in Arab and Muslim states.

Dr. Ehud Eiran, Board Member, Mitvim Institute

The Abraham Accords stemmed primarily from security-strategic interests, such as the need to confront Iran and prepare for the apparent decline in the US commitment to the Middle East. That explains the significant role of Israeli security officials in progress toward the normalization agreements, in dialogue and contacts with Gulf regimes and security counterparts there.

Years ago, diplomatic efforts vis-à-vis the Arab world were managed by the agency that preceded Israel's Foreign Ministry – the Jewish Agency's Political Department, which also conducted intelligence gathering activities in the Middle East. In later years, Israel's contacts with Arab states became a military issue (for example, meetings of the armistice committees), largely clandestine in nature (for example, smuggling Jews out of northern

Africa), leading to the “securitization” of Israeli relations with the Middle East. There is also a lateral-generational aspect involved. The first Foreign Ministry officials to deal with the Arab issue (such as Eliyahu Eilat and Eliyahu Sasson) were products of an open Middle Eastern environment that closed after Israel's establishment.

The peace with Egypt and Jordan and the diplomatic processes of the 1990s brought the Foreign Ministry back, to a certain extent and at least at the time, to the Middle Eastern arena with the opening of several representative missions in regional capitals. In other words, the type of interaction between Israel and Arab states has generally determined the identity of the Israeli agency leading the relationship. The undermining of Foreign Ministries in the conduct of foreign relations both in Israel and elsewhere in the world has also affected this aspect.

An opportunity has now opened up to expand the Foreign Ministry's role in relations with Arab states. Hopes of civilian ties, nurtured at the time of the peace agreement signing with Egypt and Jordan, were dashed; security issues have since dominated those relations. However, Israel's emerging ties with Gulf states hold a promise of success. There is already a history of civilian cooperation with those states that can be leveraged, Gulf states are far from the core of the Israeli-Arab conflict, and their general agendas underscore greater openness to the world. An example of the Foreign Ministry's importance in the renewed ties with the Arab world comes into play in multilateral aspects, such as the formal Israeli mission to the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) in Abu Dhabi and Israel's membership in the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum headquartered in Cairo.

Haim Regev, Deputy Director General for Middle East, Foreign Ministry

Israel's Foreign Ministry under a full-time minister is in a different and better place these days than it was six months ago, and that includes participation in decision making, a significant budget, broader areas of responsibility, and more. In examining the Foreign Ministry's activity in the Middle East, we have to keep in mind who Israel's interlocutors are in those states. Often, they are security and intelligence officials associated with the rulers of those states, and therefore their natural partners on the Israeli side are also security officials. Links with the Foreign Ministry are often perceived in Arab states as the final stage before normalization of relations. Nonetheless, since the 1990s, the Ministry has had varied ties in the Middle East with relevant elements, especially in the Gulf. The Ministry's greatest achievement has been the “routinization” effect – accustoming Arab states to Israeli presence in their territory. Since 2016, an Israeli mission has been operating in Abu Dhabi within the framework of IRENA, with Israeli representatives allowed to enter the UAE on an Israeli diplomatic passport, thus creating a basis for expanded relations.

Links with Gulf states up until now have existed on four levels: diplomatic – dialogue with a small circle of senior figures; economic – widespread Israeli business activity in the Gulf, which would not have been possible without Foreign Ministry involvement; people-to-people – connecting civil society organizations and preparing public opinion for links with Israel; social media – the Ministry is heavily invested in Arabic-language social media, creating a public platform for relations to develop once official ties are declared. The Ministry has learned the lessons of the peace processes with Egypt and Jordan, ones that lacked sufficient preparation of public opinion and routinization. The recent breakthrough with Gulf states provides the Ministry with broad opportunities in terms of business, tourism, culture and more.

The Jordanians and Palestinians are closely aligned on the regional scene and they are beginning to internalize the change in Israeli-Arab relations and the fact that the more they lag behind, the more they stand to lose. Now, with the annexation issue delayed and in light of the fact that the UAE is an important ally of Jordan's, new Palestinian and Jordanian thinking may emerge. It is important to remember that the peace with Jordan is of great strategic importance to Israel.

Ksenia Svetlova, Director, Israel-Middle East Relations Program, Mitvim Institute

The recent agreements and developments with Gulf states have spotlighted the weakness of the Knesset, especially of its Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee. The Knesset is tasked with government oversight, but it does not carry out its mandate. The Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee has hardly held any discussions on the regional processes that have matured in recent years. Even when lawmakers wanted to deal with these issues, information was not available to them. Some MKs tabled questions but did not receive answers and were dismissed out of hand on vague security grounds. Security issues have dominated the committee's work for years and the subcommittee for foreign affairs is very rarely convened.

We at the Mitvim Institute recently published a study on how the government conducts issues related to regional cooperation. The study's main finding was the absence of an overall coordinating body for the many agencies and ministries active in the region. Such a body, responsible for ties with Arab states and tasked with shaping a national diplomatic strategy, must be established. Specific plans must be drawn up for dealing with each country in the region, and uncoordinated overlaps between different governmental agencies must be avoided. One single body must be tasked with planning and promoting regional cooperation, and all the information available to various governmental agencies must be shared. The Foreign Ministry's tasks have been generously farmed out to various ministries in recent years while the security establishment enjoys prominence and superiority in decision making processes. In the past six months, the Foreign Ministry's standing has improved and it is clearly participating and leading more. The Foreign Ministry must be the lead agency in diplomatic relations in general, and in those with Arab states specifically.

We are at the start of an important process turning Israel into a member of the Middle Eastern family after many long years. Along with the clear advantages and opportunities this integration brings, it raises complex challenges, and dealing with them requires cooperation among government agencies. The signing of historic agreements without any Knesset oversight or input is a deeply unsound practice that must change.

Yael Ravia-Zadok, Head of Economic Diplomacy Division, Foreign Ministry

Economic diplomacy is the Foreign Ministry's growth engine. The Covid-19 crisis has illustrated the Ministry's essential role in acquiring medical equipment, arranging travel for stranded Israelis, ensuring continued flights to Israel, and more. The Ministry is working to leverage Israeli innovation and capabilities for the needs of other states as well, strengthening Israel's diplomatic equity and identifying new business opportunities for Israeli firms. Over the past two years, Israeli representative offices have helped advance deals worth 7.6 billion USD, which created over 65,000 new jobs for Israelis. The Ministry thus contributes not only to Israel's strategic security, but also to its economic security.

The Foreign Ministry is flourishing. It is leading a rich diplomatic agenda and has secured additional budgets. The presence of Israeli diplomats on the ground is an asset, as they forge the connection between local needs and Israeli capabilities (and vice versa), and strengthen ties with countries where they are posted. These needs pave the way for action. In 2011, we identified Jordan's need for alternative trade routes after its main route through Syria was blocked. The Foreign Ministry initiated the creation of an overland bridge for goods from and to Jordan, thereby strengthening Israel's regional standing and its equity vis-à-vis Jordan.

The economic dimension is a central axis to promoting ties in the region. The QIZ agreement with Egypt has increased Egyptian exports and created 300,000 jobs. Think of the fact that hundreds of thousands of households make a living off the fruits of the peace with Israel. This is no small achievement. The natural gas discoveries have changed Israel's standing in the region and turned it into an energy exporter to its neighbors. Energy diplomacy facilitated the founding of the EMGF, established this year in Cairo at the initiative of the Israeli and Egyptian energy ministers.

The Abraham Accords are a historic event affecting the entire region. The trilateral fund announced by the Americans will constitute an important tool for promoting joint economic projects. The agreements already signed (on aviation, visas and investment protection) are laying the foundations for future ties and building trust. We will strive to promote trade, innovation, renewable energy and infrastructure projects in the region. Israel seeks to solidify the new partnerships for the benefit of the region, and beyond. The sky is the limit.

E. Political Perspectives

Minister Orit Farkash-Hacohen, Minister of Strategic Affairs and Tourism

In dealing with strategic issues, it is important to focus on the campaign being waged on social media against Israel. This is a daily struggle and it is not simply about our image, but about the truth. This is a battle for consciousness and for Israel's good name. Manipulations of consciousness and awareness generate negative discourse on social media against Israel, born of a desire to influence the public agenda in a way that negates Israel's existence, its legitimacy and its interests. The Ministry of Strategic Affairs is also active in combating hate speech on the web. I recently inaugurated a new smart communication center with the head of the Julis local council and the Council for National and Civic Service, and this year six young Druze women will operate a digital communications room in Arabic.

In 1967, following the Six Day War, Sudan hosted the Khartoum Summit at which Arab states adopted the notorious "Three No's" negating Israel's existence – "no to recognition, no to negotiations, no to peace." Today, this trend has been reversed to one of recognition. Yes to dialogue, yes to connections, no to boycotts.

Tourism is the best expression of peace between nations. That was why Begin underscored the importance of tourism for building bridges in his speech during Sadat's visit to Israel. Governments are the ones that sign agreements and treaties, but true peace is built when people meet each other. The State of Israel and I, too, expect tourists from Arab and Muslim states. This is the way to infuse content into sustainable peace between states. We will continue to strengthen Israel's standing and legitimacy in the region and the world.

MK Ofer Shelah, Yesh Atid-Telem

The chasm in the heart of the Middle East between states striving for stability and radical Islam offers Israel opportunities to improve its standing in the region. Israel was for decades excluded from regional processes, and decisions on substantive issues (such as the war in Syria and the Iranian nuclear program) were adopted without input regarding its interests and those it shares with its neighbors. Putin may invite Netanyahu for a photo-op, but on matters such as the war in Syria, he talks to Rouhani and Erdoğan. They are players in the arena; we are not. The same goes for the US pullout from the Middle East. The true “deal of the century” would be to offer the US a Middle East led by its allies – Israel and the other states striving for stability.

Following the recent normalization agreements, Netanyahu may be celebrating his argument that we can improve our standing in the region without placing the Palestinian card on the table, but separation from the Palestinians is a paramount Israeli interest if it seeks to remain Jewish and democratic. The Palestinians are paying a heavy price for their rejectionism. If we do not take advantage of the momentum with Gulf states to effectuate a separation from the Palestinians, then the normalization too will boil down to a deal intended to improve the standing of various regimes in the Middle East concerned about losing touch with the US once Trump is replaced.

Just like those surveyed by the Mitvim Institute for its annual Israeli Foreign Policy Index, I do not see a recent change in the standing of the Foreign Ministry. The weakening of the Ministry and the parceling out of its tasks to other ministries for political expediency began a long time ago and has been damaging to Israel. This is not just a technical issue related to the Ministry's presence or absence at crucial decision-making junctions. It is also about the absence of coordinated Foreign Service activity and lack of backing for it to promote vital Israeli interests.

Netanyahu thinks US Jewry will disappear from the map given the high rate of assimilation and loss of contact with Israel. This must be confronted, and the US Jewish community must be reconnected to Israel. That is a job for the Foreign Ministry to do.

MK Nitzan Horowitz, Chair, Meretz

The new agreements with Gulf states are important and must be backed. Nonetheless, the argument made by the government and the Israeli right that these agreements cancel out the Palestinian issue is fraudulent and damaging to Israel's interests. Progress in negotiations with the Palestinians is in Israel's interest in order for us to live here peacefully and securely. The new agreements could help advance negotiations with the Palestinians and achieve a two-state solution.

In recent years, we have witnessed a rise in reactionary, anti-democratic and anti-liberal regimes and leaders. Israel has forged and strengthened ties with some of them at the expense of relations with democratic, liberal governments. Regarding Europe, Israel must invest resources and preserve its ties with the democratic states that have been and remain our allies. The government-backed claims that the EU is hostile to Israel must also be silenced. This is a fundamentally unacceptable and unworthy idea.

Israel's democratic essence does not allow us to distance ourselves from liberal democracies such as Germany and France, and from an organization such as the EU. Israel's place in the world is among the enlightened and democratic people who defend human rights and seek peaceful conflict resolution. The current government of Israel will not change its policy in that regard, but even it has sufficient members who are supposed to understand our affinity for and closeness to the democratic and liberal world.

Political change in the US could result in renewed thinking in Jerusalem regarding the direction of our foreign policy. Israel has always enjoyed bipartisan consensus in the US. That consensus has been cracked in recent years and Netanyahu and the government of Israel played a key role in this deterioration. The Jewish community in the US traditionally votes overwhelmingly for Democrats. In its ties with the Jewish communities there, Israel's government must underscore the shared values and interests we have with them and realize its mistake in undermining relations with the Democratic Party and over-relying on Trump and the Republicans.

MK Aida Touma-Suleiman, Joint List

This would seem to be the most successful period ever for Israel in terms of regional politics, with a new announcement of a supposed peace agreement emerging every few days. However, the states with which Israel is reaching agreements fit the profile of regimes that oppress their people. That happens in Europe, Africa and in the Gulf and the broader Arab world. Despite the general impression of success of the Netanyahu government's regional policy, we are in fact deteriorating toward a more complex situation. Economic trade agreements are a diversion from the true attempt to resolve the situation that led us to the conflict in the first place. Israel is an occupier of another people and Netanyahu's policy provides an alibi for continued occupation. The Trump plan is not a peace plan; it fails to advance the establishment of a Palestinian state. In fact, this is a mega-annexation plan thwarting the founding a Palestinian state. The agreement with the UAE is part of this plan.

The agreements with Gulf states distance us from peace. If these agreements serve the goal of isolating the Palestinians and are intended to bring them to their knees, they cannot be considered peace agreements. Do these agreements serve the interests of the people? In my view, they do not, despite their economic potential. Only the wealthy will profit. Netanyahu and his government have launched a dangerous arms race in the region. Since the signing of the agreements, all we hear about are preparations for war and acquisition of fighter jets. This is not a climate that bodes well for peaceful relations.

Anyone who thinks Israel can conduct a regional policy as an occupying power leaves us with a heavy and explosive legacy. Even after Trump and Netanyahu step down, we will have to deal with the obstacles that they sowed into the road to peace. The question that we, and especially Israel's Jewish majority, must ask is what kind of future and state we want. Netanyahu is building an apartheid state, and his moves do not help us build a true democracy and end the occupation. The alleged success recorded today in relations with the region actually signals a troubling deterioration.