



Symposium Summary

Israeli Foreign Policy and the Modern Diplomacy of the 21st Century

Tel Aviv; 20 April 2015

How can Israeli foreign policy be adapted to comport with 21st century diplomacy? This question was the focus of a symposium convened on 20 April 2015 at Tel Aviv University by [Mitvim – The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies](#), the [Frances Brody Institute for Applied Diplomacy](#) at Tel Aviv University, and the [Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung](#). The symposium followed the publication of the Mitvim Institute's [guiding principles for a new Israeli foreign policy paradigm](#) and the speakers were Mr. Momo Mahadav, CEO of Maala and a task-team member at the Mitvim Institute, Ms. Colette Avital, a former senior diplomat and Member of Knesset, and Mr. Yigal Palmor, former spokesperson of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This document summarizes their remarks.

Mr. Momo Mahadav

CEO of Maala and a task-team member at the Mitvim Institute

Today, a variety of new actors are engaging in the diplomatic sphere. These include multinational entities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), businesses and entrepreneurs. As a result, international diplomacy – specifically that of Western countries – is opening up and becoming increasingly influenced by international frameworks whose agendas are also shaped by civil society representatives. An illustration of this is the fact that in 1946 the United Nations awarded the status of an observer to only 41 civil society entities. Today that number is approximately 4,000.

These changes, however, do not render the work of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) useless. Indeed, the opposite is true, as these changes should catalyze an expansion of the ministry's portfolio, and include the need to cooperate with a wide variety of organizations and audiences. In light of this trend, Israel should develop a model of integrative diplomacy, one that fosters cooperation between traditional diplomacy and non-state actors and recognizes the latter's growing role in the national and international arenas. El Al's Ambassadors Program, which encourages crew

members to engage in public speaking events about Israel during their trips overseas, is an example of such a venture.

On an organizational level, the MFA must remold the role of the Israeli diplomat in a way that comports with this new diplomatic reality and update its cadet training appropriately. It should also increase its engagement on global issues, specifically those where Israel's contribution stands out and which have the potential to strengthen Israel's society and economy. For example, Israel should step up its involvement in global efforts relating to sustainability, poverty eradication, agriculture, water and food technology; the promotion of Israeli knowhow in advancing social change; and expanding the activities of *Mashav* (Israel's Agency for International Development Cooperation) to countries where Israeli companies have potential or existing economic interests. Additionally, Israel must recognize the importance of economic diplomacy and must provide protection and aid to Israeli companies who might be adversely affected by BDS efforts worldwide.

Ensuring that Israeli foreign policy is compatible with modern diplomacy will require resources that are not readily available to the MFA in light of its current financial difficulties. Therefore, the ministry must use current funds more effectively, while creatively seeking out new sources of capital and resources.

Ms. Colette Avital

Former senior diplomat and Member of Knesset:

The Israeli MFA should have undergone a reorganization that would make its modus operandi more compatible with 21st century diplomacy, which is more open, integrative, collaborative and democratic. However, this is not the central challenge, as such an effort would attempt to fix the organ rather than deal with the substance. The underlying challenge before us is that Israel does not have a clearly formulated, coherent and consistent foreign policy.

Dr. Henry Kissinger used to say that "Israel has no foreign policy, only domestic policy." Indeed, the frequent rise and fall of governments, and the political need to satisfy the demands of coalition partners whose views differ and sometimes contradict those of the prime minister cause an inability and sometimes an unwillingness to articulate long term policies and strategy. Under such circumstances, a "sit and do nothing" approach has become the accepted code of conduct in the foreign policy arena. This has only been exacerbated by poor relations between the prime minister and his foreign minister, which have further diminished the ministry's standing, budgets and scope of activities at times.

The Israeli government does not devote attention to its foreign affairs in a holistic fashion – neither in terms of setting priorities, nor as far as tackling the question of Israel's standing in the Middle East. An example of this is the fact that Israel has yet to respond to the Arab Peace Initiative. I am also unaware of whether the foreign minister

has presented to the government, for better or worse, a ten-year plan outlining risks and opportunities, recommendations and potential policy directions for Israel.

As far as new diplomacy is concerned, it is true that there are many “civil society diplomats,” be they NGOs, business people and cultural icons, all of whom contribute to the makeup of Israel’s foreign affairs. This reality manifests itself in the German-Israel relationship, for example, which has reached its current height thanks to the efforts of such actors. It is also true that on occasion the MFA uses specific organizations in the fields of public diplomacy and lobbying as part of its effort to “put out fires.”

This conduct raises both ethical and organizational problems. On an ethical level, the fact that Israeli society is deeply divided makes it very difficult for official Israeli entities to work together with citizens who do not identify with the Israeli government’s policies. What is required is the adoption of a liberal spirit that enables people to contribute to Israel’s foreign relations without preconditioning such assistance on their identifying with the government’s position. On an organizational level, resources must be set aside to support civil society organizations that promote Israel’s political agenda abroad and the MFA should have the capacity to plan and integrate these efforts. At present, these resources and capabilities are not available.

Mr. Yigal Palmor

Former spokesperson of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Israel does not need to adopt a foreign policy that targets NGOs or relies on them per se. That said, it should cooperate regularly with Israeli NGOs in a coordinated fashion. In so doing, it will gain greater legitimacy with their counterparts overseas. Involving NGOs in actual governmental decision-making processes is problematic because these entities very often have their own agendas, which are shaped by donors or private interests and they do not necessarily represent the public. Moreover, NGOs are not always bound by the same transparency standards that governmental bodies are required to uphold.

A comparative examination of trends in this area in other countries shows that NGOs are not playing a greater role in foreign policy formulation, because the emphasis is often greater in the economic sphere.

In the United Kingdom, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) tried unsuccessfully to involve NGOs in its decision-making processes. During William Hague’s tenure as Foreign Secretary attempts were made to augment the FCO’s efforts in the economic sphere, training diplomats to promote economic interests and recruiting local staff at British embassies who would make this their focus. In France, similar efforts were undertaken when the French Foreign Ministry took over the Ministry for European Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Trade, and the Ministry of Tourism. The Brazilian foreign ministry does not cooperate with civil society and while it is considered one of the most professional in the world, it is perceived internally to be disconnected

from public opinion. This perception foments an atmosphere in which foreign affairs are often greeted with hostility by the Brazilian people. Moreover, the Prime Minister often imposes his views on the diplomatic corps. Sweden's foreign minister announced the adoption of a "moral" foreign policy and is trying to work together with civil society groups, but these efforts have yet to bear fruit. Finally, Russia's foreign policy is based on focusing on internal Russian interests, on business-related interests and on an opposition to any foreign intervention in internal Russian affairs.

With regard to Israel, the few efforts to involve civil society groups in foreign affairs, for example on LGBT issues, have brought limited results and at times have even exacerbated criticism of Israel. Difficulty on this front is derived from, among other things, Israel's dependency on the resource of international legitimacy, which constrains Israel's diplomatic maneuvering abilities. Legitimacy is a priceless and central foreign policy commodity, which, rather than being acquired unilaterally, must be earned from a state's counterparts. In order to increase its "legitimacy reservoir," the Israeli government must work together with domestic civil society organizations in a long term fashion. Such efforts will not solve the need for a long-term broad Israeli foreign policy, but they will contribute to enhancing Israel's legitimacy in the international arena.