

## **Opportunities for Israel's Foreign Relations towards 2018**

### **Summary of a Public Panel at the 2017 Annual Conference of the Mitvim Institute**

**December 2017**

The 2017 annual conference of the Mitvim Institute was held on 1 November 2017 in Jerusalem, in cooperation with the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. As part of the conference, a public panel was held on opportunities for Israel's foreign relations towards 2018. It featured Helit Barel, Prof. Elie Podeh, Dr. Thabet Abu Rass, and Eran Etzion who spoke about issues related to the Iran nuclear deal, Israel-US relations, Israel in the Middle East, the involvement of Israel's Arab citizens in foreign affairs, Israeli-European relations, and the status of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). The panel was moderated by Yael Patir, J Street Israel Director. This document summarizes the presentations made during the panel.<sup>1</sup>

#### **A. Israel, Iran and the US**

##### ***Helit Barel, Former Director at the National Security Council and CEO of the Council for Peace and Security***

The nuclear agreement with Iran, like any other negotiated agreement, has advantages and disadvantages. Its main significant advantage is that the agreement delays the point beyond which Iran will have nuclear weapon. Its main drawbacks are that the agreement has a limited validity and that it allows Iran to continue its research and development. Moreover, there are important issues that are not covered by the agreement: Iran's support for terrorism, its efforts to develop ballistic missiles, the human rights situation in Iran, and the role it plays in the Middle East. Nevertheless, it was impossible at the time to reach a more comprehensive agreement. If dealing with the Iranian nuclear threat is of prime importance for Israel, then a nuclear agreement is important and useful, even if it does not address the other aspects.

US President Trump has not withdrawn from the agreement, despite his statement that he cannot trust Iran to abide by it. Trump has actually launched a constitutional process that opens a 60-day window of opportunity in which US lawmakers can lead an accelerated process of imposing sanctions on Iran. Congress must now assume responsibility and decide how to move forward on the issue. In light of the fact that the sanctions have already been removed and that the Europeans, the Chinese and the Russians are opposed to changing the agreement and to renegotiate its terms, I disagree with Prime Minister Netanyahu, who claims that a better agreement can be achieved at this point in time. However, it is important to note that there is definitely an opportunity to include issues that

---

<sup>1</sup> To view the panel on the Mitvim Institute's YouTube channel, [click here](#). To view the entire conference, which also included presentations by Avi Gabbay, Dr. Nimrod Goren, and Colette Avital, [click here](#).

are currently not covered by the agreement. The desire of the countries who signed the nuclear deal to persuade the US to remain committed to it, may motivate them to be ready to act with the US in areas that are not covered by the agreement, such as the issue of missiles. In the absence of a proper alternative, the Israeli interest – as well as the American one – is that the US will not abandon the agreement.

As for the Israeli-US relations, [the 2017 Foreign Policy Index of the Mitvim Institute](#) shows that the public perceives them as being better than they have been in recent years. The Israeli public perception of the relations is traditionally influenced by the American president's identity and personality. President Trump is very popular in Israel, regardless of what he does or does not actually do. The survey reflects this assertion, just as it reflected in previous years the negative attitude of the Israeli public toward President Obama rather than the good attitude toward the overall state of the relations between the two countries. In his conduct, Netanyahu turned the American support of Israel into a controversial issue in the domestic American politics, resulting in eroding the support for Israel among Democrats. However, this is reversible. In the end, when it comes to supporting Israel, Democrats and Republicans are motivated by similar reasons. The growing disagreement among Democrats with Israeli policies, emanates mainly from the conduct of the current Israeli leadership.

In contrast, there is a deep and difficult crisis in the face of American Jewry. Representatives of Reform and Conservative Jews, who form the majority of American Jewry, recently refused to meet with the Prime Minister. This indicates a rupture. Under Obama, Netanyahu put the Jews, who mostly voted for the Democrats, at the center of a sharp confrontation, implying they should choose between standing by an American president who is a democrat, liberal, and well represents their values, and between unconditional loyalty to Israel's security as Netanyahu interprets it. This has caused ruptures within the Jewish communities and it has long-term consequences. American Jewish support is perceived in Israel as a given fact, but this is far from reality. While previous generations of American Jews were invested in the future of the State of Israel, the current generation loses interest in Israel. The cynical use of the American Jewry by Israeli politicians over the past decade leads to the loss of a strategic power multiplier for Israel.

## **B. Israel in the Middle East**

***Prof. Elie Podeh, Board Member at the Mitvim Institute and Lecturer at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem***

When examining Israel's foreign policy in the Middle East, a clear distinction must be drawn between what Israel's foreign policy should be (or what we would like it to be) and what is actually expected. Unfortunately, the gap between what needs to be and what is likely to be is very large.

The Israeli government must do everything it can to preserve and strengthen its informal alliance with Sunni Arab states. This cooperation is an achievement in itself and is indicative of the flexibility of regional alliances and balances. In the 1950s and 1960s, Israel joined forces with Turkey and Iran against the Nasserite threat. In our era, Israel, Egypt, Jordan and the Gulf states are joining forces against Iran. However, as my research and the findings of a recent Mitvim Institute task-team demonstrate, realizing the potential inherent to the relationships with these countries depends on the solution or the progress towards a solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In other words, in order to make progress in the Middle

East, Israel must also advance the peace process with the Palestinians. In October 2017, Turki al-Faisal, who was head of Saudi intelligence for many years, participated in a public panel in New York with former Mossad chief Ephraim Halevi (a panel that in itself attests to a change that took place between the two countries, since the Saudi representative cannot appear in such an event without obtaining approval from the Saudi leadership). Al-Faisal's conclusion in the panel was that Israeli-Saudi cooperation should not be expected as long as there is no solution to the Palestinian issue. He mentioned the Arab Peace Initiative as a way to reach such a solution.

Precisely because of Israel's delicate strategic situation, this is the time and opportunity to advance the resolution of the conflict with the Palestinians. However, the conduct of the current Israeli government and domestic Palestinian politics are not conducive to such progress. As long as there is an internal Palestinian split, the government claims that Palestinian President Abbas does not represent all the Palestinians and therefore is not a viable partner. However, when there is a move toward unity between Fatah and Hamas, the government says that it is impossible to negotiate with a Palestinian government that includes Hamas representatives who do not recognize Israel and do not abandon the path of military struggle. It is actually in Israel's interest to positively examine the Palestinian reconciliation process, since it is indicative of the weak position of Hamas. If moving forward toward peace with a Palestinian unity government (if established) becomes possible, it will indicate a change in Hamas' position; if progress cannot be made, then there could be a renewed split between the Palestinians. Either way, since the Israeli government also includes parties that have no interest in advancing the peace process, any progress in Israeli-Palestinian talks is likely to entail the destabilization of the political systems on both sides. However, such progress is not highly likely at the moment. A possible game changer can be another Palestinian uprising. There are, in my opinion, reasons that could lead to its outbreak. Even if reality does not allow this to happen at the moment, no one will be surprised if it happens in the future.

Israel must renew negotiations with the Palestinians in order to take advantage of its increasingly strong military, economic, and political position in the Middle East. However, if the current Israeli government continues to hold office in the coming year (a presumption that may prove wrong), this is unlikely to happen and Israel's Middle Eastern policy is not expected to change. If a new US peace plan is actually presented, Netanyahu may have to decide whether the fate of his current coalition is more important to him than a genuine attempt to advance peace.

### **C. The involvement of Israel's Arab citizens in foreign affairs**

#### ***Dr. Thabet Abu Rass, Co-Director of the Abraham Fund Initiatives***

Israel's Arab citizens look at Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and the Arab world, through Israeli eyes as well as through Palestinian and Arab eyes. The Israeli point of view focuses on security, therefore what pleases the Jewish majority in the country does not always satisfy its Arab minority. For example, the relationships between Israel and fanatical regimes in the Middle East – such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the Gulf states – sometimes embarrass and worry Israel's Arab citizens. Peace is being made between nations, not just between regimes. We Arabs are more connected to the peoples in the region, while the Israeli government attempts to connect to its dictatorships.

The Palestinian space is part of us and part of our identity. Since they are the ones who are most affected by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Israel's Arab citizens are the ones who will benefit the most from ending it and from achieving peace. Contrary to Israeli public opinion, as reflected in the Mitvim Institute's 2017 Israeli Foreign Policy Index, I do not think that the internal Palestinian split serves Israel's interests. The split between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip affects both the Jewish population and the Arab population. The socio-economic situation in the Gaza Strip is very difficult. Improving the living conditions of the two million residents living there will be a moral relief for all of us, and will most probably affect the political positions of the residents of Gaza. A Palestinian reconciliation will make Palestinian society more moderate and will strengthen the Palestinian Authority. If elections were held in the Gaza Strip tomorrow, I believe that the Fatah movement would have won. The Gazans are fed up with the Hamas movement and what it has done to them. Palestinian reconciliation will remove the possibility of a military confrontation between Israel and Hamas and will give hope to the Palestinians. The political stalemate leads to despair while people have a need for hope.

The changes that are taking place in the Middle East, as well as American and European mediation efforts, can certainly help advance the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. However, it is important to remember that Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states and even Egypt, will not normalize their relations with Israel without a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Every crisis between Israelis and Palestinians, such as the one over the Temple Mount and the al-Aqsa Mosque, has potential ramifications for the stability of the regimes in the Middle East, which is a reason of concern for Arab countries. Those who think that it is possible to establish good relations between Israel and the Arab states while ignoring the Palestinian issue are likely to be disappointed.

When examining the involvement of the Arab public in issues related to Israel's foreign relations, one may identify a missed opportunity. True, the Arabs in Israel are involved in foreign policy, but in ways that are not necessarily official. A major challenge for them is that foreign and security issues in Israel are often parts of the same package. Even when Israel's Arab citizens want to be involved, they are excluded. Less than two percent of MFA employees are Arabs. However, Israel's Arab citizens do not need the MFA to maintain and create foreign relations. For them, foreign relations are manifested differently: tens of thousands of them travel to the holy sites of Islam in Saudi Arabia; 8,000 Arab students from Israel study in colleges in the West Bank and 6,000 in Jordan; and Israel's Arab citizens spend large amounts of money on purchasing goods in the West Bank markets. Those of them who wish to visit Muslim countries can issue a Palestinian passport or a transit document in Jordan. Israel's Arab citizens have a connection to the Palestinian people and the Arab people. They want and can serve as a bridge to peace and to the Arab world, but the realization of this potential will be possible only when an agreement between Israel and the Palestinians is reached.

## **D. Israeli-European relations and the status of the Israeli MFA**

### ***Eran Etzion, Former Head of Policy Planning at the MFA***

The average Israeli thinks of Europe first and foremost as a tourist destination. However, Israelis tend to associate Europe with the Holocaust and anti-Semitism (old and new), and see it as anti-Israeli, pro-Palestinian, and BDS movement supporter. Israelis see Europe as the cradle of Western Ashkenazi-Jewish culture, but in general they treat it as self-evident and show little interest in it. The respondents to the Mitvim Institute's 2017 Israeli Foreign

Policy Index, ranked Israel-Europe relations as the last of five options in terms of Israeli foreign policy issues they would like to know more about. In European eyes, Israel appears, on the one hand as a source of conflict, bad news, and injustice to the Palestinians, while, on the other hand, it is perceived as a strong country, with a successful high-tech sector, and significant research and science, which effectively confronts terrorism. When the Europeans look at Israel, they see it – at a deep conscious level – as a bridge between European culture and the Middle East.

Europe offers a strategic depth in terms of democracy, security, economics and energy. In times when Russia and China are partially filling the vacuum created by the American withdrawal from the Middle East, Europe is suffering a lot of collateral damage in the form of terrorism, refugees and immigration. Hypothetically, this creates an opportunity for Israel to help Europe in dealing with terrorism and cyber-attacks, for example. In practice, this is happening only partially. As long as the stalemate between Israel and the Palestinians continues, Europe's ability to cooperate with Israel is clearly limited. The erosion of shared values of democracy, liberalism and civil society, is even worse. The shrinking democratic space in Israel affects Israeli-European relations, both strategically and substantially. It leads to a more negative attitude towards Israel in Europe, to a weakening European support, and to a more polarized European discourse about Israel. It is comparable to the decreasing support for Israel among Democrats and liberals and most of the Jewish community in the US. This weakening support is a result of the Israeli policy which identifies support for Israel with the Republican Party. By legitimizing semi-fascist and anti-Semitic movements in Europe, certain circles of the Israeli right contribute to the European polarized discourse in relation with Israel. We are witnessing a struggle between 'open' and 'closed' societies. The more Israel is perceived as a closed society, its strategic relations with Europe will erode, and it will move away from its strategic hinterland and the roots of Herzlian and political Zionism. The Israeli government is sacrificing our historical, moral and strategic foundations, in order to strengthen the political base of Netanyahu and the Israeli right.

This process is accompanied by a deliberate, systematic and ongoing weakening of the MFA by the political echelon. In this sense, however, Israel is not unique. Foreign ministries around the world are currently in trouble. It is unclear whether and when foreign ministries will cease to exist, but there is an international trend of reducing their role and dispersing their powers. When examining the status of the Israeli MFA, one must look at long-term trends. For example, the current political system has no interest in a strong MFA. However, the Israeli public has an interest in a strong MFA, but there is no one to defend its interests in this context. The MFA is trapped between a rock and a hard place: on the one hand the political echelon prefers to control and politicize the MFA – as it does with other state institutions; on the other hand, there is a strong and dominant defense system. The Israeli public has become accustomed to this situation and no longer sees the role of the foreign minister as important. When the public was asked, in the Mitvim poll, who should be Israel's foreign minister, almost 40 percent of the respondents had no answer.

How can a change be made? Formulating a coherent foreign policy paradigm can be a significant step in strengthening the MFA, as expressed by the public in the Mitvim poll, but the chances for this to happen are slim, to say the least. There has already been an attempt to do so, but the government was not genuinely interested in that, just as it does not show any willingness to establish a national security doctrine. I support the enactment of a law that will strengthen the status of the Foreign Service. This can be a significant step forward, similar to the positive effect that the enactment of the National Security Council Law had. However, the enactment of a law does not guarantee its implementation, and as I already

stated, the politicians have no interest in doing so. Therefore, public pressure is required. The MFA plays an important role in preventing wars. As a result, it must be more operational and have closer ties to the defense establishment – not as an auxiliary service provider, but as a central body that assists the elected political echelon in fulfilling its responsibility and in formulating strategic plans for war prevention, managing military policy systems, and setting realistic goals through political processes.