

The 2020 Israeli Foreign Policy Index - Commentaries by Mitvim Institute Experts

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The eighth annual public opinion poll of the Mitvim Institute on Israel's foreign policy was conducted in September 2020. It was carried out by the Rafi Smith Institute and in cooperation with Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, among a representative sample of Israel's adult population (700 men and women, Jews and Arabs) and with a margin of error of 3.5%. This report presents the poll's key findings, grouped under four categories: Israel's Foreign Service, Israel's foreign relations, Israel and its surrounding regions, and Israel and the Palestinians. Read the full report [here](#).

Dr. Nimrod Goren, Head of the Mitvim Institute: "Israel's foreign policy is at a crossroads. On the one hand, we are experiencing improving ties with Arab countries, an attempt to improve ties with the EU, and enhanced alliances in the Mediterranean. On the other hand, there is ongoing stagnation with the Palestinians, further distancing the two-state solution. The survey's findings clearly reflect these trends. The public believes more than it did in the past that cooperation with Arab states is possible, its attitude toward the EU is slightly improved, although it still views the EU as more of a foe to Israel than a friend, and the Mediterranean is perceived as a good option for regional belonging. Nonetheless, the quest for peace with the Palestinians has been relegated to the margins despite its centrality for Israel and its foreign relations. The Mitvim Index indicates support for a strong, effective foreign service, and points to the importance that the public attributes to civilian components and moral values in the conduct of Israeli diplomacy – namely, the belief that diplomats rather than security officials – should lead negotiations, the support for ambassadorial appointments of Arab citizens, and the importance of ties with democratic states, even those critical of Israeli policy in the Palestinian Territories. Given the current challenges to Israeli democracy, this is a positive trend."

Prof. Elie Podeh, Board Member at the Mitvim Institute: "Israelis are tired of the Palestinian issue. Most would rather see peace agreements with Arab states and do not attribute much importance to promoting peace with the Palestinians. These findings are troubling because they bolster continued policy efforts to ignore and bypass the Palestinians. Furthermore, over half of those surveyed said neither American and European incentives nor progress in normalization with the Arab world would strengthen at all or only slightly strengthen their support for peace with the Palestinians. However, there is a significant difference between Jews and Arabs in the findings, with Arabs attributing greater importance to peace with the Palestinians. Objective difficulties facing resolution of the Palestinian problem must not be allowed to mute the need to devote thought, resources and effort to resolve the core of the conflict. A new US administration could create an opportunity for a resumption of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations."

Dr. Lior Lehrs, Director of Mitvim's Program on Israeli-Palestinian Peacemaking: "The Middle East Peace Process has repeatedly experienced competing negotiating channels, raising the question of which to choose and of whether progress in one would help or hamper progress in others. Israel and the US are championing a policy of normalization with the Gulf States, bypassing the Palestinian issue despite its greater significance and centrality for Israel."

The poll results suggest that most Israelis agree with this approach, preferring agreements with Arab states to progress on peace with the Palestinians. Nonetheless, the lack of interest in this issue does not testify to Israeli support for annexation, as the poll indicates that only a small minority favors such measures. Despite the negotiating freeze and lack of public interest, the findings indicate public willingness to support an international diplomatic initiative that offers Israel an incentives package to promote Israeli-Palestinian peace.”

Former Member of Knesset Ksenia Svetlova, Director of Mitvim’s Program on Israel-Middle East Relations: “Most Israelis do not attribute importance to ties with Jordan, a troubling finding that reflects the grim reality of relations between the two neighbors and Israeli governmental policy that has long ignored the Hashemite Kingdom. When the Prime Minister is effusive in his praise of the new agreements with the Gulf States but attributes little importance to the Camp David Accords (with Egypt) and the Wadi Arava agreement (with Jordan), he generates public indifference and encourages the perception that peace with Jordan is more beneficial to Jordan than to Israel. Jordan is a first-rate strategic partner situated along Israel’s longest border. Relations with it continue to deteriorate, and that must be changed through significant government investment.”

Dr. Moran Zaga, Policy Fellow at Mitvim: “Israelis are displaying great interest in the UAE and local media is reporting extensively on a country that until recent weeks was absent from the public’s radar. The Mitvim poll reflects Israelis’ curiosity about the UAE, with most of those who express a desire to visit an Arab country choosing the UAE as their favored destination. Tourism and economic-security cooperation are not enough to achieve the vibrant peace to which most Israelis aspire, however. That requires developing ties through the worlds of music, art, language, sports, education, research and, of course, direct encounters. People-to-people engagement alongside the mutual diplomatic openness expressed by Israel and the UAE would augur a new beginning for Arab-Israeli ties in the Middle East.”

Dr. Maya Sion-Tzidkiyahu, Director of Mitvim’s Program on Israel-Europe Relations: “The poll presents troubling findings regarding the persistent gap between the prevalent view of the EU as hostile to Israel and the tight and varied network of economic, trade, research and innovation, tourism, education, culture, and security ties between the two. The EU (with its 27 member states and 440 million citizens) is a strategic partner of Israel. Its perception as a foe stems from tense relations over the peace process freeze with the Palestinians and continued construction in the settlements. The EU was the most vocal opponent of the Prime Minister’s annexation plan. Given that public Israeli support for annexation was absent, it is unclear whether the EU’s opposition to it carried it any favor among those polled. The EU is a true friend to Israel, albeit a critical one.”

Dr. Roei Kibrik, Mitvim’s Director of Research: “Israeli democracy is mired in a severe crisis, as reflected in its foreign relations. After aspiring for years to join the club of democratic nations and to be a light unto nations, Israel is now not advancing peace with the Palestinians and is deepening its territorial occupation, adopting the Trump administration’s rejection of global cooperation and befriending authoritarian, non-liberal and even antisemitic regimes. The results point to a clear generational gap. Older Israelis on the left and right are more cognizant of the importance of international cooperation and the need to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, more supportive of democratic values and more aware of the dangers inherent in unilateral annexation. The younger generation is less aware of the importance of democratic standing in foreign policy and of the threats posed by its erosion. They may need history lessons from the older generation.”