

## The Collapse of the Israeli Foreign Service

### Summary of a conference at the Knesset of the Caucus for the Empowerment of Israel's Foreign Service and the Mitvim Institute

February 2018

A special conference of the Caucus for the Empowerment of Israel's Foreign Service (led by MK Nachman Shai) and the Mitvim Institute took place at the Knesset on 15 January 2018. The conference was convened in light of a planned cut in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' (MFA) budget, which is part of a systematic weakening of Israel's foreign service. The speakers at the conference included MKs, MFA representatives, former diplomats, and relevant experts. The speakers highlighted the need for a strong and efficient foreign service, criticized the damage done to the status of the MFA, and suggested steps that can help strengthen Israel's diplomacy. This document summarizes the debate at the conference.

#### A. Opening Remarks

**MK Nachman Shai, Head of the Caucus for the Empowerment of Israel's Foreign Service, Zionist Union:** "This discussion is a last-minute cry. Today we call upon the Knesset, the government, and the general public to wake up and stop the deliberate weakening of the Israeli MFA. The plan of the Ministry of Finance to cut the MFA's budget is malicious. The attempt to increasingly dwarf the MFA has no justification. There is no substitute for the MFA; it is necessary for our country. The diplomats are responsible for the development and nurturing of Israel's economic, political, and even cultural relations with other countries. Maybe Finance Ministry officials think that in the current environment, which is saturated with social networks, the foreign service is doomed to become irrelevant, but we have news for them - there is no substitute for diplomacy and there will never be."

**Dr. Nimrod Goren, Head of the Mitvim Institute:** "The damage to the status of the MFA in recent years is reflected not only in budget cuts, in the dispersal of its authority, and in the absence of a full-time foreign minister, but also in the exclusion of the MFA from core policy issues, the reduced professional freedom of Israeli diplomats, the absence of a clear foreign policy paradigm, and the increased disdain for diplomacy among the current government. The annual public opinion polls of the Mitvim Institute testify yet again to the public's dissatisfaction with Israel's standing in the world, the government's handling of foreign policy, and the ability of the MFA to fulfill its mission. The primary focus of the MFA should not be public diplomacy, nor should it be thwarting international initiatives, delegitimizing criticism towards Israel, or attempting to gather additional votes in the UN; rather, it should focus – with the Ministry's available resources – on building of bridges and relations, encouraging conflict resolution and peacebuilding, creating channels of dialogue with supporters and opponents alike, promoting regional belonging, and adopting a more internationalist and inclusive approach."

## B. Members of Knesset

**MK Isaac Herzog, Chairman of the Opposition, Zionist Union:** "Employees of the MFA are located all over the world, including in some of the most difficult places. They are at the forefront of diplomatic challenges, and are frequently under severe physical threats. There is no reason to ridicule and humiliate them, and it is certainly wrong to close diplomatic missions in countries that are important to Israel's national security. What are the consequences of closing down seven missions, as required by the proposed budget cuts? It will be detrimental to our relations with seven UN member states. The Ministry of Finance treats the MFA with disdain. It is more appropriate for the Israeli government to praise MFA officials rather than treat them with such contempt."

**MK Ofer Shelah, Yesh Atid:** "The MFA is as important to national security as the Ministry of Defense, and if the Ministry of Defense were undergoing such a crisis, large amounts of money would have been invested to solve it, and it would have been treated as a national emergency. The Minister of Defense would have never treated the ministry he heads in the way that Netanyahu now refers to the MFA, which is under his responsibility. No coalition is attending this conference. This is not important enough to them. They are busy with a deliberate and destructive weakening of the MFA. It is important that the government has a clear foreign policy, which it currently lacks. The Foreign Service Bill, which I am advancing in the current Knesset and was initially formulated by Dr. Ronen Hoffman in the previous Knesset, can help solve the crisis."

**MK Amir Peretz, Zionist Union:** "During Prime Minister Rabin's time, many people around the world wholeheartedly praised Israel. At a time when the government policy is not acceptable, even to our friends around the world, we need professional diplomats and we need to open additional embassies. The cuts that the MFA is suffering from, and the closing of diplomatic missions are senseless. The MFA will not be treated with respect as long as its standing is portrayed as a political issue. We have to take care of the entire foreign service, not just the MFA, and we have to fight to save it before it is downsized, because in Israel, what closes down usually does not reopen."

**MK Merav Michaeli, Zionist Union:** "On my travels around the world, I meet the fine people of the MFA who represent Israel in such a way that does not make me – as an opposition member – feel uncomfortable. However, the language used by diplomats is an intellectual language, a culture that the current government wants to eradicate. Educated people tell us in a more complex way what the government does not want to hear – what is happening in the world and what people think of us out there. Therefore, Netanyahu is drying up the MFA while turning the National Security Council into his own foreign affairs bureau, as if he is the MFA and the State is him. In the previous Knesset, we supported the strike initiated by MFA employees, but that did not help either. There is a fundamental problem, and we must support the MFA in its struggle."

**MK Omer Bar-Lev, Zionist Union:** "The Prime Minister, who is also the Foreign Minister, does not want the ministry's employees, because they only make it difficult for him to represent his version of reality. MFA officials present a complex reality, while for Netanyahu it is easier to paint to the world a black-and-white reality. Unfortunately, Netanyahu does not respect the MFA. He brags about his diplomatic achievements on every possible stage, but those countries he is proud of having ties with vote against us at the UN. Netanyahu thinks he can do everything on his own, without budgets and without diplomats. This is wrong."

**MK Haim Jelin, Yesh Atid:** "Instead of buying more F-35 aircrafts, it is better to invest more funds in public diplomacy. We win all military battles, but not the public diplomacy battle. Splitting the MFA's responsibilities among five ministries undermines coordination in the government and damages Israel's foreign policy. We currently do not have anyone leading our foreign policy, and empowering the MFA is not a matter of right and left. The cuts and steps taken vis-a-vis Israeli missions around the world should not be influenced by political considerations. Israel must have a clear foreign policy, and the MFA should lead it. We see beautiful pictures from the Prime Minister's visits around the world, but in the end almost everyone votes against us at the UN."

**MK Yoel Hasson, Zionist Union:** "There is an impression in the government that the MFA does not have an important role in dealing with Israel's challenges in the world. This is, of course, a mistake. When I meet with Israeli diplomats, the extent of their disappointment and neglect is evident. This is not just about closing missions down; it is also about human capital. Our diplomats need an economic and professional horizon. Otherwise, they will turn to other professions, and we will lose their expertise. We also have to take care of the conditions of local Israeli workers who work in missions abroad. The foreign service does not have the resources it needs, certainly when compared with the defense establishment. We will mobilize the opposition to fight this, and we will raise the issue in the Knesset and in the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, which deals primarily with security and not with foreign policy."

**MK Eyal Ben-Reuven, Zionist Union:** "During my military service, I understood the role of the MFA. We must do everything we can to prevent war, and the MFA is in charge of doing just that. Why, then, are we systematically weakening the MFA, on the one hand, and pushing for exerting force on the other? We at the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee took upon ourselves that whenever we travel abroad we meet with the embassy personnel in the country we are visiting. Whenever we hear what our diplomats tell us about their current working conditions, we feel terrible. It is almost impossible to remain in the foreign service under such conditions. Israel deserves a full-time Foreign Minister, and the MFA deserves a budget that matches its objectives and the needs of its employees."

**MK Ayelet Nahmias-Verbin, Zionist Union:** "Israel's diplomats demonstrate great responsibility by staying on board and fulfilling their mission despite the working conditions they are offered. They also show great will to serve those who are directly responsible for the deterioration of their status and for the irrational decisions that harm the ministry. It is problematic that the public does not always realize how important the role of the MFA is and its effect on our life. But, we parliamentarians understand the role it plays. We must take more aggressive and radical measures to solve the crisis of the MFA. We will not stand by when the ministry is falling apart."

**MK Yael Cohen Paran, Zionist Union:** "During the approval of the gas outline agreement, the MFA was required to present why the outline is good for Israel's foreign relations. The opinion the ministry submitted was of low professional standard. The former Director-General Dore Gold had reservations regarding this written opinion and said he was not sure that Israel's gas export had such a critical impact on Egypt's stability as was claimed. We learned that the MFA had become a political tool in the hands of the Prime Minister in the best case, or redundant in the worst case. The diplomats are not perceived by the Prime Minister as serving the government's positions, and therefore the Prime Minister believes they are not needed."

**MK Salah Sa'ad, Zionist Union:** "The collapse of the foreign service is due to the government's policy. This is a critical issue for the state and we are paying a heavy price for it. Introducing politics into the MFA interferes with its work. In view of the current events in the Middle East and the challenges that Israel faces in the world, we must not cut the ministry's budget. Instead, because of the developments in Israel's relations with Europe, more missions should be opened there. The Prime Minister has no time to engage with the work of MFA because he is preoccupied with his political survival. Everything must be done to make the MFA stronger and more influential in decision-making processes."

**MK Michal Biran, Zionist Union:** "The status of the MFA is an issue that needs to be addressed and resolved. It is necessary to increase the manpower quota of the ministry and its budget. Not only is it necessary, it is quite possible to do so. In a year in which there is an excess tax collection of about NIS 20 billion, it is incomprehensible that a budget increase for the MFA is not possible."

### C. MFA Representatives

**Hanan Goder, Chairman of the MFA's Workers Union:** "The MFA is struggling daily with the challenges that Israel is facing. Israel must not abandon the diplomatic front. The closure of seven missions, budget cuts, and manpower cuts are seriously undermining the ability of diplomats to deal with these challenges. Israel can and should provide every resource to improve its standing in the world, as other countries do. Israel now has fewer diplomatic missions abroad than other Middle Eastern countries and other countries of the same size. The government cuts erode and shred whatever remained of the MFA. The MFA budget is only 0.3 percent of the government budget, and even the MFA's cadet course no longer has enough applicants. We need to appoint a full-time Foreign Minister, and the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee should urgently address the MFA crisis and provide a solution."

**Yaacov Livne, Secretary General, Israel Diplomatic Association:** "This is not only a struggle over working conditions, it is a struggle over Israeli diplomacy. The Prime Minister is right to praise our developing ties with countries like Russia, China, and India, but the daily work that enables this is done by the MFA staff, and they should be given the tools to do it. Israel has relations with 170 countries, but we have representative offices in less than half of them. Fewer representative offices means less national security, less exports and tourism, less public diplomacy, and less services for Israel's citizens. Less diplomacy means more anti-Israeli motions at the UN, more anti-Semitism, and more BDS. A weak MFA means that in the next regional escalation, there will be no one to speak with the world in sixty languages; there will be no one to protect IDF soldiers abroad. There will also be no one to prevent our expulsion from FIFA. There is no diplomacy without investment."

**Noga Arbel, Chairwoman of MFA Headquarters Workers Union:** "After the Prime Minister leaves a country he visits, the diplomats abroad are the ones who need to make sure that the promises made during the visit will be realized. After all, the diplomats are the ones drafting the agreements and implementing them. Closing down a diplomatic mission is an insult to the hosting country, which then finds itself with no counterparts to discuss these agreements with. This ultimately damages national security. The Prime Minister needs MFA officials, delegates, and representatives to support his actions in the international arena. We joined the MFA out of a feeling of Zionism, but we are in crisis and we cannot do our work properly. We are deprived of tools, budget, and personnel, which inhibits our ability to serve the State of Israel."



## D. Former Diplomats and Experts

**Dr. Alon Liel, Former Director-General of the MFA:** "Out of ignorance and lack of understanding that diplomacy is a profession, the current government views the MFA as a nuisance and part of the previous administration that needs to be abolished. However, the problems that the MFA is experiencing have not begun recently. There has always been tension between diplomats and politicians, but now it is aggravated and accompanied by hostility and disrespect towards diplomats. The problem is not the budget deficit, but the overall attitude and approach. It is only symbolic that this conference is held a few days after the passing of the late Judge Eliyahu Winograd. The Winograd Committee's report on the Second Lebanon War was a bill of indictment for making the MFA irrelevant. Since the report was published, the MFA continued to weaken even more, and the flaws pointed out by Justice Winograd have become chronic and perhaps even terminal."

**Dorit Shavit, Former Deputy Director-General of the MFA:** "The diplomatic arena is the backbone of our national strength. Diplomatic missions cannot shutdown without the prior deliberation of the headquarters staff regarding their uniqueness and utility. There is no substitute for the physical presence of the MFA on the ground in foreign countries. It is not enough for our leaders to just visit countries, smile, be photographed, and return home. The manpower of the MFA has been greatly reduced and there are missions abroad that rely on only one diplomat. It does not make sense, and it is impossible to do the required work on such a tight budget. It harms our national security."

**Pinchas Avivi, Former Deputy Director-General of the MFA:** "The Prime Minister and Foreign Minister must remember that Israel's existential threats are in the international arena. He himself identified Iran as the greatest challenge. Even in the context of Iran, one must understand the importance of the MFA in achieving a worldwide understanding of the severity of the threat, and in promoting sanctions and international cooperation against Iran. Everything is done by the MFA. Israel's national security depends very much on the ability of the MFA to prevent wars or justify them if necessary. The MFA also supports Israel's economic infrastructure around the world. Every closing of a mission supposedly frees up budget, but harms the economy."

**Daniel Mokady, Former Head of Policy Planning at the MFA:** "The MFA has an adversary that has not been discussed enough – the Ministry of Finance. I suggest hiring a management consulting firm that will examine how to dismantle and rebuild the MFA. The MFA has become corrupt and it may be necessary to redefine its objectives and goals, build a new list of diplomatic missions, and a new list of sections and departments."

**Avital Leibovich, Executive Director of the American Jewish Committee:** "Even in the advanced technological and digital age, the profession of diplomacy is still crucial and important. There is no substitute for human relationships. The issue of the crisis in the MFA should be examined both at the micro and at the macro levels. At the micro level, for example, Israel's ties with the Jewish community in the US have been deteriorating in recent years, and the leadership of the Jewish Federations is moving away from Israel. Closing down missions in the US is a harsh statement and is of severe significance."

**Henrique Cymerman, Journalist:** "Reforms in the MFA may be necessary, but it is not acceptable to make such a budget cut that would harm national security. Is it possible that weakening the MFA is based on electoral considerations and political survival, while neglecting the national interest? After all, this is our national security, which is not disputed between right and left. It is inconceivable that the MFA operates as the private travel agency of the Prime Minister. In order for the MFA officials to know what goals they need to advance, it is necessary to set a clear foreign policy strategy and diplomatic objectives. Furthermore, the MFA crisis deserves to receive more media coverage and to be publicly debated."

**Joseph Fischer, Tourism expert:** "As a person who has been involved in tourism for many years and extensively travels around the world, I am very much assisted by the MFA and I am extremely disturbed by their situation. The MFA has become a private travel agency of the Prime Minister and other senior officials. It has ceased to function as a ministry. When diplomats resign, there are currently not enough new candidates to replace them. There is less and less interest to join the ministry. The MFA staff must launch a major struggle to change this situation."

## D. Concluding Remarks

**Dr. Nimrod Goren, Head of the Mitvim Institute:** "The conference did not focus on the wage struggles of MFA employees, but rather with Israel's international standing and its national security. Its speakers discussed what the MFA currently lacks: a full-time minister, authority, budget, tools, goals and objectives, guiding principles, diplomatic missions, manpower, cadets, better ties with Jewish communities abroad, and professional freedom of action. They also mentioned the dominance of the security establishment over the foreign service, and the dismissive and condescending attitude towards diplomats and diplomacy altogether. The importance of the foreign service should, in principle, be excluded from any political debate; however, it is evident that this is not the case. The struggle over the standing of Israeli diplomacy is political, not because MFA staff is on the left side of the political spectrum, as certain right-wing officials claim, but because weakening the ministry is a deliberate move by the government that must be changed in the political arena. Alongside the activities of MKs, Knesset committees, and lobbies, the MFA should take steps to improve its own standing, in spite of the current difficulties. It can conduct regular media briefings on foreign policy issues, share more information with the public about the ministry's activities, appear before public audiences and explain the importance of diplomacy, claim their place in policy discussions and decision making, and not be afraid to express their professional positions in appropriate forums, even when they are not consistent with the positions of the political echelon. Such steps will advance Israeli diplomacy, while contributing to a better public positioning of the MFA, and assisting the struggle of its employees."

**MK Nachman Shai, Head of the Caucus for the Empowerment of Israel's Foreign Service, Zionist Union:** "Given the severity of the crisis that Israel's foreign service is facing, we are dealing today with damage control. However, we will continue to act to change the situation and to strengthen the MFA and the foreign service. We thank Israeli diplomats here and abroad for the important work they do. The MFA is perhaps slightly too diplomatic in its handling of this crisis, but this does not justify the serious damages it is undergoing, which amounts to a substantial damage to national security."