

The Role of Former Diplomats in Israel's Public Sphere

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In Israel, former diplomats do not tend to play a significant public role. However, they have the potential to make a real contribution to improving the public and political Israeli discourse on foreign policy. Israel's former diplomats have dozens of years of experience, diplomatic skills, knowledge of various countries and organizations, intricate networks of social ties around the world, analytic capacity and deep understanding of the international arena and of Israel's place among nations. This valuable experience often goes down the drain. A Mitvim Institute task-team recommended to increase their role in Israel's public sphere, in order to empower Israel's diplomacy and Foreign Service. On February 3, 2019, the Mitvim Institute hosted a policy workshop to discuss how this can be done. It was carried out in cooperation with the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and with participation of senior former diplomats (including Foreign Ministry directors-general and deputy directors-general). Discussants presented examples from other countries, outlined the situation in Israel, described the challenges to optimizing the potential impact of Foreign Ministry retirees, and identified recommendations to promote change.

A. Introduction

Public discourse and decision-making in Israel are dominated almost exclusively by security issues and personnel. This is evident throughout Israeli society and all levels of public administration. Security officials are the ones most often invited to appear before the government and cabinet. The security discourse guides the National Security Council in preparing cabinet and government discussion of defense and diplomacy issues. The Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee deals virtually solely with security-related matters. The Knesset [hardly deals](#) with foreign policy issues.

This predominance of security matters is also reflected in the social and economic arenas. Much research has been devoted to the relationship between the security and civilian sectors in Israeli society.¹ The public is familiar with the names of top Israeli generals, but only a handful can name the director-general of the Foreign Ministry, Israel's ambassador to the UK or the Foreign Ministry spokesperson. This is a problem. Too often, the State of Israel examines reality through a rifle scope, looking out for threats rather than identifying opportunities, finding partners and avoiding pitfalls and entanglement in avoidable wars. Many share this criticism – researchers, social activists, business people and even security experts themselves who reiterate that any military activity must be aligned with a diplomatic goal. In his reports on Israel's most recent military forays in Lebanon and Gaza, the State Comptroller provided an example of the price Israel pays for this attitude, describing how the government and cabinet repeatedly failed to devote sufficient attention and resources to examining possible diplomatic alternatives to war and violence.

¹ See for example: Gabriel Sheffer and Oren Barak (eds.), *Militarism and Israeli Society*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

With this in mind, the Mitvim Institute's task-team that devised recommendations for the empowerment of Israel's Foreign Service also dealt with the need to improve the status of the Foreign Service vis-à-vis the security establishment, and to raise public awareness of the importance of foreign policy. The task-team [concluded](#) that former diplomats have a significant role to play towards these goals. Consequently, the Mitvim Institute convened former senior diplomats, together with relevant experts, to discuss how to make this happen and to draw lessons from the experiences of other countries.

B. Lessons from the Experience of Other Countries

In examining the contribution of former Foreign Ministry officials in other countries to public discourse and their country's Foreign Service, one finds a very different picture than in Israel. A wide spectrum of roles is played by them and a broad range of involvement is present. A comparative review reveals that security issues do not play such a prominent role in other democracies, and diplomatic issues are accorded a more central role in shaping policy and public discourse. The UK provides a good example of the respected and fitting standing of the Foreign Service: When the director-general of the Foreign Office retires, the title of "Lord" is bestowed upon him in appreciation of his service.

Former diplomats in other countries go on to the political arena, run for political office, fill senior public positions, and [express views](#) regarding [political](#) appointments. They often [help promote](#) various [issues](#) and causes in global politics, helping in negotiations and conflict resolution. They are regular, high-profile media analysts and [pundits](#), [writing](#) open letters and [advancing](#) petitions. The BBC Board, for example, reserves a director's slot for former diplomats. Retired ambassadors maintain a prominent presence in the public sphere through [social media](#). They are involved in civil society activity and as fellows at research institutes, [active](#) in non-profits promoting social issues, and maintain cross-border relationships among organizations. They branch out into academia as guest lecturers or staff, they participate in parliamentary [committee](#) discussions, lobby on behalf of organizations or causes and provide foreign policy expertise. They go into business, are courted by international corporations, serve as directors of public and private organizations and as advisers to international conglomerates.

In other countries, retired diplomats have formed organizations to help promote various goals. Often these organizations [are dedicated](#) to ensuring [the welfare](#) of former diplomats and [protecting](#) their rights, working together with employee associations within the Ministry. Some organizations [target](#) specific diplomatic goals and contribute to the general public discourse. Sometimes they focus on shaping new careers for ex-diplomats, crystalizing into joint business activity.

One of the explanations for the strong, active role of former diplomats in some other countries lies in the structured link between them and the Ministry, often through academic programs under the joint [tutelage](#) of the Ministry and former diplomats. Some former diplomats [are invited](#) by the ministries to participate in brainstorming on foreign policy issues and provide their take on events. Some ministries maintain regular [contact](#) with former diplomats, providing them with ongoing updates and conducting joint events, and sometimes even calling them up for "reserve duty" to carry out ad hoc foreign policy tasks, such as [participation](#) in [negotiations](#) or various international committees.

Another institutionalized element that strengthens diplomatic discourse and empowers retired diplomats in some countries is a revolving door enabling Foreign Ministry staff to take a leave of absence and join a think tank or university or even go into business or politics – and then come back to the Ministry once their stint is over. This mobility allows diplomats to create a varied professional network and take a breather from diplomatic service while acquiring additional skills for their next job or posting. Nonetheless, it is natural that not all former diplomats continue to hold key positions in society. Many choose to retire from public life and do other things in their retirement years.

C. The Role and Standing of Israel's Former Diplomats

Despite its outstanding staff, Israel's Foreign Ministry has no representation of its former diplomats that is commensurate with their abilities and talents in the political, cultural, academic and business spheres. While some former diplomats find a way of integrating into academia, civil society or boards of directors, these are not systematic efforts, they lack formal guidance and a support network, and they depend largely on individual motivations and capabilities. Former diplomats usually do not find their way to think tanks and research institutions in Israel, inter alia due to the small number of foreign policy institutes.² Israelis for the most part do not understand the significance and importance of the Foreign Ministry, and the Ministry itself is unable to affect a change, a fact that also has an impact on the prestige (or lack thereof) of its retirees.

Several changes have been introduced recently facilitating leaves of absence from the Ministry and enabling a certain amount of mobility in and out, which may become more significant over time. In addition, the Israeli Association for Diplomacy, a non-profit established several years ago, seeks to position the Foreign Ministry as a central anchor of national security, to bolster diplomatic discourse and to look out for Foreign Ministry retirees and their rights. However, this grouping has a way to go to fulfill its declared goals. Many retired diplomats feel there is no public interest in their expertise, a sentiment that may stem from their expectation of a change in their public standing once they leave the Ministry. However, once they leave and offer their services elsewhere, including media outlets, they often find a receptive welcome.

One of the central challenges facing Foreign Ministry retirees seeking key public roles in Israel is the decline in the standing of the Ministry, which in turn generates limited understanding and appreciation of the Ministry and its work. Unlike the Defense Ministry, the Israeli public does not understand the role and importance of the Foreign Service. The prestige of the service is low, in turn undermining the prestige and attractiveness of its former members. Undoubtedly, an improved standing of the Foreign Service and of the Foreign Ministry in general would also project onto the standing of its retirees.

Ministry retirees have a hard time going into politics. Given the ban on any political party involvement during their tenure. Once they retire, they have largely missed their chance compared to others who started out in politics when they were much younger. Only very few former diplomats have ever assumed significant roles in national politics, contrary to the number of generals and former security officials filling Knesset and government positions over the years. The same is true not just for politics, but for any key public positions.

² The Mitvim Institute regularly integrates former diplomats into its activities as board members, policy fellows, researchers and task team members.

Unlike members of the security establishment who retire at a relatively early age and are given an opportunity to develop a second career and position themselves in other organizations, Foreign Ministry officials retire late, when their desire and ability to integrate into other positions are more limited. In fact, some Foreign Ministry officials who took early retirement were more successful in acquiring key positions in Israeli society. In recent years, more and more diplomats have been opting for early retirement from the Foreign Service, which has become less attractive, enhancing their options for public activity.

An additional challenge facing former diplomats is the question of their loyalty to the governmental system and to its institutional voice. With their retirement, diplomats shed the professional codes that inhibit them from expressing their personal opinions, and their way is paved to express their views and even to criticize the government and publicly propose alternatives to its foreign policy. The diverse views of former diplomats, along with the tensions created between them and serving colleagues still under the limitations of their position, constitute an additional challenge for joint activity.

As mentioned, diplomats in other countries are allowed to take a leave from work and then come back. In Israel, this back-and-forth usually does not happen. Those who choose to leave the Ministry tend not to return. This precludes the creation of a network of contacts between the Ministry and former colleagues and trusted retirees. In countries where mobility is possible, the time away from the Ministry is an opportunity for diplomats to carve out a niche for themselves in the public sphere and prepare the ground for their future retirement.

Cooperation between Foreign Ministry retirees and current officials could generate certain tensions, with incumbents feeling threatened by professionals who have amassed a tremendous body of knowledge and may have been their bosses at one time. Ministry leavers risk being perceived as competition for the Ministry, which is very weak to begin with. In addition, given that the expertise within the Foreign Ministry is usually based on relatively short and alternating stints in various arenas and regions, rather than on one specific specialization over many years of service, the life span of former diplomats' expertise in the public sphere is short and limited. It becomes less and less relevant and updated with time in light of the rapid changes on the ground.

D. Ten Recommendations That Can Promote Change

Mitvim's workshop participants came up with several concrete suggestions for enhancing the standing of Israel's former diplomats and strengthening their contributions to public discourse and decision-making. The recommendations include structural changes as well as concrete measures that can be implemented immediately.

1. Providing Foreign Ministry officials with increased mobility options along their career paths, enabling them to gain professional experience in other organizations and then return to their positions at the Ministry. This will provide them with access to a varied network of contacts, which will also help them once they retire.
2. Undertaking internal change within the Ministry to allow more diplomats to specialize in one sphere or geographic region during their career. In addition to the contribution of such a move to their professional work as diplomats, positioning them as experts is expected to open up additional opportunities for them once they retire.

3. Conducting additional pre-retirement training for diplomats in fields such as business (for example, a course on public directorships), social media, local government, and more. The Ministry can also introduce an assessment model for mid-career diplomats so that those not targeted for advancement to senior positions can retire at a sufficiently early age to take on other roles in the public sphere.
4. Inviting former diplomats to take part in a structured manner in periodic discussions within the Ministry, in brainstorming and consultation and periodic assessments in keeping with the Ministry's demands and needs and the added value of the retired diplomats.
5. Enabling former diplomats to take part in foreign policy training of veteran and freshmen Members of Knesset, to initiate briefings and provide access to knowledge. For example, after the elections, Members of Knesset could be offered a series of lectures on foreign policy in conjunction with the Ministry, former diplomats and policy and think tanks. Regular briefings can also be provided for lawmakers in accordance with policy issues on the agenda.
6. Providing varied platforms for former diplomats to lecture on a range of foreign policy issues and the importance and substance of diplomacy – schools, universities, senior citizens' clubs, workers' unions, general audiences, and more. Such repeated public appearances will also contribute to promoting their standing and role in society.
7. Linking up with local governments and the Federation of Local Authorities to offer the help of former diplomats in forging foreign contacts and international cooperation. Such issues are growing increasingly central around the world these days and provide many opportunities to utilize the expertise and experience of former diplomats.
8. Former diplomats can also make their voices heard on a variety of public agenda issues, including politically controversial ones, by signing petitions, writing open letters, penning opinion pieces and giving interviews. Although some former diplomats are reluctant to expose their political views, presenting the foreign policy angle and significance of central issues is of great importance even if their views on a certain subject clash with those of fellow retirees or acting officials.
9. The media and social network present former diplomats with an array of platforms through which to shed light on current events, provide social and political background about different countries, express their opinions on Israel's conduct in the international arena, and share their knowledge of past events and areas of expertise. Former diplomats are much in demand for media interviews on current events. They can also leverage this demand, with the help of research institutes or independently, to influence and enrich the public discourse.
10. Improving and institutionalizing various frameworks for former diplomats, such as the Israeli Association for Diplomacy, expanding their involvement with think tanks (such as Mitvim) and examining the need for additional bodies to strengthen the standing of retired Foreign Ministry officials, empower Israel's Foreign Service, and improve Israel's foreign policy.