

## **Time for an Israeli Regional Initiative**

### **Summary of a conference of the Knesset Lobby for Regional Cooperation, in cooperation with the Mitivim Institute**

**November 2016**

On July 20, 2016, the Knesset Lobby for Regional Cooperation held a conference at the Knesset, in cooperation with the Mitvim Institute, on the need for an Israeli regional initiative that can assist the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as well as Israel's relations with the Arab and Muslim worlds.

The conference was attended by politicians, diplomats, and experts on regional affairs. The speakers included: Co-chairs of the Lobby for Regional Cooperation, MK Merav Michaeli, MK Yaakov Peri, and MK Michael Oren; Minister of Tourism MK Yariv Levin; Deputy Minister for Regional Cooperation MK Ayoob Kara; MK Ksenia Svetlova, MK Zuheir Bahloul, MK Ayelet Nahmias-Verbin, MK Nachman Shai; Ambassador of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, Walid Obeidat; Ambassador of Bulgaria, Dimitar Mihaylov; Ambassador of the Republic of Cyprus, Thessalia-Salina Shambos; UNSCO Director of Regional Affairs Unit, Ms. Jody Barrett; Head of Political and Press Section at the Delegation of the European Union, Mr. Mark Gallagher; Political Counselor of the United States Embassy, Keith Mines; Professor Uzi Arad, Former National Security Advisor to the Prime Minister, and the head of the National Security Council; Head of Mitvim, Dr. Nimrod Goren; Mitvim Board Member, Professor Elie Podeh; Director of the Israeli Peace Initiative, Koby Huberman; Adv. Pnina Sharvit Baruch, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS); Head of the Tamar Regional Council, Mr. Dov Litvinoff; EcoPeace Middle East's Director of Government Relations, Mr. Uri Ginot.

This document presents an edited version of the remarks that were made at the conference. [The full conference can be viewed on Mitvim's YouTube channel.](#)

#### **A. Opening Remarks**

##### **MK Merav Michaeli (Co-Chair of the Lobby for Regional Cooperation, Zionist Union):**

The time has come for an Israeli regional initiative. In fact, the time has come many years ago, but for some reason it has not yet happened. This is worrisome, because it is highly detrimental to the interests of the State of Israel. Israel's passivity is working against the country. The concept of preserving the status quo, as if time is on our side, proves just the opposite. There is no such thing as a status quo. The reality is constantly changing and in recent years our region is changing more rapidly than we are used to, and not in our favor.

An upsetting gap exists between Israel's economic and military power and its unwillingness to take steps in favor of its security, for the benefit of its future, and in favor of the country's long term political and economic interests. We are gathered here today to discuss the present policy options and consider how can we initiate an Israeli regional initiative.

**MK Michael Oren (Co-Chair of the Lobby for Regional Cooperation, Kulanu)**

For more than five years our region has found itself in a deep and continuous crisis. Yet, in every crisis there is also opportunity. For the past five years, Israel has found itself in an improved situation. Today, we are at peace with Jordan and Egypt. We recently reconciled with Turkey, we have strategic relations with Greece and Cyprus, and there are renewed relations with East Africa. If you consider our relations with China, Russia and India, which did not exist thirty years ago, our relations in the region are much better. In addition, we have unprecedented mutual interests with the Gulf. We agree with the Gulf states regarding the issues of Iran, Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood, and ISIS. Therefore, we have an opportunity here. Israel must not sit back with its arms folded. I will be the first to welcome the possibility of convening a regional peace conference, but I have doubts about the ability of those countries in our region, especially the Gulf states, to support it in public. I think their support will be more behind the scenes and concealed. Nevertheless, Israel should take the initiative and take advantage of this opportunity by declaring to the world, unequivocally, that we are ready for peace. We will also prove it by clearly declaring where we will and will not build in Judea and Samaria, and how we are working to prepare the ground for the two-state solution, even if it is still far away.

**B. Members of Knesset**

**MK Yariv Levin (Minister of Tourism, Likud):**

To define Israel as passive is the opposite of reality. Israel's prime minister is ready to meet with his counterparts from the region at any place and any time, without any preconditions. I too, as Minister of Tourism, would like to meet with my colleagues from the Arab world, anywhere and anytime. If such meetings are not occurring, it is not because I do not want to hold them, but it is due to other reasons.

In order for a country to advance, it must first expand cooperation on economic issues. Cooperation in the field of tourism, for example, will create interactions between people and between nations. Direct encounters are much better and much stronger than any attempts to impose a solution from above, and forcing two leaders to sign any document. When an agreement is signed between leaders, the manner in which it reaches the people is much more difficult and problematic. What has been tried thus far has failed, so maybe the time has come to try something else.

The biggest mistake that was made over the years is the thought that reaching a solution between us and the Palestinians is the key to establishing a different reality in the region. On the contrary. You can only imagine what would have happened had all the efforts invested thus far on the Palestinian issue been invested instead in strengthening relations and cooperation in our region with the Gulf states, North Africa and the Mediterranean Basin. If such cooperation is established, there is no doubt in my mind that this would yield great economic benefit for Israel and the entire region. I do not object, of course, that the Palestinians would join this effort, but the process needs to happen from the outside in and not the opposite.

In the field that I am responsible for, the tourism sector, we work closely with the Deputy Minister for Regional Cooperation, Ayoob Kara, who managed to hold quite a few important meetings that also contribute to the tourism issue. There is a significant increase in pilgrimage tourism to Israel from neighboring countries. One project that was hugely successful was bringing in workers from Jordan to work in hotels in Eilat. This is an excellent initiative that helps the hotels sector. It generates employment for workers from Jordan, as well as movement and connection between the peoples.

The Eilat-Taba-Aqaba triangle needs to become a center that attracts incoming tourism. If there was cooperation and collaboration between the parties, including marketing and logistical measures, we could achieve very significant results. Unfortunately, what is happening is exactly the opposite. While we were working on bringing Eilat back on to the world's tourism map, Jordan dramatically increased the transit fees to Aqaba. This creates a situation where the tourists that come to Eilat do not find it worthwhile to travel to Jordan. This is not what I expect in terms of cooperation. I want to positively note the willingness of our friends in Cyprus, Greece, and Bulgaria to cooperate on bringing more tourists from remote destinations. I am prepared to reach any arrangement and enter into all forms of cooperation on this matter. Tourism can and should be a pioneer in promoting regional cooperation.

**MK Ayoob Kara (Deputy Minister of Regional Cooperation, Likud):**

In the past year, I made a point to open doors throughout the region. At the establishment of the current government, the situation with our neighboring countries, both near and far, was very problematic. Today, the situation with leaders in the region is much better. We agreed that economics is the right matter to work on together. We would be happy if we could advance on the Palestinian issue, but we are not stuck because of it. We straightened things out with Turkey. At first I was alone in supporting the reconciliation, but in the end everyone joined in because they realized it is a clear Israeli interest. Relations with the region are improving every day, and soon you will hear about new opportunities for cooperation with Turkey, Jordan and Egypt.

In the past year, we advanced many projects with Jordan that had been stuck since the peace agreement. Red Sea–Dead Sea Conduit initiative will be launched soon. We will finalize the tender, and we will be able to transport water from the Red Sea to the Dead

Sea. This is the first phase of the \$200-million-dollar project. We started the project for Jordanians working in hotels in Eilat, which solved a problem and decreased the number of illegal workers there. According to Jordan, this is also a positive development for them. The goal is to replace the illegal foreign workers in the agricultural and hotel sectors with Jordanian workers. As it is said – better a close neighbor than a distant brother.

On the Palestinian issue, I had a very successful visit to Jericho. After a long time without bi-lateral meetings, I met the governor of Jericho, the Director of the Palestinian Ministry of Industry, and others from the Palestinian Authority. We agreed on the establishment of an industrial zone that will provide an economic upgrade for Jericho and the surrounding areas. The project will be sponsored by Japan, and in addition the Ministry of Regional Cooperation and the Ministry of Defense will invest 250 million NIS. Another step we have taken recently is to allow passage of trucks from the Palestinian Authority through the Jordan Valley, so that they can enter the Arab world.

Contrary to what others are trying to portray, the current situation is unprecedented in terms of the relationship with the Arab world – the unknown is greater than what is known. Soon there will be more news about ties with several countries in the region. As long as there are more economic ties and common interests between countries, that will create an impact. Do the Palestinians also want to get on this bandwagon? If so, we will be happy. If not, we will continue moving forward.

#### **MK Ksenia Svetlova (Zionist Union):**

It is very encouraging that at crazy times like these, difficult times for regional agreements, during which no peace negotiations are occurring, it is still possible to meet people that believe that we must move forward through diplomatic channels, in order to decrease the chance of another war and to move toward a political horizon with an agreement and a two-state solution.

Deputy Minister Kara said better a close neighbor than a distant brother. This is true, but there is a neighbor that is not present at this conference, and this is the Palestinian neighbor. There is a man that represents the Palestinian society and works to create the connection with the Israeli society. His name is Mohammed al-Madani, and he is the Chairman of the Palestinian Committee for Interaction with Israeli Society. This is the man entrusted with the promotion of relations between our two societies. So when our distinguished ministers say that we should talk to one another in the region, I want to know exactly what they mean. Why is the man that is entrusted with creating such important relationships between the two divided societies, two societies that have seen so much blood flow between them, prevented [by the Minister of Defense] from coming here and participating in this discussion? I hope that at the Lobby's next conference there will also be a Palestinian representative, because we cannot make progress when we shut our eyes and ignore the main regional problem, the Palestinian issue.

Recently, an article of mine was published in a Saudi newspaper. I wrote that if someone is dreaming that it can be possible to maintain contacts between Israel and Dubai or between Israel and Oman, to sit quietly and settle with them issues related to the Palestinian issue – he is wrong and he is showing the public a misleading picture of the reality.

The Prime Minister mentioned that we have upgraded our status in the international arena. Indeed, recently we held a very important visit here by the Egyptian Foreign Minister. There were even those that called it an historic visit. I just want to mention that before the recent rift between the two countries, which lasted nine years, foreign ministers of Jordan and Egypt had visited Israel frequently. This was a period in which Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations were conducted. I want to take you back to the 1990s, to the historic agreement with Jordan, which was made possible by the Oslo Accords. I want to take you back to the 1990s, during which diplomatic missions from the Gulf were established in Israel. This also seems to be the desire of our current government. But, they should remember that these relationships were made possible thanks to progress on the Palestinian issue.

Our close neighbor is important, and our distant brother is also important. We must not neglect any of them. The regional support that we get from our friends in Jordan, Egypt and more distant countries, should be utilized to moving forward with our Palestinian partners. With regional and international support, from the EU and the US, we can fulfill the vision of two states for two peoples, justice, equality, and peace.

### **MK Zuheir Bahloul (Zionist Union):**

I assume that this conference is tied to and intertwined with regional developments. It cannot be that what we know about regional cooperation is all that exists. If this conference is timed and orchestrated in conjunction with covert processes, according to Deputy Minister Kara, then we are very pleased and we hope that you will soon unveil new diplomatic achievements with regional countries, so that we may be encouraged. I really want to believe this conference will yield positive results and that in another decade we will celebrate dramatic regional developments, which will bring Israel closer to the Arab world, and the Arab world closer to Israel.

The Mitvim Institute, that does excellent work, surveyed public opinion prior to this conference. The survey shows that Israel's flawed and exclusionary policy causes the Israel public to forget about the Palestinian Authority (PA), as they no longer attach any great importance to the promotion of cooperation with the PA. Jordan and Egypt have a crucial role in mobilizing the diplomatic processes in the region, and I understand that they yearn for to do their part in this partnership. I especially take my hat off to Jordan, as it stands alongside that Palestinians in matters relating to the Al-Aqsa Mosque and coexistence, at a time when no one stands by their side.

**MK Ayelet Nachmias-Verbin (Zionist Union):**

I am chair of the Israel-Greece Parliamentary Friendship Committee and I recently took part in an official visit to Athens with the Speaker of the Knesset. It was the first visit ever of a Speaker of the Knesset to Athens. The potential for regional cooperation extends beyond the Middle East, to the Mediterranean basin. Beyond the issues of energy and security, which are important, we also spoke about multilateral cooperation, not just between Israel, Greece, and Cyprus, but also the Palestinian Authority, Jordan and Egypt. It is important that even during such challenging times, there will be a feeling of hope regarding regional cooperation.

**MK Nachman Shai (Zionist Union):**

I am involved in various regional initiatives. I was with the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee in Cyprus, and we are also getting closer to Greece and Turkey. These things are right and fit my world view. I also respect the idea of looking towards the East and talking as much as possible with those in Arab countries that are willing to do so. But, I have no doubt, and I agree with the previous writings of Prof. Elie Podeh and Dr. Nimrod Goren of the Mitvim Institute, that without a breakthrough in the negotiations with the Palestinians, we cannot move forward. There will come a time when our partners to the East and West will tell us to first resolve the immediate conflict with the Palestinians. I am convinced of this. There is an illusion that we can just skip over the very high hurdle that the conflict with the Palestinian presents, and jump straight to cooperation with the Arab world. Even Egypt will eventually raise the Palestinian issue, as will other countries in the region. Therefore, the first thing that we must do, that does not contradict efforts to progress on the other fronts, is look for a way to engage in dialogue with the Palestinians.

**C. Diplomats****Ambassador Walid Obeidat (Ambassador of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan):**

The preamble of the Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty highlights three principles: the first is the achievement of just, lasting, and comprehensive peace that will also include the Palestinians; the second is the necessity of promoting human dignity, not just between Jordan and Israel but in the region and the world; the third is the development of friendly relations and cooperation between Jordan and Israel.

The peace treaty between Israel and Jordan emphasizes the need for security cooperation between the two countries, in order to achieve lasting security. We have not witnessed security issues between Israel and Jordan, but all of us have witnessed such problems in our region and beyond. Therefore, it is important to insist on security cooperation, and not to restrict other players from taking part in it. We obviously do not want to include those against which we are fighting, but we want everyone else to be on board, and that includes the Palestinians.

The peace treaty also respects and recognizes the pivotal role of human development and dignity for regional and bilateral relations. The agreement goes beyond the fields of economy and security, and more broadly relates to how the guiding principles between the two countries could have a positive effect on the rest of the world. After all, our goal is basically to create a better future for our children and for other generations to come.

The peace treaty highlights the need for a comprehensive peace settlement. For us, this means insisting on a two-state solution. Nobody has been able to offer any other alternative. Time to achieve this solution is running out, as has been said many times already. But we need to move forward. It is imperative that the Israelis and Palestinians sit together and hold negotiations, not only concerning security issues, but also on the core issues of a final-status agreement. This is a necessity. It is not a luxury. This is essential for the future of Israelis, Palestinians, Jordanians, and other regional actors. His Majesty, the King of Jordan, recently stated that a political solution is the only way to ensure international cooperation and justice in the global community. The only option for a political solution is the two-state solution. In order to achieve this goal, negotiations are absolutely necessary. We insist on that.

Following the discovery of natural gas reserves in the eastern Mediterranean, we are witnessing a rise in the importance of other regional actors, such as Cyprus, Greece, Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, and even Africa. In this regard, Jordan is not only part of the Middle East, but also the Arab world, which transcends Asia and Africa. Jordan also possesses favored status from the EU, and is a bridge to Europe through its partnership with the OSCE, as well as being active partners with NATO and the Gulf Cooperation Council. So, when we talk about regional cooperation, it is important to remember that Jordan plays a role in a number of regions. Thus, we will do all in our power to advance whatever processes we can, to promote human dignity.

**Ambassador Dimitar Mihaylov (Ambassador of the Republic of Bulgaria):**

All around us, a new reality is being created. Even though Bulgaria is not close to Israel geographically, we feel as if we share the same space and that we contribute to the creation of a positive atmosphere in the region. Bulgaria looks at the region from both a political and social perspective, and believes that it is possible to build cooperation between Israel and the moderate states in the region. Bulgaria successfully maintained good relations with a plethora of regional actors and therefore can serve as an honest broker.

We are witnessing a tectonic transformation in the Middle East. This is not the first time the Middle East has gone through a transition period. We must be aware of the challenges that exist in the region and navigate through them wisely. Naively, some of us believed that Jeffersonian liberal democracy could be implanted into the Middle East. Unfortunately, it did not work. We must be patient and help the new Middle Eastern states find their own way and build their own democracy. Thirty years ago, Professor Bernard Lewis wrote a very important book looking at the multitude of identities of the Middle East, an issue that

remains unresolved. At the beginning of the 20th century, the great thinkers of Islam believed that the Middle East and the Muslim world could join the modern world with ease. Unfortunately, this did not happen and the reconciliation of tradition and modernity still needs to be completed. On the one hand, there is a process of globalization, which is beginning to affect the region; on the other hand, the region is host to archaic, dysfunctional economic systems. This is alongside the profound ideological differences in the region and the severe split between Sunni and Shia Muslims.

These issues are also relevant to the topic of security. Some of the regional states, especially Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, have recently found themselves feeling less secure than in previous years. This creates an opening for Israel to play an important role in the region.

**Ambassador Thessalia Salina Shambos (Ambassador of the Republic of Cyprus):**

Cyprus is the closest Mediterranean country to Israel, and relations between both states are blossoming because we share similar democratic values. Both of our leaders turn to each other for assistance in times of trouble, as we have seen recently with the terrible fire in Cyprus. We are grateful for the immediate assistance of Israel. Our partnership is not accidental: it is one of strategic choice. Our strong bond began in the aftermath of World War II – between the citizens of Cyprus and Holocaust survivors – and we continue to be connected in a shared journey of statehood, international recognition, and the promise of liberty. In addition, the two states share a need for stability, in a region where peace is a rare commodity.

In recent years, a multitude of high-level meetings between both countries were held. In the last year alone, 19 official visits took place, which is indicative of the depth and significance of the relations between us. Greece is also a partner: in November 2016, a trilateral Israeli-Greek-Cypriot meeting took place in Cyprus, and later this year we will be holding another such meeting in Jerusalem. We share a peaceful maritime border, which both influences and is influenced by the depth of our cooperation. Our cooperation is varied, founded on security and energy issues, but also includes areas such as tourism, business and high-tech. Israel and Cyprus are working together to tackle global and regional challenges – across a space spanning from France to Syria.

Cyprus can serve as a geopolitical bridge between Europe and Israel. Cyprus also supports the dialogue between Israel and the Arab states, including of course the Palestinians. Cyprus enjoys special relations not only with Israel and Greece, but also with Egypt, Jordan and now also with Lebanon. This is an example of successful peace building, and it has imperative value.

Regarding Turkey, the latest internal events taking place are disturbing. The restoration of ties between Israel and Turkey bears regional significance. Regional cooperation is not a zero-sum game and is not directed against anyone. We are ready to cooperate with any party that accepts and operates according to the principles of international law. On this



exact date, we are regrettably marking 42 years after the Turkish invasion and continued illegal occupation of 37 percent of our territory. The energy issue can serve as an incentive and opportunity to solve the ongoing conflict in Cyprus. Energy cooperation is a much-discussed area between Israel and Turkey, and it also concerns Cyprus. Thus, a solution to the conflict in Cyprus will be a precedent for the inhabitants of the region, and can lead to further collaboration. We stand ready to do much more to cooperate, with Israel and other local actors, for the good of all of the residents of the region.

**Ms. Jody Barrett (Chief of the Regional Affairs Unit, UNSCO)**

The Middle East Quartet report, which was published recently, is not an additional roadmap, nor is it a formula for a peace agreement. Indeed, the report unequivocally states that there is no possibility to impose a solution on the parties, and that only through direct negotiations will a lasting peace that will meet the aspirations of the two peoples be achieved. The report provides a snapshot and an analysis of the current situation on the ground. The purpose of the report is to warn the Israeli and Palestinian leadership, alongside the international community, that the two-state solution is under great threat.

The starting point for the report is that the two-state solution is the only existing alternative for settling the conflict. The one-state reality, to which we are advancing on a daily basis, will lead to the prolonging of the conflict. The two-state solution is not a new idea, and leaders of both the parties have publically acknowledged – at least formally – that this is the option they support. Public opinion surveys also show that this is the preferred option for a majority of Israelis and Palestinians, though fewer and fewer believe that the implementation of this option is a possibility in the near future. Nevertheless, the international community remains committed to the two-state solution. The Paris Conference, the EU, the UN Security Council and the international community as a whole, all constantly re-affirm that the two-state solution is the only way to resolve the conflict.

The Quartet report presents the current, negative trends on the ground. If they are not stopped and altered, they will disrupt the feasibility of the two-state solution. The report refers to the three most pressing issues. There is no conditionality in terms of how to approach them, they are each stand-alone threats to the two-state solution that need to be addressed by the parties. Subsequently, the report presents a series of simple recommendations, which both sides can implement right now, even in an environment that discourages a return to negotiations.

The ongoing violence is the first obstacle described in the report. The escalation over the past year, alongside the violence that has persisted since the beginning of the conflict, creates an eternal cycle that increases fear and undermines any possibility for building mutual trust and creating hope. Attacks by knife-wielding Palestinians; harsh Israeli responses; incitement on both sides, especially from Hamas; extremist violence such as the horrible attack in Duma – all these create more and more distrust and fear. In an environment like this, negotiations cannot have a successful outcome.

The second obstacle, which must not be ignored, is the Israeli policies in the West Bank. These policies clearly threaten the feasibility of the two-state solution. The allocation of land for the use of Jews only, the expansion of settlements, and a ban on Palestinian construction throughout Area C – all of these policies contradict the spirit of existing agreements signed between both parties. Israel is taking steps on the ground that are simply not fair. Thus, on the ground, progress towards a two-state solution has been stopped and needs to be re-started.

The third obstacle is related to Gaza and to the threat posed by the ongoing division between Fatah and Hamas. The increasing armament of Hamas and other groups in Gaza – including the construction of tunnels and the firing of rockets, jeopardizes lives on both sides of the border. The humanitarian crisis in Gaza is worsening because of the blockade, adding fuel to the volatility of the region. The split between Ramallah and Gaza needs to be addressed, in order to be able to envision negotiations, which will lead to an agreement that can actually be implemented on the ground.

The ten recommendations in the Quartet report relate to these three obstacles. The implementation of the recommendations would indicate the good will of the parties, reversing the current trend of moving away from the two-state solution. The Quartet recognizes the importance of the region. The report refers positively to the Arab Peace Initiative, welcoming the recent announcement of President Al-Sisi of Egypt, alongside the ongoing efforts of the international community. We hope that this report can be used by all the relevant parties as a basis and a starting point for discussions. The Quartet would be delighted if the parties involved in the conflict start to engage in order to implement the recommendations. However, if that is not possible, the next best option is for the parties to actually take note of these warnings, and to incorporate them into their policies.

**Keith W. Mines (Chargé d'affaires, Embassy of the United States):**

I want to thank the members of the Israeli peace camp for the important and difficult work they do to keep the analytical framework alive and relevant, alongside their search for new ideas, whilst we wait for something to develop. The work that they do is very important and valuable.

The parties in the conflict would perhaps prefer that the Quartet report would not get prominent coverage. Many of my friends think that the report will become irrelevant very quickly. They are disappointed that the report did not go far enough and was too much of a compromise. But, I propose we give it more credit than that. When you look at all the ten recommendations included in the report as a whole, it is clear that they are definitely significant. The report was not an attempt to strike a balance between the two sides for balance's sake; instead it seeks to present aspects on both sides that need to be fixed in order to preserve the two-state solution. This is where we are, right now. We have to preserve the two-state solution, until we can return to direct negotiations and resolve this conflict.

**Mark Gallagher (Head of Political Section, European Union Delegation):**

The Quartet report emphasized the importance of the Arab Peace Initiative and the call by Egyptian President Al-Sisi to the leaders of the region, whilst welcoming the results of the Paris Conference. These various initiatives are all on the table, at the same time. The initiatives do not contradict each other, and yet you are not supposed to take a little from each one. The implementation of these initiatives relies on the types of things that appear in the recommendations contained in the Quartet report. These recommendations are in fact not easy to implement, but nonetheless, the Quartet calls on the sides to adopt them independently. Israel is strong enough to fulfill its obligations, even without immediate steps by the Palestinians. Progress in implementing these recommendations will help create a supportive atmosphere, which will allow other regional initiatives to flourish as well.

**D. Experts****Professor Uzi Arad (Former National Security Advisor to the Prime Minister):**

Israeli-Arab cooperation in the fields of economics and business, and sometimes even among intellectuals and academics, is often conducted through unofficial channels and not through the government. Cooperation with Egypt and Jordan is not surprising, as we have peace with these countries. Regional and multilateral thinking should take other countries into consideration, which we have not made peace with.

It is important to note that Israel has always had connections in the region, and it always had official bodies for this purpose. One such body, that is strikingly absent from this conference is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Even the National Security Council and the Ministry of Defense – the bodies that are supposed to do this clandestine work – are not present at the conference. Another organization that was established to promote Israel's relations with the Arab world is the Mossad, which has a department in charge of relations with countries that do not have diplomatic relations with Israel. The Mossad operates in countries in the Arab and Muslim world, as a quiet and secret replacement for official political activity. The Mossad is responsible for a large part of breakthroughs listed here, which took place decades ago.

The current regional circumstances create opportunities to enhance the regional cooperation that takes place on an official level and increase its political and security content. I recommend thinking multilaterally and not bilaterally. Today, the trick is to work in networks, both regional and sub-regional. It is an art of political architecture that Israel needs to adopt. It will not be led by the business sector.

I am convinced that without a significant turning point that will change the political climate, it will be very difficult to implement a regional move that will break through the existing parameters. A regional initiative cannot replace an Israeli-Palestinian diplomatic process. If there is such a process, we can get much farther with countries in the region. My

hypothesis is that as long as the policy of the government on this issue is as was presented here by the Minister of Tourism, and as long as they rely only on the basic levels of interaction, regional cooperation will not get off the ground. As long as no official action is taken by the implementing bodies of the government – including the dismantled Ministry of Foreign Affairs that needs to be restored – nothing will happen.

**Koby Huberman (Director of the Israeli Peace Initiative):**

The Israeli Peace Initiative is a group that deals with influencing the Israeli society and primarily decision-makers, in order to take advantage of the regional opportunities that stand before us. In our opinion, the purpose of the Knesset Lobby for Regional Cooperation is not to engage in the here and now, but to promote a bold breakthrough that will significantly change the geo-strategic situation of Israel, and will eventually lead to the possible creation of a regional alliance with some Arab states.

In order to reach a solution to the conflict, there needs to be a political, strategic, and economic revolution. The Israeli Peace Initiative offers a program based on a number of points, including: Israel needs to set a strategic goal that aims to establish a regional, political, strategic, and economic alliance; Israel must initiate a political initiative that corresponds with, responds to, or reacts to the Arab Peace Initiative as a political umbrella for the resolution of the conflict; Israel should begin conducting negotiations with the Palestinians and the Arab world in parallel; Israel must act to change the situation on the ground and continue working on improving the situation in Gaza and the Palestinian Authority, Jordan, and Egypt in accordance with the adoption of the Arab Peace Initiative as a political umbrella; in the long term, Israel must work with its natural partners in the region to establish a regional security mechanism that will deal with the threats from Iran, ISIS, and other terrorist organizations; Israel should treat the economic risks in the Middle East as a security problem and establish a mechanism for regional economic development along with other partners.

There cannot be any illusions, there will be no breakthroughs without creating a bold diplomatic breakthrough, and we must not delude ourselves into thinking that we can maximize the regional potential through taking tactical steps. On May 17 we witnessed an earthquake of which we have yet to understand its potential results. The public appeal of Egyptian President Al-Sisi to the government of Israel is the beginning of an extraordinary opportunity. The Israeli public is beginning to understand that we must find a way to maximize every opportunity. A survey that we conducted shows that the Israeli public prefers a regional package deal over individual arrangements with the Palestinians and wants to see a two-state agreement as part of a regional deal. For several years, this type of arrangement has received the support of over 80 percent of the Israeli public. This is the way forward and the role of the Lobby is to persuade this Israeli government and future coalitions to move forward according to this framework.

**Dr. Nimrod Goren (Head of Mitvim – The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies):**

The Mitvim Institute is working to raise the issues of regional cooperation and peace on the Knesset's agenda, and thus welcomes the work of the Knesset Lobby for Regional Cooperation. Today, there is an opportunity for a breakthrough in relations between Israel and the region, but its realization requires progress on the Palestinian track. Based upon conversations that we have held with officials in the region, research that we have conducted, and public statements made by the Arab leaders, it is evident that in the absence of progress on the Palestinian track, cooperation with the Arab world remains largely secret and limited, and the regional opportunity will be missed.

Towards this conference, the Mitvim Institute initiated a public opinion poll, which showed that the Israeli public assigns low importance to the Palestinian issue in terms of regional cooperation. We asked respondents to rate “with whom in the Arab world is it most important for Israel to try and promote cooperation?” The average ranking in first place was Egypt, followed by Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the PA, and Morocco (in descending order of importance). Nearly 70 percent ranked Egypt in first or second place and 44 percent ranked Jordan first or second place. 26 percent rated the PA in first place, while 54 percent ranked it last the two places. Likud and Habayit Heyehudi (Jewish Home) voters ranked the PA in last place.

For us, the findings are a warning sign. An Israeli regional initiative is needed, an initiative which also includes Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, and not one that tries to avoid them. An Israeli regional initiative cannot be a substitute for other international initiatives – like the Quartet report and the French peace initiative – and should be coordinated with them. Recently, Israel has been presented with two incentives for regional peace, which have remained unanswered by the Israeli government - the Arab Peace Initiative and the EU proposal for a Special Privileged Partnership. The first step in an Israeli regional initiative should be a positive response to these proposals.

**Professor Elie Podeh (Member of the Board at the Mitvim Institute and Lecturer at the Hebrew University):**

Today, it is not necessary to convince anyone of the importance of regional initiatives or the existence of regional opportunities; however, I want to recall that five years ago, no one talked about these matters. Awareness shapes reality here as well. Civil society organizations – the Mitvim Institute, the Israeli Peace Initiative and others – worked very hard to convince the public, the Knesset, the government and the Prime Minister that there is an opportunity and that there is such a thing as regional opportunities.

Now, it is necessary to move from the discourse about opportunities to one of missed opportunities. We must not be caught saying Abba Eban's infamous remark that Arabs or Palestinians never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity. We, Israelis, have also missed opportunities. My latest research focused on historic missed opportunities within

the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict. I did in fact discover that not only the Arabs missed opportunities, but Israel missed some as well. I am afraid that a great missed opportunity exists before us, as there is no doubt that there is an historic opportunity to move forward. In the political discourse, many utilize the mantra of promoting a regional initiative, as a means to divert attention from the real problem, the Palestinian issue. If there is no breakthrough on the Palestinian track, there will be no real progress on the regional level.

Indeed, over the years there has been covert cooperation between Israel and the countries of the region. I call this the “mistress syndrome.” Israel has been the mistress for years. The Arab world's relationship with Israel was mostly a secret. Other than peace with Egypt, the most significant change in relations with the region only occurred when there was progress with the Palestinians following the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993. Progress was halted with the outbreak of the second *intifada* in 2000.

My greatest fear is that Israel will continue to claim that there is progress in the region, at the expense of the Palestinian track. It would be a colossal mistake. It is important to understand that the core of a regional initiative is the creation of an umbrella of Arab countries that can help us move forward with the Palestinians: Egypt can help with Hamas, Saudi Arabia will help regarding Jerusalem, Jordan will help with the refugees issue. In other words, the Arab countries have the ability to play an active role in promoting the Palestinian issue, which is currently at an impasse.

There is currently a Palestinian partner for moving forward, contrary to the popular myth in Israel that “we have no partner.” But, there are difficulties and problems with the Palestinian partner and therefore, it is important to make the leaders of the Arab world our partners, in a way that will also pressure and assist the Palestinian partner to move forward.

**Colonel (Res.) Attorney Pnina Sharvit Baruch (Senior Researcher, the Institute for National Security Studies)**

How can we move forward when everything is stuck? Of course, it is possible to gain assistance from regional partners, but I believe that the regional initiative approach is not the way to achieve a breakthrough, or to bypass the need for a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On the other hand, today there is also no progress on the Palestinian track. The Quartet report attempted to propose practical suggestions for immediate implementation, rather than recommendations for an overall settlement to the conflict, but the report also contains suggestions we should implement as soon as possible. However, it is difficult to see, for instance, how to implement the Quartet recommendation for reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah. This and the other recommendations the document proposes for both sides are therefore not so simple.

Deputy Minister Kara asked: what should be done if there is no Palestinian partner? The answer is that Israel needs to define what it wants, and then make progress in that direction. If Israel is really interested in the two-state solution, which in my opinion is the

correct solution – a view which the Prime Minister publically supported – steps can be taken on the ground in order to promote this solution. These steps could include initiatives, such as delineating a list of all that Israel wants, to which the Palestinians would object. It is true that they have already said no many times, but lately they have not had to reject anything, because Israel has not offered anything. If Israel were to take the initiative, and the Palestinians were to continue their rejectionist stance, this would allow for pressure to be leveled against them. Regional actors would also be able to pressure the Palestinians, if it really is important for them to resolve the conflict. The international community can also provide assistance, because the fact is that part of the problem is the stance taken by the Palestinians.

However, in order for that to happen, Israel needs to present a detailed proposal, to delineate what it wants, whilst promoting these aims on the ground and on the political level. We should not return again and again to the slogan that there is no partner, and that they will not agree to our terms, when we conduct ourselves in a way that at least outwardly does not demonstrate the fact that we want to make progress.

**Dov Litvinoff (Head of the Tamar Regional Council):**

As there is no substitute for diplomacy between states, there is no substitute for diplomacy between people. This is what we are doing at the Dead Sea, in cooperation with the Jordanians. This cooperation has been built up over time. We are establishing a farm on the Jordanian side, to solve ecological and geological problems together. We promote collaboration in research and with the help of the Ministry for Regional Cooperation, we have established a research institute at Masada that will open in the summer of 2016 and will include Jordanian and Palestinian researchers. We are also promoting joint actions to raise awareness for saving the Dead Sea in both Israel and Jordan. These collaborations, however small, eventually lead to larger collaborations. This November we plan to hold a swim that crosses from the Jordanian side to the Israeli side and in May 2017, we are planning to hold a concert that will be held simultaneously at Masada and in Petra. The purpose of these two events is to raise awareness of the Dead Sea's situation, which is an important issue for both countries. We are also working on the establishment of a new border crossing between Israel and Jordan, south of the Dead Sea, which will contribute to cooperation between the two countries. More projects can be carried out around such a border crossing, such as bringing in workers to Eilat from Jordan. Such workers can earn five hundred Jordanian dinars a month working in Eilat, as opposed to one hundred Jordanian dinars working in Jordan. This generates a change in the regional economy and cooperation.

**Uri Ginot (Director of Government Relations at EcoPeace Middle East):**

EcoPeace is an Israeli-Jordanian-Palestinian non-governmental organization, and unfortunately, the only one of its kind. For over twenty years we have been promoting issues related to the environment, water, and energy, and welcome the important activity of the Ministry for Regional Cooperation, headed by Deputy Minister Kara.

Much has been said at this conference about the diplomatic front versus the economic front, and about the regional channel versus the Palestinian one. We need to start thinking in terms of both. We live in a complex region that has experienced turmoil. There are many issues and resources that we share with our neighbors. In order to make headway in the complex diplomatic issues, we must find a way to make progress on important bilateral and regional issues – like the issue of water – and produce tangible benefits for all parties. The Tamar Regional Council serves as an example of how to engage in regional cooperation.

It is important to keep in mind that every day my colleagues in Jordan and the PA need to explain domestically the benefits of cooperation with Israelis. We need to recognize that such cooperation is not about providing assistance to the other side, it is about promoting common interests. If the situation in neighboring countries will be good, then the situation in Israel will be good too. Our interests are intertwined.

## **E. Closing Remarks**

### **MK Merav Michaeli (Co-Chair of the Lobby for Regional Cooperation, Zionist Union):**

The Mitvim Institute's survey indicates very explicitly how the current situation shapes the public consciousness. Countries with which we have longstanding peace agreements are viewed by the Israeli public as the most important. As people hear more good things about neighboring countries, they are more convinced and persuaded to think favorably about them. In this context, it must be noted that the current government is holding onto a false belief that you can move forward with a regional initiative, while skipping over the Palestinian issue. Reality proves that this is something unrealistic.

### **MK Yaakov Peri (Co-Chair of the Lobby for Regional Cooperation, Yesh Atid):**

Unique collaborations with countries in the region will ultimately lead to a better future and strengthen the security of Israel. With the launch of Knesset Lobby for Regional Cooperation, we call on the Prime Minister and the entire government to take the reins; to put a regional initiative on the table, to promote Israel's political and security interests, and to offer a new horizon, a new era, vision, future, hope, for Israel's relations with all the countries in the region, including our Palestinian neighbors.



