

## **Towards an Inclusive Israeli Foreign Policy**

### **How to increase the involvement of diverse groups in the formulation of Israel's foreign relations**

***Summary of a policy-workshop conducted by the Mitvim Institute and  
the Israel Democracy Institute; Jerusalem, July 19 2016***

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Due to developments in the international diplomatic arena, as well as the information revolution, foreign relations are no longer the sole purview of government officials. Increasingly, civil society organizations, businesses and private entrepreneurs are playing a pivotal role in international relations among states.

Nevertheless, Israeli foreign policy is still considered the exclusive domain of experts. Indeed, significant sub-groups of the population – women, Palestinian citizens of Israel, ultra-Orthodox Jews, new immigrants and residents of the country's geographic periphery – do not participate meaningfully in the Israeli public debate concerning foreign affairs, let alone the corresponding decision-making process.

In light of this, the Mitvim Institute and the Israel Democracy Institute convened a workshop comprised of experts to explore ways to advance a more inclusive Israeli foreign policy, through increasing the involvement of diverse population groups. The workshop was attended by scholars, diplomats and representatives of relevant population groups. The discussion centered around the need for a broader debate on foreign policy issues, the challenges and barriers that prevent certain groups from getting involved, and the added value that each group can bring to the foreign policy debate.

Below is a summary of the main points raised during the workshop.

### **A. Opening Remarks**

#### **1. Dr. Nimrod Goren** ***Head, the Mitvim Institute***

In Israel, there is lack of awareness and public understanding about the importance and nature of foreign policy. As a result, many groups within the population have little or no involvement in areas related to foreign policy.

However, modern diplomacy is increasingly influenced by regular citizens, civil society organizations, businesses and the media. Diplomacy is no longer in the hands of diplomats and ambassadors alone.

While this trend continues to grow worldwide, Israel lags behind. For example, there exists today significant groups within society – particularly Palestinian citizens of Israel – whose involvement in foreign policy is not perceived as legitimate. Some groups – for instance, women – are struggling to increase their representation in foreign policy discourse. Additionally, there are groups – such as ultra-Orthodox Jewish citizens – who often do not consider topics such as foreign policy to be relevant to their agenda and worldview.

These realities need to be addressed and changed. It's imperative that the State of Israel develop a more inclusive discourse on foreign relations that reflects the diversity of voices that make up Israeli society, an approach that would encourage different groups to increase their involvement.

This is an important component in the new paradigm for Israel's foreign policy, as formulated by the Mitvim Institute, which calls for a pro-peace, multi-regional, outward-facing, modern and inclusive Israeli foreign policy.

## **2. Dr. Jesse Ferris**

### ***Vice-President of Strategy, the Israel Democracy Institute***

The foreign policy of the State of Israel is influenced by the basic fact that it is surrounded by enemies. It is no coincidence that diplomatic discourse in Israel is heavily tilted towards security considerations.

Nevertheless, it is essential to broaden the discourse with regard to foreign affairs, so as to assign the correct weight to economic and diplomatic considerations as well. After all, the United States won the Cold War thanks to a comprehensive and multi-faceted strategy, formulated by the government, working in partnership with American academia.

The inclusion of groups who do not ordinarily take part in shaping diplomacy might seem odd, because foreign affairs is supposedly a field for experts. However, in the diplomacy of the 21st century, there is a legitimate place for the participation of many sectors of the population, in diverse and varied ways, at both the official and civil society levels. To date, this potential remains unrealized.

An ancillary benefit of pursuing a more inclusive foreign policy is that it could aid the search for common ground between the various groups that make up Israeli society. The Arab saying of: "me and my brother against my cousins, me and my cousins against the foreigner", refers to the ability of tribal groups to unite against an external threat. If Israeli society is indeed tribal, as President Reuven Rivlin argues, perhaps all of its tribes can unite against their shared enemies to advance common national interests.

### **3. Mr. David Saranga**

#### ***Senior Foreign Affairs Advisor to President Reuven Rivlin***

Over the last few years, the field of foreign policy has undergone a significant change. If foreign policy was once considered the purview of elites and small groups of experts, today every citizen can influence foreign policy. At last year's Herzliya Conference, President Rivlin explained his theory that Israeli society consists of four tribes: religious, secular, ultra-Orthodox Jews and Arabs. In the future, as already reflected today in the education system, the majority of the population will be composed of two tribes: ultra-Orthodox and Arabs. The question that needs to be asked is: "how to assemble all the tribes into a single Israeli experience?" The problem is that we are not always familiar with or even aware of "the other", which can lead to animosity among the different tribes. While Israel's tribes do meet today, their interaction needs to be much more comprehensive, in order to create a healthier society.

It is undoubtedly important that each of the four tribes take part in the discourse concerning foreign policy. Some of the tribes are already trying to participate in the process, taking an active role in the realm of foreign relations. In the contemporary era, different groups within a society can represent their own interests, and influence foreign relations. This involvement may occur in collaboration with institutions such as universities, as well as through delegations or technological tools. For example, we can cite the activities of the *Yesha Council*, which visited the European Parliament and organized a discussion about the Jewish connection to the holy places. We can also see elements within Israel's Arab society operating abroad in order to present their own narrative.

Each group seeks to advance its own perspectives, even when these views contradict those of the wider society. This is a healthy expression of democracy and pluralism.

On a governmental level, the diplomacy of the 21st Century requires a diversification of both the sources of information and the methods by which messaging is delivered to global audiences. Information from the government, including that which originates from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is mostly perceived as government propaganda. On the other hand, information originating from different sectors of the population is perceived as more trustworthy. Therefore, it is important that divergent groups within Israeli society take part in the dissemination of information outside of Israel. This does not mean sending messages to foreign governments. Rather, today it is all about shaping public opinion.

Existing diplomatic channels between Israeli government officials and their overseas counterparts consists of a certain shared discourse and language, and Israeli diplomats are considered highly credible. However, Israel faces significant challenges in terms of public opinion in the United States, Europe and the Arab World. An inclusive foreign policy, which demonstrates the pluralism and different voices that exist within Israeli society, can help overcome these challenges.

Research commissioned by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs demonstrated that Israel is perceived in the United States and in Europe through two primary lenses: security and religious extremism. People outside of Israel do not consider the human aspect and the complexity of Israeli society. When a rabbi expresses prejudiced views against the LGBT community, this has external consequences. Nevertheless, when Israeli leaders publicly oppose such pronouncements, this has a positive impact on Israel's image. These messages can be conveyed, for instance, via social media. Such a realm of communication does not require any mediators, such as the government. Through social media, a variety of opinions about different issues can be reflected. Anyone who uploads a picture to Facebook or Instagram is de facto contributing to increasing awareness and shaping opinion about Israel. Studies prove that the most effective way to influence public opinion in foreign countries is not through formal *Hasbara* (Israel's official messaging toward international audiences), as is commonly thought, but by consistently highlighting varied and pluralistic voices.

These processes can also be seen within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In recent training courses for diplomatic cadets, there is a greater emphasis on gender equality, as well as minority representation. So even though under-representation persists in Israel's Foreign Service, one can definitely point to an ongoing trend of improvement.

## **B. Diverse population groups and Israel's foreign relations**

At the workshop, representatives of different groups within Israeli society were asked to present a contemporary picture of each sector's involvement in Israeli foreign relations. Specifically, representatives were asked to detail the roadblocks and challenges to increased participation, and to specify fields where each group has a unique ability and interest to interact with the international arena.

The groups represented included: women, ultra-Orthodox Jews, settlers, Russian speakers, and Arab citizens of Israel.

### **1. Women**

In Israel, there is a noticeable trend towards increased representation of women in the political arena, although true equality has not been reached.

The relative number of female Members of Knesset (MKs) has increased by several hundred percent in the last few decades. In the 14th Knesset (which lasted from 1996-1999), there were only nine female MKs. The current Knesset (the 20th Knesset) includes 33 female representatives.

However, compared to other countries, the Israeli parliament has a low number of female parliamentarians. Israel is ranked (as of late 2015) 53rd in the world, and 20th out of 34 OECD countries, in female parliamentary representation.

Since the founding of the State of Israel, only 17 government ministers out of 242 have been women. There has never been a government that included more than four female ministers in its cabinet. When it comes to the most senior ministerial positions - Foreign Minister, Defense Minister, Finance Minister, and Interior Minister - the record shows that women have only served as foreign ministers (specifically Golda Meir and Tzipi Livni).

Currently, the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee includes six female parliamentarians (MKs Merav Ben Ari, Anat Berko, Sharren Haskel, Shelly Yachimovich, Tzipi Livni, and Shuli Moallem-Refaeli) out of a total of 17 members.

Additionally, none of the sub-committees are headed by any female representatives. Therefore, there are also no women in the forum of sub-committee chairs. This means that important and crucial meetings about foreign affairs and defense issues do not include any women. When Prime Minister Netanyahu convenes a meeting of senior ministers, this forum also does not include any women. Thus, women are not represented in positions where they are able to influence and take part in the national debate on foreign affairs. In 2005, then-MKs Yuli Tamir and Eti Livni passed an amendment to the Equal Rights for Women Act that would ensure female representation in international negotiations, but this bill has not been enforced and does not apply to informal meetings and forums.

By contrast, the inverse is true in other Western countries. In Canada, Sweden, Norway, and Italy, the ratio of women to men in governments is almost equal. The Swedish Foreign Minister even promotes a paradigm of "feminist foreign policy".

Several key arguments can be made for including more women in key political and decision-making processes. First and foremost, it is essential to widen the pool of available and experienced people from which the right person for a certain political role can be chosen. Secondly, the more women get involved in foreign affairs, the greater the chances that women will be chosen for key positions in the field. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has put this key insight into practice by maintaining gender equality in recent cadet courses for diplomats.

However, many barriers that continue to restrict the involvement of women in foreign affairs should be acknowledged. In Israel, the combination of three major obstacles makes the task of greater integration even more difficult: the high fertility rate in comparison to other OECD countries; the continued salience of traditional gender roles pertaining to the need for women to raise children and look after their families, rather than pursue a career; and a working culture that demands long, round-the-clock hours, a trend that has become more pervasive in recent years.

Nevertheless, new technologies are enabling greater flexibility in working hours and the workplace, opening up new opportunities to further women's involvement in issues related to foreign affairs.

## 2. The ultra-Orthodox community

In the run up to the formation of the current government, the different parties sent their representatives to the Israeli President, in order to recommend their preferred choice for Prime Minister. MK Yakov Litzman, from the ultra-Orthodox United Torah Judaism party, complained to the media that: “No one asked us for our opinion on Israel-US relations”, referring to the general conviction that the ultra-Orthodox parties are primarily focused on the immediate concerns of their own constituencies, rather than broader national issues.

In the past, the ultra-Orthodox public was uninformed on issues pertaining to foreign relations. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, peripheral groups in Israeli society are generally excluded from issues of peace, foreign affairs and security. Furthermore, the general public feels that – regarding the ultra-Orthodox community – since they do not serve in the army, they do not have the legitimacy to voice an opinion on these matters. Additionally, for many years, the ultra-Orthodox public has focused on securing its own rights and interests, neglecting to pay much attention to foreign affairs.

However, today there is greater willingness amongst the ultra-Orthodox community to become integrated into society, alongside an openness to the subject of foreign affairs. Indeed, a large proportion of the ultra-Orthodox public sees itself as a full partner in the day-to-day affairs of the country, and is interested in taking part in the discourse concerning national issues. Ultra-Orthodox society is in a process of leaving “the ghetto” and ending its status as an isolated, closed community.

If ultra-Orthodox members of society were once only working as teachers, gardeners, *mohels* (ritual circumcisers) and Kosher butchers, today a change has occurred as these citizens are increasingly being employed in a greater variety of professions. As a result, ultra-Orthodox members are interacting more and more with the world outside of their communities. This exposure strengthens the desire for information and involvement in a variety of fields, including foreign affairs. In addition, the relative increase in the size of the ultra-Orthodox population strengthens their ability to exert influence in the Knesset, which has led to a broadening of the policy interests and concerns of ultra-Orthodox MKs.

Despite these positive developments, the lack of knowledge about foreign affairs amongst the ultra-Orthodox public remains a barrier to participation. In order to increase the involvement of the ultra-Orthodox community in foreign policy debates, their representatives must be provided with tools and information to enable such participation. Actors within civil society recognize this and are attempting to respond accordingly. There has been a proliferation of foreign policy and security programs sponsored by different groups (such as the Council for Peace and Security, the Geneva Initiative, and Poli-Tikva) for the ultra-Orthodox population.

There are also foreign policy-related projects tailored to ultra-Orthodox women, such as the dispatch of delegations of Haredi women to Northern Ireland to

learn about the conflict in that country, and then draw comparisons to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. An additional project works to bring together ultra-Orthodox and Muslim women, in order for them to think together about how to promote peace. The ultra-Orthodox media (especially radio and news sites) have also undergone a change. A significant knowledge base about foreign affairs has been created and current affairs shows regularly delve into these issues.

All of the above testifies to the depth of the change occurring within the ultra-Orthodox community.

Despite this, when attempting to increase the involvement of ultra-Orthodox Jews in foreign affairs, it is important to remember that some tools that are relevant for other population groups are of little value in the ultra-Orthodox community. The prime example of this is social media. Additionally, effective interaction with the ultra-Orthodox community requires working directly with opinion-makers within the community. Indeed, this community contains acknowledged leaders and influential members, who can contribute to increasing involvement in the foreign affairs discourse. Additionally, the ultra-Orthodox population in Israel has ties to ultra-Orthodox citizens in other countries: an added value that this community brings to the foreign affairs discussion in Israel.

### **3. The settlers**

According to data from the *Yesha Council*, there are 413,000 Jews living in the West Bank, not including Jerusalem. The annual growth rate of this community is 4.3%: 75% of this is natural growth, whereas the remainder comes from new residents. Approximately one-third of the settlers are national-religious; one-third are ultra-Orthodox and the remaining one-third are secular. The settler public often feels that they are in a constant state of struggle, and are under unremitting attack from the international arena. This feeling has fueled a sense of purpose, alongside increased sensitivity, with regards to developments in foreign affairs.

Until recently, the settler public did not engage in Israel's foreign policy debates. The turning point came in 2013, with the decision to appoint Danny Dayan as head of foreign affairs for the *Yesha Council*. Dayan made an impact around the world and was consequently even appointed as Consul General of Israel in New York. Today, the settler public recognizes the need to act in the international arena, and invests significant efforts to this end. The purpose of this international activity is to convince different population groups around the world that the settlers are different from how the media portrays them, and that the settlement enterprise is not a passing phenomenon. The settler public is currently attempting to promote the worldview according to which the right of Jews to settle in the West Bank is undeniable, basing this belief on the report written by judge Edmond Levy. The settlers also attempt to lobby the Israeli government for increased building within existing settlements, a request that has a direct impact on Israeli foreign relations.

#### 4. The Russian-speaking community

For many young Russian-speaking Israelis, the terms 'new immigrants' or 'the Russian sector' are no longer relevant. There is a community of Russian-speakers in Israel, but the community is diverse, heterogeneous and far from uniform. In general, immigrants from the Former Soviet Union (FSU) are not extensively involved in day-to-day Israeli concerns. In 2009, the Israel Democracy Institute commissioned a comprehensive survey that examined the perceptions of different groups within the population, regarding their perceived ability to influence everyday events in Israel. The findings of the survey showed that the Russian speakers ranked themselves amongst the lowest in terms of their ability to influence events, whilst also demonstrating a low level of trust in the government.

Immigrants from the FSU came from a communist society, where the ability of the individual to influence events taking place around them was non-existent. In addition, these states lacked a functioning or influential civil society. Because of this, the Russian-speaking community's lack of involvement in the social justice protests that broke out in Israel in 2011 was conspicuous. Russian-speakers are generally unfamiliar with the tools employed by civil society and are unaware that the public can gain concessions through their use.

This trend is also apparent in foreign affairs, where members of the Russian-speaking community often find themselves outside of the foreign policy discourse. Many Russian-speakers perceive foreign affairs as an area that is distant and disconnected from the basic, everyday needs of their community, which constitutes a daily struggle for economic survival. The priorities of Russian-speakers differ from the vast majority of Israeli society. The Russian-speaking community is struggling with a plethora of problems, such as low wages, high mortgages, a pension crisis, and issues relating to a lack of education and familiarity with the Hebrew language. Often, this community is impacted more acutely than other groups within Israeli society by these societal ills.

As a result, the Russian-speaking community is able to channel very little of its resources and internal strength to taking part in the processes related to the formation of foreign relations.

There are additional barriers preventing the involvement of immigrants from the FSU in national issues, including foreign affairs. Israeli society is characterized by the predominance of established personal networks and citizens having "a foot in the door". The lack of personal contacts within the Israeli establishment is a significant problem facing the Russian-speaking community. Thus, there are over one million members of the Israeli public who don't have anyone to open the door for them. Although there are Russian-speaking representatives serving in the Knesset and government, and there is a perception that Russian-speakers possess power as a unified group, the Russian-speaking public is not sufficiently integrated into the civil, social or public spheres of Israeli society. Indeed, the language barrier is a significant stumbling block in the integration of the Russian-speaking public.



Even young, educated, Russian-speaking Israelis – raised and educated in the Israeli school system – often lack the necessary Hebrew language proficiency required to pass the entrance exams for work in the public sector. As a result, the “immigrant” population – and the Ethiopian-Israeli community in particular – suffer from significant under-representation in the public sector, including the Foreign Service.

Despite these challenges, the Russian-speaking community in Israel now includes a generation of young, liberal, educated locals, who are highly critical of both the Israeli establishment’s treatment of their parents, and of their parents’ acceptance of that treatment. Nevertheless, this generation – also known as “Generation 1.5” – is still mainly preoccupied with domestic issues. For instance, a hot topic is the non-recognition of the Jewishness of many Russian-speakers, an issue that particularly affects their ability to get married in Israel, because marital affairs are controlled by the Israeli Orthodox Rabbinate. Foreign affairs are thus given a lower priority.

When members of the Russian-speaking community do have an opportunity to involve themselves in the public sphere, they often receive token positions serving as “the Russian-speaker”. Regarding foreign affairs, Russian-speakers are perceived as having a relative advantage regarding Israel’s relationship with Russia and Russian-speaking countries, due to their familiarity with internal affairs within these countries. This perception creates an opening for the Russian-speaking community to become involved in foreign affairs, whilst simultaneously obstructing their path by fencing in their possible spheres of involvement.

In terms of the peace process, the Russian-speaking communities felt excluded from the developments that occurred in the 1990s, and continue to feel the same way today. This feeling of exclusion from central national and political processes in Israel intensifies the apathy shared by many Russian-speakers towards foreign affairs. This is also one of the reasons for the tendency of immigrants from the FSU to adopt right-wing political positions.

However, the Russian-speaking community could become more involved with foreign affairs if, amongst other things, more basic documents and texts – such as the Arab Peace Initiative – were to be made available in Russian. In addition, further involvement could be promoted by actively engaging the Russian-speaking community in foreign affairs, in order to hear their opinions on this issue and provoke internal discussions.

## **5. The Arab citizens of Israel**

Israeli society is often considered “a society of tribes”. However, quantifying four distinct tribes – as President Rivlin did – does not reflect the full complexity of Israeli society. There is pluralism within the distinct groups of Israeli society, including the Arab sector, which cannot be presented as a homogenous entity. Additionally, a tribal perception of Israeli society masks the deepest divide within society, between Jews and Arabs, and downplays the urgency of

addressing the critical problem of relations between Israel's majority and largest minority.

For many Arab citizens of Israel, internal, communal issues take precedent over foreign affairs. Many Arab citizens contend that, before considering greater Arab involvement in foreign affairs, the underlying discrimination and inequality in Israel between Jews and Arabs must be overcome. These issues are simply more urgent for Arab citizens than those related to foreign affairs. The first step in addressing these concerns is related to terminology and the desire of many within the Arab public to be able to define themselves as "Palestinian citizens of Israel", without having to defend themselves or prove their allegiance to the State of Israel.

The subject of foreign affairs evokes suspicion amongst many members of the Arab community. Many fear that the state will attempt to employ them for *Hasbara* purposes, recruit them to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, or use them as a fig leaf before the international community. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs aspires to show the world the pluralistic nature of Israeli society by showcasing voices from different population groups. But this tactic may be perceived amongst some Arab citizens as a cynical tool that exploits them for propaganda purposes. In general, Arab society perceives foreign policy issues as falling within the domain of the state, not as a subject where Arab citizens of Israel should play a role.

The occupation and unresolved conflict between Israel and the Palestinians also create a serious barrier for greater Arab involvement in issues pertaining to foreign relations. Government policy towards the Palestinians makes it difficult for Arab citizens to take part in official mechanisms dealing with foreign relations. In addition, Arab states in the Middle East remain suspicious of Arab Israelis, as an extension of the general opposition to relations of any kind with Israel. This remains the case, despite the Arab world's increased interest in hearing and learning from the experiences of Arabs in Israel.

Until the end of the 1980s, military service was a requirement for the acceptance of candidates wishing to work in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which constituted an additional barrier to the acceptance of candidates of Arab origin. Even after the removal of this condition for entry, workers in the ministry continued to be largely drawn from Jewish elites.

Today, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs recognizes the importance of employee diversity, and continues to make efforts accordingly. Nevertheless, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs still only employs a very limited number of diplomats of Arab origin. Out of approximately a thousand workers currently employed in the ministry, only around 20 are members of ethnic minorities. And these few are subjected to frequent criticism from Arab society.

Absent significant Arab involvement in the decision-making bodies responsible for foreign policy – for instance, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee – the routes of influence available to Arab society within Israel are limited to independent and unofficial channels. They

include involvement on both an international level and within civil society (particularly, civil society organizations promoting peace and coexistence, or research and policy-focused institutes). Activities within this framework, the majority of which are conducted outside of official state-level channels, focus on the following issues: advancing of the Arab minority within Israel, promoting the peace process, and strengthening relations with the Arab World.

In the last few years, the Arab public has increased its involvement in the international arena, in order to advocate for increased equality within Israel. Activities within this sphere include meetings with foreign delegations and diplomats, visits to international organizations and links with political actors from foreign countries. The purposes of these activities include: influencing – through foreign actions – domestic policies and distribution of budget allocations, alongside fundraising and raising awareness of the problems facing the Arab minority in Israel.

In terms of the peace process, there exists an expectation that Arabs in Israel could serve as a bridge to Arab states and assist in obtaining peace. Within the Arab community itself, there is some support for this position, but there are also many who oppose it. Those in opposition argue that Arabs living in Israel were – and continue to be – excluded from the peace process. From the Oslo Accords (1993) to the present day, Arabs living in Israel were never seen as a true partner. The feeling amongst Arabs in Israel is that both the Israelis and the Palestinians do not see them as a legitimate actor that can offer and advance initiatives promoting peace.

When it comes to shaping relations with the Arab states, in fields such as tourism and economics, Arabs living in Israel may have a greater opportunity to play a role. In recent years, there has been a qualitative leap forward in the activities of Arab civil society, including its ability to influence policies and to raise awareness. Arab civil society is host to a comprehensive range of activities, including links with intellectuals and young people from the Arab world. New technological tools have facilitated enhanced regional cooperation and the cultivation of contacts. In addition, Arab society is also engaging in activities with regional actors who directly affect the interests of Arab society in Israel, such as the needs of the many Palestinian citizens of Israel who are studying in Jordan.