

US Foreign Policy towards Israel and the Middle East

**Symposium Summary
Tel Aviv University, 19 May 2014**

On 19 May 2014, a symposium on American foreign policy towards Israel and the Middle East, hosted by Mitvim - the Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies and the Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research, was held at Tel Aviv University. Speaking at the event were three distinguished guests, Jeremy Ben-Ami, President of J Street; Alon Pinkas, former Israeli Consul General in New York and advisor to four former foreign ministers; and Dr. Ilai Saltzman, board member at the Mitvim Institute and lecturer at Claremont McKenna College, USA. Yael Patir of J Street and the Mitvim Institute chaired the symposium.



Jeremy Ben-Ami touched upon the internal political changes going on within the US in recent years and the growing trend within Congress, and the American public, towards isolationism. Ben-Ami also pointed out the main reasons he believed the latest round of peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians failed.

First, US Secretary of State John Kerry believed that his passion and resilience would be enough to sway Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

But Kerry underestimated the challenge, and did not concern himself with developing a concrete diplomatic backup plan upon which negotiations could be predicated.

Another reason for the negotiations' failure, according to Ben-Ami, was the manner in which the US facilitated negotiations - by first negotiating with Israel in order to reach proposals which are acceptable by Israel, and only then turning to the Palestinians and showing them what Israel had agreed upon.

According to Ben-Ami, the US needs to change this practice. It should be reaching simultaneous understandings with the Israelis and the Palestinians, or perhaps trying to approach the Palestinians first and afterwards Israel.

Following the collapse of the peace talks, J Street calls for the Obama administration to publicly present the American framework for a final-status agreement between the Israelis and the Palestinians, to work towards strengthening international support for this plan, and to put the Israelis and Palestinians in a position where they are forced to decide which path they truly desire.



Alon Pinkas, who possesses a high level of familiarity with American society, addressed the changes in the U.S. approach toward Israel.

"The US is in the process of withdrawing from the Middle East," he said. "It is tired of dealing with the Arab world, and tired of dealing with the Palestinian issue. The US is an old, staunch ally of Israel, but cracks are showing."

"Netanyahu relies on American Jewry, but he speaks in archaic terms and does not see the realities on the ground. Israel must re-educate itself and re-invent itself in order to remain a significant partner and ally of the US."



Dr. Ilai Saltzman argued that despite repeated attempts by Israeli decision makers, including efforts by Israeli ambassador to the US Ron Dermer, to paint Israel as a strategic and technological equal to the US, the reality is quite different:

"Israel is an important player in the Middle East for the US, but given the dramatic changes in American interests today, its value has eroded significantly and it is no longer a key ally as it was in the past."

"The current administration sees Israeli policy in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and towards Iran as an obstacle to Washington's ability to promote President Obama's foreign policy goals. If Israel continues to pursue such adversarial policies, it will only widen the gap between Israel and the US."

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