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Former Minister of Foreign Affairs Israel Katz with the incoming minister, Lt. Gen. (ret.) Gabi Ashkenazi, at the Foreign Ministry, May 18, 2020. Photo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Discussion of Israel's Foreign Policy

Moderated by Kobi Michael and Yaron Salman

The July 2020 issue of *Strategic Assessment* focuses on the theme of Israeli foreign policy and national security. To complement the articles in this issue, we held a discussion with former senior figures from the Foreign Ministry and researchers on foreign policy. Our goal was to shed light on a number of issues relating to the status of the Foreign Ministry from a historical and contemporary perspective, the contribution of foreign policy to national security, and the challenges facing the Foreign Ministry in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis and the future. Participants were Ron Prosor, former Director General of the Foreign Ministry, Israeli Ambassador to the UK and to the UN; Dr. Alon Liel, former Director General of the Foreign Ministry, Israeli Ambassador to South Africa and to Turkey; Dr. Haim Koren, former Israeli Ambassador to Egypt and South Sudan; Dr. Nimrod Goren, head of Mitvim—the Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies; Leah Landman, head of the 2030 Diplomacy Program; and Adv. Yaniv Cohen, CEO of the Abba Eban Institute at the Interdisciplinary Center. This summary of the discussion presents the main insights raised by the participants, without attributing the words to a specific speaker, except in cases where we felt exact words were warranted.

Status of the Foreign Ministry

Participants agreed that the Foreign Ministry has always suffered from a structural weakness, which has been particularly blatant in the last four years. In this period, the Ministry operated without a full time minister engaged solely in this position, with a limited budget that does not meet the Ministry's needs, and while systematically and regularly excluded from important decision making processes. This was in part due to the prominent role played by the Prime Minister's Office and its responsibility for relations with the superpowers, and due to the transfer of some of the Ministry's authorities to other ministries, such as the Ministry for Strategic Affairs.

There was agreement among the parties regarding the Ministry's structural problems, which are at the base of its weakness. For example, Ron Prosor argued that the Foreign Ministry is absent from the decision making table "both de facto and de jure" against a background of a strong security establishment, close and direct relationships among leaders, a dominant and centralist Prime Minister, who according to Nimrod Goren even promotes "deliberate moves to weaken the Foreign Ministry," and a strong National Security Council. In Prosor's estimation, even when the Foreign Ministry was involved in decision making, it had difficulty meeting the "decision makers' timetables" and providing the policy insights required for decision making process in real time, and so the decision makers preferred other tools and other actors. The recurrence of such processes reinforces the erosion of the Foreign Ministry's status among decision makers, who have become used to working with substitutes whom they consider more effective and relevant: for example, the direct link between Prime Minister Netanyahu and Prime Minister Modi of India; the use of the Mossad in countries with which Israel has no open relations, and in some cases, also in countries with which Israel maintains diplomatic relations; and others.

Apart from these and other procedural difficulties, Alon Liel mentioned two structural problems that have an adverse effect on the Ministry's status and its ability to affect decision making processes. One relates to "the structural conflict between politics and diplomacy," where politics is conducted according to party ideology and government/cabinet decisions, while diplomacy is conducted according to law, protocols, and international treaties. The second derives from the sectorial dimension of the Foreign Ministry, which is influenced by the homogeneity of its personnel. This is the result of processes of locating, assigning, and training the members of the professional echelon who replicate the organizational DNA and give it a political hue that is identified with liberal approaches labeled as political tendencies, leading to reservations about the Foreign Ministry professionals, or as Liel put it, "the body rejects this organ." In his understanding, the Ministry must change the way it recruits in order to make its professional staff more diverse and representative.

Although the Ministry is perceived as extremely homogeneous, decision makers tend to perceive it as old fashioned, out of date, lacking initiative, or as Haim Koren put it, "not connected to the world" in a constantly changing reality. Since in Koren's view the structural weakness of the Ministry "has become much worse in recent years," people in the Ministry should look for niches where, as individuals and as groups, they can draw on their relative advantages and promote issues that will encourage the decision makers to seek their help.

In many cases there is an inherent difficulty in proving the link between diplomatic activity and any economic, political, social, or informational contribution or outcome. In the absence of a systematic methodology for measuring and assessing diplomatic activity, it is often hard for the Ministry to prove an actual contribution. Referring to this problem, Leah Landman said that if the Ministry fails to convey "why we

have to send emissaries to a country instead of adding beds,” this is a failure on its part.

Some of the structural weaknesses attributed to the Israeli Foreign Ministry are shared by other foreign ministries in the West, but in the Israeli case the securitization of the debate and the attitude that diplomacy must serve security weakens the Foreign Ministry's status and casts a shadow over it. These are joined by the weakness of the Knesset, which spends little time on foreign affairs, even in the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, whose time is largely devoted to security matters. Nimrod Goren, head of the Mitvim Institute that studies Israeli foreign policy, advises the Foreign Ministry to adopt the principles from the model used by other foreign ministries, such as those of Australia and Germany, that have invested thought, initiative, and effort in persuading the public of their necessity and importance.

While the traditional focus of power has changed in recent years, and economic, academic, and international cooperation in the spirit of globalization have become the centers of activity and influence, according to Yaniv Cohen, the Foreign Ministry staff have failed to internalize the changes and the potential for leveraging them in order to increase their involvement and influence on decision making processes. “Economic diplomacy and academic and other partnerships can be the bread and butter, and they should be at the heart of the Foreign Ministry's work.”

On the other hand, in spite of the Ministry's structural weaknesses and its exclusion from decision making, participants pointed out its striking achievements during the Covid-19 crisis. The Ministry took action to bring 8,000 Israelis home on fifty special flights, and helped to import ventilators, thanks to its personal contacts all over the world. In addition to this contribution to the national effort to fight the coronavirus, the participants also mentioned the Ministry's achievements in constructing a niche of civilian activity in Arab countries where Israel

still has no diplomatic relations, in reinforcing relations in the Mediterranean arena, and in adjusting structurally and organizationally to the changing reality by establishing the role of emissaries on special tasks (such as energy matters, climate matters, and contact with new communities in the United States).

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Diplomacy and National Security

Since the establishment of the State of Israel there has been tension between diplomacy and security, with diplomacy and the Foreign Ministry perceived as secondary in the service of security. Over the years, notwithstanding the understanding that national security is best achieved through a combination of military elements, foreign relations, economy, social resilience, and other dimensions that must be seen as important, necessary, and complementary to military security, the Foreign Ministry has largely remained weak. This is in spite of its potential and actual contribution, even if it does not realize its full potential for the Israeli economy, security, and society.

The explanations for the Ministry's weakness and its limited contribution to national security, at least in the eyes of decision makers, can be attributed to a number of factors:

- a. Structural reasons in the Ministry itself, which in Ron Prosor's words should be able to show its contribution, “but is unable to demonstrate its relevance to the public.” Another explanation for this failure, according to Haim Koren, lies in the secrecy involved in certain types of diplomatic work, which prevents the public exposure of its achievements. This is frustrating for

- politicians who serve as Foreign Minister and who want to publicize what they have achieved. Although future challenges are likely to be political no less than military, the Foreign Ministry uses too few political tools. For example, Nimrod Goren claimed that the Foreign Ministry does not make enough use of its overseas emissaries to promote aspects of national security from a regional viewpoint, although diplomacy and international mediation prevent escalation, and Israel's overseas representatives can try to develop contacts with diplomats from other countries in the region who are also stationed there. The Foreign Ministry is not sufficiently involved, and does not express its opinions forcefully and persuasively in order to challenge the decision makers.
- b. The security element in the Israeli discourse, and the “over-securitization” of decision making processes, according to Alon Liel. He argued that security is seen as existential, while the political dimension is not. The Foreign Ministry has not persuaded the public that foreign relations are a “super important” element of national security, notwithstanding impressive achievements in the field and the successful branding of Israel as a start-up nation, in a way that distracts from focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These achievements are not necessarily identified with the Ministry, but rather with the Prime Minister. A very important achievement that the Ministry has managed to retain is its outstanding performance in the area of “disaster diplomacy,” with no real competition from other ministries or at all.
 - c. Activity on social networks and adjustment to the digital world. In spite of improvements and initiatives by the Ministry relating to social media activity, in Haim Koren's view there is a need for an effort to develop an infrastructure of relationships in the regional arena, including by means of a more prominent presence in the discourse on social media in the Arab world and exposure of the effort to the Israeli public.
 - d. Leveraging relative advantages: In spite of Israel's striking advantages and its proven abilities to deal with weakened populations, partly against the background of its production in hi-tech, economy, and civil society, the Foreign Ministry has still not managed to establish these advantages as another significant export sector for Israel. Yaniv Cohen believes that this is a global export market that the Foreign Ministry must develop as a unique and vital contribution to Israel's national security.

Renewal of Israel-Africa and Israel-Latin America Relations

Over the past fifteen years, Israel has widened its foreign relations, and Prime Minister Netanyahu has defined recent years as a “political renaissance.” In this period Israel has formed, renewed, and strengthened diplomatic ties in Africa and Latin America, while forging closer ties with the rising powers of India and China, as well as with Putin and with the United States in the Trump era.

African countries have special needs in the fields of communications, health, agriculture, and infrastructures, as well as security, intelligence, and cyber needs. African countries need “everything—communications, agriculture, health, technology; they want to receive and Israel is the source,” said Alon Liel, stressing their admiration for Israel at the economic-technological level. At the same time, Israel enjoys the image of an entity that can help to open doors in Washington. Ron Prozor believes that Israel offers responses to many of these needs, and the benefits are mutual. For Israel, they reinforce the economy and help it in the international arena. “The best ambassadors for Israel are the ones we have touched,” said Prozor. As for the common perception among many African leaders that good relations with Israel “open doors in Washington,” “the

significance is the expectation of promoting broad interests in the international arena.”

On the other hand, Alon Liel believes that “Israel’s soft power also has a soft underbelly in areas of morality, human rights, foreign workers, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,” although what actually interests African countries is “survival.” They make a clear distinction between civilian relations and political relations, and therefore have no problem with the duality of developing economic and security ties with Israel, while identifying with the Palestinians and the Arab world, and not supporting Israel in international institutions, particularly the UN. In this context, Leah Landman maintains that Israel must understand the needs and priorities of African countries: fewer values, more needs. As she sees it, the Covid-19 crisis could lead to an increase in the numbers of failed states, thus creating “many opportunities for Israel, which knows how to make the desert bloom” and provide a solution for the new problems and challenges created by Covid-19, on top of the existing ones.

In the opinion of Yaniv Cohen, the time has come to establish an external Israeli aid agency within the Foreign Ministry, similar to USAID, which can express Israel’s relative advantages and maximize its potential to help African countries, other Third World countries, and even developed countries that will be happy to cooperate on the subject of international technological development.

Nimrod Goren disagrees with the distinction, largely accepted by the other participants, regarding the duality of African countries, claiming that relations with Africa actually highlight the Foreign Ministry’s weaknesses. Although there is bilateral work, he argues that it encounters a “glass ceiling on the Palestinian issue,” which was demonstrated by Israel’s recent attempts to obtain observer status in the African Union. Not only that, the budgetary limitations of the Foreign Ministry make it very hard for the Ministry’s Agency for International Development Cooperation to realize political

objectives in Africa. He claims that relations with many African countries rely more on weapons deals and foreign workers, and less on aspects of developing democracy. For example, the Ethiopian-Eritrean peace process, in which the leadership succeeded in changing policy, did not lead Israel to a re-examination of its potential on the continent or what it can learn from African leaders.

It is important not to see Africa as an undifferentiated whole. Haim Koren, who served as Israeli Ambassador in South Sudan, distinguished between countries like South Sudan whose “attitude toward us borders on love” and other countries whose attitude toward Israel is more instrumental. From his experience, Israel has a relative advantage over competitors in Africa, reflected in its ability to establish relationships on a personal basis. That is important and bears fruit.

Israel’s Relations with India and China

In recent years, Prime Minister Netanyahu himself has managed Israel’s relations with the superpowers (the US and Russia), while the role of the Foreign Ministry was marginal. The Prime Minister also increased his personal involvement in developing and managing relations with the two rising powers in the East: China and India. The structural changes in the international system and the rising status and influence of Asian countries require a change in Israeli perceptions. According to Yaniv Cohen, Israel must grasp the significance of “the Asian century” and focus on the need for political gains in return for the investment in developing economic and security relations with countries in Asia.

Alongside Israel’s obligation to balance its relations with China and with the United States, and avoid damaging its relations to its American ally, Nimrod Goren believes that it is possible to recruit China, as an active and strengthening player, to invest in economic incentives to promote the peace process and

thus compensate for what Europe is no longer able to give. In his opinion, in its relations with China, and in view of the Chinese focus on extensive infrastructure projects, Israel must develop a more regional approach that can create links through a network of ports and railways.

The challenge for the Foreign Ministry, according to Haim Koren, is to identify Israel's relative advantages and how they can be harnessed in global terms. China has ambitions in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa as part of a modern Silk Road, and Israel must understand where it can leverage its technological solutions in a way that coincides with Chinese interests in the region. In India, Israel has been perceived as an ally after many years of pro-Arab tendencies, and in this case too, it must act to reinforce mutual interests.

The reliance on the “deal of the century” and Israeli involvement behind the scenes in shaping it restrict Israel’s ability to promote regional relations, “and if Israel goes for annexation, [then] at the end of the Trump era this will create a crisis,” said Nimrod Goren.

The Covid-19 crisis could increase the number of failed states in the context of the powers, and Alon Liel believes that China could emerge from the crisis economically stronger than the United States, and certainly stronger than Europe: “We too have no idea how long we will remain economically handicapped after the coronavirus, and foreign aid will receive a mortal blow, because charity begins at home.” Nevertheless, Ron Prosor believes that this is in fact the time to examine where we can create a relative advantage and offer solutions, even for huge countries like China. The opportunity is even more relevant now, because the Covid-19 crisis will likely accelerate the trend of weakened multi-national frameworks and the rising importance of the nation state.

But in spite of the coronavirus impact on the international arena and the potential for changes following the crisis, the Ministry's weaknesses are striking. Liel pointed to the lack of assertiveness and the inability of Ministry personnel to make their voices heard and fight views such as those of the Directors General of the Ministry of Health and the Treasury, for example.

Shaping Israel’s Foreign Policy toward the United States after the Trump Era

The high level of ideological overlap and strong intimacy that developed between Israel and the United States in the Trump era has, according to Yaniv Cohen, made it hard “to maintain the lifeline with the Democratic Party.” This is also true, as Nimrod Goren sees it, with respect to Israel's relations with the Jewish community and liberal and other communities in the United States, which were damaged by Israel's close ties with the Trump administration, the closeness to the President, and its absolute identification with him. The reliance on the “deal of the century” and Israeli involvement behind the scenes in shaping it restrict Israel's ability to promote regional relations, “and if Israel goes for annexation, [then] at the end of the Trump era this will create a crisis,” said Goren. Therefore Israel must invest efforts in thinking how to promote the peace process and how to restart a dialogue with other elements in the US that have been neglected in the Trump era. Haim Koren concurred, and stated that “the composition of the US population is changing and we have to renew our ties with the Democrats and American Jews—the situation demands it.” Koren added that the Covid-19 crisis requires a rethinking of Israeli policy toward the United States, but it is hard to plan at this moment. In this context, Ron Prosor stressed the need for the Foreign Ministry to address other communities in the US, including in their language and on matters that interest them, for example, the Hispanic community.

Leah Landman agreed with the need to rehabilitate relations with the Democratic Party, but she argued that the “deal of the century” is in fact “an opportunity that reflects what is actually happening. There are relations with Arab countries in spite of the Palestinian situation, and it would be a pity to stop that.” Ron Prozor took a similar view of the “deal of the century” because “it sends a message to the Palestinians that time is not necessarily on their side; you aren’t moving but the dynamics on the ground are moving.” However, Alon Liel sees annexation, a move deriving from the plan, as a strategic danger of the first order, and is convinced that the Foreign Ministry must present this danger. In his view, the Ministry must “fight back where politicians don’t let you talk on matters that you see as a long term disaster. If the Ministry doesn’t see the annexation as a red line, to be fought professionally rather than politically, it will poison Israel’s foreign relations.”

Foreign Policy in the Covid-19 Period and After

The global coronavirus crisis once again highlights the argument between the supporters of realism, self-reliance, and isolation, and the supporters of liberalism, globalization, and cooperation, and renews the debate over the relevance of the Foreign Ministry.

In spite of the weaknesses of international and supra-national institutions, and in spite of the strengthening of national feeling, it will not be possible to stop globalization, said Leah Landman. The nation state has become stronger, but the role of international institutions has not ended and the nation states will need their help to mediate between the international system and the nation states. Organizations such as the World Health Organization must reinvent themselves, change their patterns of operating, and set aside the political dimension. Landman claimed that the idea of “the nation state in the center alongside the global system” requires thinking about global coalitions and needs.

According to Ron Prozor, the Covid-19 crisis has highlighted the fact that some democratic countries “are not sufficiently effective.” It is not possible to ignore the question about the role of the state vis-à-vis international frameworks. He added that “Israel has a prominent relative advantage in sustainability” that must be realized following the crisis, although this demands an improvement in Israel’s ability to measure its diplomatic activity—“If you don’t measure, you can’t manage”—and to allocate budgets for proven ability to act and measure that will make the Foreign Service relevant and influential.

It is too early to eulogize diplomacy, said Haim Koren, arguing that the Covid-19 crisis offers opportunities. Yaniv Cohen agreed with this assessment, adding that “paradoxically, the coronavirus is a big gift for Israel’s Foreign Service, giving it a sense of action and awakening.” He stressed the need to introduce innovation into Israeli diplomacy. Israel must harness technological solutions and adapt them to diplomatic and consular work (such as issuing passports).

According to Nimrod Goren, the crisis requires Israel to shape its foreign policy “while looking at the world.” In his view, this period is an opportunity to work with international organizations, to retain and develop cooperation and solidarity, and to connect with global trends, while preserving Israel’s place in the family of democratic countries.

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