THE MITVIM INSTITUTE 2018 ANNUAL REPORT

This report highlights the Mitvim Institute’s activities in 2018. Throughout the year, Mitvim focused on three program areas: improving Israel’s foreign policy, advancing Israeli-Palestinian peace, and promoting Israel’s regional belonging. Mitvim continued to generate new progressive foreign policy knowledge and put it into use by engaging with local and international political, diplomatic, and civil society actors. It did so through policy planning, research, expert workshops and public events, regional and international policy dialogues, public opinion polls, media engagement, and briefings to Members of Knesset (MKs), government officials, and foreign diplomats.

In 2018, Mitvim presented alternative directions for Israel’s foreign policy; engaged the Knesset on foreign policy issues; tracked developments and trends in Israel’s foreign policy; advanced the participation of Palestinian citizens of Israel in foreign relations; analyzed Israel’s changing ties with Arab countries; highlighted the unfulfilled potential of Israel’s relations with the Arab world; supported the improvement of Israel’s ties with specific Arab countries; conducted policy dialogues with regional partners; suggested improvements to Israel’s foreign policy towards the EU; challenged Israel’s closer ties with non-liberal regimes in Europe; supported new alliances for Israel in the Eastern Mediterranean; worked to improve Israel-Turkey relations in light of renewed crises; advised on possible policy steps towards Israeli-Palestinian peace; drew lessons from other conflict resolution process; analyzed changes in Palestinian politics; and identified regional opportunities to improve the situation in Gaza.

In the 2018 global rankings of think tanks, published by the University of Pennsylvania, Mitvim was ranked among the top think tanks in the Middle East and North Africa, and as one of the world’s top 25 centers for regional studies and think tanks with the most innovative policy ideas/proposals.
A. IMPROVING ISRAEL’S FOREIGN POLICY

1. Presenting Alternative Directions for Israel’s Foreign Policy

Mitvim’s second annual conference, which took place in December, presented alternative directions for Israel's foreign policy towards the April 2019 general elections. The conference sought to translate the pro-peace, multi-regional, internationalist, modern, and inclusive approach to Israel’s foreign policy that Mitvim is advancing into concrete policy proposals. The conference featured Members of Knesset, public figures, experts and scholars, who presented directions that will enable Israel to improve its foreign policy, increase its regional belonging, and advance peace. It was held in cooperation with the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, and can be watched (in Hebrew) on Mitvim’s YouTube channel.

2. Engaging the Knesset on Foreign Policy Issues

Mitvim seeks to strengthen the willingness and ability of MKs to lead and influence progressive foreign policy. In individual meetings and user-friendly briefing papers, Mitvim provided knowledge, analysis and recommendations to MKs, party leaders, and their advisors from a range of political parties. In addition, Mitvim encouraged and assisted MKs to submit parliamentary questions to government ministries on foreign policy issues; testified before Knesset committees and caucuses; spoke at conferences held in the Knesset; helped raise foreign policy issues on the Knesset’s agenda; cooperated with professional staff of relevant Knesset units; and published recommendations on improving the Knesset's conduct in the field of foreign affairs, based on a Mitvim research carried out by former MK Nitzan Horowitz.
3. Strengthening Israel’s Foreign Service

In light of the systematic weakening of the Israel's Foreign Service, Mitvim held a special conference at the Knesset, together with the Caucus for the Empowerment of Israel’s Foreign Service. It featured MKs, foreign ministry representatives, and former diplomats who highlighted the need for a strong and efficient foreign service, and who echoed Mitvim’s recommendations. Mitvim cooperated with the Special Committee for the Transparency and Accessibility of Government Information, led by MK Stav Shaffir, in its efforts to increase the transparency of the ministries dealing with foreign policy issues. In addition, Mitvim engaged with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) on research findings, policy recommendations, and public opinion data regarding the status of Israel's Foreign Service and ways to improve it.

4. Tracking Developments and Trends in Israel’s Foreign Policy

Mitvim published monthly reports (in Hebrew) that track developments in Israel’s foreign policy, with an emphasis on Israeli-Palestinian relations, Israel's relations with the Middle East, Europe, and the Mediterranean, and the conduct of Israel’s Foreign Service. This publication series, edited by Dr. Roee Kibrik, is the only publicly available tool that provides a comprehensive overview of policy developments on a regular basis. Mitvim also published commentaries expanding on issues identified in the reports. Based on the reports, Mitvim launched in 2018 the publication of semi-annual assessments that outline major trends in Israel’s regional foreign policies.
5. Studying Israeli Public Opinion on Foreign Policy Issues

The annual Israeli Foreign Policy Index of the Mitvim Institute was published in October 2018 for the sixth consecutive year, in cooperation with the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. This year’s poll surveyed the largest sample to date and provided insights into Israelis’ views on Israel’s foreign policy, relations with surrounding countries and regions, and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process/conflict. The poll garnered extensive media coverage, including in the Arab world. Findings were presented at a press briefing in Jerusalem, a policy workshop with experts and former diplomats, a roundtable at the Israeli MFA, and individual briefings to politicians and diplomats. MK Ksenia Svetlova introduced findings from the poll at a Knesset speech, MK Tamar Zandberg referred to the poll findings in a television interview, and the EU Ambassador to Israel issued a media response to the poll’s EU-related findings.

6. Advancing the Participation of Palestinian Citizens of Israel in Foreign Relations

Mitvim released two major research papers on the role of Israel’s Arab citizens in issues related to foreign affairs and the peace process, and promoted them in policy circles and in the media. The first, written by Inbal Ben Ezer, identified barriers to increased involvement by Palestinian citizens of Israel in the peace camp, and ways to increase their involvement, focusing on both content and structural changes. The second, written by Sana Knaneh, explored the potential of Palestinian citizens of Israel to influence and shape foreign affairs, as well as their current level of involvement, and included recommendations to increase their participation. Research findings were presented to MK Zouheir Bahloul at a special meeting at the Knesset, and were introduced by Sana Knaneh at the international congress of Women Wage Peace, and at a series of events in the UK. At the 2018 J Street conference in Washington DC, Dr. Nimrod Goren, Head of Mitvim, moderated a panel on the Palestinian citizens of Israel and their role in advancing Israeli-Palestinian peace.
B. PROMOTING ISRAEL’S REGIONAL BELONGING

Israel and the Middle East

1. Analyzing Israel’s Changing Ties with Arab countries

In light of new opportunities and developments in Israel’s relations in the Middle East, Mitvim published a series of research papers on Israel’s current and potential relations with key Arab countries. The papers, a product of a Mitvim task-team, also included assessments on the linkage between the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Israel’s ability to fulfill the potential of regional cooperation. The research papers included a critical analysis of Netanyahu’s attempt to delink Israel-Arab relations from the Palestinian issue, and country-specific papers on Israel’s relations with Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. A series of commentaries based on the research papers were published in a special section for Mitvim in Ynet, a leading Israeli news portal. Mitvim’s task-team members were regularly interviewed by the media, as developments unfolded in relations between Israel and its Arab neighbors. In addition, Mitvim continued to update its database on Israel-Arab cooperation, and led a panel at the J Street conference in Washington DC on "Israel’s Regional Cooperation: New Opportunities, Old Obstacles".

2. Highlighting the Unfulfilled Potential of Israel’s Relations with the Arab World

Mitvim’s research papers emphasized that there is still much unfulfilled potential in Israel’s relations with Arab countries, that will only be materialized after progress is made in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. This was the main topic of the public conference convened in May 2018 by Mitvim and the Hebrew University’s Davis Institute. The conference included a keynote address by then-Opposition leader MK Isaac Herzog, in addition to sessions concerning civil, economic and political cooperation between Israel and its Arab neighbors. In June, a Mitvim-led panel during the annual conference of the Middle East and Islamic Studies Association of Israel (MEISAI) highlighted the unfulfilled potential for cooperation with Morocco, the United Arab Emirates, and Iraq. Research findings on the unfulfilled potential were also shared with MKs, the MFA, the Ministry of Regional Cooperation, and the Ministry of Economy, via a series of briefings and joint discussions. Dr. Nimrod Goren gave talks on the issue at Brandeis University and at the Center for American Progress.
3. Supporting the Improvement of Israel’s Ties with Specific Arab Countries

In light of a crisis in Israel-Jordan relations, Mitvim held in early 2018 a conference at the Knesset with MK Ksenia Svetlova on the need to overcome the crisis and improve relations. The conference, participated by MKs Isaac Herzog and Tzipi Livni, included a video address by Dr. Abdulla Swalha from Jordan. Following the conference and a research paper written by Yitzhak Gal, Mitvim developed and advanced a set of recommendations for Israeli policymakers and civil society actors on how to improve Israel-Jordan relations. Mitvim also convened policy workshops on opportunities to improve Israel’s relations with Morocco and Iraq. These workshops were based on research papers written by Einat Levi and Dr. Ronen Zeidel, and hosted experts, government officials, and civil society activists. They revealed a significant range of opportunities for interaction between private citizens, alongside legal and bureaucratic challenges that hinder cooperation.

4. Conducting Policy Dialogues with Regional Partners

Mitvim constantly seeks to expand and deepen its relationships with official and unofficial actors in Arab countries, in order to open new channels for policy dialogue on regional and domestic developments, bilateral relations, and ways to promote Israeli-Palestinian peace. Mitvim maintains contact with the Embassies of Jordan and Egypt in Israel, as well as with experts, entrepreneurs and organizations in different Arab countries. For example, Mitvim cooperated with the Center for Israel Studies in Amman, participated in a regional conference in Morocco, hosted an entrepreneur from Iraq who was visiting Israel, took part in the regional environmental forum of the Arava Institute, and engaged with US-based experts from countries in the Middle East. Interactions with regional partners were also made possible via Mitvim’s participation in multinational umbrella organizations, such as the EuroMeSCo Network, and via online communication tools.

5. Responding to Developments Regarding Syria, Iran, and US Policies

Mitvim published a monthly report on US Policies towards Israel and the Middle East, edited in 2018 by Rebecca Bornstein and then by Amb. (ret.) Barukh Binah. The report tracks developments in US policy, with an emphasis on developments in the Syrian war and the role of Iran. Mitvim experts also analyzed developments related to the Iran nuclear deal and the war in Syria, which were published in a variety of venues. Following increased tensions between Israel and Iran in Syria, Mitvim convened a policy workshop on ways to prevent further escalation via diplomacy, which featured Ofer Zalzberg of the International Crisis Group and explored the potential roles of regional and international actors. In 2018, Mitvim also published the main policy insights from a dialogue between a group of US-based Israeli and Iranian experts that met in Washington DC in late 2017, under the leadership of Mitvim Policy Fellow Gabriel Mitchell and Middle East Institute Senior Fellow Alex Vatanka.
Israel and Europe

1. Suggesting Improvements to Israel’s Foreign Policy towards the EU

The Israeli government has adopted an increasingly critical stance towards the EU, presenting it as a foe – rather than a partner – to Israel. This, even though the EU is Israel’s major trading partner that shares democratic values and with which Israel’s cooperates on a wide-range of issues. This development has an impact on Israeli public opinion towards Europe, and damages a relationship that Mitvim sees of strategic importance. In response, Mitvim established a task-team consisting of experts from the fields of diplomacy, academia, civil society, and media to formulate recommendations for improving Israeli foreign policy towards the EU. Task-team deliberations resulted in two papers dealing with current characteristics and trends in Israel-EU relations, as well as with guiding principles and recommendations for improving these relations in the diplomatic, economic, and civil arenas. They will be presented to the new Israeli government that will take office in 2019. Mitvim’s Government Relations Coordinator Nehoray Ofri participated in a study visit to Germany, in which political and diplomatic discussions on Israel-EU and Israel-Germany relations took place.

2. Challenging Israel’s Closer Ties with Non-Liberal Regimes in Europe

Mitvim experts analyzed the pitfalls of the current Israeli policy of developing closer ties with non-liberal regimes in Europe. While doing so, special emphasis was put on the need to refrain from providing legitimacy to far-right, sometimes even anti-Semitic, actors in Europe, with which some Israeli right-wing politicians are increasingly developing ties. Mitvim experts voiced criticism of the alliance formed between Israel and the Visegrad Group (Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia) on the expense of Israel’s traditional pro-democracy allies in western Europe. Mitvim took part in discussions on these issues at the Knesset, including at the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee and the Israel-Austria Parliamentary Friendship Committee, and its experts appeared in the media and published commentary articles. Mitvim also produced a video report, in which Policy Fellow and former MK Nitzan Horowitz led a discussion among experts about Israel’s relations with anti-liberal regimes in Europe.
3. Exploring Intra-EU Divisions and their Impact on Israeli-Palestinian Peacemaking

Growing divisions among EU member states limit the ability of the EU to play an effective role in advancing Israeli-Palestinian peace. The current Israeli government is wary of European involvement in the peace process and is therefore encouraging the intra-European split by fostering ties with groupings of EU member states that can block decisions in Brussels. In early 2018, Mitvim hosted Member of the European Parliament Arne Lietz for a briefing and discussion on the EU’s role in promoting Israeli-Palestinian peace. In June, Mitvim launched a policy-oriented research project in cooperation with partners from the German Institute for International and Security Affairs - SWP and PAX (the Netherlands) on divisions within the EU and their impact on ties with Israel and the peace process. The project consists of research papers on internal divisions within the EU, Israel’s changing foreign policy towards the EU, and EU policies regarding the Israeli-Palestinian peace process/conflict, which were presented at a policy workshop in November. The project will also generate policy recommendations that will be introduced in Israel and Brussels.

Israel and the Mediterranean

1. Leading a Regional Working Group on Opportunities in the Eastern Mediterranean

Mitvim led a regional working group in the context of the EuroMeSCo Network (a network of more than 100 research centers from Europe, the Middle East and North Africa) that explored opportunities and dynamics in the Eastern Mediterranean. In March, the working group’s joint study on new dynamics and the potential for cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean was published, featuring inputs by Dr. Ehud Eiran, Gabriel Mitchell and Dr. Nimrod Goren of Mitvim. In April, Mitvim hosted the working group’s conference in Jerusalem, and in July, Mitvim led a panel in Morocco, at EuroMeSCo’s annual conference, in which the final research and recommendations were presented. Also as part of the working group, Mitvim published a policy brief by Rebecca Bornstein on how countries in the Eastern Mediterranean can support each other on their path towards conflict resolution.
2. Supporting New Alliances for Israel in the Eastern Mediterranean

Mitvim Policy Fellow and former Israeli Ambassador to Cyprus Michael Harari conducted research and analysis on Israel’s foreign policy towards the Eastern Mediterranean, with a special focus on Israel’s emerging alliance with Greece and Cyprus and the regional opportunities it enables. Mitvim Policy Fellow Gabriel Mitchell analyzed the regional implications of the natural gas findings in the Eastern Mediterranean, and assessed whether and how they can foster regional cooperation, also given the turbulent relations between Israel and Turkey. Finally, Prof. Elie Podeh represented Mitvim at the MED2018 conference in Rome, at which political leaders and experts from the Middle East, Europe, and North Africa met to discuss geopolitical developments and advance a positive agenda for the Mediterranean region.

3. Working to improve Israel-Turkey Relations in Light of Renewed Crises

The past year was characterized by renewed tensions between Israel and Turkey, including the withdrawal of Ambassadors and Consul Generals from both countries in May. Mitvim experts called for a containment of the crisis and explained why an improvement of ties can serve the interests of both counties. In October, Mitvim carried out its annual Israel-Turkey policy dialogue in Istanbul, for the seventh consecutive year. The policy dialogue included a series of meetings and discussions with Turkish scholars, journalists, former diplomats, and civil society activists. It focused on Israel-Turkey relations, in light of the crisis in ties, and on Turkey’s foreign policy in the Middle East. The policy dialogue enabled experts from both countries to exchange views on regional developments, to identify opportunities for better bilateral relations, and to increase their cooperation. Mitvim also took part in the annual event of the Turkish-Israeli Civil Society Forum, facilitated by Arik Segal, which explored how media, business and civil society can contribute to Turkey-Israel relations in challenging times.
C. ADVANCING ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN PEACE

1. Advising International and Local Actors on Possible Steps towards Peace

As stagnation in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process continues, and renewed negotiations are not in sight, international and local actors are seeking ideas on how to work towards a renewed peace process and undertake positive diplomatic steps on the ground that preserve the viability of a future peace deal. Mitvim engaged with multiple embassies and officials as well as with local and international think tanks and NGOs, and provided analysis and ideas on possible steps that can help advance peace and increase civil society cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians. In November, Mitvim hosted Prof. Yossi Mekelberg from Chatham House (UK) for a discussion on lessons from previous Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations, based on a research he co-authored with Greg Shapland. Dr. Nimrod Goren and Nadav Tamir spoke at Harvard University on the role of the international community in advancing the peace process.

2. Drawing Lessons from Other Conflicts for Israeli-Palestinian Peacemaking

Mitvim published research by Dr. Dahlia Scheindlin, “Fresh Thinking for Old Problems: Comparing Conflicts to Advance Israeli-Palestinian Peace,” the culmination of her 2016-17 research on cross-conflict comparison. Dr. Scheindlin looked at conflicts in Cyprus, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Serbia and Kosovo, and drew lessons that can potentially benefit Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking efforts. Dr. Scheindlin published commentaries, conducted media interviews, and delivered lectures on her work in Israel and in the US. In November, Merav Kahana-Dagan and Sana Knaneh of Mitvim moderated a panel at the international congress of Women Wage Peace on the role of women in promoting peace in different countries and conflicts. Later in 2018, Amb. (ret.) Colette Avital, spoke about lessons from different conflict resolution processes at a conference titled “Negotiation Matters”, held by the Institute for National Security Studies.
3. Analyzing Changes in Palestinian Politics and their Impact on Chances for Peace

Dr. Ido Zelkovitz led research on changes in the Palestinian political system that can impact Israeli-Palestinian relations and prospects for peace. Dr. Zelkovitz published policy and research papers, and conducted media interviews and briefings to MKs, on Fatah-Hamas relations, the situation in Gaza, tensions between the Palestinian Authority and the Trump administration, and prospects for a new Palestinian leadership. In May, Mitvim and the Yezreel Valley Academic College held a conference on the subject, which focused on social and political processes in the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip, the changing role of global and regional powers, and Palestinian perceptions regarding possible solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

4. Identifying Regional Opportunities to Improve the Situation in Gaza

In March, Mitvim hosted Miroslav Zafirov of UNSCO for a briefing and policy exchange on the situation in Gaza and on Israel’s policies towards it. In October, Mitvim and IPCRI convened a unique policy workshop that explored the role that various regional and international actors can play to improve the situation in Gaza. The workshop brought together more than fifty participants – Israelis, Palestinians (including from Gaza), diplomats and international experts – to assess the current situation and formulate policy recommendations on how to prevent military escalation and address the humanitarian crisis in Gaza without jeopardizing chances for a broader Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement. UN Special Coordinator to the Middle East Peace Process Nickolay Mladenov delivered the opening address at the event, which was held at the UN Headquarters in Jerusalem. A policy paper based on the workshop was published and follow-up discussions with new Palestinian partners have taken place after the event.

5. Delivering a Course on the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process

Mitvim convened the fourth annual summer course on "The Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process in a Domestic and Regional Context" for the Institute for National Security and Counterterrorism at Syracuse University. The summer course included lectures by Mitvim experts, a political tour of East Jerusalem, a meeting with a Palestinian policy analyst, and a concluding simulation on Israeli-Palestinian dialogue.
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