



Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People: Mapping the Relationship between Israeli State Agencies & World Jewry

Systematic Overview

In this paper, the Reut Institute maps out the relationship between different official agencies of the State of Israel and World Jewry, and presents the conclusions and recommendations derived from this. This paper follows [the conceptual framework](#) that Reut published in March 2017, which predicted the current “perfect storm” in the relationship between Israel and World Jewry.

The Reut Institute believes that the relationship with World Jewry should be defined by the Government of Israel (GOI) as a national security issue. However, there is no clear national security strategy that deals with this issue, and as a result, Israel does not have any clear policy regarding this relationship.

Since 2008, the Reut Institute has been promoting the concept of Jewish peoplehood in Israel and worldwide through innovative research and programs. The Reut Institute thanks Mr. Amnon and Dr. Katie Rodan for their generous support of this work.

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Introduction

The legitimacy of the State of Israel is rooted in the idea that Israel is the nation-state of the entire Jewish people. Consequently, the Reut Institute asserts that Israel's connection with the Jewish World should be defined by the Government of Israel (GOI) as a matter of national security. However, in the last few years, the gap



between Israel (both at the governmental and societal levels) and World Jewry has widened to the point of endangering the role of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people.

The erosion of this relationship presents a major threat to Israel's national security. Israel's connection with the US is one of the building blocks of Israel's national security concept and relies heavily on the Jewish community's commitment to and support of Israel. Jews in the US are at the frontlines of the battle against the assault on Israel's legitimacy and the boycott movement. Accordingly, the Kotel Crisis is not just a struggle for progressive Judaism in Israel but a matter of national security.

Conclusions

The State of Israel must formulate a strategic framework towards World Jewry, from which the policy of the GOI will be derived. Today, no such strategy exists and the relationship with World Jewry is not being treated as an issue of national security. Reut's conclusions about the current situation are as follows:

- ❖ **There is no coherent and clear national approach regarding this issue,** not to mention one which regards the relationship with World Jewry as one of Israel's most strategic assets, as it should. This relationship is essential for maintaining Israel's legitimacy, and could be critical to its survival in the long run.
- ❖ **Israel has no clear policy on major issues affecting World Jewry;** therefore, these issues are addressed on an ad hoc basis and are often dictated by narrow political interests. This dynamic is destructive to the connection with World Jewry. **Israel's policy is effectively the sum of arbitrary and uncoordinated activities of the different GOI branches.**
- ❖ **The connection with World Jewry is not on the agenda of most Israeli government branches,** even if some of their activities have a significant impact on World Jewry.
- ❖ **Public sector officials are not being trained to understand this issue and appreciate the significance of the connection with World Jewry.** The training that exists today does not deal with the questions of Zionism or treat Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people.

Recommendations

The Reut Institute recommends that the GOI take the following actions:

- ❖ **Treat the relationship between the State of Israel and World Jewry as a subject of national security in Israel.** The Ministry of Diaspora Affairs, in cooperation



with the National Security Council, should monitor trends, analyze them and share them with all relevant departments and officials.

- ❖ **Reevaluate the allocation of resources and responsibilities related to the relationship with World Jewry.** A committee should be formed of representatives from different government agencies, led by officials from MODA, to craft a new policy for dealing with the relationship between Israel and World Jewry, including identifying the aims and goals of an effective policy. In addition, the committee will reexamine the division of authority and allocation of resources with respect to the relationship and make recommendations about how they should be divided to best confront the challenge of maintaining this relationship.
- ❖ **Define the 'core issues' that affect the relationship.** This list should include issues that are seemingly internal to the State of Israel, but which have a significant impact on the relationship with World Jewry, such as religious conversion, prayer arrangements at the Western Wall, and marriage certificates. This list of issues should be reexamined every year.
- ❖ **Assign an 'integrative body' to the core issues that affect the relationship. MODA should have residual responsibility.** The integrative body will craft Israel's policies on aspects of the issue that are under its responsibility and present them to the PM or a committee of relevant ministers for approval. MODA will be required to present its policies on each of the core issues and will have residual responsibility.
- ❖ **Include the issue of the connection with World Jewry in all government training programs** (i.e. for government cadets) at all levels. Specifically, training should include direct formative experience with Jewish communities abroad.

Map of the Relationship between State Agencies and World Jewry

The following is a comprehensive, but not necessarily exhaustive, review of Israel's official State agencies that have connections and interfaces with issues that affect the Jewish world. This review is intended to illustrate the unsustainable decentralization of the many uncoordinated State agencies dealing with such issues.

Government Agencies

- ❖ **Ministry of Diaspora Affairs:** MODA is in charge of strengthening the connection between the State of Israel and World Jewry. The Ministry works to strengthen Jewish identity, fight anti-Semitism, and maintain the connection between Israelis



and World Jewry. The establishment of the Ministry in 1999 was a step in the right direction toward preserving the relationship between World Jewry and Israel.

However, as this paper shows, the decentralization of responsibilities of the various government agencies dealing with this issue makes it hard for MODA to be successful in its efforts. Moreover, most of MODA's work on this issue is conducted in partnership with Orthodox groups,¹ while the large majority of Jews worldwide practice pluralistic streams of Judaism.

- ❖ **Office of the Prime Minister:** The Prime Minister's Office does not have any operational strategy for managing the relationship between Israel and World Jewry, despite overseeing many projects that affect this relationship, including Israel's Civil Service Cadet Program; the committees that coordinate actions between the Israeli government, the World Zionist Organization and the Jewish Agency; the PMO Information Directorate; the Unit of Religious Conversion; the National Heritage Sites Project; and even the Taglit and Masa programs, which the PMO partially sponsors.
- ❖ **Ministry of Aliyah and Integration:** Currently focusing on encouraging immigration to Israel (Aliyah), this Ministry has the potential to leverage its delegates abroad in order to preserve the bond between World Jewry and Israel and to engage the Israeli community abroad as a living bridge between these communities.
- ❖ **Ministry of Justice:** The Counseling and Legislation Unit within the Ministry touches upon several issues that affect Jewish communities outside of Israel (i.e. marital status and conversion registration), including on the latter's ability to sustain Jewish identity and continuity.
- ❖ **Ministry of Religious Services:** This Ministry is the regulatory body that governs religious services for the Jewish public in the State of Israel. It is currently run by the ultra-Orthodox minority in Israel, which has been working to "strengthen the relationship" with Jews around the world, but only through an Orthodox lens.
- ❖ **Ministry of Education:** The Heritage Department of the Ministry of Education is responsible for designing curriculum pertaining to World Jewry. A unit of this department is specifically in charge of the relationship between Israel and World Jewry, and works to strengthen the relationship between schools in Israel and

¹ See here: <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/education/.premium-1.3043311>



Jewish day schools worldwide. Among other things, this unit develops programs about Jewish identity and heritage for schools abroad.

- ❖ **Ministry of Strategic Affairs:** This Ministry leads the fight against the assault on Israel's legitimacy around the world, and thus maintains regular contact with Jewish and pro-Israeli organizations. The connection with World Jewry and the international standing of the State of Israel are important and relevant for strengthening Israel's legitimacy.
- ❖ **Ministry of Foreign Affairs:** International representatives of the Ministry are the face of Israel and provide direct access to the GOI abroad.
- ❖ **The Ministry of Economy:** the trade attachés of the Ministry of Economy (and occasionally the economic attachés of the **Ministry of Finance**) work closely with Jewish communities as part of their portfolio.

Israeli Parliament

- ❖ **The Legal Department:** The purpose of this department is to assist the Knesset Legal Advisor in performing his or her duties. Legislation in Israel often affects the lives of Jews living abroad, especially with respect to matters of marital status, the relationship between state and church, and minority rights.
- ❖ **Committee for Immigration, Absorption and Diaspora Affairs:** This committee deals primarily with encouraging Aliyah and absorbing Olim and maintaining a connection between the State of Israel and Israelis living abroad.
- ❖ **Constitution, Law and Justice Committee:** Some of the discussions of this committee have an influence on matters that could directly influence Jews around the world. However, the voice of World Jewry is absent from these discussions.
- ❖ **Joint Committee on the Proposed Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People – the bill sought to entrench the State of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish People.**
- ❖ **Lobbies of the Knesset:** Lobby for Strengthening the Jewish World; Lobby for the Struggle Against the Delegitimization of the State of Israel; Lobby for the Relationship between Israel and the US; Lobby for Strengthening Israel's Foreign Affairs System; Lobby for the Renewal of Ties with Descendants of Spanish and Portuguese Jews; Lobby for Religion and State, and Lobby for Jewish Renewal. Each of these lobbies has a different agenda and goals that relate directly or indirectly to the relationship between Israel and World Jewry.



- ❖ ***The Research and Information Center:*** The Center has only conducted a small amount of research on the Jewish World, most of which related to Aliyah or the effectiveness of partially government funded programs (e.g. Taglit, Masa, etc.).

Other Bodies

- ❖ **The Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI):** JAFI's special legal status states a strategic partnership with the GOI, and even allocation of responsibilities regarding certain issues. Despite innovative models and practices of JAFI,² it does not “manage” the most important issues comprised of the the relationships with Jews worldwide.
- ❖ **President of the State of Israel:** The President's agenda has an impact on the activity of World Jewry. For example, the current President's "new Israeli order" (i.e. the four tribes of Israel – religious, secular, ultra-Orthodox and Arab) has had a significant influence on shaping the priorities of Jewish community organizations around the world, but it excludes World Jewry.
- ❖ **Chief Rabbinate of Israel:** As the chief religious body in Israel, the Rabbinate has a significant influence over Jewish life worldwide and in Israel. The status of the Chief Rabbinate in Israel has become a hotly debated topic within pluralistic Jewish communities around the world in recent years.
- ❖ **The Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People (CAHJP)**
- ❖ **The Israel Association of Community Centers (IACC):** The IACC plays a major role in shaping education – both formal and informal – as well as leisure activities in Israel. It has untapped potential to promote informal education amongst Jewish communities around the world via cooperation with parallel Jewish community organizations abroad.

The End.

² the Diaspora Conference that was host by JAFI in March 2017, brought more than a 100 members of parliament, ministers and high officials from 29 countries, that strived to learn how Israel engages with its Jewish and Israeli diaspora.