

Israel, S'pore perfect examples of what small nations can achieve

As Singapore celebrates its founding 50 years ago, TODAY is running a monthly series of interviews with ambassadors of countries that play a key role in Singapore's foreign relations. This month, Rumi Hardasmalani (rumih@mediacorp.com.sg) speaks to Israel's Ambassador to Singapore Yael Rubinstein. In a wide-ranging interview, the envoy speaks about the role that the Israeli Defense Forces played in the early days of Singapore's fledgling military, opportunities for bilateral cooperation and the Middle East peace process, among other issues.

The Singapore Armed Forces received advice and training from Israel during the early days of our nationhood. Fast forward 50 years, how has this relationship evolved?

Singapore's founding father and Prime Minister, the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew, in his 2002 book *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story*, recalled that he had approached several nations asking for military advice, but it was Israel who responded positively.

The job of helping Singapore's army was given to Major-General Rehavam Ze'evi and the military delegation was headed by then-Colonel Yaakov Elazari. Several Israel Defense Forces officers laboured over what became known as the Brown Book, dealing with combat doctrine, which was translated into English and sent to the Singaporean Government for review.

Over the years, Singapore and Israel have continued to cultivate and nurture this relationship. Today, cooperation between the two countries has grown not only in defence and the economy, but also in the areas of international development and culture. We aim to further develop and nurture the friendship between the people of the two countries.

Has the Singapore-Israel Industrial Research and Development Foundation (SIIRD) been successful? Are there any plans for further collaboration on research and development (R&D)?

SIIRD started off in 1997 promoting R&D collaborations between Singapore and Israeli commercial companies. Owing to its success, the SIIRD programme has been expanded to include Singapore's non-commercial R&D entities such as A*STAR (Agency for Science, Technology and Research). Now, Israeli companies can also work with research institutes in Singapore. Separately, there are other R&D programmes under the National Research Foundation Singapore (NRF)'s Campus for Research Excellence and Technological Enter-

prise (CREATE) programme that promotes R&D between academia from both countries. Going forward, SIIRD will be encouraging more Singapore and Israeli companies from areas such as cybertech and data analytics to explore doing R&D together.

The SIIRD programme was extended every three years, but in 2012, recognising the increased interest among the companies from both countries, the programme was instead extended by five years. This will likely be repeated in 2017. To date, SIIRD has approved 146 joint projects involving 292 Israeli and Singapore companies, 2,000 research scientists and engineers, and total research investments of US\$170 million (S\$239 million). In addition, SIIRD helped more than 30 companies annually from both countries to look for R&D partners.

This year, an agreement was signed between two leading universities in Singapore and Israel, to work together on R&D in environmental and life sciences.

On the business front, what are the opportunities for Singaporean and Israeli companies to work together? What are the new areas of economic cooperation the two countries may look at?

Singapore and Israel enjoy a long history of commercial relations, given Singapore's pro-business landscape, well-developed infrastructure and English-speaking environment. Bilateral trade amounted to close to S\$2 billion in 2014. Top exports/imports are in industries including semiconductor devices, telecommunications, electrical machinery and equipment, as well as across various other industries such as life sciences, F&B and others.

In line with Singapore's strategy towards innovation and technology, our office is forging new areas of economic cooperation in sectors such as cybersecurity with local government agencies such as the Economic Development Board (EDB), as exemplified in the establishment of Custodio's research centre together with Israel Aircraft Industries (IAI).

Another area would be finance technology or "fintech". Singapore's Infocomm Development Authority (IDA) is investing S\$200 million into Israeli tech start-up companies, as announced earlier this year. The Embassy also organised the inaugural FinTech Conference at Fullerton Hotel last month, hosting a delegation of 10 Israeli companies that presented their solutions and capabilities to many banking and finance professionals in the industry.

Cybersecurity or cybertech is another field that Singapore and Israel are closely collaborating on. The cybertech conference held in Singapore



last Friday is a premier event for cyber, technological solutions, investment opportunities, and much more. It brings together the most innovative technologies in cyber solutions.

A bilateral cultural treaty was signed in 2007. What are some of the key efforts undertaken to promote more people-to-people links between Singapore and Israel?

I strongly believe that culture is an important tool through which we can build bridges and capture the hearts of people. If we are able to share the Israeli culture with Singaporeans, I think the bond between the two countries will become stronger. I see a strong interest in Israeli culture among Singaporeans, be it in cinema, the performing arts, music, etc.

The Embassy shares and showcases the Israeli way of life through the medium of art and culture, music, dance and other cultural activities. At the 23rd Israel Film Festival last month, we presented some of the finest and the best of Israeli cinema in Singapore. I was happy to see the overwhelming response from Singaporean movie lovers for Israeli cinema.

The second visit of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by the legendary conductor, maestro Zubin Mehta, will be held on Jan 7, 2016, at the Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay. This is Israel's gift to Singapore on its 50th birthday.

The Embassy will continue to bring glimpses of Israeli life for our friends here in Singapore, through art, music, films, books, etcetera.

As small states surrounded by much larger neighbours, how can countries such as Singapore and Israel stay relevant in the changing global system?

I believe for small countries such as ours, innovation is the magic word. If we can use innovation to solve bigger, global problems, we will have the world's attention. This can be in any field, from medicine to finance and

economics; and from artificial intelligence to national defence.

It is imperative in today's world that we look for solutions and answers to issues affecting us globally not from physical resources, but from a combination of innovation, technology and global-mindedness. It is my view that both Singapore and Israel excel on these two parameters of technology and innovation.

We stand out as perfect examples of what small countries with limited resources can aim for and achieve. And it is my belief that as long as we can sustain this edge, we will stay relevant.

How do you see the Middle East peace process? Are the recent suggestions by United States Secretary of State John Kerry to change the status quo in Jerusalem helpful?

We believe that the solution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict is the two-state solution, which Israel had indicated time and again. Peace offers, on the basis of "Lands for Peace", have been made by almost all Israeli Prime Ministers to the Palestinian side time and again. However, Israel has found itself attacked by "intifada" (uprising).

In 2008, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert had extended his hand in peace to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, suggesting Israel was to keep 6.3 per cent of the West Bank. The Palestinians, on the other hand, were offered areas in exchange for the settlement blocs, which consisted of 5.8 per cent of the Israeli territory. But, in return, people of Israel were again faced with another "intifada". The two leaders met 36 times, mainly in Jerusalem, and reached a draft agreement that would clearly constitute the basis for any future peace deal between the parties. But in the end no peace deal was signed ... despite Mr Olmert's far-reaching offer. Until today, the Palestinian Authority has not responded either positively or negatively to Mr Olmert's offer.

Then, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu offered withdrawals from most of the West Bank and committed himself to a two-state solution and still the answer was no. Before that, in 2005, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon withdrew every soldier, settler and settlement from Gaza hoping to create an opening for peace, and instead set the stage for Gaza to be controlled by a terror organisation.

The latest rounds of peace talks initiated by Mr Kerry comes at a time when peace is much needed in the region. Prime Minister Netanyahu and US President Barack Obama's meeting on Nov 9 has reinforced the two-state solution and (ensures) legitimate Palestinian aspirations are met through a political process, even as we make sure that Israel is able to secure itself. As Prime Minister Netanyahu has said, Israel will never give up on peace and we remain committed to a vision of peace of two states for two peoples, a demilitarised Palestinian state that recognises the Jewish state.

By sharing Israeli culture with Singaporeans, Ambassador Yael Rubinstein believes the bond between both countries will be strengthened.
PHOTO: WEE TECK HIAN

INNOVATION THE MAGIC WORD

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Israel's Ambassador to Singapore Yael Rubinstein