



## Lessons of Israel's Political Shuffle

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The latest political move by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is significant on many fronts. Yesterday the news was reported that Netanyahu had offered Avigdor Lieberman, head of the right-wing nationalist Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel is our home) party, the post of Defense Minister in an effort to lure him and his party into a governing coalition that would expand from 61 to 67 Knesset members.

Just before courting Lieberman, however, Netanyahu was in negotiations with Isaac Herzog, the head of the “Zionist Union” party in what was seen as an attempt to broaden the coalition ideologically bringing in so-called moderates. Herzog would have assumed the role of Foreign Minister and his presence in the coalition, along with some of his party members, might be used as an opportunity to restart the ever-stalled “peace process.”

There have been past instances where Netanyahu has offered such posts to players from a different end of the Israeli political spectrum. The playbook is quite familiar. Whether it was Ehud Barak or Tzipi Livni, Netanyahu would appoint a figure far more palatable to the Western world to interface with Washington and Europe on matters relating to diplomacy and the Palestinians all while ensuring they would never be successful on the peace front by having the final say as Prime Minister. This simultaneously allowed Netanyahu to present a “peace face” outwardly while never straying from apartheid policies inwardly. It also allowed him to set up his political opponents for guaranteed failure. Herzog, remarkably, was about to take the bait.

But then there was a reversal. Netanyahu was still able to hurt Herzog, who came off as groveling and has since spent the time fighting with his party and others over his willingness to even consider joining Netanyahu, while Netanyahu broadened his coalition through the addition of another right-winger in Lieberman.

Surrounding himself with right-wingers to ensure political stability without ever taking political risks for peace has long been Netanyahu's *modus operandi*. It is the kind of thing that has infamously earned him the moniker “chickensh-t” in some quarters of Washington.

However, the implications of this decision are much greater than the political cowardice many have grown to expect from Netanyahu.



For Palestinians, those living in the West Bank and Gaza under occupation and those living as second class citizens inside Israel, the elevation of Avigdor Lieberman is a perilous prospect. Lieberman, perhaps more than any other politician, has been responsible for the mainstreaming of racism against Palestinians in Israel. He has built his political career on it. He has spoken of beheading Palestinians (those “disloyal to the State of Israel”), transferring Palestinian villages, even bombing Egypt's Aswan dam. He will now oversee a military with the world’s largest per capita nuclear arsenal.

Lieberman, who is himself a settler living in the illegal Israeli colony of Nokidim in the occupied West Bank, will be responsible for administering the occupation. For the first time ever, an Israeli settler will be running the very system of privilege and oppression which sustains these illegal settlements.

This move also rounds out Lieberman’s political experience. He will now have held several major posts including Foreign Minister and Defense Minister, a currently unparalleled resume in comparison to other sitting MKs. In a political system where there are no apparent heirs to Netanyahu, this helps push Lieberman to the fore.

The context in which Netanyahu made this decision however might tell us most about the implications of it on the future. In the weeks prior, Lieberman has spent his time being a high profile supporter of Elor Azaria, the Israeli soldier caught on film executing a Palestinian in cold blood. Lieberman was outspoken in his criticism of the handling of the case by the defense ministry headed by Moshe Ya’alon, calling for the Defense Minister’s impeachment, even calling Netanyahu “spineless.” Less than two months after this outburst, Netanyahu replaced Ya’alon with Lieberman. At the very moment that even the Israeli military leadership was beginning to question the horrific extent to which they have devalued Palestinian lives, Netanyahu doubled down on the Lieberman side of this public debate. Lieberman has played a big role in the mainstreaming of racism in Israeli society, now his appointment as Defense Minister is the most recent benchmark of just how much he has succeeded.

Moshe Ya’alon ultimately resigned after this reshuffle became public. For perspective on just how far to the right the Israeli mainstream is moving consider that Ya’alon himself is a long-time Likudnik who supports settlement expansion, once spoke of Palestinians as a “cancer”, called the anti-settlement group “Peace Now” a “virus” and even backed the idea of segregated buses in the West Bank. This same man, when announcing his resignation, stated that the Israeli government is becoming too extreme for him. In addition to the far-right nationalist Lieberman replacing Ya’alon as Defense Minister, Ya’alon’s resignation opens a spot on the Likud party’s Knesset list. Next in line on the list is Yehuda Glick, a religious nationalist best known for his persistent calls to build a Jewish temple in place of the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa Mosque in occupied Jerusalem.



Beyond Israel, however, this coalition decision also sends an important message to the Sunni Arab leaders. The negotiations between Netanyahu and Herzog have been reported to be the product of an effort by Tony Blair aiming to broaden a coalition in the hopes of restarting an Israeli-Palestinian peace process which would offer Sunni Arab states the political cover they needed to bring their anti-Iran aimed collaboration with Israel more into the open.

Netanyahu has long spoken of a desire to unite Israel and so-called moderate Arab states against Iran, but when provided with an opportunity to move in that direction, he chose otherwise. Arab states, who should know better to begin with, ought to learn what Palestinians have long known to be certain: Netanyahu considers the maintenance of the apartheid regime in Israel/Palestine far more important than Iran.