Israel: Olmert brings Lieberman's far-right party into government

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Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has brought Avigdor Lieberman, the leader of the far-right Israel Beitenu (Israel is Our Home) party, into his cabinet as deputy prime minister. Lieberman has been given the specially created post of minister of strategic affairs, dealing with threats against Israel, with a focus on Iran.

As a member of the foreign and defence committees and other "security cabinets," and reporting directly to the prime minister, Lieberman will be one of the inner circle making Israel's key decisions. He will be more powerful than either the defence or foreign ministers, Amir Peretz and Zippi Livni, both of whom are from the Labour Party.

Lieberman is an ultra-nationalist and notorious racist, who in 2001 advocated using nuclear weapons against Tehran as well as bombing Palestinian civilians and targeting Egypt's Aswan High Dam. He is in favour of the ethnic cleansing of Israeli Arabs.

His appointment signifies a major shift to the right within the Israeli political establishment on both domestic and foreign policy. This shift presages sharp class struggles in Israel and new wars that will further destabilise the region.

Lieberman's inclusion in the cabinet confirms that Israel is opposed to any resolution of the Palestine conflict on terms other than the establishment of a "Greater Israel."

As *Ha'aretz* opined, "The choice of the most unrestrained and irresponsible man around for this job constitutes a strategic threat in its own right."

Within days of Lieberman joining the government, Israel threatened to invade Egypt to prevent Palestinian militants smuggling arms into Gaza and launched a massive military offensive against Gaza, the most extensive since last June, in order to stop the firing of crude homemade Qassem rockets on towns and villages in the south of Israel that rarely prove fatal.

In a weeklong operation starting on November 3, anIsraeli brigade encircled and laid siege to Beit Hanoun in northern Gaza, killing 8 people and wounding 60. Troops blew up 40 homes and damaged 400 more. The military rounded up and interrogated thousands of men, detaining dozens.

In another operation, Israeli troops fired on a group of women demonstrating in support of Palestinian militants besieged in a mosque in Beit Hanoun, killing 2 women and injuring 10. They turned their fire on the mosque and destroyed it.

In the most notorious incident, tanks bombarded a residential area of Beit Hanoun, in the early hours of the morning on November 7, killing 19 people and injuring more than 50. More than 60 Palestinians and an Israeli soldier have been killed in the weeklong offensive.

The US-based human rights group Physicians for Human Rights has stated that of the 247 fatalities from Israeli fire in Gaza between June 28 and October 27, nearly 63 percent of were civilians, of which more than one third were children.

Lieberman's appointment to the newly created post of strategic affairs with a special focus on Iran also underscores the preparations by Washington for further military adventures in pursuit of its imperialist agenda in the Middle East, with Israel as Washington's main subcontractor.

The reaction from the West to his appointment is revealing. The US ambassador to Israel called on Lieberman even before his appointment had been officially confirmed by parliament. His visit was followed one day later by European Union Commissioner Javier Solana.

Just last week, the White House accused Syria, Iran, Hezbollah, and their Lebanese supporters of trying to topple the elected government of Lebanese Prime Minister Fuad Siniora. A spokesman said any attempt to undermine Lebanon's government would violate the country's sovereignty and United Nations resolutions.

Olmert turned to Lieberman and Israel Beitenu, the fifth-largest party in the parliamentary elections last March, to shore up his tottering government. The Kadima-Labour coalition faced collapse in the wake of Israel's defeat at the hands of Hezbollah in Lebanon and the prospect of corruption and criminal charges against Olmert and other members of his government. Now, with Israel Beitenu's 11 seats, the coalition has 78 votes in the 120-seat Knesset, Israel's parliament.

Lieberman founded Israel Beitenu in the aftermath of his acrimonious split with Benyamin Netanyahu's Likud Party in 1999. The party draws its main support from the 1 million-strong Russian immigrant community that came to Israel as conditions deteriorated precipitously in the former Soviet Union.

He is best known for his espousal of ethnic cleansing via a "population exchange," a policy supported by other far-right parties such as Moledet, Herut and Hayil. One million of Israel's 6 million inhabitants are Arab. Under Lieberman's plan, first announced in 2001, one third of Israel's Arab citizens who live in the north of Israel would be stripped of their Israeli citizenship to become citizens of the Palestinian Authority, while Israel would keep the Zionist settlements in the West Bank.He also advocates financial incentives to encourage Israeli Arabs to leave Israel and the use of "loyalty tests" to determine whether those Arabs who remain in Israel should continue to hold Israeli citizenship.

Lieberman served twice in Sharon's coalition governments. He called, when a cabinet minister, for the bombing of Palestinian gas stations, banks and commercial centres during Israel's assault on Jenin in April 2002. He was sacked in June 2004 for opposing Sharon's plans to dismantle the Israeli settlements in Gaza.

Earlier this year, he demanded that Arab Israeli legislators who met with Hamas officials or marked Israel's Independence Day as the Palestinian Nakba, or "catastrophe day," be charged with treason and executed, calling them Nazi supporters.

In return for shoring up Olmert's coalition, Lieberman insisted upon a number of conditions:

* An inquiry into the conduct of the war against Lebanon.

* An end to Olmert's plan to settle Israel's final borders based upon the dismantling of a few isolated settlements and the settler outposts, even though most of the Zionist settlements in the West Bank would be included.

* Cabinet support for legislation to replace Israel's parliamentary system with a presidential system with enhanced powers for the executive, whereby the president would appoint the cabinet, whose members would not serve as legislators or be dependent upon or answerable to parliament.

* An increase in the level of minimum voter support that a party, under Israel's system of proportional representation, needs for representation in the Knesset, to prevent small parties winning seats in parliament and thereby effectively disenfranchise Israel's Arab citizens.

Amir Peretz, Labour's leader, and his Labour cabinet colleagues endorsed Lieberman's appointment and the coalition with Israel Beitenu. All except one Labourite remained in their posts, arguing that it was necessary to do so in order to forestall the fall of the government and new elections.

Only Ophir Pines-Paz, the minister of culture, sport, science and technology, opposed Lieberman's appointment. He resigned his cabinet position and announced he would run for leadership of the Labour Party against Peretz next year.

Peretz, a founder of the "Peace Now" movement, assumed the leadership of the party just 12 months ago on the basis of an appeal to widespread popular sentiment for peace with the Palestinians and social reform.

He took Labour out of Ariel Sharon's Likud coalition government, which Labour had propped up after Sharon lost the support of much of his own party and the ultranationalist parties—for whom the pullout from Gaza was little short of treason—and the ultra-religious parties whose social base includes some of the most impoverished layers. Labour's alliance with Likud had become untenable, as the government waged an unremitting economic war on the working class at home even as it waged a military war against the Palestinians.

Peretz's election as Labour leader prompted Sharon, with the support of Shimon Peres and other Labour members, to split from Likud. He proclaimed the founding of a new "centrist" party, Kadima, to take forward his expansionist agenda, and called an early general election.

In May, following the March general election in which Kadima became the largest party without an overall majority in the Knesset, Peretz took Labour back into a coalition with Kadima, now led by Olmert. He took up the defence portfolio, launching a brutal military assault on the Palestinian Authority and Lebanon. In so doing, Peretz and Labour have laid the basis for Kadima's ongoing lurch to the right and a government that can now accommodate a fascistic demagogue.