

Netanyahu seeks to shore up Israeli government with far-right alliance

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Israeli Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu has offered the post of minister of defence to Avigdor Lieberman, leader of Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel is our Home), in order to bolster his fragile Likud-led coalition of ultra-orthodox and nationalist parties.

The coalition has had a majority of one in the 120-seat Knesset since last year's elections. According to opinion polls, in the event of an election, Netanyahu would see his share of the vote fall in favour of another far-right party and coalition member, Jewish Home.

The appointment of this ultra-nationalist demagogue, who is holding out for better pension rights for impoverished Russian immigrants that form his support base, would bring the entire right wing into the coalition. It would send a clear message to the Israeli military and political establishment, Israeli and Palestinian workers, and Netanyahu's political backers overseas.

Lieberman is a fascistic warmonger, a settler and provocateur whose career is mired in shady financial dealings. He has repeatedly branded the current government as defeatist. He once called for the blowing up of the Aswan Dam in a war with Egypt, saying that Egypt's then-President Hosni Mubarak could "go to hell."

He is a vicious opponent of liberal Israelis who seek to expose the crimes of Israel's Defence Forces (IDF), calling members of Breaking the Silence "mercenaries who sold their soul to Satan," and Yesh Gvul activists "kapos." He hailed the IDF soldier Elor Azaria, who shot dead a wounded Palestinian, as a hero.

He has accused the Palestinians of being part of a global jihad, and called for the death penalty for the perpetrators of attacks on Jewish Israelis. He has repeatedly denounced Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and called for him to be removed

from office.

A few weeks ago, he threatened war on Hamas, which controls the Gaza Strip, saying that should he become defence minister he would give Hamas two days to hand over two detained Israeli civilians who crossed into Gaza of their own accord, as well as the bodies of soldiers killed in the 2014 war—"or you're dead."

He has branded Israel's Palestinian citizens as "the enemy within" and called Israeli-Palestinian legislators to be tried as in Nuremberg.

As minister of defence, Lieberman, who was foreign minister in Netanyahu's government from 2009 to 2012, and again from 2013 to 2015, would be second only to Netanyahu in rank. He would be in charge not just of the IDF, whose upper echelons are increasingly controlled by people affiliated with the settler movement, its war plans and Israel's security. He would also become the de facto head of the Occupied Territories, which are under military rule. Israel's land seizures, settlement expansion, road blocks, house demolitions, stop-and-searches, and detention without trial make life a misery for the 2.5 million Palestinians in the occupied West Bank, while its blockade of Gaza has turned the coastal enclave into an open air prison.

The shift to the right by what is already the most right-wing government in Israel's history has caused consternation among Israel's political and military establishment, as well as internationally.

Former Prime Minister and Defence Minister Ehud Barak told Channel 10, "What has happened is a hostile takeover of the Israeli government by dangerous elements." Israel has been "infected by the seeds of fascism, which should be "a red light for all of us regarding what's going on in the government."

On Friday, Moshe Ya'alon, the current defence

minister and Likud party member, who had been expected to take up the Foreign Affairs portfolio, resigned from Netanyahu's cabinet and the Knesset. He refused to take another government post in a cabinet with Lieberman, saying, "[E]xtremist and dangerous forces have taken over Israel and the Likud movement."

In what is seen as a possible move to found his own political party, he said, "I have no intention of leaving the public and political life, and in the future will return to compete for the national leadership of Israel." He took a swipe at Netanyahu saying, "I saw before me the safety of Israel and its citizens in all of my acts and decisions, and the good of the country above all other considerations. This was so in security and professional matters and in matters of values and rule of the law."

While Ya'alon is a right-winger on most Palestinian issues, he has opposed some of the most egregious attacks on democratic norms—albeit from the perspective of not alienating Israel's international support. He is part of that faction of the military-intelligence establishment that opposed the plans to attack Iran in 2010, criticised some aspects of Israel's brutal suppression of the Palestinians and blocked the expansion of some settlements as counterproductive, thereby incurring the wrath of the right wing.

The resignation of his Knesset seat means that the gun-toting Yehuda Glick, as the next person on the Likud list, will take his place. Glick rejects Palestinian statehood, calling for a "one-state solution" and the "transfer" of Israel's Palestinian population. An ardent proponent of moves to allow Jews to pray in the al-Aqsa Mosque compound, known as Temple Mount to the Jews, it was his activities—and those of his supporters—that provoked Palestinian fears about Israel's plans to change the status of the al-Aqsa Mosque compound and sparked widespread protests last autumn. Since then, Israel's security forces have killed more than 200 Palestinians and injured thousands.

Netanyahu announced his decision to bring Lieberman on board after months of talks with the Labour-led Zionist Unity leader Isaac Herzog. Herzog, who had previously opposed joining a Netanyahu-led government, was eager to take over the Foreign Ministry and push for talks with the Palestinians. When it became clear, however, that Herzog could not deliver

his full 24 Knesset votes, facing bitter opposition from the former leader of the Labour faction Shelly Yachimovich, and Tzipi Livni of the Ha-Tnuah faction, who had been minister of justice in an earlier Netanyahu government, Netanyahu ditched him in favour of Lieberman's smaller Yisrael Beiteinu. Now Herzog is utterly discredited and faces the disintegration of his electoral coalition.

Netanyahu has rejected the French government's proposal for an international conference, planned later this month in Paris, to relaunch peace talks between Palestinians and Israelis aimed at providing a fig leaf for Paris' and Washington's plans for a ramped up military intervention to unseat Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Had Zionist Unity joined the government, it would have left the Joint Arab List as the largest—and thus the official—opposition party in the Knesset. Under Israeli law, the prime minister must give regular monthly briefings, including on security matters, to the leading opposition party, while the Knesset must allow it more speaking time.



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