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There are only two things we should fight for. One is the defense of our homes and the other is the Bill of Rights.  
– General Smedley Butler

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October 27, 2006

## A Jewish Hitler? The rise of Avigdor Lieberman

With the **entry** of Avigdor Lieberman into the government as deputy minister for "strategic threats" – essentially in charge of preparing for war with Iran – Israel makes a qualitative step toward a regime that increasingly resembles, in all its essentials, a rogue state, and, I might add, potentially a very dangerous one.

Lieberman's views are notoriously racist, and his rhetoric is invariably violent. He **called for the execution** of Israeli Arab members of the Knesset who met with Hamas or didn't celebrate Israel's Independence Day. His party, **Yisrael Beytenu** ("Israel is our Home"), accuses Israeli Arabs of "dual loyalty" on account of their ethnicity, and advocates the complete separation of the Jewish and Arab populations in Palestine – in effect, forced transfer. Lieberman and his followers vehemently oppose the peace process, support the militant settlement movement, and are proud partisans of ethnic cleansing.

In 2002, Lieberman averred that he **wouldn't flinch** at ordering the IDF into the occupied territories on the West Bank for 48 hours, an operation designed to "Destroy the foundation of all the [Palestinian] authority's military infrastructure ... not leave one stone on another. Destroy everything." Civilian targets included: that same year he also argued the Israeli air force should bomb all Palestinian commercial centers, including banks and even gas stations.

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Lieberman's portfolio as minister in charge of strategic threats allowed the editors of *Ha'aretz* to quip "**Lieberman is a strategic threat!**" Here, after all, is a man who has threatened to bomb Tehran, the Aswan Dam, and Beirut. His entry into the government of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, in coalition with Kadima and Labor, marks an ominous shift in the stance of the Jewish state. As *Ha'aretz* put it:

*"The choice of the most unrestrained and irresponsible man around for this job constitutes a strategic threat in its own right. Lieberman's lack of restraint and his unbridled tongue, comparable only to those of Iran's president, are liable to bring disaster down upon the entire region."*

Up until this point, the stance of the government has always been set forth in the context of the American plan for the eventual creation of a Palestinian state, the so-called **road map**, which includes a freeze on Israeli settlements and the return of some land claimed by the settlers to the Palestinians. No more. With the inclusion of Lieberman in the governing coalition – and in such a key post – the Israelis are signaling that they've had enough of being dictated to by the Americans. This also dramatizes a sea-change in Israeli politics: ideas that were generally considered out of the mainstream – and out of the question, as far as actual implementation – are now up for consideration.

Yet the line that separated Lieberman, the Jewish equivalent of **David Duke**, from the Israeli "mainstream" has been increasingly hard to discern for quite some time. As **Arthur Neslen** put it in the *Guardian* **recently**:

*"The most worrying thing about Lieberman is not that his ideas exist on a plane outside Israel's political continuum but that, in many ways, they are close to its dead center. The proposal to transfer 'the triangle,' an area around Um al-Fahm where 250,000 Palestinian citizens of Israel currently live, was first brought into the press spotlight at the end of 2000 at Israel's most prestigious annual policy-making forum, the Herzliya conference.*

*"The then prime minister Ariel Sharon publicly floated the idea again in February 2004. Opposition from Washington to a de facto violation of international law reportedly took the plan out of the headlines, but it remained in the comment pages.*

*"In December 2005, Uzi Arad, a former Mossad director, government foreign policy adviser and current head of the Institute for Policy and Strategy, which organizes the Herzliya conference, resurrected the idea in an article for [The] New Republic."*

I have covered the growing influence of Israeli extremism for **years**, and worried over the rise of what seems, at first, a hopeless oxymoron: Jewish fascism. That an ideology that has proved so

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harmful – indeed, **near fatal** – to the Jewish people should gain a foothold in the Jewish state seems too bizarre even for a **post-9/11 reality** that increasingly resembles **Bizarro World**. Yet here we are, confronted with the specter of Avigdor Lieberman, the would-be Hitler, currently the second most popular politician in the running for prime minister, right behind **Benjamin Netanyahu**.

The *Jerusalem Post* **reports** Lieberman originally pushed for the internal security post, but this was vetoed by Israel's Attorney General, who told Olmert that Lieberman must be kept entirely out of the realm of law enforcement. The Russian immigrant, a **former bouncer** in a bar, **is being investigated** for his ties to Russian underworld figures: money funneled into his political activities from abroad apparently came from some pretty dubious sources.

That a gangster of Lieberman's ilk is now a serious contender for the post of prime minister and his fascist party is rising in popularity are measures of how the Israeli settler colony, **originally** designed along left-wing Zionist-utopian lines, has hardened into a national socialist **Sparta**.

Lieberman's prominent position in the Israeli government raises some new considerations when contemplating the future of the long-standing "**special relationship**" between the U.S. and Israel – and at least one very disturbing possibility.

To begin with, if Lieberman's views now represent those of his government, at least when it comes to matters related to his portfolio, then it seems clear Tel Aviv is bent on war with Iran. The Europeans are already reacting with distaste to the prospect of having to deal with him: before meeting with him, Javier Solana, the EU negotiator, declared he disagreed with Lieberman about "**everything**." One presumes the U.S. State Department holds similar views, but others in the Bush administration might prove more tolerant of Lieberman and even sympathetic. In any case, **the War Party** in the U.S. is likely to find him very useful: Lieberman's fiery rhetoric is sure to set off sparks in a very volatile region of the world, one that is just waiting to explode.

Secondly, what does Lieberman's ascent tell us about the future of Lebanon and the prospects for another Israeli invasion? The minister in charge of strategic threats will not be restricted to just making threats, but will be at least partially empowered to carry them out. If I were a resident of **Beirut**, I would start packing.

Finally, it must be remembered that Israel is a member of the nuclear club, with **at least 400** nukes and perhaps more at its disposal. The chilling question is this: do we really want to see Israel's nukes fall into the hands of a madman like Lieberman?

The image of the "**mad mullahs**" of Tehran brandishing a nuclear scimitar is routinely conjured to frighten Westerners into supporting military action against Iran, and there is some

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legitimacy to this fear, although **not nearly as much** as the War Party **would have us believe**. After all, **Iran doesn't have nukes**, yet: Israel, however, does have them, and we have to wonder what use Prime Minister Lieberman will make of them.

Not that I am predicting Lieberman will achieve that office – although I wouldn't rule it out, either. The point I'm making is that Israel is moving in a new and very disturbing direction, one that requires us to take a fresh look at U.S.-Israeli relations and reevaluate our level of financial and political support. If the Israeli government is going extremist, the moral and strategic implications of our continued assistance are grave: will we be complicit as Israel "transfers" hundreds of thousands of Arabs, many of them Israeli citizens? As hard-right ideologues embark on a campaign of aggression aimed at creating a "**Greater Israel**," will U.S. tax dollars continue to **fuel** the Israeli war machine?

The U.S. has made **no comment** on Lieberman's elevation. How long we can keep up our embarrassed silence is going to be the measure of the Israel lobby's strength. Their power, once without serious challenge, is waning. As the **ongoing investigation** into spying on behalf of Israel by AIPAC uncovers the **shocking extent** to which our "ally" has penetrated our security and probed our deepest secrets, the Israel lobby is facing a major crisis. They aren't just facing a legal challenge, but also an intellectual one from professors **John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt**, of the University of Chicago and Harvard respectively, whose now famous study of "**The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy**" is proving almost too much for them to handle. However, what's really undermining the formerly impregnable position of "the Lobby," as Mearsheimer and Walt call it, is the sudden outbreak of honesty, and a **growing refusal** on the part of many in the intellectual community to kowtow to threats and smears. This has caught the Lobby off guard, and now they are confronted with the horribly unattractive figure of Lieberman, who makes Iranian President **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad** – **often likened** to Hitler by Western commentators – seem relatively reasonable. What a public relations headache!

Oh, but don't worry: they'll think of something. You can't prettify a man like that, so the strategy will be to downplay Lieberman's importance. Yet his entry into the government is quite significant, for Israel and for the world, in that it marks the end of the honeymoon era in relations between Israel and the West, particularly the United States. Israel and its Western **amen corner** have always insisted that the Jewish state is part of the West, yet the rise of Lieberman tells us something quite different.

Lieberman's appeal is directed at the large Russian immigrant population: these people are poor, resentful of their low status, and imbued with the same receptivity to authoritarianism that has long afflicted their Russian motherland. The rapid rise of Lieberman's political fortunes means that Israel is turning away from the West and asserting its **Asiatic** identity. It is no more a Western democracy than, say, Turkey or Lebanon – and, if

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Lieberman rises all the way to the top, considerably less so.

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