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## Lieberman getting stronger; right wing unsure how to take it

By [Mazal Mualem](#) and [Nadav Shragai](#)

The head of the Yisrael Beiteinu party, Avigdor Lieberman, is shaping up as the surprise of the election season and the success of the right-wing camp. The latest polls give Lieberman 10 seats, and Yisrael Beiteinu is fighting Shas for the chance of being the fourth-largest party in the next Knesset.

The Likud and other right-wing parties are monitoring Lieberman's increasing power and are trying to decide how to deal with him. The Likud has decided not to intensify the attack on him in the meantime, in an effort to retain Kadima as its primary rival and mark Lieberman as the secondary one. However, National Union, which included the Yisrael Beiteinu faction in the last elections and is running with the National Religious Party this time around, is not portraying Lieberman as a rival of any kind. Instead, the merged party is characterizing Lieberman as a partner - not just in the past, but in the future as well.

Close associates of Likud chairman Benjamin Netanyahu said he was deeply hurt by a disparaging announcement from Lieberman in which the latter reported that the two had met this week. Netanyahu wanted to work together with Lieberman to block Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert from forming a Kadima-led government, but Lieberman refused outright and advised Netanyahu not to be on the outside.

"Lieberman's attack on Bibi [Netanyahu] this week was treachery," said a Netanyahu associate. "Apparently, he got excited by his own spin and that of Kadima, that he will be bigger than the Likud."

The Likud maintains that Yisrael Beiteinu won't get more than 10 seats.

Lieberman's criticism of Netanyahu and the Likud's battle for the Russian vote led the Likud to fight back. Within a day, it produced a particularly negative campaign spot portraying Lieberman as a leftist plotting to use right-wing votes to join an Olmert government. But after Netanyahu discussed the issue Wednesday with the party's PR head, MK Gideon Sa'ar, the party decided to

shelve the ad - for now at least.

At the moment, the Likud wants to maintain its focus on winning back votes from Kadima, and fighting what Likud activists refer to as "Olmert's unilateral withdrawal plan." Nonetheless, the Likud has been targeting Lieberman, an immigrant from the former Soviet Union who appeals to Russian-speaking voters, in the Russian-language media, where it calls him an "undercover leftist."

At an elections convention for immigrants held in Ashkelon yesterday, Likud activists distributed cartoons showing Lieberman joining Olmert, Shimon Peres and Yossi Beilin.

The Likud's attacks on Lieberman focus on the presence of several leftists on his Knesset list - Yisrael Hasson, a signatory to the Geneva Initiative, and former Laborite Sofa Landver. The Likud accuses Lieberman of having "made an alliance with the left and with the unilateral withdrawal plan."

National Union-NRP officials are far friendlier. They recall the press conference that took place some 18 months ago, when Lieberman and Binyamin Elon sat shoulder to shoulder and explained why they were parting ways: They had concluded that they would win more seats by running as separate parties.

Elon said at the time that religious people don't vote for a Russian candidate, and Lieberman said Russians don't vote for religious candidates. We're separating so we can meet again after the elections, they promised.

Elon, who heads the National Union-NRP list, is not getting excited over Lieberman's refusal to rule out a coalition partnership with Kadima. "I know Lieberman and, like several of my friends, maintain contact with him," said Elon. "I have no doubt that Lieberman is right-wing," he said, adding that in a situation in which a right-wing bloc could keep Kadima from forming a government, Lieberman "will be with us and not with Olmert."

It appears that even some voters see National Union and Yisrael Beiteinu as partners - not just in the past or future, but in the present too. As National Union-NRP officials toured Jerusalem's Mahaneh Yehuda outdoor market yesterday, several shoppers asked where Lieberman was. Some voters also seem to have missed National Union's merger with NRP, leading to a few embarrassing encounters.

Uri Ariel and Zvi Hendel, also from National Union, agree with Elon's perspective that Lieberman is a partner, not a rival. They are pleased that the

polls are predicting 10 seats for Lieberman, and view his success as increased power for the right wing that comes from sectors the National Union may well not have been able to reach.

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