

Electionscape: Lieberman's grand strategy

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Two months ago, Avigdor Lieberman's Israel Beitenu was already being tipped as the potential surprise of this year's elections, when the polls had him on six Knesset seats.

This Monday night's poll on Channel 1 awarded him 12, and "Yvette" is still hungry for more. He doesn't want to be just another partner in Olmert's coalition; his plan is to be the senior partner alongside Kadima, on the seat that would normally have been reserved for Labor, Likud or Shas. On the way he's planning to usurp his one-time boss, Binyamin Netanyahu, as leader of the Right.

Lieberman's strategy has been well thought-out.

Israel Beitenu's image at the outset of the campaign was of an ultra-right splinter party, aimed mainly at immigrants from the former Soviet Union. At the advice of American elections guru, Arthur Finkelstein, Lieberman started out with a quiet campaign in the general population, and concentrated his efforts within the Russian community. His greatest boost came after Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's stroke, when he remained the only recognizable strong leader amongst the Russians.

About a month ago, when he had secured his base at the expense of Kadima and Likud, who saw their share of the immigrant vote plummet, he advanced to the second stage. Now began the remarketing of Lieberman to the general public.

The fearsome operator, who had been branded by the press in the late Nineties as a corrupt fascist and satirized in the TV show Hartzufim (the Israeli version of Spitting Image) as violent "Vladimir," was transformed in interviews and TV appearances into a pragmatic politician, who saw himself as a natural partner also in a Kadima government.

"A political party isn't a protest movement, it should be in government" and "I've already sat in the same cabinet with Olmert and Peres" were the two refrains that he repeated in every interview. His crowning achievement was a joint interview in Yediot Aharonot with Meretz leader Yossi Beilin over a cozy breakfast at Beilin's home.

His steady insertion into the mainstream began to worry Kadima and the party's spin doctors began briefing reporters that he wouldn't be invited to join the coalition, and that only Kadima could push through a solution that would enable mixed couples to marry - a thorny problem, especially for Lieberman's Russian electorate.

Labor and Meretz joined the anti-Lieberman campaign when their leaders announced that they wouldn't sit with him in the same coalition. But the polls proved that it wasn't working.

Netanyahu also began to feel the heat and tried to rein in Lieberman; at a secret meeting last week, the Likud leader asked him to publicly promise that after the elections Israel Beitenu would recommend him to the president. Lieberman refused, blamed Netanyahu for panicking and somebody leaked the meeting's contents. He wasn't going to work for anyone except himself.

This week, Lieberman (by this stage you have probably realized that this a one-man party) began the third and final phase of his plan. After establishing his mainstream credentials, and creeping up on the Likud in the polls, he made a right turn.

In a front-page interview earlier this week with Haaretz, Lieberman attacked Olmert's pullback plan as "strengthening Hamas," and ridiculed Kadima's leaders for talking about cabinet positions before the elections are over.

Don't be fooled - staying out of the next government isn't an option for Lieberman, he was careful to close no doors. If forced to sit on the back benches of opposition, he will prefer to retire once again from politics and return to the business world.

Lieberman is simply signaling to the right-wing voters still supporting Likud, that he is the only one capable of defending their interests in the next administration. If his plan works, he's not only going to be a senior minister, he might just end up as leader of the third largest party in the Knesset.

Now Netanyahu really has something to worry about.

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