

### **One on One with Avigdor Lieberman: 'Without Iran, there is no Hizbullah and no Hamas'**

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Ruthie Blum Leibowitz , THE JERUSALEM POST

Like an expected incident that nevertheless takes one aback when it actually materializes, the Color Red alert comes as a surprise.

Avigdor Lieberman grins, his deep blue eyes sparkling mischievously. "I arranged this for illustrative purposes," he says in Russian to the group of VIPs he has escorted to the South, to see for themselves what Operation Cast Lead is all about. Among them are the ambassadors to Israel from Belarus, Moldova and Uzbekistan, a Ukrainian diplomat and the Russian and Kazakhstani embassy secretaries.

Some laugh nervously; others have not heard his quip, as they are trying to position themselves safely in the stairwell where they have huddled, waiting for the coast to be clear, or for the rocket to fall, whichever comes first. That they have just returned from visiting an apartment that had been struck by a Grad missile mere days before, and seeing the havoc it wreaked, makes this moment really hit home, so to speak.

After a boom is heard far off in the distance, the guests and their host emerge from the building - lodged between a row of shops and felafel stands near Ashkelon's City Hall - in which they have been taking temporary refuge. They reboard their bus. Lieberman, bodyguards in tow, sits down with me at a small table adjacent to a kiosk, for a 15-minute interview.

As we do, dozens of locals, some from the former Soviet Union and others native Israelis, gather around the chairman of the Israel Beiteinu party, to shake his hand and express their support.

"Keep up the good work!" one shop-keeper yells above the din.

"You're the best!" another shouts, patting the Knesset member on the back.

"Here's to our next prime minister!" a woman calls out, blowing kisses in the air.

Whether this is more a function of Lieberman's celebrity - or notoriety - than an indication of how he is going to fare on February 10 is not clear. But polls have the former minister of strategic affairs, who joined the current government in October 2006 and quit last January, adding a mandate or two to his present 11.

This may have something to do with the fact that the controversial figure - whose separation plan had Peace Now comparing him last year to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and still has many on the Right rejecting him for his willingness to relinquish territory - has become more mainstream. Or, at least, more acceptable to a wider societal spectrum. Whereas his core base has been voters from the former Soviet Union, a broader cross section of the public has come to consider him an option - particularly among those secular right-wingers who have grown disillusioned with Likud in general and with its leader, Binyamin Netanyahu, in particular.

Two recent additions to Lieberman's list both reflect this trend and harbor hopes of enhancing it: former Likud MK Uzi Landau, who first joined forces with Netanyahu in 2005 to try to oust Ariel Sharon as party leader, then ran against Netanyahu himself and, finally, quit the race altogether; and former ambassador to the US and co-chairman of Nefesh B'Nefesh Danny Ayalon. What they bring to the table even money can't buy, and that's the sabra "stamp."

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Oh, and "cleanliness" - something which, before the war in Gaza diverted all attention away from the campaign trail, was touted as crucial to an electorate fed up with the corruption scandals surrounding its politicians.

And Lieberman himself is no stranger to police investigations. That he has never been brought up on any charges has caused him to accuse Attorney-General Menahem Mazuz of less-than-pure motives in his "witch-hunt."

The key allegations against the 50-year-old resident of the Judean settlement of Nokdim, who made aliya from Kishinev (today Moldova) in 1978, are that he exerted influence on the Russian mafia to prevent the collapse of an Austrian bank by manipulating the value of the ruble. Other suspicions surrounding him involve his alleged use of illegal donations to finance his party's first run for the Knesset in 1999.

But what the three-time former minister is best known for these days is his uncompromising stance on the need for Israeli Arabs to prove their loyalty to the state, and on employing any measure it takes to eradicate the Iranian nuclear threat.

*(The following exchange took place less than a week before Israel declared a unilateral cease-fire in Gaza, and subsequent "agreement" on the part of Hamas to adopt the same policy. Given Lieberman's comments on what constitutes the achieving of the war's goals, it is no wonder that he expressed great displeasure on Sunday with the circumstances under which IDF troops are pulling out.)*

**Seeing the results of the disengagement from Gaza, do you not have second thoughts about your party platform, which involves territorial exchanges? Is the conflict between the Jews and Arabs in this region really an issue of "real estate"?**

Our platform has nothing to do with "real estate." On the contrary, what we state unequivocally is that we are completely opposed to what has been and still is the guiding principle of Israel's foreign policy: "land for peace."

We have enough examples to show that the formula doesn't work, among them the fact that we withdrew from every last millimeter in Gaza, and in exchange, we got Kassams and Hamas. The same applies to Lebanon, where we got Hizbullah and Katyushas. This is why we say that there is no such thing as "land for peace." There is either "peace for peace" or the exchange of territory and populations.

I remember arguing with [former prime minister] Arik Sharon in the cabinet following disengagement. I said, "Look, you're going to establish a Palestinian state without a single Jew. You committed to evacuating all Jewish settlements, so there would be a homogeneous Palestinian state. At the same time, Israel is moving toward a binational state that has more than 20 percent Arabs. This kind of construct won't survive. And, if you've already decided to progress toward a two-state solution, why is one of them a state and a half - since all Israeli Arabs identify themselves as Palestinians - and the other half a state? If the aim is two states, at least let's have two states for two peoples."

I cited the model of Cyprus. Cyprus used to be in the condition that we are in. Greeks and Turks lived together, and there was friction between them, that included bloodshed and terrorism. In 1974, they put 100 percent of the Turks on the northern side of the island, and 100% of the Greeks on the southern side. There is no peace agreement to this day. But there is stability, security and prosperity. That is our ambition.

**If this was your argument with Sharon, what possessed you to join the government headed by Ehud Olmert?**

The way I see it, the main existential threat to Israel is Iran - not the Palestinians, the Lebanese or anybody else. Iran created a strategic advantage over Israel by establishing a border with us, even though we don't have a border with them.

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There are three Irans: Iran via Hizbullah from Lebanon; Iran via Hamas and Islamic Jihad from Gaza; and Iran with unconventional weapons and long-range missiles. Without Iran, there is no Hizbullah, no Hamas and no Islamic Jihad, most of whose budget, weaponry, technology and training comes from Iran. These groups are unable to exist without Iranian backing.

Moreover, Iran is not part of our internal debate. It doesn't split the nation from within. There's no essential difference between [former Meretz Knesset member] Yossi Beilin and Avigdor Lieberman regarding Iran. No one is suggesting we annex it or liberate it or establish settlements there. So, Beilin proposes to give it a smack from the Left, and I from the Right, but there's no real argument of the kind there is regarding the Golan Heights or Judea and Samaria. As a normal country, then, we should focus on the Iranian problem, and first remove it as a threat, so we can begin to argue again.

In other words, the whole idea was to shift the debate from the Palestinian track to the Iranian. And we did for a year, until Olmert went to Annapolis. As soon as he returned from there and began negotiating on core issues, we left the government.

**When former Likud minister Uzi Landau joined your party, he said that though he didn't agree with that aspect of your platform involving territorial and population swaps, he could live with it, because it wouldn't be relevant for so many years that it didn't really matter. Do you agree?**

I don't know. The processes in this region are unpredictable, so I don't want to make forecasts. What I do want is to have contingency plans, so as not to be taken by surprise by events. I want to be prepared for any development that arises. No one knows what is going to happen in the future. After all, who could have predicted the events in Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Palestinian Authority? But we do know what we have been experiencing for the last 20 years. Therefore, we have to be ready and able to confront any challenge that comes our way.

Secondly, I don't expect every member of the party to agree 100% with every other member on everything. So, there are some with whom you agree 95%, 90% or even 80%. But, we're not like Likud. I don't understand, for example, what the common denominator is between Moshe Feiglin and Dan Meridor. Such differences couldn't exist in our party.

**Danny Ayalon told *The Jerusalem Post* recently that if opposition leader Binyamin Netanyahu becomes prime minister and forms a broad coalition with Kadima and Labor - as he has said he will do - there is no way Israel Beiteinu will join him. Is that true?**

I don't see any chance of Netanyahu's forming a coalition with both Kadima and Labor. It's true that he has been speaking of a national unity government, but his intention first - as I understand it, at least - is to form a national coalition, and after that to find out which of the two - Kadima or Labor - will be ready to join. As of yesterday, when I spoke to Netanyahu, that was his approach.

**Returning to your party platform, though Israel forcibly moved Jews out of their homes in Gush Katif and northern Samaria, is it realistic to expect anyone in this country or abroad to agree to the uprooting of even a single Arab?**

We are not proposing to move populations. We are talking about moving the border. This way, people will stay put in their homes and on their land.

**Isn't this a bit unrealistic, considering the border would have to wind around in circles, creating enclaves?**

You can't separate the populations entirely, but you can with a large portion. All the Arab settlements on the line between us and the PA - Umm el-Fahm, for example - won't be moved. We'll move the border. We won't have to pay for their unemployment, or health, or education. We won't have to subsidize them any longer.

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**In that event, what will happen if they behave as the Gazans have been - and, instead of building up their society, they store weapons and fire missiles?**

As in the case of any country acting aggressively, which could come from Lebanon or Syria, we would respond accordingly.

**Are you saying that, if necessary, Israel would go to war with such a Palestinian state?**

Absolutely. You saw what happened when terrorism was rampant in Judea and Samaria; we launched Operation Defensive Shield.

**Justice Minister Daniel Friedmann, during a trip to the South, said that no arrangement on Gaza should be reached without making Gilad Schalit's release a condition.**

I think that it's clear that any arrangement should include Schalit.

**Do you anticipate a different ending to this operation from the Second Lebanon War? Is the cease-fire going to mean a retreat on the part of the IDF, and a subsequent renewal of weapons amassing?**

I hope not. I wanted Israel - at minimum - to achieve control over the Rafah crossing and the Philadelphi Corridor. Without that, this whole operation loses its significance.

**What about completely destroying Hamas? Wasn't that your hope, as well?**

Ultimately, Israel won't be able to live in peace and security as long as Hamas remains in control. And we will have to have a decisive outcome - something this government is not able to achieve. And a decisive outcome, in this case, means breaking Hamas's motivation and will to continue fighting us - just as the United States did to Germany and Japan at the end of World War II. They simply gave up on the military option. That's what constitutes breaking the enemy.

**But can that be accomplished without breaking Iran first?**

As I said, the source is Iran. And we have to do what needs to be done.

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