

Avigdor Liberman's New Job: Control Over Four Million Palestinians

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Avigdor Liberman's appointment as defense minister is, in my eyes, one of Netanyahu's most surprising moves (in fact, on Wednesday I argued that it wouldn't happen; two hours later I was proven wrong). Netanyahu is a careful politician that does not like big egos surrounding him, and Liberman is Liberman — a person who deliberately chooses to be unexpected and undisciplined — even when it doesn't serve his interests — and who spews hawkish remarks in spades.

Liberman promised to take down Hamas and execute terrorists — and all this before [we blow up Egypt's Aswan Dam](#), as he once famously suggested. I do not think that anyone in Israel wants to fully re-occupy Gaza, but Liberman has too many promises to fill, and an electorate that runs the gamut from traditional right-wingers to Kahanists. This is disturbing. Even for Netanyahu it's not an easy bet, since Liberman has serious political ambitions and can always leave the coalition right before the elections, claiming that Netanyahu prevented the IDF from going all the way, or by fueling smaller fires that may serve his interests.



Avigdor Liberman speaks at the campaign launch for the 2015 elections. (photo: Yotam Ronen/Activestills)

So why did Bibi do it? In my opinion it has [little to do with the recent comments](#) made by Deputy Chief of the General Staff, General Yair Golan or the [soldier in Hebron who shot a Palestinian in the head](#) — two recent incidents in which the prime minister did not back Defense Minister Ya'alon. In fact these only provided Netanyahu the opportunity to get rid of Ya'alon, whose support from the Right has all but disappeared.

The great fracture between Netanyahu and the defense establishment stems from their disagreement over Iran, and the insubordination that occurred or did not occur during Gabi Ashkenazi and Ehud Barak's tenure. The story is that former Director of the Mossad Meir Dagan and head of Shin Bet Yuval Diskin revealed that in 2010 the army and the Mossad were given orders to prepare for an attack in Iran, although it remains unclear whether it was an explicit command. Ashkenazi and Dagan either "opposed" or refused the order — depends who you ask. After that came the wars between Ashkenazi and Barak, and the torpedoing of Yoav Galant to IDF chief of staff, which certainly did not help mend relations between the prime minister and the army.



We can go back even further to former IDF Chief of Staff Amnon Lipkin Shahak and Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai taking down Netanyahu in the 1999 elections. The army remains — despite everything — connected to “the old elites,” which Netanyahu seeks to replace. Ya’alon’s likely dismissal (or his transfer to a different ministry) will prevent a repeat of the rise of centrist parties full of ex-security chiefs, or at the very least will make them look less attractive to the Israeli voter. That is why Netanyahu is appointing a defense minister who does not have a military background (Liberman served a shortened army service as a new immigrant), and who is not part of the old elite. Now they can make high-level appointments between themselves, without worrying about the defense minister or his deputy protecting the interests of the top officer brass.

Netanyahu is a man of the geo-political status quo and internal revolutions, and it seems that after the media, academia, and the court system, he is looking to tackle the defense establishment. He has no patience to wait a decade or two for change to come from below with a new generation of officers. As mentioned earlier, it’s a dangerous gamble — not only because of the person Bibi chose, but also because the fate of the army is simply incomparable to other institutions in Israel, whether measured in support by the public or the power it holds. However, perhaps Netanyahu recognizes that the public’s support for the generals — not for the common soldier — is slowly cracking. There is an opportunity here.

Personally I support the desire to limit the power of the defense establishment in Israel, and putting a civilian rather than a military man in charge is not a bad idea. The question is, of course, who is put in charge. Liberman won’t be able to go to war or on bombing campaigns on his own accord (that takes a cabinet decision); but the most significant role of the defense minister is the de-facto ruler of over four million Palestinian subjects in the West Bank and Gaza — the one responsible for all aspects of life on the ground — from home demolitions to checkpoints to settlements.

Liberman recently took part in the protest against the IDF following the execution in Hebron. What kind of day-to-day decisions will he make? How will his relations with the Palestinian Authority look, considering he defames the PA at every possible opportunity? (There were many reports in the past on the relationship between Liberman and Muhammad Dahlan, who is waiting for Abbas to die in order to return and fight to be his successor). What kind of extreme promises will the defense minister make good on? And to what extent will the IDF — its top-level officers and soldiers — fall into line? We will find out soon enough.

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