



Avigdor Lieberman: Netanyahu's former ally and longtime arch-enemy

In the run-up to the Israeli parliamentary elections on October 27, FokusIsrael.ch is profiling the Jewish state's most prominent political leaders. This week: Avigdor Lieberman of the "Yisrael Beytenu" party.

By Jan Kapusnak

Avigdor Lieberman has spent his political career on the right, but for the past seven years he has been one of Benjamin Netanyahu's most tenacious opponents. Once a close confidant of the current prime minister and serving as his foreign and defense minister, Lieberman blocked the formation of a governing coalition in 2019 and has since positioned himself as a champion of a secular, nationalist right that clearly distances itself from Benjamin Netanyahu's "Likud" due to its dependence on the ultra-Orthodox parties.

At 68, Lieberman is one of the longest-serving figures in Israeli politics. Outspoken and combative, he combines hard-line positions on security and the Palestinians with strongly secular views on religion and the state. His party, "Yisrael Beytenu" (Israel Our Home), supports mandatory military service for all Israelis, civil marriage, public transportation on Shabbat, a free-market economy, and reducing the political power of the Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) parties. This combination has earned Lieberman a distinct voter base that feels fully represented by neither "Likud" nor Israel's centrist parties.

The most recent election polls, conducted on August 26, showed "Yisrael Beytenu" with nine seats in the Channel 13 and Walla polls and eight seats in the i24NEWS poll. This makes the party a stable part of the anti-Netanyahu camp.

From Moldova to the Israeli Right

Lieberman was born in 1958 in Kishinev (now Chişinău), Moldova, and immigrated to Israel with his family in 1978. He studied political science and international relations at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and was active in the Israeli right as well as in organizations representing immigrants from the Soviet Union.

Lieberman's rise was closely linked to Netanyahu's. From 1993 to 1996, he served as director-general of Likud, helping Netanyahu consolidate his leadership of the party and prepare for his successful campaign for the office of prime minister. After the victory in 1996, Lieberman became director-general of the Prime Minister's Office.



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The relationship between Lieberman and Netanyahu became one of the most complicated partnerships in Israeli politics: periods of close cooperation alternated with bitter disputes. In 1999, Lieberman founded his own party: "Yisrael Beytenu." Initially, the party identified primarily with the large Russian-speaking immigrant community that had arrived in the 1990s and combined a nationalist security policy with a distinctly secular approach to domestic affairs. It won four seats in its first Knesset election and gradually expanded beyond its initial base of Russian immigrants to include other segments of the population. In 2009, "Yisrael Beytenu" reached its peak with 15 seats, becoming the third-largest party in the Israeli parliament.

A hawk, but not a conventional far-right figure

Lieberman established his reputation early on as one of Israel's most uncompromising politicians when it comes to security. In 2005, he opposed then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's withdrawal from Gaza and repeatedly called for Israel to respond much more forcefully to Hamas and other armed groups.

Nevertheless, Lieberman's stance toward the Palestinians is more complicated than his label as a "hard-line right-winger" would suggest. Lieberman has accepted the principle of territorial separation and promoted a plan that involves exchanging both territory and populations: Large Jewish settlement blocs would remain within Israel, while some predominantly Arab areas within Israel would become part of a future Palestinian state. The proposal was heavily criticized, particularly by Israel's Arab citizens.

However, Lieberman's goal differs from the annexationist vision of today's religious right. He does not seek permanent Israeli rule over all Palestinians; rather, he advocates a separation aimed at maximizing Israel's Jewish majority while preserving strategically important territory.

Lieberman's domestic policy is firmly secular. Although he lives in the Nokdim settlement in Judea and Samaria, he has repeatedly clashed with the ultra-Orthodox parties over military exemptions, marriage, conversion, and religious authority. "Yisrael Beytenu" describes itself as Zionist, right-wing, and liberal, and advocates for a constitution that separates religion and state. This unusual combination of security nationalism and domestic secularism is the foundation of Lieberman's political survival.



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Foreign Minister, Defense Minister—and an ally of Netanyahu

For years, Lieberman served in governments led by both “Likud” and centrist parties. He served as Minister of Infrastructure, Minister of Transportation, and Minister of Strategic Affairs before becoming Foreign Minister under Netanyahu in 2009. In 2013, “Yisrael Beytenu” joined forces with “Likud” to form a joint electoral list. In 2016, Netanyahu appointed Lieberman as Minister of Defense, thereby giving him the portfolio most closely associated with his political image.

However, the relationship between the two politicians came to a dramatic end in November 2018: Lieberman resigned after the government agreed to a ceasefire following a fierce round of fighting with Hamas in the Gaza Strip. He condemned the agreement as a “surrender to terror” and withdrew “Yisrael Beytenu” from the coalition.

This withdrawal triggered political instability in Israel, leading to repeated elections. More importantly, however, Lieberman's departure from the governing coalition marked his transformation from a close ally to a major opponent of Netanyahu and his continued rule.

The five seats that changed Israeli politics

Lieberman's defining political moment came after the April 2019 election. Netanyahu appeared to have won another term, but without “Yisrael Beytenu”—which had won five seats—his coalition had only 60 members of the Knesset, one short of a majority. Lieberman, however, refused to join Netanyahu's camp unless it passed a law extending mandatory military service to ultra-Orthodox men. Since neither side backed down, Netanyahu was unable to form a government, and Israel had to hold another election.

This confrontation permanently altered Lieberman's political identity. For years, the Israeli left had regarded him as one of the country's most far-right politicians. Now he had become indispensable to efforts to topple Netanyahu. The issue was not a shift to the left: Lieberman remained a security hawk and refused to rely on Arab parties to form a government. His argument, instead, was that Netanyahu had subordinated the secular right to the ultra-Orthodox parties “Shas” and “United Torah Judaism” merely to save his coalition.

Ending Netanyahu's Twelve-Year Rule



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After four elections in two years, Lieberman finally joined the exceptionally broad coalition that Yair Lapid had put together and that was initially led by Naftali Bennett in June 2021. The government included parties ranging from the nationalist right to the Zionist left and, for the first time in Israel's history, an independent Arab party: Ra'am. Lieberman became Minister of Finance.

The appointment enabled him to implement his secular agenda in economic policy. He advocated for labor force participation, reducing dependence on government benefits, and integrating Haredi men into the workforce and national service. He also promoted market-oriented reforms to increase competition and reduce import barriers. His party continues to present economic liberalization, alongside universal service, as a central part of its platform.

The Bennett-Lapid coalition, however, lasted only eighteen months, and Netanyahu returned to power after the 2022 election. But Lieberman had helped achieve something that had seemed almost impossible just a few years earlier: temporarily removing his former political mentor from office.

October 7—The Security Hawk in the Opposition

The massacre on October 7 reinforced Lieberman's argument that Israel had been too cautious toward Hamas. Unlike former Chiefs of Staff Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot, however, he did not join Netanyahu's emergency government. From the opposition, Lieberman accused the government of failing both before and during the war. He advocated for a significantly more aggressive stance toward Israel's enemies. His criticism of the government was not limited to Gaza. Iran and its regional terrorist network occupy a central place in Lieberman's strategic thinking. For him, the confrontation with the Islamist mullah regime in Tehran is a comprehensive struggle that requires Israeli military strength and regional alliances.

Lieberman's position gives him an advantage that is unusual among Netanyahu's opponents. Lieberman can attack the prime minister from the right on security issues and the current governing coalition from the secular center on domestic policy—while continuing to win support among Russian-speaking Israelis. This combination has helped "Yisrael Beytenu" remain remarkably stable, while other opposition parties around it have risen and fallen.

The perennial rebel of the secular right



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Lieberman's greatest strength is also what limits him. He has a clearly defined political identity: hawkish, secular, nationalistic, and extremely hostile toward the privileges of the ultra-Orthodox. But this identity also limits him. Religious conservatives are suspicious of his secularism, a large portion of the center-left is uncomfortable with his rhetoric toward Arabs, and his long tenure in previous governments makes it difficult to present him as a new alternative.

That is why Lieberman is not the opposition's leading candidate for the office of prime minister in the upcoming elections. The race centers on Gadi Eisenkot and the renewed Bennett-Lapid alliance. Nevertheless, Israeli politics has repeatedly rewarded Lieberman's ability to make himself indispensable.

But with a projected nine to ten seats in the October 27 elections, "Yisrael Beytenu," led by Avigdor Lieberman, could once again play a decisive role in determining who becomes Israel's prime minister in the highly fragmented Knesset. Seven years ago, in 2019, just five seats were enough for him to prevent Netanyahu from forming a government.

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