

Is Lieberman the New Israeli Mainstream?

In an interview given to Newsweek, Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman made the following, quite chilling statement: "I am the mainstream. When I started with my vision, I was really a small minority. Today we're the third [largest] party in Israel."

Lieberman is certainly no stranger to bluster, so it's easy to dismiss this as more of Yvet's (as he is called) hubris. But is that really the case? There's a good deal of evidence to suggest that Lieberman is absolutely right.

Each piece of that evidence is another massive blow to the teetering ship that is Israeli democracy. The latest was a [proposal introduced this past week](#) by Lieberman's party, Yisrael Beiteinu, to set up a Knesset committee to investigate the funding sources of progressive, and only left-wing, NGOs.

Israeli journalist and blogger Yossi Gurvitz [likened the event](#) to the burning of the Reichstag, implying that this was the point where Israel slipped from democracy to fascism. Gurvitz may be overstating the case (I'd certainly say he is), but he is not exaggerating how anti-democratic this action and this Knesset are. Nor can it be reasonably denied that, whether Gurvitz is right or not today, if Israel continues on its present course, there is no doubt he will be someday and probably not in all that distant a future.

The committee may never be formed, but that is beside the point. The goal of the proposal is not to investigate the funding sources of Israeli progressive NGOs. Their funding is already fully transparent, there are already oversight agencies and yet the organizations that are being singled out – including [ACRI](#), [B'Tselem](#), [Yesh Din](#), [Machsom Watch](#), [Adalah](#), [Mossawa Center](#), and [Ir Amim](#) – have not had any accusations of impropriety leveled against them. One might note that the same cannot be said, for instance, about ElAd, the most prominent of settler NGOs, which has never been forced to live up to the requirement of all NGOs in Israel to disclose their list of donors.

No, this tactic is about smearing. It follows in the footsteps of the extremist anti-democracy group NGO Monitor, which uses obfuscation to attack research by human rights groups (like [in this example](#), where they claim inflated number of non-combatants in Operation Cast Lead by using Hamas' numbers of how many of their members were killed, ignoring the fact that being a Hamas member and being a non-combatant are far from mutually exclusive) and the [even more radical Im Tirtzu](#), which roused Jewish revulsion around the world with their heinous, and [anti-semitic, campaign](#) to demonize New Israel Fund chair and former MK Naomi Chazan. The substance of the attack is secondary to the goal of raising public animosity in Israel to those working for peace and universal human rights.

This event comes on the heels of a heavy dose of [police violence](#) at a Tel Aviv protest last week and the police intimidating, harassing and arresting [activists in their own homes](#). This last followed activists being charged with attacking the US ambassador's home for a protest where they "returned" spent tear gas canisters to him in the wake of the [death of Jawaher Abu Rahme](#).

Only the previous week, Israeli activist [Jonathan Pollak](#) was convicted for taking part in a bicycle ride to protest the blockade of the Gaza Strip. The prosecution in that case made no secret of wanting to "make an example" of Pollak, just as the Shin Bet has made no secret of [targeting Israeli Jewish non-violent radicals](#).

And, of course, at the very center of these attacks on peace and human rights groups is the occupation and its daily violations of international and Israeli law, and the norms of universal ethical values.

It looks like Lieberman is very much in the mainstream in the Knesset. That is particularly clear when one considers the Prime Minister's reluctance to confront him, as well as the fact that many Likud MKs and several Kadima ones also supported the proposed witch hunt. It should be noted, however, that the Right is not united on this. [Knesset Speaker Reuven Rivlin](#) (Likud) opposes it and [Likud hawk Benny Begin](#) was quite eloquent in his denouncement of the proposal.

Unfortunately, the evidence suggests that Lieberman's racist views are very much in the mainstream in the Israeli public, not just the Knesset. [Recent polls](#) have come up with the following findings:

[46% of Jews](#) in Israel do not want to have Arab neighbors (keep in mind, this is referring to their fellow citizens).

[86% of Jews](#) believe that critical decisions regarding the future of Israel must be decided by a Jewish majority

[53% of Jews](#) believe Arabs should be encouraged to leave Israel, while only 51% believed that Jews and Arabs should have equal rights.

[62% of Jews](#) believe that as long as the conflict with the Palestinians continues, the country should not take foreign policy opinions of Arab citizens of Israel into account

Is Lieberman the mainstream in Israel? He certainly doesn't define it. But his views are clearly mainstream and a very big part of that mainstream. And, as the increase in these events, as well as Israel having elected its most right-wing government ever which has also proven to be the most stable one in many years, demonstrates this trend is moving in Yvet's direction.

Is this the same Israel as it ever was? Some say so. But consider this: when Meir Kahane's Kach party was banned two weeks before the 1988 elections, [polls suggested](#) big gains for him, gains which would have brought Kach three or four seats in the Knesset. Yisrael Beiteinu, which espouses many of the same views Kach did currently holds 15 seats. Those who are predicting that Lieberman will be Israel's next Prime Minister may be wrong, but it's not a

baseless prediction and, even if he's not next, the prediction could prove correct in the not-too-distant future.

An American Response

The proposal to demonize left-wing NGOs has brought an unprecedented response from a wide swath of the Jewish spectrum. One would naturally expect [J Street to condemn it](#), and of course [Americans for Peace Now](#). But on this particular issue, the American Jewish Committee (AJC) also [harshly criticized the](#) proposal and even a [prominent right-wing blogger](#), while blasting progressive Israeli NGOs still called the measure "a misguided response."

This is very good news, particularly seeing [AJC siding](#), for once, with the [New Israel Fund](#) and other, liberal Israeli groups. It reminds everyone of the generally liberal sensibilities of most American Jews.

But what is the effect, really? The point of this proposal was never the actual investigation of the NGOs. Indeed, it is highly doubtful that the forces behind the legislation want to see it happen because they know the funding of these NGOs is already transparent. It was always about demonizing human rights groups, peace groups, and virtually everyone in Israel who sees an Arab as deserving of rights and dignity as a Jew.

So the American groups come out against the idea, and the bill is likely going to fail. But are we prepared to go further, and to address the real problem: the mainstreaming of an avowed racist and anti-democracy ideologue like Avigdor Lieberman?

The question is fundamental to how Jews relate to Israel. For years, it was a point of pride for many Jews that Israel had passed a law barring racist parties, at the time directed at Kach, from standing for election to the Knesset.

Today, Israel's Foreign Minister, and leader of its ruling coalition's second-largest party, stands for similar ideas, and the reaction is comparatively invisible. Lieberman is a little less brazen than Kahane in order to avoid conflicting with the law, but few doubt he is the fruit of the same poisonous tree.

And it's not just Lieberman; Michael Ben-Ari, a former member of Kach and devout disciple of Kahane, also sits in the Knesset, for the National Union coalition. He doesn't bother with the pretense that this proposal has anything to do with transparency, and [proudly names the witch-hunt](#) for what is.

Israel has no constitution (something it needs very badly), and that, along with several other factors like the coalition structure of its government, lends populism a good deal of influence in shaping the political zeitgeist of the state.

There's little doubt that Israeli zeitgeist is moving away from democracy, toward more racism and alienating it from the [next generation](#) of Jews in the Diaspora. The trend has been detected by influential, mainstream pro-Israel

Jews like [Peter Beinart](#) and [David Remnick](#) and, more recently, the more hawkish (from the liberal side) Jeffrey Goldberg has expressed his [own misgivings](#) about Israel's direction.

Perhaps this will prove to be a tipping point, and a critical mass of Israelis will realize they are jeopardizing their relationship, not only with other countries, but also with world Jewry. But this seems unlikely. More likely, most will believe what they have been told for so long: the Diaspora will support Israel no matter what it does. Certainly, that has been the historical message.

But if this is treated as a sort of anomalous incident which, once reversed, can be forgotten, Diaspora Jews, especially those of us in America are eventually going to have to confront the question of support for Israel.

If Israel persists in building its obstacles to peace with settlement expansion and draconian policies in the West Bank and its siege of Gaza; and, if it also continues to renounce its democratic mandate by fomenting discrimination against its Arab citizens and smothering the dissent of even its Jewish ones it will lose Diaspora support. The question will be what form that loss will take.

It may take the form a lot of it taking today: a sort of disgusted apathy, where young Jews (and some not so young ones as well) just aren't interested in Israel, prefer to stay away from the politics because they don't like some of what Israel is doing, find it hard to balance their opposition to Israeli policies with their belief that Israel should continue to exist and don't want to get into the [ugliness and vile tactics](#) employed by some so-called "pro-Israel" advocates.

In that case, most Jews will have abandoned Israel, but the political and financial support from the increasingly unrepresentative (on this issue) "mainstream Jewish peace groups" and the [Christian Zionist](#) organizations will continue to flow. Israel will become even more identified with the right than it is now. It will no longer be a democracy, and, really, it won't be a Jewish state since it will be so alienated from most of the world's Jews.

Or, we can work to avoid that future, and start to rebuild the Diaspora-Israel relationship.

In the Diaspora, we often shy away from telling Israel how to act. But we can certainly decide what we will or will not support. We can send the message that our love for Israel may be unconditional, but our support for Israel, while passionate and steadfast, is not. We can and must send Israel the message that a Jewish state that is not democratic and does not pursue a realistic peace agreement with vigor is not one we can support however much we may still love it.

Israel is a sovereign state, and ultimately its actions are and must be determined by its citizens (ALL its citizens, Jewish or otherwise). But it is also the Jewish state and its actions and policies do affect the rest of us. And it has always relied on material, political and moral support from the

Diaspora and it continues to. As long as that is true, Israel owes us an ear, and we must use our voice. We can and must help those Israelis who are working so hard to preserve the democracy that is now under attack in their country.