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Where is Israel Heading?

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Abstract

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has weakened the Israeli Foreign Ministry by redistributing many of its traditional responsibilities to other, sometimes new and bogus, ministries. The appointments, driven as they are by various political moves and calculations, create an impossible political mosaic; impossible, that is, in terms of forming and executing a coherent foreign policy. Deciphering Israel's preferences regarding negotiations with the Palestinians and its vision for a final settlement is next to impossible. A coherent strategy to deal with Israel's conflict with the Palestinians would warrant a government which provides a coherent agenda and agreed upon policies to a strengthened foreign ministry.

Keywords: *Israel / Foreign Ministry / Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations*

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Where is Israel Heading?

by Piki Ish-Shalom*

In an oft quoted remark Henry Kissinger observed that "Israel has no foreign policy, it has only a domestic policy." Israel keeps on proving Kissinger right and by now his *bon mot* has become a sad truism. But recently the truism has turned into a farce as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu relentlessly takes apart Israel's Foreign Ministry and its professional Foreign Service.

In an act of political payoff, Netanyahu did not appoint a Foreign Minister in his new cabinet at the request of Avigdor Lieberman, the former Foreign Minister, who is currently standing trial for breach of trust and fraud.[1] Netanyahu decided to keep the position open for Lieberman until the end of the trial.[2] In the meantime, he himself is acting as the Foreign Minister. Needless to say, the Prime Minister hardly has the time to manage the daily matters of the Ministry, though he started his public career as a diplomat, and a very apt one. Additionally, to further weaken the ministry, Netanyahu redistributed many of the traditional responsibilities of the Foreign Ministry among other ministries, some of them new and bogus creations, such as the gimmicky Ministry of International Relations. Other related ministries include the Ministry for Regional Cooperation, a Minister for Diasporas, and a Justice Minister, Tzipi Livni, who is also responsible for diplomatic initiatives and peace talks with the Palestinians. Considering that Prime Minister Netanyahu keeps for himself and in his office some key files of Israel's foreign relations, what we get is a beheaded and enfeebled Foreign Ministry, lacking political backing and leadership, that competes with several artificial and bogus ministries, without clear dividing lines between them. Why is this so? Why is Netanyahu sacrificing the Foreign Ministry with its years of experience and professionalism?

One may argue that by weakening the Ministry and establishing evermore competing entities, Netanyahu is trying to divide and rule, a well-worn strategy of playing all against all, so as to secure his own agenda. However, and as we will see shortly, Netanyahu's agenda is murky at best. In Israel today it seems that everyone is in charge and no one is in command.

Here are two possible alternative reasons for the establishment of these "bogus international ministries" in competition with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The first might be a deep-seated animosity Netanyahu bears towards what is called the "old

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[1] Stuart Winer, "Liberman, finally testifying in his corruption trial, denies any wrongdoing", in *The Times of Israel*, 29 May 2013, http://www.timesofisrael.com/liberman-takes-the-stand.

[2] Revital Hovel, "Lieberman takes the stand as first defense witness in fraud trial against him", in *Haaretz*, 29 May 2013.

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elite". This animosity was very explicit in his first administration, between 1996-1999, and was targeted at various strongholds of the old elites, like the Supreme Court, the national media, and academia.[3] Though more restrained in his second and third administrations, it seems that his stand towards the diplomatic service still echoes with this rancor. The second reason might be related to Netanyahu's weakness. Contrary to the widespread perception of Netanyahu as a strong leader,[4] he is in fact a weak politician who is coerced and arm-twisted rather easily. The proliferation of these various "international bogus ministries", rather than indicating the cynical tactic of an all-powerful King master, on closer inspection appear to be the product of the Prime Minister's weakness.[5]

The Minister charged with regional cooperation is Silvan Shalom from the Likud. Shalom is a harsh internal opponent of Netanyahu, who every now and then receives some political goods from the Prime Minister in order to keep him at bay. The (rather obscure) Minister of International Relations is Yuval Steinitz, a close ally and loyalist of Netanyahu, who had to be compensated for being "robbed" of his post as Finance Minister. The creation of the Ministry of International Relations essentially seems to serve no other purpose. The Minister in charge of the Diasporas, Naftali Bennett, is the head of the Jewish Home, the right-wing partner in Netanyahu's coalition. While Tzipi Livni, Justice Minister responsible for peace talks with the Palestinians, is the head of the splinter centrist party, the Movement. Each received his or her share of the spoils.[6] The proliferation of these ministries seems to serve precious little other purpose. And on top of them all, presides Lieberman, who for years now has successfully wrested most of his wants and whims from Netanyahu, including his demand not to appoint a Foreign Minister in his place until the conclusion of his trial.[7]

All these facts may appear as unnecessarily tedious, especially to analysts who tend to look at the macro level and examine the structure of global politics. But boring as they are, these facts are crucial in understanding and explaining Israel's international behavior. One only needs to think back at Robert Putnam's two-level-game[8] to grasp the broader significance of this domestic musical chairs. The appointments, driven as they are by various political moves and calculations, create an impossible political mosaic; impossible, that is, in terms of forming and executing a coherent foreign policy.

[3] Yoram Peri, The Assassination: Causes, Meaning, Outcomes", in Yoram Peri (ed.), *The Assassination of Yitzhak Rabin*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 42-46.
[4] See, for example the May 2012 Time Magazine coverage of "King Bibi": Ishaan Tharoor, "Why Bibi Netanyahu Is King of Israel", *Time*, 17 may 2012, http://world.time.com/2012/05/17/cover-story-why-bibi-netanyahu-is-king-of-israel.
[5] Mattew Kalman, "7 Ways Netanyahu Is Destroying Israeli Diplomacy", in *The Daily Beast*, 13 June 2013, http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/06/13/7-ways-netanyahu-is-destroying-israeli-diplomacy.html.
[6] Lahav Harkov, "PM awards last few portfolios, resolving feuds", in *The Jerusalem Post*, 18 March 2013, http://www.jpost.com/Diplomacy-and-Politics/Coalition-disputes-resolved-as-PM-appoints-final-MKs-306778.
[7] Ofra Edelman, "Knesset is urged: Don't let cabinet form while seat is illegally held for Lieberman", in *Haaretz*, 17 March 2013; Yossi Mekelberg, "Friends with benefits? The trial of Avigdor Lieberman", in *Al Arabya*, 7 May 2013, http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/world/2013/05/05/Friends-with-benefits-The-trial-of-Avigdor-Lieberman.html.
[8] Robert D. Putnam, "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games", in *International Organization*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Summer 1988), p. 427-460.

No wonder then that deciphering Israel's preferences regarding negotiations with the Palestinians and its vision for a final settlement is next to impossible. Prime Minister Netanyahu declares every now and then his commitment to a two-state solution. On June 5th 2013, for example, he called on Palestinian Authority Abu Mazen not to miss yet another opportunity, asking him to "give peace a chance."[9] Yet, the same month, the Israeli government revealed that more housing plans were being approved and new settlement construction was in the offing in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.[10] At the same time, Likud MP and Deputy Minister of Defence, Danny Danon, openly mocked the idea of a two-state solution.[11] The same goes for many other Likud MPs and other coalition members who oppose any negotiation with the Palestinians.[12] This duplicity clearly hampers efforts by international actors, like the recent initiative of US Secretary of State John Kerry to launch yet another round of peace negotiations.[13] He, like many others, receives mixed, confusing and practically impossible signals to decipher from the Israelis (as well as from the Palestinians).[14]

The same duplicity has been evident in a recent attempt to craft a joint Israeli-Polish declaration prior to Netanyahu's official visit to Poland. Mid-level bureaucrats met and published a very moderate declaration approving the two-state solution. Not a day passed before Netanyahu distanced himself from the statement and effectively voided it.[15] Maybe if the professional and skilled diplomats of the Foreign Ministry had been involved in the process from the outset, none of the subsequent diplomatic embarrassment would have occurred. But nowadays who consults the Israeli Foreign Ministry? No wonder the frustrated Israeli diplomats have been on strike for the past three months or so, partly because of their deteriorating salaries[16] and partly as a result of the steady gutting of their ministry. It should not come as a surprise that the Prime Minister (who is also the Acting Foreign Minister) does not even meet with the striking diplomats. It seems that no one in the government really cares.

But then again, how could the diplomats, skilled as they are, solve Israel's deep-seated conflicts if no one provides them with a coherent agenda and agreed upon policies?

[9] Raphael Ahren and Avid Sterman, "Netanyahu to Abbas, in English: 'Give peace a chance'", in *The Times of Israel*, 5 June 2013, http://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-to-abbas-in-english-give-peace-a-chance.
[10] Peace Now, *Two new plans for 1225 units in settlements deposited*, 13 June 2013, http://peacenow.org.il/eng/ItamarBruchin.
[11] Raphael Ahren, "Deputy defense minister: This government will block any two-state deal", in *The Times of Israel*, 6 June 2013, http://www.timesofisrael.com/deputy-defense-minister-this-government-will-block-any-peace-deal.
[12] Shlomi Eldar, "Israeli Minister's Blunt Opinion On Two-State Solution", in *Al Monitor*, 20 June 2013, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/06/naftali-bennett-blunt-speech.html.
[13] US Departmet of State, *Solo Press Availability in Tel Aviv, Israel*, 9 April 2013, http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/04/207203.htm
[14] Harriet Sherwood, "John Kerry acknowledges failures over Israeli-Palestinian peace process", in *The Guardian*, 23 May 2013, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/may/23/john-kerry-israeli-palestinian-peace.
[15] Tovah Lazariff, "Poland-bound PM backtracks on peace statement", in *The Jerusalem Post*, 12 June 2013, http://www.jpost.com/Diplomacy-and-Politics/Heading-to-Poland-PM-backtracks-on-peace-statement-316254.
[16] Barak Ravid, "Israeli Foreign Ministry employees halt virtually all consular services", in *Haaretz*, 23 June 2013.

And who should partake in the formulation of those agendas and policies? Presumably a coherent strategy to deal with Israel's conflict with the Palestinians would warrant a government that acts as Plato's Captain of the Ship. And the seas that Israel rides, it should be noted, are rough indeed and full of existential challenges; but also, we should not ignore, of opportunities. The regional seclusion of Israel that lasted for decades is being challenged now by changing circumstances. The Arab uprisings and the recent discoveries of Eastern Mediterranean gas are clear evidence of this. Thus, there are those in Israel who call upon the government to rethink its position in the region following the Arab Spring, to embrace the Arab Peace Initiative, and adopt a more regional integrationist position. This was, for example, the message of Meir Dagan, former head of the Mossad, in his address at the Israeli Presidential Conference, on June 19th 2013.[17] However, also those calls fall prey to the aimless drifting of the ship.

Without a captain and without a skilled and trusted crew, such as the Foreign Ministry diplomats, the Israeli ship would appear to be hazardously drifting to the shoals.

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[17] "Former Mossad chief and ambassadors ask: What is Israel's role in changing Mideast?", in *Haaretz*, 19 June 2013, http://www.haaretz.com/news/presidential/former-mossad-chief-and-ambassadors-ask-what-is-israel-s-role-in-changing-mideast-1.530561.

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