

OPINION and ANALYSIS

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local and international writings on the Middle East**

<http://www.sazionfed.co.za>

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In embracing Lieberman, Netanyahu has hitched his fortunes to a starkly polarizing figure, an admirer of Vladimir Putin whose previous campaigns were striking for racist appeals targeting Israel's own Palestinians, who account for 20% of the population ... Tzipi Livni called the prospect of Lieberman as defence minister "an existential threat to the State of Israel."

The Secret of Islamist Success

Dalibor Rohac, Foreign Policy, 31 October 2012

http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/10/31/the_secret_of_islamist_success?page=full

In Syria's horrific civil war, Islamists, ranging from the Muslim Brotherhood to radical Salafi groups, are leading the fight against Bashar al-Assad. Once the war is over, Sunni Islamic political groups are bound to become the most important political force in the country. But Islamic politics is on the rise throughout the region, not just in Syria. In Egypt, the Brotherhood's candidate, Mohammed Morsi, was elected the country's fifth-ever president in June of 2012. In Tunisia, the Islamic Ennahda ("Renaissance") movement won 41 percent of all votes and 89 seats in the 217-seat legislature in the 2011 elections. In Morocco, the has become the ruling party following the November 2011 elections. What is driving the ascent of Islamic politics in Arab countries? Islam certainly plays an important role in the life of Arabs, and religion is also present in their political life. However, contrary to what common sense might be telling us, that is not the whole story.

Available data from Muslim-majority democracies suggest that the statistical link between personal religiosity, and actual voting for religious candidates, is quite weak. In other words, religiosity is a poor predictor of whom people vote for, and why. The existing data from Arab countries is limited, but it suggests that Islam has only a small impact on political attitudes. A study by political scientist Mark Tessler seeks to identify the determinants of attitudes towards democracy; he finds that religion has only very little explanatory power in accounting for support for democracy in Arab countries. Similarly, in Indonesia -- the most populous Muslim-majority country in the world -- religiosity seems related to voting behavior.

Rather, the key to the success of Islamic parties lies in their organizational structure. Many Islamic political groups in the Arab world are part of the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization founded in 1928 in Egypt. Involved in politics, proselytizing, and the provision of social services, Egypt's Brotherhood has become a model of Islamic political organization and the basis for a loose network of religious political organizations throughout the region.

Of all the legally registered NGOs and associations in Egypt, an estimated 20 percent are run by the Brotherhood. In 2006, the Brotherhood was running 22 hospitals and schools in every governorate of the country. In Jordan, the Brotherhood operates the huge Islamic Hospital in Amman and the al-Afaf Charitable Society, providing collective weddings and matchmaking services. (The image above shows an al-Afaf-organized wedding in Amman in 2008.) When an earthquake struck Algiers in 1989, Islamic groups were among the first and most effective organizations to help the victims by providing them with shelter, medical care, and food. In other

places, Islamists run sports clubs, help people find accommodation, host collective weddings, and help set up businesses through Islamic investment vehicles.

More strikingly, it is difficult to link Islamic politics to a clear policy platform, so the support for Islamic candidates cannot be reliably identified with any consistent pattern of policy preferences. The economic policy platforms of Islamists are generally vague, encompassing a broad support for free markets, but also stressing the importance of social justice and the need to combat corruption. The Ennahda movement in Tunisia, which has by far the most detailed economic program of all Islamic parties in the region, calls for a fight against inequalities driven by "exploitation, hoarding, [and] monopoly." In other countries, the economic agendas of the parties are so poor on specifics that the appeal of Islamic politics cannot plausibly lie in the substance of their economic policies.

So why do people vote for the Islamists? Economists can provide a non-obvious solution to this puzzle. It has been long known that politicians in new and emerging democracies suffer from a credibility problem. Politicians in transitional environments are either new, with no political history or reputation, or old, in which case they were probably active under the previous authoritarian regime. In either case, it is not clear whether they can be trusted. New democracies are also characterized by a lack of trusted "brand name" political parties that voters could reliably associate with specific policy agendas.

It is no surprise that in most transitional environments, promises about policies and the provision of public goods are not trusted by voters. Instead, electoral competition is organized around promises of special favors and transfers to interest groups -- the only kind of commitments that are credible. As a result, new democracies tend to be plagued by patronage, clientelism, and bad governance. If you have doubts, just think of Latin America or post-communist Eastern Europe.

The advantage of Islamic parties, including the Brotherhood, lies precisely in the fact that they are able to make credible promises about the provision of public goods. There are three fundamental reasons for this: First, they have a long history of organization, and therefore possess trusted "brand names." Second, they tend to be involved in large-scale provision of local public goods and social services where government has repeatedly failed to do so, such as providing community services, welfare, schooling, healthcare, or humanitarian aid. Third, in most cases, Islamic parties were not part of the official rent-seeking structures of the old regimes. As a rule of thumb, Islamists actively opposed the secular Arab regimes -- often at great personal risk. In Syria, for example, Brotherhood membership was a capital offense between 1980 and 2011.

This also helps explain why Libya is one of the Arab Spring countries where the Islamic electoral advantage did not manifest itself. The Muslim Brotherhood's Justice and Construction Party in Libya was founded only in March of this year, and because of Qaddafi's repression, the Libyan Brotherhood lacked grassroots organization and involvement in public goods provision. (These factors also characterize some Islamic organizations in other Arab countries.)

To say that the rise of religious parties in Arab Spring countries has nothing to do with religion would be an exaggeration. Religion matters for politics because religious organizations are a natural node for providing public goods and social services, which accounts for the reputation that the Islamic parties have built over time.

Thus religious parties in the Middle East and North Africa are succeeding for a good (rather than a radical) reason. Does that mean that we should remain complacent? Not necessarily, because while religious groups are good at organizing the provision of public goods, they may also be good at organizing political violence. Hamas and Hezbollah are prime examples of groups with a long history of successfully providing community services to their adherents -- and conducting terrorism against their enemies. The encouraging news is that, if the Arab Spring countries

remain democracies, the electoral advantage of Islamists will likely dissipate over time as secular politicians acquire the skills and invest in the channels of communication needed to make credible electoral promises -- just as it happened in Indonesia. Until then, Islamists are likely to remain an integral part of Arab political life.

An election of great import for Israel ***Isi Leibler, Jerusalem Post, 31 October 2012***

<http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Columnists/Article.aspx?id=290011>

Next week's US presidential election will have major implications for the entire western world, but in particular for Israel. It is also noteworthy that Israel and the Jews have never featured so prominently in a presidential campaign. In last week's debate on foreign policy between President Barack Obama and Governor Mitt Romney, both candidates competed to demonstrate their pro-Israel credentials and the Jewish state was mentioned no less than 34 times.

Until six weeks ago there was an emerging consensus shared by supporters and opponents alike, that Romney had failed to make an impact and that Obama would be reelected. Yet since the first dramatic debate, the upsurge in support for Romney has been extraordinary, and if the polls reflect reality, the outcome could be a real cliff-hanger.

Of course, opinion polls can be misleading. The complexity of the Electoral College voting system does not necessarily grant victory to the candidate receiving the majority of votes. The even more critical factor is whether those who actually vote will proportionately adhere to the same trends as those initially polled.

Not surprisingly, many Israelis will be hoping for a Romney win. Despite Obama's ongoing commitment to providing Israel with military aid and his more recent positive policies towards Israel, it is no secret that he personally loathes Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu.

Most Israelis are fearful that if reelected, no longer needing a charm offensive to garner Jewish support, Obama is likely to repeat the pattern of his first term when he unashamedly reneged on many of his previous undertakings towards Israel.

They are concerned that he will revert to his earlier policy of "adopting daylight between Israel and the US" and will renew pressure on the Jewish state to make further unilateral concessions towards the Palestinians. There is fear that he will again insist that the indefensible 1949 armistice lines be considered as the opening benchmark for negotiating borders and will also press for the division of Jerusalem.

Romney, in contrast, enjoys a cordial personal relationship with Netanyahu. More importantly he also seems to display a far more positive attitude towards the Jewish state. One of his major criticisms of the administration's foreign policy has been Obama's alleged abandonment and continuous public chastisement and humiliation of Israel.

Whereas Obama blames Israeli settlement policies – including home construction in east Jerusalem's Jewish suburbs – for the impasse with the Palestinians, Romney says plainly that peace will be unattainable until the Palestinians genuinely abandon their objective of destroying the Jewish state.

As to Iran, notwithstanding undertakings to do all that is necessary to prevent them from becoming a nuclear power, should sanctions fail to bring about tangible results there are grave doubts as to whether Obama would be willing to take the tough measures required. However, should Romney be elected, while presumably providing notice of tougher intentions, during his first months in office he too would be unlikely to immediately initiate drastic military action.

There is a vast chasm between the approaches of both candidates in relation to the Arab world, which is

increasingly falling under more extreme Islamic and jihadist influences and where use of the terms Islamic extremism or Islamic terrorism are even banned.

Despite having eliminated Osama bin Laden, the Obama administration has, as a matter of course, appeased Islamists by initially resisting sanctions and failing to support the Iranian dissidents seeking regime change.

Shortly after taking office, Obama infuriated the Mubarak government by legitimizing the Muslim Brotherhood when he insisted that their representatives occupy the front row at his inaugural speech in Cairo. Furthermore, at the outset of protests in Egypt, he abandoned the authoritarian President Hosni Mubarak, regarded as one of the strongest US allies in the Arab world.

Since then, his administration has consistently understated the fanatical extremism of the Muslim Brotherhood and ignored the recent genocidal exhortations against Israel by their newly elected Egyptian leader. The groveling response to the terrorist upsurges in Libya and Egypt is another indicator of the administration's policy of Islamic appeasement.

Obama also repeatedly publicly praised the dictatorial Islamist Turkish leader, Recep Erdogan, who made himself popular in the Arab world by his anti-Israeli tirades and efforts to impose boycotts and isolate the Jewish state.

Yet, after four years in office, despite President Obama's desperate efforts to appease and "engage" the Islamists, the US today is more reviled in the Arab world than ever before.

The perception amongst most Israelis is that a Romney administration would be more realistic and tougher towards the Islamists.

However, in contrast, the majority of American Jews, clearly loth to forfeit their liberal DNA, still support Obama and will continue voting Democrat. Besides, like most Americans, economic policies are the principal factors determining their vote.

This also partially reflects the depressing reality that a large proportion of American Jews, especially the more assimilated, no longer consider Israel a major priority when casting their votes. Indeed, for many of the less committed Jews, issues like gay marriage and abortion on demand seem to outweigh the wellbeing of the Jewish state.

On the other hand, there will undoubtedly be a substantial number of Jewish defections from the Obama camp, with the more committed and Orthodox Jewish segments voting heavily against the current president.

Prime Minister Netanyahu has assiduously avoided engaging in the presidential campaign. That has not prevented his political opponents from accusing him of making Israel a "wedge" issue. Yet it would be inconceivable that due to the US presidential election, an Israeli prime minister should remain silent on the need to for the world to stand up and take tough action against a potentially nuclear power publicly exhorting the world to support its objective of wiping his country – "a cancer" – off the face of the planet. As Netanyahu said to CNN, "I am being guided by the Iranian nuclear calendar not the American political calendar."

But Netanyahu would be less than human if privately he did not yearn for a victory for Romney, who has been both a friend and ally.

If, however, Obama is reelected, Netanyahu will be obliged to try to overcome the personal animosity and work with him, without compromising Israel's security or long-term strategic interests. This will not be easy but as long as grass roots support for Israel remains strong and Congress does not abandon us, it is possible. From his side Obama may have learnt that his bullying tactics only strengthened public support for Netanyahu in Israel.

And if Romney wins, Israelis should not be euphoric. Although Romney will undoubtedly have a better chemistry with Israel than his predecessor, we still face tough challenges. And we should bear in mind that whereas Romney is undoubtedly a friend, the track records of Republican presidents toward Israel has also often been problematic.

Irrespective who becomes the next president of the USA, American Jewish leaders must seek to reverse the growing threat from the far Left anti-Israeli activists in the Democratic party and reinvigorate the bipartisan spirit which has been so vital to maintain the strong US-Israel relationship.

Britain must atone for its sins in Palestine
Nabeel Shath, The Telegraph, 31 October 2012

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/palestinianauthority/9645925/Britain-must-atone-for-its-sins-in-Palestine.html>

Over the past few weeks, British diplomats have stated that they are doing all they can to discourage Palestine's bid for "observer state" status in the UN General Assembly. If this is an official British position, then it is reprehensible, yet not all that surprising.

Ninety-five years ago tomorrow, on November 2, 1917, British imperialism in Palestine began when Lord Balfour, the then British foreign secretary and former prime minister, sent a letter to Baron Rothschild, one of the leaders of the Zionist movement. This letter became known as the "Balfour Declaration".

In that letter, Balfour promised British support for the Zionist programme of establishing a "national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine. This pledge of support was made without consulting the indigenous Christian and Muslim inhabitants of Palestine, the Palestinian people. And it was made before British troops had even conquered the land.

Balfour, on behalf of Britain, promised Palestine – over which Britain had no legal right – to a people who did not even live there (of the very small community of Palestinian Jews in Palestine in 1917, very few were Zionists). And he did so with the worst of intentions: to discourage Jewish immigration to Britain. No wonder Lord Montagu, the only Jewish member of the Cabinet, opposed the declaration.

And yet, just two years earlier, Britain had committed herself to assisting the Arab nations in achieving their independence from the Ottoman Empire. Arab fighters all over the region, including thousands of Palestinians, fought for their freedom, allowing Britain to establish her mandate in Palestine.

From that moment, Palestine became the victim of colonial conspiracies. The Balfour Declaration helped to encourage Zionist immigration into Palestine and away from America and Western Europe. Concomitantly, Britain repressed Palestinian nationalism, which was exemplified by its crushing of the Arab revolt of 1936-1939 and the denial of the right of the Palestinian people to express their will through their own representation. In fact, Britain suppressed Palestinian political representation through a policy of systematic denial of Palestinian political rights.

The dying days of Britain's rule in Palestine were marked by destruction, blood, and the start of the Palestinian exile, meaning the expulsion of the majority of the Palestinian people against the backdrop of Zionist terrorism. It was not the Palestinians who blew up the King David Hotel, who blew up the British Embassy in Rome, who tried to assassinate Ernest Bevin, Britain's foreign

secretary, and who succeeded in assassinating Lord Moyne, British minister of state in the Middle East. That was the Irgun, an ideological Right-wing group – and the predecessor to Israel's ruling Likud Party.

The British mandate was supposed to deliver independence to Palestine through the establishment of representative institutions. It was never meant permanently to thwart Palestinian national aspirations. Nor was it ever envisaged that the British mandate would end with a catastrophe in the form of the expulsion of the majority of the Palestinian people from their homeland.

When Britain decided to relinquish Palestine to the UN in 1947, she was well aware that the Zionist movement was well established and equipped, while Palestinians were still healing from the effects of British colonialism during the years of the revolt.

Since the Palestinian catastrophe of 1948, during which approximately two thirds of the Palestinian people, Christians and Muslims, were expelled to become refugees, Britain has not done anything substantially to repair the suffering it has caused to the Palestinians. Britain has not met its historic responsibility. Successive British administrations have avoided repairing this injustice by making statements of goodwill instead of taking actions to end the Israeli occupation and support the Palestinian right to self-determination.

It is unacceptable that today, 65 years after the partition of Palestine, the UK has recognised the state of Israel but not the state of Palestine. It is unacceptable that, having invested large human and economic resources in the development of Palestinian institutions, the UK has not taken the necessary political and diplomatic steps to realise the establishment of a free and independent state of Palestine. Rather than continuing down this path, the UK, more than any other state, should stand behind the Palestinian endeavour towards the fulfilment of their national rights and aspirations, through supporting its application for enhancement of status at the UN.

Some argue that Palestine's recognition and enhanced status will not immediately end the occupation. None the less, it is a step in the right direction towards a peaceful solution, and it sends a strong message to Israel that the world will no longer tolerate its illegal and oppressive policies. For a country with the historic responsibility that the UK carries towards Palestine, a victim of British colonialism, this should be the least we can expect in order to repair decades of occupation and exile.

Why Khamenei will compromise

Meir Javedanfar, AL Monitor, 25 October 2012

<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2012/al-monitor/khamenei-compromise.html>

The Iranian regime is currently facing tough open-ended sanctions. Judging by the recent presidential foreign-policy debate, there is no end on the horizon as neither candidate would be willing to reduce sanctions unless Iran Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei backs down.

The economic challenges posed by the current sanctions are by far the biggest foreign-induced challenge that Khamenei has faced since assuming the role in 1989.

Should the current sanctions and isolation regime imposed by the West against Iran continue in their current format, in my opinion it is highly likely that Khamenei will be forced to make a new set of compromises at the nuclear talks. This could happen within two to three years, at most. Compromises are likely to include the following:

1. Closing Iran's nuclear site at Fordow near Qom
2. Agreeing to ship all of its 20%-enriched uranium abroad for conversion into nuclear fuel
3. Agreeing to answer all outstanding IAEA questions regarding its past nuclear activities
4. Agreeing to a tougher inspection regime for Iran's nuclear facilities
5. Dropping the demand that the West recognize Iran's right to enrich uranium as a precondition (This recognition is likely to be postponed until all other outstanding issues have been resolved.)

The Iranian regime is likely to offer these compromises as part of a step-by-step program. After each step is taken, part of the current sanctions against Iran would be lifted and nuclear fuel would be supplied, at stages agreed on by both parties.

Khamenei is also very likely to insist that ultimately Iran be allowed to enrich at lower levels on its soil. It is likely that the Israeli government would accept such a proposal, as its biggest concern is enrichment at Fordow and Iran's current unwillingness to answer IAEA questions. A clean bill of health for Iran's nuclear program from the IAEA, as well as a subsequent tough inspection regime by it, would alleviate many of Israel's major concerns.

These compromises would be in contrast to Khamenei's current proposal to the P5+1, which does not show any willingness on Iran's part to compromise on its enrichment facility at Fordow or to answer questions about its previous activities to the IAEA. Although president Ahmadinejad has in the past offered to stop enrichment at 20% if nuclear fuel is supplied to Iran, this offer was not pursued as he has no authority over Iran's nuclear program.

Khamenei would need to offer new compromises in order to secure his regime's survival. By allowing the sanctions to continue, Khamenei could ultimately face the economic collapse of his regime. This is a price which Iran's most powerful man would be unwilling to pay. Nothing is worth more to him than the stability of his government.

There are numerous reasons behind the Iranian regime's inability to get through the current challenges without having to offer a new set of compromises. The supreme leader's style of leadership and its consequences are one of them.

Khamenei is no Mohammad Mossadegh. In other words, he has failed to convert his nuclear policies into a nationalistic consensus issue as Mossadegh was able to do with his oil-nationalization policies. This is due to numerous reasons. Khamenei does not have the charisma and, more importantly, the nationalist credentials of the former prime minister, who was overthrown by the CIA and MI6 in 1953. Also, Mossadegh was elected democratically, whereas Khamenei was not. Mossadegh had the backing of the majority of the Iranian people, whereas I believe that Khamenei only has the support of a minority.

When Mossadegh resigned in 1952 and was replaced by Ahmad Qavam, protests erupted after he announced his intention to reverse Mossadegh's stance and to negotiate with the British in order to end the oil dispute. However, if Khamenei announces that he is willing to show compromise at the nuclear talks, instead of protesting, many inside Iran are likely to celebrate.

Evidence of Khamenei's failure to make the nuclear issue into a nationalistic one are not difficult to find. These include his refusal to hold a referendum on the issue, something which opposition leader Mir-Hossein Mousavi has called for. Even online questions on this issue are prevented after a recent poll on the the Islamic Republic of Iran News Network's (IRINN) website showed 63% of respondents want the regime to compromise at the nuclear talks. That poll was soon removed and nothing similar has appeared since.

Khamenei is no Ruhollah Khomeini either. He does not have the credentials of Iran's charismatic leader of the 1979 revolution. Khomeini managed to unite the regime behind him for eight years to fight Saddam Hussein. This is in addition to being able to get through numerous domestic challenges. Khamenei has failed to create such unity. His falling out with every single president who has served under him including Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is testimony of the divisive nature of his leadership. This is in addition to the 2009 post-election uprising in Iran, something which never happened under Khomeini as he was more successful in uniting the different regime factions. This is one of the reasons why the regime has failed to create the same atmosphere which Khomeini did during Iran's war against Saddam's army.

This failure has meant that Khamenei has needed to buy the loyalty of those around him, especially Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), far more than Khomeini had to do. Lack of oil income could reduce the IRGC's loyalty. It could also create more infighting between the different factions, conflicts that until recently had been contained by regime funds. Such important factors are likely to be crucial in Khamenei's likely decision to make new nuclear compromises.

There are other reasons which make it improbable for the regime to get through the current open-ended sanctions. These include massive economic mismanagement by Ahmadinejad that has ravaged Iran's economy for the last eight years, adding to the negative impact of sanctions. It also seems that the regime was caught off guard as it did not believe that US President Barack Obama would be able to impose such extensive sanctions. This has meant that it is economically unprepared to meet the challenge of the current sanctions in the long term.

The same challenges that are likely to force Khamenei to make nuclear compromises are also likely to deter him from making a mad dash for the bomb. His regime is too divided, too economically weak and most probably, too concerned about the concerns of the military attack this could invite. Israel's prime minister may not have heard Obama's red line, but Iran's supreme leader is likely to have heard Obama's declaration that when it comes to a nuclear Iran, containment is "no option" loud and clear.

Netanyahu's big gamble: The risks of throwing in with Lieberman

Karl Vick, Time World, 28 October 2012

<http://world.time.com/2012/10/28/netanyahus-big-gamble-the-risks-of-throwing-in-with-lieberman/?xid=newsletter-europe-weekly>

It might be a product of one politician's panicky impulsiveness. Or it may be a shrewd bet that Israel's steady drift to the political right has passed a crucial threshold. Either way, prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu's startling decision to link his center-right Likud party with the Russo-phile, rightist Yisrael Beiteinu party of his foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman, has shaken up an Israeli election campaign just as it's getting underway.

Netanyahu and Lieberman made their joint announcement on Thursday, amid a flurry of developments that stood to complicate the incumbent's presumed glide path to re-election. Polls that only weeks ago showed Netanyahu alone in a field of dwarves, lately showed that his party – and in a parliamentary system, ballots are cast for parties, not people — faced erosion from both the right and the left. On the right, the charismatic ultra-Orthodox politician Aryeh Deri returned to the Shas Party, after serving 22 months in prison for taking bribes, and a decade away from politics. Deri immediately recast the agenda at Shas, which represents religious Jews from North Africa and the Middle East, to emphasize economic justice as the core domestic issue in the campaign, one on which Netanyahu is considered most vulnerable.

At the same time, pollsters found that Likud would finish behind a theoretical "super-party" that consolidated all the major candidates associated with the Israeli center: Tzipi Livni and Shaul

Mofaz of the eviscerated Kadima party, a former journalist named Yair Lapid, and, at the top of the ticket, Ehud Olmert, the former prime minister driven from office in 2008 by corruption charges. Olmert mostly beat the rap in July but a few charges remain, and enough of a cloud to prevent him from announcing a return to politics – so far, at least.

Netanyahu's move sized up as a pre-emptive strike. It's a ballot alliance – joining not the two parties themselves, but their candidates, who will appear on a single electoral list in January's election. The arrangement stands to benefit Netanyahu personally, polling and analysts agree. Even if Likud and Israel Beiteinu gather fewer total votes as a single list than they might have separately, the amount will surely be more than the Likud would have gained alone, and hence all but assures Netanyahu will emerge from the election atop the faction with the largest number of seats in the Knesset, likely assuring he will return as prime minister.

What's far from clear, however, is whether what's good for Bibi is all that great for either party. In embracing Lieberman, Netanyahu has hitched his fortunes to starkly polarizing figure, an admirer of Vladimir Putin whose previous campaigns were striking for racist appeals targeting Israel's own Palestinians, who account for 20% of the population. "There's no question that in the old days the founders of the Likud would never have gone anywhere near someone like Lieberman," Bradley Burston, an editor at the liberal daily *Haaretz*, tells TIME. "They would've seen him as someone that could infect the party with all kinds of anti-democratic elements that they were determined to, at least, formally disavow."

"Likud and Yisrael Beiteinu are two very different tribes," Burston notes. "Likud has this very very long history, emotionally powerful to those who are loyalists, the first party of the right, and a home, with this very strong emphasis on democracy, in the sort of European sense. There's also this sense of observant Jews being welcome, and Jews of northern African descent in particular being very welcome, in terms of being the core. And that puts them and Yisrael Beiteinu in direct conflict, in a number of ways. They're this 'party of the pork-eating Russians.' You have that kind of grumbling."

Likud in fact came into existence as an blending of right-wing parties, including the Herut faction headed by Menachem Begin. In Hebrew, the word itself, Likud, means "consolidation." But Avraham Diskin, a political scientist at Hebrew University, says the alliance with Yisrael Beiteinu – "Israel Is Our Home" — risks losing three groups who formerly voted Likud. First and most important are centrists who will be turned off by Lieberman's proudly right wing positions and extremist tenor, especially in campaigns. Next, Diskin says, come religious Jews of Sephardic origins, who may turn to Shas when faced with Lieberman's antipathy to ultra-Orthodox rabbis, whose strict rules, barring civil marriage, for instance, are regarded by largely secular Russian immigrants as an impediment to their assimilation in Israeli society. "The extreme right wingers might be more satisfied," Diskin says, "but settlers who are religious are not voting for Lieberman, though some do vote for Likud. So they're hesitant."

At the same time, some Yisrael Beiteinu voters don't care for Netanyahu, whose alliances with ultra-Orthodox parties, including Shas, has protected their nemesis. "This merger is a mistake because it repels voters," Likud minister Michael Eitan told reporters. "Some of Lieberman's voters don't like Netanyahu and some Likud voters don't like Lieberman. Running separately could have led to a larger bloc after the election."

Eitan was trying to derail the alliance, which must be approved by the Likud central committee at a meeting Monday night. (Yisrael Beiteinu, which Lieberman created, is run more as his personal fiefdom.) Analysts say if the voting were secret, the alliance might be voted down, so risky does the deal seem to everyone except Netanyahu and Lieberman — who is guaranteed a senior ministry, possibly even defense. Livni called the prospect of Lieberman as defense minister "an existential threat to the state of Israel."

Diskin says that, given Netanyahu's previous tacks to the center, the government that emerges from the Jan. 22 ballot will likely be moderate. He figures the alliance with Lieberman is driven less by ideology than by fear of being left behind. Twice in the last decade, Yisrael Beiteinu has thrown in with centrist parties to form governments, and the polls showing the electoral potential of a unified centrist bloc may have unnerved the prime minister, the professor says. "I think Netanyahu got afraid that Lieberman would jump over his party and make a deal with a center-left coalition, like he did before," says Diskin. "So he got panicked, and he made a risky move. A stupid move."

NOTE: The views expressed in certain articles are not necessarily those of the SAZF

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