

Master of Mischief

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AVIGDOR LIEBERMAN HAS a restless nature. From time to time he has to do something, anything. As Minister of Foreign Affairs he should be doing something about, well, foreign affairs. Trouble is, Israel's foreign affairs are managed by others.

The most important sector of our foreign affairs concerns the relationship with the United States. Indeed, this is so important that Binyamin Netanyahu keeps it entirely to himself. Our ambassador in Washington reports to him personally, after being handpicked by Sheldon Adelson, the casino billionaire.

Relations with the Palestinians are mostly (mis)managed by Ehud Barak, who, as Minister of Defense, is formally in charge of the occupied territories. The main actor there is the Shin Bet, which is under the authority of the Prime Minister.

The relations with the Arab world, such as they are, are maintained by the Mossad, also under the authority of the Prime Minister. In practice, Netanyahu and Barak together make all the decisions, including, of course, The Decision concerning Iran.

So what's left for Lieberman? He can deal as much as he wants with Zambia and the Fiji islands. He can appoint ambassadors to Guatemala and Uganda. And that's it.

Except that he has a personal monopoly on relations with the countries of the Former Soviet Union. How's that? Well, he was born in Soviet Moldavia and speaks Russian fluently. Even though he came to Israel already 34 years ago, just a few days after his 20th birthday, he is still considered by most Israelis as a "Russian", speaking Hebrew with a heavy Russian accent and looking as foreign as possible. But his connection with that part of the world goes beyond cultural factors – he is an ardent admirer of Vladimir Putin and his Doppelgängers, Alexander Lukashenko in Minsk and Victor Yanukovich in Kiev. He would dearly like to install the same kind of regime in Israel, with himself as the Putin look-alike.

Most of his colleagues in Europe and around the world shun him because of his views, which many of them consider semi-fascist, if not worse.

SO HOW of all possible jobs, did Netanyahu come to give him the job of foreign minister? Well, as the leader of a party essential for the formation of the right-wing coalition, he had a right to one of the three major ministries: defense, finance or foreign relations. Who would dare to deny that defense is a God-given fief of Barak? Since Netanyahu considers himself an economic genius, he decided to keep the finance ministry in practice to himself. He found a doctor of philosophy, who had the advantage of being innocent of any knowledge of economics, and appointed him as his proxy minister of finance. That left only foreign affairs, a much despised ministry, for Lieberman.

As this ministry does not provide much activity, and even less that generates headlines, Lieberman is compelled every

few months or so to do something to stir things up. He has already insulted many of his colleagues abroad, ably assisted by his deputy, Danny Ayalon, who boasted to journalists that he humiliated the Turkish ambassador by putting him on a low seat. Since at the time the Turkish army was still the closest partner of the Israeli army in the region, Barak was livid.

Lieberman also needs something to divert attention from his famous corruption affair. For 14 years now he has been under investigation about receiving millions of dollars from mysterious sources abroad. Some of the money went to straw companies abroad managed by his daughter, who was then in her early twenties. The Attorney General still has to decide whether to indict him – which may compel him to resign.

Now Lieberman has caused a stir again.

TWO WEEKS ago, Netanyahu and Barak were amazed to read in the newspapers that Lieberman had sent letters to the foreign ministers of the so-called quartet – the US, the European Union, the UN and Russia – who oversee the non-existent "peace process".

In this message, Lieberman demanded that the four dismiss the President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, and call immediate elections in the West Bank.

The idiocy of this message is mind-boggling, even by Lieberman standards.

First of all, the quartet has absolutely no authority to dismiss anyone in Palestine, or for that matter, Israel. Nor can it order elections anywhere.

True, Palestinian elections are long overdue. They should have taken place in January 2010. Hamas has already announced that they would not take part, so they would be held only in the West Bank. That would have finalized the split between PLO and Hamas – a split no Palestinian on either side wants to aggravate.

Second, if Hamas did participate, the next Palestinian president would conceivably be the Hamas leader Khaled Mishal, the man Israel tried to assassinate. With the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas' mother organization, now ensconced in power in Egypt, the chances of Hamas in democratic elections would probably be even stronger than last time, when they won handily.

Third, and most importantly, Mahmoud Abbas is by far the most peace-oriented Palestinian leader around. And that is the crux of the matter.

LIEBERMAN BASES his bizarre demand on his contention that Abbas is the main obstacle to peace – an assertion that few experts around the world would take seriously. Lieberman's real reason for his initiative may be the very opposite: that Abbas' stance puts Israel in the uncomfortable seat of the peace-destroyer.

Abbas' conditions for the start of peace negotiations are well-known: Israel must stop all settlement activities. The world, by and large, agrees with that.

Abbas' terms for peace are also well-known. They were formulated long ago by Yasser Arafat: a State of Palestine side by side with Israel, with East Jerusalem as its capital and a return to the Green Line border (with insubstantial and mutually agreed exchanges of territory). For the refugee problem, an "agreed" solution, meaning the symbolic return of a small number. The world, by and large, agrees with that, too.

If it wanted to, Israel could achieve peace with the Palestinians next week, followed the week thereafter by peace with the entire Arab world, on the terms set out in the Arab Peace Initiative, which are practically identical with the Palestinian terms.

And that, of course, is the source of Lieberman's hatred of Abbas. Like Netanyahu, he doesn't dream of giving up Greater Israel. Therefore he very much prefers a Palestinian leadership composed of Hamas – that is, as long as Hamas rejects peace.

IN PRACTICE, the Palestinian Authority led by President Abbas is actively cooperating with Israel in the one field that really matters to Israelis: security.

Most Israelis believe that Palestinian violence (a.k.a. "terrorism") has been stopped by the "security obstacle", the combination of walls and fences that cut deep into the occupied Palestinian territories. However, a wall can be climbed, tunnels can be dug underneath and militants can be smuggled through the checkpoints. As an American politician said about the wall between the US and Mexico: "You show me a 50 foot wall, and I'll show you a 51 foot ladder." I have seen Palestinian youngsters climb the wall even without a ladder.

The real reason for the total cessation of acts of violence in Israel emanating from the West Bank is the intimate, day-to-day cooperation of the Palestinian security forces with the Israeli security services. On the orders of Abbas, the Palestinian police, which is actually a military force trained by US officers, is mercilessly persecuting the militants of Hamas and other Palestinian factions favoring "armed struggle".

By following this course, Abbas is taking huge risks. Hamas and others accuse him of collaborating with the occupation and compare the Palestinian authority with the Vichy regime in France, which collaborated with the Nazi occupation.¹

Abbas has come to the conclusion that the "armed struggle" has led the Palestinians nowhere. He hopes that the absence

of violent acts will allow the West Bank population to build up their civil society, strengthen Palestinian institutions, raise the pitiful standard of living (far less than a tenth of the Israeli one), and assure the Palestinian Authority of foreign aid and legitimacy. Under the able stewardship of his prime minister, Salam Fayyad, this is working – for the time being.

The risk is indeed great. The West Bank economy, such as it is, may founder any time. The creeping enlargement of the settlements is reaching a point where every Palestinian village is surrounded by them, making life for the Palestinians intolerable – especially since young settlers carry out almost daily acts of terrorism (so defined by Israeli security officials), physically attacking villagers, burning mosques, houses and cars and felling olive trees.

Some day, the spirit of the Arab Spring may reach the West Bank, and even the PLO leadership will not be able to stem the tide.

In something close to desperation, Abbas is seeking some respite by appealing to the UN for recognition. The application for the acceptance of Palestine as a member state is barred by the US veto in the Security Council. The application to the General Assembly, where there is no veto, to receive Palestine as a member "which is not a state" has been called by Lieberman "political terrorism".

The Israeli government has condemned the Palestinian application as "one-sided". As though the Israeli 1948 application for membership in the UN had been "many-sided". However, be that as it may, in face of the dire Israeli and American threats, Abbas may have to drop this effort too, endangering his position even more.

This week, Abbas has been invited by the Iranian regime to take part in the huge assembly of so-called non-aligned nations in Tehran. The Palestinian leader had to weigh whether to accept the invitation and gain some international status or to refuse, for fear of American reprisals. He decided to attend.

IN THE meantime, Lieberman has already achieved his goal – a few days in the news, and his face, with his trademark shifty eyes and sinister smile, was on all TV screens.

Now he will drop from the news again for a few weeks or months, until he can think up some new way to cause mischief.

¹The police of Marshal Henri Petain, a World War I hero, closely cooperated with the Germans, inter alia helping them to round up the Jews and send them to Auschwitz.