

New Israeli foreign minister disavows U.S.-led peace talks

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Dion Nissenbaum

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As foreign diplomats and his predecessor looked on in astonishment, Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman began his new job Wednesday by declaring the death of U.S.-sponsored Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.



"Whoever thinks that concessions ... will achieve something is wrong," Lieberman said shortly after being sworn in before a crowded room of diplomats at the Foreign Ministry. "He will bring pressures and more wars."

Lieberman made it clear that he opposes attempts to pressure Israel into rushing into a deal with a weak Palestinian leadership.

He said the joint statement at Annapolis, which calls for "vigorous, ongoing and continuous negotiations" with the Palestinians, no longer bound Israel.

"It has no validity," Lieberman said as Tzipi Livni, the outgoing foreign minister, who led Israel's negotiating team during the Annapolis process, grimaced by his side.

Lieberman, a Soviet-born former nightclub bouncer, heads the Israel Is Our Home Party, the second-largest coalition partner in the new government led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

At one point Livni became so angry about Lieberman's speech that she nearly rose to interrupt him.

"She was infuriated, and it was quite clear on her face," one Foreign Ministry official said, speaking on the condition of anonymity because of the shifting political

dynamics in the government.

The speech also flew in the face of statements by President Barack Obama, who's made the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a top priority in his young administration.

"It's a direct challenge to the Obama administration," said Gershom Gorenberg, an Israeli political analyst and the author of "The Accidental Empire".

The State Department tried to minimize Lieberman's comments, pointing instead to Netanyahu's statements this week that he's interested in peace with the Palestinians.

"We support the two-state solution, and we will continue to work for that," State Department spokesman Gordon Duguid said, speaking of the creation of a Palestinian state alongside Israel.

While Lieberman supports a two-state deal as necessary to preserve the predominant Jewish identity of Israel, Netanyahu has avoided endorsing a creation of a Palestinian state -- Obama's goal -- or talking publicly about a "two-state solution" to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Lieberman spoke hours after Netanyahu was sworn in as Israel's prime minister and the head of a fractious governing coalition that also includes the center-left Labor Party, which long has favored negotiating a two-state solution to the impasse.

As a member of the Israeli parliament, Lieberman has suggested that Arab-Israeli lawmakers who met with the country's Middle East adversaries should be executed as collaborators. He also suggested that Israel give up Arab villages in northern Israel in exchange for annexing Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

Lieberman won over many voters during the recent election by focusing on a proposal, clearly aimed at Israel's Arab minority, that would strip Israelis of voting rights if they refused to take a loyalty oath.

Netanyahu's main spokesman for the international media is Mark Regev, a veteran government official who served in the same role for Livni and former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. Regev had no comment Wednesday on Lieberman's speech.

While Lieberman eschewed the U.S.-led Annapolis negotiations, he said Israel was still bound by the 2003 "road map" for peace, which outlines the steps that Israel and the Palestinians need to take to end the conflict with a two-state solution.

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A two state solution is a good idea providing both are Jewish states. There are more than enough Arab and Mohammedan states already.

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