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Alarm bell

Ali Haider

According to Ali Haider, the entry of Lieberman into the government will pose an outright threat to the Arabs of Israel. They are afraid

The talks about bringing Yisrael Beiteinu into the coalition are advancing at a rapid pace. Some of the five conditions Avigdor Lieberman set for joining the coalition are no longer an obstacle, such as the convergence plan and the dismantling of outposts. In addition, due to the post-war political instability, what was once a crack through which Lieberman could squeeze into the government has now become a wide open door. The Labor Party, which stood on its hind legs in opposition to this move when the government was first established, is fearful of losing power and thus is no longer being stubborn. The same is true for the other partners in the coalition.

One of the conditions that Lieberman allows himself to demand for entry into the government is a change in the system of government to a presidential one. Perhaps he has his own future in mind because a presidential regime is known to be a fertile pasture for the activity of "strong" leaders who exploit times of crisis to attain power.

This is a perfect recipe for someone who leads an extreme right-wing, nationalistic party that advocates what I regard as racist ideas and is characterized by hostility toward pluralistic democracy, xenophobia, ethnic discrimination and social Darwinism.

These are not empty words. The Palestinian citizens in Israel are an ongoing target for provocation by Lieberman and his party. Moreover, the political platform the party formulated for the last elections includes an explicit proposal to disengage from Um al-Fahm and the Arab communities in Wadi Ara and transfer them to the Palestinian Authority. The practical impact of this plan would be to revoke the citizenship of Israeli citizens.

Lieberman is not satisfied with words alone. Just before the disengagement from the Gaza Strip, his party launched a publicity campaign against the disengagement and proposed instead to disengage from Um al-Fahm in the framework of his exchange of territories proposal. Last May, during a speech to the Knesset plenum, he said that Arab Members of Knesset "who collaborate with the enemy and meet with Hamas leaders" should be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. He added: "At the end of World War II, they not only executed criminals at the Nuremberg trials, but also those who collaborated with them. I hope that this will be the fate of collaborators in this house."

A negative message and a threat

The idea Lieberman is promoting is not a new one. But the granting of legitimacy to this idea by bringing Yisrael Beiteinu into the government of Israel and the comparison of Arab citizens of Israel to Nazis constitute an escalation of the inroad these ideas are making into the Israeli public discourse.

This fact constitutes an explicit and direct threat to the Arab population in Israel. The threat already stirs real fear among the Arab citizenry, but it should also arouse a similar fear among all those who hold a democratic and humane outlook on relations between people. It should sound a very loud warning bell in the ears of all citizens of the state.

This real threat is compounded when analyzing the latest public opinion surveys that show a growing trend in extremism and racist views among the Jewish public. This is besides the Jewish public's scorn for the civic status of Arab citizens.

A survey conducted in March for the Center for Anti-Racism found that 40% of the Jewish public in Israel agreed with the statement: "The state should encourage Arab citizens to emigrate." Another study, conducted two months later by the Israel Democracy Institute, showed that 62% of the Jewish public supports this view.

Granting legitimacy to racist ideology, rhetoric and practice by bringing Lieberman into the government, sends a negative message and poses a threat to Arab society in Israel. The addition of Lieberman to the government also provides him with the public resources to help him realize his plans and put them into effect.

The government's policy toward Arab citizens is exacerbating the systematic discrimination practiced against them. The addition of a divisive element like Lieberman to the government is liable to inflame the relationships between Jews and Arabs in Israel.

Attorney Haider is co-executive director of Sikkuy – The Association for the Advancement of Civic Equality.