

Israeli Foreign Minister: Time to Think 'Out of the Box'

In the seemingly never-ending saga of “peace talks” between Israel and the Palestinians, the facts often are hidden under a flurry of diplomatic stone-throwing.

Israel's Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman got himself in trouble a week ago when he said it's time to think “out of the box” and recommended the Palestinian Authority hold long-overdue elections to replace President Mahmoud Abbas.

Lieberman is known as a man who doesn't mince words. Neither does he seem, some observers say, as interested in diplomacy as in finding solutions based on the facts as they exist. His letter drew fire from Israeli politicians and, of course, from the Palestinians. But a deeper look at it exposed some interesting facts.

In the letter to current E.U. Foreign Policy chief Catherine Ashton and the Quartet (U.S., E.U., U.N. and Russia), Lieberman writes of some of the steps Israel has taken in 2012 to pave the way for resuming direct negotiations.

But instead of moving the process forward, the P.A. leadership holds Israel solely responsible for the stalemate.

Lieberman blames Abbas' “unfortunate behavior” for the impasse, saying he “apparently is uninterested or unable ... to reach an agreement that would bring an end to the conflict, including addressing all the core issues.

“Instead, he is creating a culture of blaming Israel for delaying the process, while attempting to achieve advantages without negotiation via blackmailing and ongoing attempts to

internationalize the conflict," he said.

In ways reminiscent of former PLO chairman Yasser Arafat, Lieberman says Abbas speaks in pleasantries to the international community and encourages "a culture of hatred" elsewhere.

While Abbas "speaks with a moderate and pleasant voice to the international community ... [he's] encouraging a culture of hatred, praising terrorists, encouraging sanctions and boycotts, and calling into question the legitimacy of the existence of the State, as can be seen, for example, in his last speech at the General Assembly of the U.N."

Abbas, in turn, said Lieberman's letter didn't deserve a response, calling it "diplomatic terror," without specifying which of Israel's actions fit that description.

Does improving the P.A.'s tax system, increasing revenues and bolstering the Palestinian economy—steps Israel has taken that were recommended by the International Monetary Fund—qualify?

Or did advancing tax transfers for August to end of July so the P.A. could pay government salaries before Ramadan constitute "diplomatic terror?"

Was reducing roadblocks in Judea and Samaria to a total of 10 or hiring an additional 5,000 Arab construction workers steps in the wrong direction?

How about helping to develop the gas field off the coast of Gaza or approving an additional 119 infrastructure projects in Area C and speeding up renovation of schools and clinics in this area. Do any of these steps designed to bolster the P.A. economy constitute "diplomatic terror?"

Lieberman said these were just some of the steps Israel has taken since the beginning of the year to help the Palestinian Authority.

"I won't go into all the details of additional Israeli gestures that were made throughout 2012," Lieberman wrote, "all of them with the goal of assisting the Palestinian economy and easing the lives of the residents in the West Bank and Gaza."

None of it appears to matter to PLO executive committee member Dr. Hanan Ashrawi, who accused Lieberman of "racism and exclusivity."

"Official statements and policies such as those espoused by Lieberman and his ilk are creating a culture of impurity, racism and exclusivity," Ashrawi responded, saying the main obstacle to peace "is not the Palestinian leadership."

"We call upon members of the Middle East Quartet to end their tolerance of Israeli excesses and violations of international and humanitarian law," she said.

In the meantime, talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority remain deadlocked, while the P.A. continues to blame Israel for the stalemate, Israel's actions would seem to indicate it has stepped up to the plate and is waiting for the Palestinians to play ball.