

# Israel's "Thug Diplomat" at the UN. A Cruel Joke on the International Community

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*The appointment by Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu of one of his most hawkish and outspoken rivals as Israel's new ambassador to the United Nations has prompted widespread consternation.*

As one Israeli analyst noted last week, Danny Danon's appointment amounts to a "cruel joke" on the international community. The new envoy "lacks even the slightest level of finesse and subtlety required of a senior diplomat".

Last year Netanyahu sacked Danon as deputy defence minister, describing him as too "irresponsible" even by the standards of Israel's usually anarchic politics. Danon had denounced the prime minister for "leftist feebleness" in his handling of Israel's attack on Gaza last summer.

Danon is a UN official's worst nightmare. He is a vocal opponent of a two-state solution and has repeatedly called for the annexation of the West Bank.

Back in 2011, days before the UN General Assembly was due to vote on Palestinian statehood, Danon dismissed the forum as irrelevant: "Even if there will be a vote [in favour], it will be a Facebook state."

On the face of it, Netanyahu's timing could not be worse. Danon is to represent Israel as the Palestinians are expected to step up efforts at the UN to entrench recognition of their statehood. He will also be a leading spokesman as Israel tries to fend off war crimes investigations at the International Criminal Court in the Hague.

The generally accepted explanation is that Netanyahu's move is driven by domestic, not diplomatic, calculations. Danon is the Israeli right's poster boy, one who makes the prime minister look too cautious and conciliatory.

The two faced off for the Likud party leadership last November. Danon lost but Netanyahu doubtless fears, as his party and the Israeli public shift ever rightwards, that his rival's time is coming.

The posting removes Danon as head of the Likud's powerful central committee, dispatches him to a distant land, and should provide him with opportunities aplenty to self-harm.

But that is not the whole story. Danon's appointment reveals something more significant

about Israel's deteriorating relations even with its international supporters.

It is hard nowadays to recall that Israel once took the UN very seriously indeed. It had to.

In the decade following 1948, Abba Eban, the country's foremost diplomat, sought to carve out international recognition and respectability for Israel at the UN.

Eban often used deceit and misdirection – he is reported to have avowed that “diplomats go abroad to lie for their country”. But he never forgot the importance of creating a façade of moral justification for Israel's actions, even as it launched wars of aggression in 1956 at Suez and again against Egypt in 1967.

Reality caught up with Israel when the UN adopted a resolution in 1975 equating Israel's official ideology, Zionism, with racism. The resolution was only revoked 16 years later, after the Soviet Union collapsed and the United States emerged as the world's sole superpower.

Washington arm-twisted the General Assembly with promises that Israel would engage in a peace process with the Palestinians, culminating a short time later in the Oslo Accords.

But as Oslo slowly unravelled, and Israel's leaders – not least Netanyahu himself – were exposed as the true rejectionists, Israel was forced on to the back foot again.

Today, the consensus in Israel is not only that the UN is a bastion of anti-Israel prejudice but that it is an incubator of global anti-semitism, much of it supposedly spawned by Arab states. Israel is blameless, so this story goes, but the world has fallen under the haters' spell.

The parting shot of Danon's predecessor, Ron Prosor, last week was to accuse yet again a leading UN official, Jordan's Rima Khalaf, of anti-semitism for pointing out the untold misery caused by Israel's near-decade blockade of Gaza.

Earlier this year, after stepping down as Israel's ambassador to the US, Michael Oren went further, arguing that the plague of anti-semitism had infected even America's leading Jewish journalists. Their critical coverage of Israel was proof of self-hatred, he claimed.

The need for such desperate diplomacy has grown as Israel's moral image has tarnished, even for its allies. But the hectoring and intimidation by seasoned diplomats like Prosor and Oren has produced diminishing returns.

Danon's posting is part of a discernible pattern of recent appointments by Netanyahu that reflect a growing refusal to engage in any kind of recognisable diplomacy. Confrontation is preferred.

The trend started with Netanyahu's decision in 2009 to let the thuggish Avigdor Lieberman lead the foreign ministry and Israel's diplomatic corps.

Notably, Netanyahu picked Ron Dermer, a high-profile partisan of the US Republican party, to replace Oren in 2013. Dermer is widely credited with engineering Netanyahu's provocative address earlier this year to the US Congress, in an undisguised effort to undermine President Barack Obama's talks with Iran.

Danon's appointment, like Dermer's, indicates the extent to which the Israeli right has

abandoned any hope of persuading the international community of the rightness of its cause – or even of working within the rules of statecraft.

Just as Dermer has turned Obama’s White House into a diplomatic battlefield, Danon can be expected to barrack, abuse and alienate fellow ambassadors at the UN in New York.

An Israel that has no place for negotiations or compromise wants only to tell the world that it is wrong and that Israelis don’t care what others think. Danon is the right man for that task.

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