

# Come il kahanismo si è fatto strada nel mainstream politico israeliano

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Attivisti di destra partecipano a una cerimonia in onore del defunto leader estremista ebreo rabbino Meir Kahane a Gerusalemme, 17 novembre 2016. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)

**La retorica genocida non è una novità nella politica israeliana. Ma la distruzione di Gaza rispecchia il linguaggio apocalittico che si riversa dalla Knesset, dove l'establishment ha gradualmente assorbito membri di un ex gruppo terroristico.**

Di [Natasha Roth-Rowland](#) 14 maggio 2025

Alla fine di gennaio, l'ambasciatore israeliano negli Stati Uniti è arrivato a Washington per assumere il suo nuovo incarico. Per certi versi, il curriculum di Yechiel Leiter è tipico di qualcuno nominato per forse l'incarico diplomatico più prestigioso in assoluto: immigrato statunitense in Israele, Leiter ha ricoperto numerosi incarichi governativi di alto livello, tra cui quello di capo dello staff dell'allora Ministro delle Finanze Benjamin Netanyahu, prima di lavorare come senior fellow presso il Kohélet Policy Forum di destra, per poi passare al settore privato prima e dopo una fallita corsa alla presidenza con il partito israeliano al governo, il Likud.

Altri aspetti della biografia di Leiter, tuttavia, sono meno tipici di un diplomatico di alto rango, soprattutto la sua precedente appartenenza a un'organizzazione considerata un gruppo terroristico sia dal suo paese di nascita che da quello adottivo.

Mentre si trovava ancora negli Stati Uniti, Leiter era stato membro della Jewish Defense League, un gruppo di estrema destra fondato dal rabbino americano estremista Meir Kahane. Negli anni '70, dopo essersi trasferito in Israele, Leiter si unì al Kach, il partito e movimento politico fascista fondato da Kahane dopo la sua immigrazione. Inizialmente concepito come una branca internazionale della JDL, il Kach si trasformò infine in un'autentica organizzazione israeliana che diede vita a un proprio credo politico: il kahanismo. Leiter fu in seguito nominato leader dell'insediamento ebraico radicale di Hebron, prima di diventare un leader del più ampio movimento dei coloni.

Nel 1994, dopo che Baruch Goldstein, membro del Kach e seguace del Kahane – un altro immigrato americano in Israele – massacrò 29 palestinesi in preghiera nella moschea Ibrahimi di Hebron, sia il governo israeliano che quello statunitense classificarono il Kach come organizzazione terroristica. (Il Dipartimento di Stato americano ha revocato questa designazione nel 2022.)

Leiter's appointment as ambassador to the U.S. despite his prior membership in this group is noteworthy, and offers a depressing snapshot of the extremism of both Israeli and U.S. politics. This was reaffirmed in late April when another Kach veteran, Israel's National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir, arrived in the United States for his first official overseas visit after being effectively boycotted by the Biden administration. Ben Gvir, who has been convicted for supporting a terrorist organization, met with several Republican members of Congress and spoke to welcoming audiences in Mar-a-Lago, Manhattan, and at Yale University, in between visits across Florida to a prison, a gun store, and a Jewish school.

At the same time, Leiter's rise is a window onto a larger story: the perpetual and ever-growing absorption of extremist groups into Israel's political mainstream, typically through their alumni either being elected into office or serving as top aides to powerful members of the Knesset.



Israel's Ambassador to the United States Yechiel Leiter, in Jerusalem, Feb. 16, 2025. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)

Indeed, the sight of Kahanists and members of the extremist hilltop youth going about their day in the Israeli parliament is now well-established, and has thrown into sharp relief Israeli politics' rightward march over the past few decades — which has accelerated into a race to the bottom since October 7. It is now commonplace to hear statements that would sit comfortably in a Kach manifesto from politicians who, in Israel's right-skewed political spectrum, are by no means considered extreme.

Consider, for example, former Defense Minister Yoav Gallant declaring, on Oct. 9, 2023, that “[w]e are fighting human animals, and we are acting accordingly” while announcing a complete siege on the Gaza Strip; Deputy Speaker of the Knesset and Likud MK Nissim Vaturi calling to “erase the Gaza Strip from the face of the Earth”; Likud MK Amit Halevi saying there should be “no more Muslim land in the land of Israel ... [and] Gaza should be left as a monument, like Sodom”; or Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu making biblical allusions about Gaza's fate widely understood to be a reference to mass slaughter.

Genocidal rhetoric is by no means new to Israeli politics, or to the wider Israeli public sphere (there are plenty of journalists joining in). Previous Israeli assaults on the Gaza Strip were accompanied by calls to “flatten” or “erase” the enclave, if not quite as uniformly across much of the political spectrum. But what has changed is the gap between the rhetoric and what is happening on the ground. The total destruction of the current onslaught feels closer than ever to the apocalyptic language pouring out of the

Knesset — where the most dominant political party in the country's history has made plenty of space for current and former Kahanists who embrace the violent visions of their founder.

## **From the hilltops to the corridors**

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The election that led us here, back in November 2022, brought about a number of firsts: the first time an avowed follower of Kahane made it into the governing coalition and then the cabinet; the first time a former member of the hilltop youth entered the government and another became a parliamentary aide; the first time an electoral slate with Kahanist outlook had gobbled up over 10 percent of the Israeli vote. These developments and others meant that Israel's latest governing coalition, when it was sworn in, was rapidly — and accurately — dubbed the most far right in the country's history.

Numerous explanations have been offered for why, over the past 20 years or so, almost every freshly-elected Israeli government has been labeled as such — with the common wisdom amalgamating around a combination of the failed Oslo peace process, the Second Intifada, and the personal corruption of Netanyahu.

But there is also another, much longer-term mechanism at play, of which the current government is just the latest example. With the political establishment's gradual absorption of some of the most far-right elements in Israeli society, yesterday's right-wing ideologues — who once protested against the government from the outside — have become today's Knesset members, aides, ministerial staff, and so on.





Menachem Begin, former leader of the Irgun, a Zionist paramilitary organization, speaks at a Herut party meeting in Tel Aviv, Aug. 14, 1948. (Hans Pinn/GPO)

This has been going on in some form since the founding of the state: The far-right militants who bombed hotels and markets during the pre-state era — and agitated against the British Mandate authorities, the indigenous Arab inhabitants of Palestine, and their mainstream Jewish rivals — were rapidly folded into the new country's institutions, from the army to the parliament. And although the Israeli right was relatively quiet during the 1950s and '60s, the trend picked up once more following the start of the 1967 occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, which launched the settler movement and led to the emergence of a new Jewish far right imbued with messianic zeal — albeit one that had organizational and ideological ties to its forebears.

The Kahanist pipeline into mainstream Israeli politics is the most notable and consistent aspect of this trend, given the movement's longevity and transparently fascist ideology. But Kach is far from the only extreme-right group in Israeli society to find a place for itself in the Knesset. Members of Gush Emunim, the Jewish Underground, the Temple Mount Movement, and, as noted above, the hilltop youth, have all found their way into Israel's corridors of power — whether as elected officials or as their aides and advisers.

There is a generational pattern at work here: Over the last five decades, far-right groups have emerged to challenge Israeli government policy, particularly over perceived betrayals to the project of Jewish settlement and ethnic cleansing of Palestinians. These groups objected to, for example, the Camp David Accords in the late 1970s and the Oslo Accords in the mid-1990s. And now, as then, they insist that the government and military aren't doing enough to settle the land, protect Jews, and eliminate Palestinians.

In time, members of these groups have been subsumed into the country's governing institutions. This process has disarmed their ability to pressure the government from the outside: Cooptation remains one of the most effective ways to neutralize protest movements. But it also reveals the absurdity of the Israeli government's insistence, in the wake of Jewish nationalist violence, that it takes action against "bad apples," only to welcome their ideological peers into power at a later date.

And while coopting extremists may neutralize their external pressure, it also mainstreams their poisonous ideas, thus perpetuating the country's rightward momentum. Every time a new far-right group pops up — often more extreme than the last — and is then woven into Israel's electoral fabric, the voting public, along with large sections of the commentariat, become increasingly inured to their violent rhetoric.

After being elected to the Knesset for the first time as head of Otzma Yehudit, Ben Gvir's rapid rise in 2021 garnered intensive coverage of the far right's racist and persecutory rhetoric. This coverage has been the very thing that has shored up their public support — thereby cementing their place in formal Israeli politics. Ben Gvir is now accepted in a way Kahane never was. Yet even while Kahane was alive, his one-time acolytes were already making their way into mainstream Israeli politics.





Itamar Ben Gvir speaks in front of a banner reading “Kahane was right” during a ceremony marking the 27th anniversary of the death of Rabbi Meir Kahane, Jerusalem, November 7, 2017. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)

Seen from this perspective, the role played by Netanyahu over the past few years to try and broker election deals for a Kahanist party in order to make sure it would enter the Knesset is unsurprising. Indeed, the Likud-Kahanist alliance itself has a much longer history, one that encapsulates the wider far-right agitator-to-government pipeline of which it is a part — and one that led, with Ben Gvir’s election in 2021, to Kahanism officially coming in from the cold.

## A well-trodden path

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The story began in the early 1970s, when Kahane — fleeing legal trouble in the United States — arrived in Israel, and was promptly courted by a future Likud prime minister.

As the leader of Herut, the forerunner to Likud, Menachem Begin initially took Kahane under his wing out of the belief that he could boost the party’s political fortunes. Begin introduced Kahane to politicians and offered him a “safe seat” in his party, which Kahane declined. Geulah Cohen, the former member of Lehi — the other main Jewish extremist group operating in Mandate Palestine, alongside Begin’s Irgun — was also a Kahane admirer, and saw him as a strong potential candidate for Herut, which she was also about to join. Begin and Cohen were themselves among the first cohort of Israelis to graduate from an extreme-right militant organization to the Knesset.

Kahane went in his own direction and formed the fascist Kach party shortly after. But several of his contemporary and future acolytes would take the step from Kahanist movement member to Likud, serving in the Knesset, as ministry staff, or as some other kind of functionary.

Perhaps the most famous former Kach follower to transition into Likud is now-Yisrael Beitenu head Avigdor Liberman, who became, according to Kach personnel who were around at the time, a member shortly after emigrating from the Soviet Union in the late 1970s. (Yisrael Beiteinu disputed the revelations at the time they were published.) He joined Likud in the 1980s and worked his way up the party apparatus before leaving to form his own party, while burnishing his reputation as a virulent racist with Kahane-adjacent violent fantasies — as per his infamous 2015 comment that Palestinian citizens “disloyal” to the State of Israel should have their heads cut off. (Then-Attorney General Yehudah Weinstein declined to open an investigation into Liberman’s incitement.)

Morton (Mordechai) Dolinsky, who co-founded the JDL with Kahane in New York, became politically active with Herut in the 1970s after emigrating to Israel, and served as a senior adviser at the Jewish Agency. Begin appointed him to lead the Government Press Office in the early 1980s.

Shmuel Sackett, another American immigrant to Israel who joined Kach after having been a JDL member, took a slightly different route into the Likud ranks. After co-founding the anti-Oslo Accords Zo Artzeinu (“This is Our Land”) movement with Moshe Feiglin, he and Feiglin launched, in 1998, Manhigut Yehudit (“Jewish Leadership”) — a far-right Likud faction that established a firm foothold within the party apparatus. Sackett, who also expressed an interest in a spot on Likud’s electoral slate, made no effort to hide his continued fealty to Kahane during his tenure as Manhigut Yehudit’s international director. Indeed, as he wrote to a critic in 2013, being referred to as “an open Kahanist” was “the highest compliment imaginable” and “the greatest gift.” Far from being “a negative force to be avoided at all cost,” Sackett continued, Kahanists “are very often the best members of a team.”

Although no longer active in Israeli politics, Sackett continues to be a prolific commentator; a few months before October 7, he suggested — in the far-right New York-based Orthodox outlet the Jewish Press, where Kahane used to have a weekly column — that Israel’s next military assault should be called “The War to Annihilate the Enemy,” and then after the Hamas attacks, he invoked Kahane in calling to “smash the enemy and drive them from our land.” His organization, the Am Yisrael Chai Foundation, enjoys tax-exempt status in the United States.



Likud MK May Golan seen with MK Itamar Ben Gvir at his makeshift Office in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah, Feb. 14, 2022. (Arie Leib Abrams/Flash90)

More recently, May Golan, currently serving as a Likud MK in the governing coalition, first ran for the Knesset in 2013 as part of Otzma LeYisrael (Power to Israel) — now known as Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power), an avowedly Kahanist party. After an unsuccessful run for



the Knesset with Likud in 2015, Golan made it to the Knesset as part of the ruling party in April 2019. Golan, who has rallied in support of re-establishing Israeli settlements in Gaza and who last year was appointed minister for social equality and women's advancement, gained notoriety in the early 2010s for her protests against and racist comments about African asylum seekers.

Golan was briefly tapped to become Israel's consul general in New York, amid Netanyahu's efforts to quell a far-right rebellion within his party. The move was slammed by members of the Biden administration and liberal American-Jewish institutions, and Golan's nomination was promptly withdrawn, but the incident served as a further reminder that Kahanist bona fides are not an impediment to progression within the Likud ranks. (Last year, Golan declared herself "proud of the ruins in Gaza.")

## **The end of the (pipe)line**

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The fact that numerous followers of Kahane have ended up — whether by election or appointment — serving some kind of role in the most dominant political party in Israel's history should not be taken to mean that there is no difference between the two groups. Although united by a shared desire for control over as much of "Greater Israel" with as few Palestinians as possible — a vision to which the majority of Israel's political spectrum subscribes, even as there are divergences on method — there are genuine differences in aesthetics and approach between Likud and the various Kahanist groups.

But as Israel's political and military apparatus remains gripped by an eliminationist frenzy, it is worth reflecting on why graduates of Kahane's network have, over the decades, found themselves gravitating toward Likud — beyond reasons of pure political ambition and the well-worn tradition of extremists "moderating" to gin up electoral support — and how this alliance has shifted the entire Israeli political spectrum rightward.

There is, moreover, no end to this conveyor belt in sight. Even before October 7, Israeli politics had become more extreme, violent, and abusive than ever, consistently finding room for terrorists, inciters, and those who make no secret of their genocidal ideology. Post-October 7, annihilatory rhetoric simply sped up its march into the mainstream, a fitting accompaniment to the inferno Israel has rained down on Gaza.

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Two years ago, Israeli settlers carried out a pogrom in the Palestinian town of Huwara in the occupied West Bank, two months after Israel's current government was sworn in. At the time, the operational support they received from Israeli security forces, and the moral support they received from significant chunks of the governing coalition, raised the question of whether, and when, today's pogromists would become tomorrow's Knesset members.

Seventeen months after October 7, as Gaza lies in ruins and the Israeli army plans a massive new ground offensive, and as settlers and the army engage in a combined scorched-earth campaign across the West Bank, the answer is clear: That pogrom was in

fact a glimpse into the immediate future. And while its perpetrators may not yet be running for office, their logic and approach are in lockstep with those of Israel's political and military establishment. The pipeline, it seems, has become a relic.

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**Our team has been devastated by the horrific events of this latest war. The world is reeling from Israel's unprecedented onslaught on Gaza, inflicting mass devastation and death upon besieged Palestinians, as well as the atrocious attack and kidnappings by Hamas in Israel on October 7. Our hearts are with all the people and communities facing this violence.**

We are in an extraordinarily dangerous era in Israel-Palestine. The bloodshed has reached extreme levels of brutality and threatens to engulf the entire region. Emboldened settlers in the West Bank, backed by the army, are seizing the opportunity to intensify their attacks on Palestinians. The most far-right government in Israel's history is ramping up its policing of dissent, using the cover of war to silence Palestinian citizens and left-wing Jews who object to its policies.

This escalation has a very clear context, one that +972 has spent the past 14 years covering: Israeli society's growing racism and militarism, entrenched occupation and apartheid, and a normalized siege on Gaza.

We are well positioned to cover this perilous moment – but we need your help to do it. This terrible period will challenge the humanity of all of those working for a better future in this land. Palestinians and Israelis are already organizing and strategizing to put up the fight of their lives.

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