

A libertarian ultra-Zionist party could determine Israel's next prime minister

Philip Klein

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A new libertarian party with ultra-Zionist positions is "proving popular with both extremists and hipsters" in Israel and could end up with enough support in April elections to help determine the next prime minister.

Zehut, a party founded by former deputy Knesset speaker Moshe Feiglin, supports a broad array of limited government policies in the economic and social sphere that could have been lifted from the Cato Institute's website. According to an English-language summary of its platform, the group backs gun rights, a flat tax, school vouchers, privatization of hospitals, slashing government agencies, deregulation, legalizing pot, reducing power of Israel's religious authorities, and eliminating the state sanction of marriage. The platform sums up its goal this way: "A state that restores responsibility to the citizen and reduces its involvement in private lives to a minimum."

It also believes in ending U.S. economic aid to Israel, taking the view that accepting the aid makes it more dependent on America and susceptible to pressure.

At the same time, the group supports radical policies regarding control of Judea and Samaria, aka East Jerusalem and the West Bank, that also put it well outside the mainstream of Israeli politics. The party supports a one-state solution in which Israel would control all of the territory and Arab communities living there would be given three choices: accept help to emigrate elsewhere, take Israeli residency, or become citizens of Israel after careful vetting. The party also backs rebuilding a Jewish temple on the Temple Mount, which was once the site of an ancient Jewish temple. The Temple Mount currently holds Muslim holy sites: the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock.

While the party isn't likely to take over Israel any time soon, in Israel's multi-party parliamentary system, smaller players could end up the difference maker when a potential ruling party tries to form a government. And in recent polls, the party has been able to cobble together enough support to meet the threshold for representation in the Knesset, attracting voters favoring pot legalization, those supporting economic and religious liberalization, and those favoring a more assertive approach to the ongoing territorial dispute with Palestinians. Furthermore, some people may vote for a smaller party to give voice to a given issue (such as pot legalization), or to disrupt the status quo, knowing that the party wouldn't be in a position to become the ruling party and actually implement their whole agenda.

Israel's parliament, the Knesset, has 120 seats, and to form a government, a ruling party must hold 61. Right now, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has served for 10 consecutive years, and 13 total, is fighting for his political life. Challenging him are a new centrist bloc

formed by Benny Gantz, a former general chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces, and journalist-turned-politician Yair Lapid.

While polls in Israel are notoriously unreliable, given all the small parties, recent polls have shown a tightening, with the two major parties at around 30, give or take, but with the Gantz-Lapid's party generally a few seats ahead. So far, news that the attorney general plans to indict Netanyahu has not affected him in the polls. That means it's almost certain that the performance of the smaller parties is going to determine the next prime minister. Even if Gantz and Lapid secure a plurality and get the opportunity to try and form a government first, if they are unable to put together a coalition, then Netanyahu could ultimately remain in power despite a weaker showing by Likud.

Under the system, any party has to meet the threshold of 3.25 percent support, the equivalent of four seats, to enter the Knesset. In several recent polls, Zehut has met that requirement. As Haaretz notes, such polling data can help build momentum: "It's a promising sign when a party suddenly tops the threshold in the polls. After all, some respondents haven't yet opted for Zehut, fearing that their vote would be wasted. But once such voters see a poll putting the party in the Knesset, it might even reach seven or eight seats."

Were Zehut to end up with that sort of showing, it could emerge as a power broker when the major parties start cutting deals to form a coalition. Though it's identified as a right-wing party, many of its positions on social issues would be more at home on the Left, and as the Times of Israel notes, Zehut leader Feiglin is "a vocal critic of Netanyahu, and has stressed that he would not necessarily join a government headed by Likud."

Whether support for Zehut continues to grow or if it fades, the closer voters get to the April 9 election, it is a fascinating example of how parliamentary systems can produce parties with such a seemingly heterodox mix of positions, in stark contrast to America's two-party dominant system.