

## Israel's Policy toward the Far-Right Party in Austria

### Summary of a Special Meeting at the Knesset of the Israel-Austria Parliamentary Friendship Group

February 2018

The Israel-Austria Parliamentary Friendship Group, headed by MK Amir Peretz (Zionist Union), held a special meeting at the Knesset on 31 January 2018 to discuss Israel's policy towards the far-right Freedom Party, which has recently joined the coalition government in Austria. The meeting was attended by Members of Knesset (MKs), the Ambassador of Austria to Israel, and representatives of Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), the Jewish Agency, and the Mitvim Institute. This document summarizes the main points raised during the discussion.<sup>1</sup>

#### A. Members of Knesset

**MK Amir Peretz, Head of the Knesset's Israel-Austria Parliamentary Friendship Group (Zionist Union):** "The memory of Holocaust victims and the voices of the survivors are more important for the State of Israel than any tactical alliance. Until further notice, we adhere to the position of the MFA and the Jewish community in Vienna, and we will not maintain any parliamentary relations with members of the Freedom Party. However, we will evaluate the situation based on the party's planned actions against expressions of anti-Semitism. I ask the MFA to consider the request of the Jewish Agency to release an outline of actions and criteria for re-evaluating our position."

**MK Hilik Bar (Zionist Union):** "Relations with Austria and its leadership are as important as relations with any other country. However, we must carefully examine expressions of disturbing phenomena such as anti-Semitism, extremism, and support for neo-Nazism among members of the Freedom Party, and address them together with the Austrian government. In this context, attention should be paid to the positions of the Jewish community in Austria, which should be taken into account."

**MK Ksenia Svetlova (Zionist Union):** "The bilateral relations between Israel and Austria are important, but we must remember that people and parties holding anti-Semitic and fascist views cannot be friends of Israel and their visits here should be prevented. I recently initiated new legislative motions on the topic. Before being accepted by Israel, Austria's Freedom Party and similar parties in other countries must undergo a major change and renounce their extremist and anti-Semitic ideology. We must take a clear and transparent position on behalf of the victims of the Holocaust, their grandchildren, and their great-grandchildren. I deeply regret that MK Yehuda Glick [Likud] is going to meet Heinz-Christian Strache [Chairman of the Freedom Party] again, contrary to the position of the MFA, the Jewish Agency, and the Jewish communities in Austria."

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<sup>1</sup> The statements made at the meeting by MFA representatives and the Ambassador of Austria, were off-the-record, and are therefore not included in this document.

**MK Mossi Raz (Meretz):** "There are radical right-wing parties all over Europe, but Austria is the first country where they have a foothold in the government of an EU member state. Unfortunately, such parties – that are based on hatred, including toward Jews – tend to support Israel more than parties that uphold the values of justice do. We therefore need to maneuver between our diplomatic needs and our values."

**MK Yehuda Glick (Likud):** "I call upon Prime Minister Netanyahu, who is also serving as Foreign Minister, to find a suitable outline in order to put the relations between Israel and Austria back on track, including our relations with the party of Strache, Israel's friend, who is currently serving as the Deputy Chancellor. I will soon travel to Vienna and will be very happy to help mediate in every way I can to the benefit of the State of Israel."

## B. Experts

**Yigal Palmor, Spokesperson for the Jewish Agency:** "The Freedom Party is clearly associated with anti-Semitic events, even if the leader of the party and few of his colleagues in the party's leadership are not personally involved. It is clear that a firm and consistent stance must be maintained against recurring and troubling events within the party and other entities associated with it. The institutions of the Jewish community in every country must serve as a measure for us Israelis, since its members understand the local political and cultural codes better than we do in Israel, and they are able to decide whether these events involve anti-Semitism. The Israeli position should be coordinated with the local Jewish community, and it does not matter whether certain Jews, as individuals, lend a hand to extremist elements. They do not represent the community and should not be our focus. At the same time, one must be alert to every effort made by party extremists to eradicate unacceptable political views while leading their party to becoming democratic."

There is precedence for such a process. The Italian politician Gianfranco Fini led a neo-fascist party that praised Mussolini's legacy. He then led a courageous, protracted, and arduous process of repentance and disavowed any trace of the Duce's heritage, in coordination with the Israeli embassy and the Jewish community. After a series of irreversible actions that led to introducing ideological and personal reforms within the party, affecting the party's highest echelon as well as field activists, Fini became a legitimate and respected political leader in Europe. Every right-wing leader who claims to be respectable and legitimate should be given a series of practical measures against which his intentions and his ability to transform his party will be examined. After examining his actions, such a leader would be able to gain legitimacy. Such a process should be carried out over time, with the assistance of MFA officials and the Jewish community.

In any process of identifying and denouncing anti-Semitic groups, or legitimizing those who have abandoned anti-Semitism, we must ensure that they are fully coordinated with the local Jewish communities. Solidarity with the Jewish community is a cornerstone in the struggle against anti-Semitism."

**Dr. Nimrod Goren, Head of the Mitvim Institute:** "While the Knesset is formulating ways to deal with the Freedom Party, attention should be paid to the recently growing gap between the official Israeli policy toward extreme right-wing parties in Europe and the attitude of certain elements of the Israeli right toward them. While the MFA, the former and incumbent President of the State, and former Knesset Speaker, refused to meet with members of extreme right-wing parties and called on Israeli politicians to refrain from doing so, certain

Likud MKs did exactly the opposite and held meetings with them. In those meetings they did not protest the anti-Semitic roots of those right-wing parties but rather tried to develop partnerships with them and even expressed appreciation for what they see as their friendship to Israel. These European right-wing representatives then boast of having such ties with Israel before the public in their countries. By doing so, Israel provides them the public legitimacy they need in the face of accusations of anti-Semitism. For the right-wingers in Israel, on the other hand, such ties provide rare European support for the settlements. The hostility toward the Arabs and Muslims is also a factor that sometimes brings Israeli and European right-wing groups closer together.

This gap should be narrowed. There is a need to formulate clear recommendations on how Israeli parties should conduct themselves vis-à-vis extreme right-wing parties in Europe, including in Austria, in order to prevent them from legitimizing the ideology of such parties. It is important that such a process, which the MFA should lead, involves additional public and political entities, including the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, the Knesset Speaker, the Jewish Agency, the Union of Local Authorities, and relevant Parliamentary Friendship Groups. It is also highly important that these recommendations will be made public, so those who do not endorse them could be held accountable. A list of requirements for extreme right-wing parties in Europe must also be formulated and introduced as a condition for establishing contact with them, in order to prevent misrepresentations of change on their part."

**Micky Drill, Member of the Foreign Affairs Committee of Israel's Labor Party (and an Austrian national):** "The Freedom Party is a right-wing populist party that to this day flirts with a racist and anti-Semitic ideology. It is true that its language has changed and it portrays itself as a supporter of Jews and Israel. However, in practice, some 40 percent of the representatives of this party in the Austrian parliament belong to 'National German Societies', nationalist-fascist organizations. It is no coincidence that the competent authorities of the Jewish community in Austria recently decided that the community would continue to refuse political relations with the representatives of the Freedom Party. The State of Israel, as the state of the Jewish people, must back the Diaspora Jews and speak with one voice. I therefore welcome the decision of MK Peretz to refrain from any contact with members of parliament from the Freedom Party or with any other representatives of this party. A change in this position must follow genuine modifications in the actions of the Freedom Party's leadership, and we should not settle for merely nice words."