



Bezalel Smotrich: From Fringe Activist to Coalition Power Broker

Ahead of Israel's parliamentary elections, which will be held on October 27, 2026, FokusIsrael.ch is profiling the country's key political leaders. Here: Bezalel Smotrich from the Religious Zionist Party.

By Jan Kapusnak 

Bezalel Smotrich does not lead a large party, yet few ministers in Netanyahu's government have exercised such far-reaching influence over Israel's political future. Long before [entering the Knesset](#) in 2015, he was an activist shaped by the radical wing of the religious-Zionist movement, and that ideology continues to define his career.

Since 2019, Smotrich has led the [Religious Zionist Party](#) (RZP), which combines hardline nationalism with religious and social conservatism, seeks to strengthen Israel's Jewish identity and character, opposes Palestinian statehood, and supports the vision of a "Greater Land of Israel" through continued settlement expansion.

Religious Zionism^[1] has never produced a dominant and enduring party; its harder-right factions have [repeatedly](#) split, merged, changed names and formed short-lived alliances. Amid Israel's political crisis and repeated elections from 2019 onward, Netanyahu pressured these parties to run together so their votes would not be lost below the electoral threshold of 3.25%. In doing so, he legitimized forces once considered [beyond](#) the bounds of acceptable government, above all Otzma Yehudit because of its [Kahanist roots](#).

The strategy paid off in 2022, when the joint RZP-Otzma Yehudit-Noam list won [14 seats](#) before splitting again. Netanyahu returned to power while standing trial, while Smotrich and his allies gained influence far beyond their individual strength. Because Netanyahu depended on every coalition seat, they could threaten the government's survival. Smotrich used this [leverage to secure](#) the Finance Ministry, despite his limited economic experience, and extensive authority over civilian policy in the West Bank.

Smotrich entered the ministry with rhetoric shaped as much by religion as by conventional policy. Citing Leviticus, he argued that Israel had tried capitalism and socialism, but not an economy based on divine blessing: "If we uphold the Torah," [he said](#), prosperity would follow. His early tenure was overshadowed by the judicial overhaul, which economists and business leaders – particularly from Israel's technology and start-up sectors – [warned](#) was undermining investor confidence.



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The wars that followed the October 7 massacre brought soaring military expenditure, weaker growth and a widening deficit, yet Smotrich resisted cutting coalition funds allocated to religious communities. [The Bank of Israel](#) urged him to [redirect such spending](#) toward the war and recovery. Israel subsequently suffered unprecedented [credit-rating downgrades](#), driven mainly by the prolonged conflict and deteriorating public finances.

[Public debt](#) has risen from roughly 60 to 70 percent and the central bank [has warned](#) that the next government must curb it and invest more in education and infrastructure. Israel's economy has nevertheless remained resilient: [the Bank of Israel forecasts](#) 4 percent growth, 1.8 percent inflation and unemployment near 3 percent in 2026. The recovery owes more to Israel's private sector, monetary credibility and easing hostilities than to any distinctive "Smotrich doctrine".

Few issues divide Israeli society more than unequal military service, especially while many ultra-Orthodox men remain exempt and some Haredi leaders openly incite against the IDF. Smotrich's position is marked by hypocrisy. He postponed enlistment for years, joined the IDF only at 28 and [served 14 months](#), mostly in an administrative role. In 2017, under the headline ["Save the IDF—don't enlist,"](#) he urged religious students to delay enlistment in protest against mixed-gender service, which he called a "twisted and dangerous value system." He has opposed women serving in combat roles and [said he](#) would educate his daughter not to enlist because "mixing men and women in tanks is, in my view, delusional."

Amid a severe wartime manpower shortage, Smotrich called for [greater Haredi enlistment](#) while avoiding measures that would compel it. During the [2026 budget dispute](#), he opposed making passage of the budget conditional on a draft-exemption law, but continued to sustain a coalition that repeatedly [delayed](#) coercive measures and, on July 14, 2026, enacted legislation temporarily [shielding Haredi draft evaders](#) from arrest and prosecution.

During the Gaza war, Smotrich challenged the generals despite having only limited military experience, demanding a [broader campaign](#) and permanent [Israeli control of Gaza](#). He blamed the IDF leadership for October 7, [telling](#) Chief of Staff Herzi Halevi that "we are not the ones who went to sleep on October 6." Halevi [accepted responsibility](#) and resigned before completing his term; Smotrich, a member of the government that shaped Israel's prewar policy, did neither.

He subordinated the hostages to these aims, [saying](#) they could not be returned "at



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any cost” and [later](#) that “returning the hostages is not the most important thing.” He opposed deals requiring a ceasefire and, in 2024, Smotrich [said](#) that allowing two million Gazans to die of hunger might be “justified and moral” until the hostages were returned, although “nobody” in the world would permit it. Yet after all remaining living hostages returned in October 2025, Smotrich claimed his opposition to partial deals and insistence on military pressure had [secured](#) their release. [Former hostages](#) argued that his obstruction may instead have prolonged their captivity and cost lives.

Netanyahu created a [special ministerial post](#) for Smotrich within the Defense Ministry, giving him authority over civilian policy in the West Bank, including planning, construction and the legalization of outposts. Smotrich has used these powers to expand settlements and advance his 2017 “Decisive Plan,” a policy essay [published](#) in *Hashiloach*. It called for full Israeli sovereignty over the West Bank, the [end](#) of Palestinian national aspirations and three options for Palestinians: accept Israeli rule, emigrate, or continue resisting and be defeated. Smotrich has since [advocated](#) dismantling the Palestinian Authority and abandoning Oslo.

Smotrich [supports](#) the judicial overhaul, while his party colleague Simcha Rothman, has been one of its chief architects. Their hostility toward the Supreme Court reflects its role in blocking parts of their agenda, including settlement expansion and attempts to legalize unauthorized construction. Their proposals include an override clause allowing a Knesset majority to re-enact laws struck down by the Court. Smotrich has [argued](#) that without curbing it, “we are not in power.”

His rhetoric has been openly racist and has contributed to damaging Israel’s international reputation. In a historically distorted portrayal, he told Arab lawmakers that they remained in Israel only because Ben-Gurion had failed to “[finish the job](#)” in 1948. After Jewish extremists rampaged through the Palestinian village of Huwara in 2023, he [said](#) it should be “erased” – by the “state”, not private citizens. Although he has occasionally condemned individual attacks, he has done little to curb Jewish extremist violence and often minimized it. Several Western governments later [sanctioned](#) him for inciting violence against Palestinians.

Smotrich seeks to strengthen religious control over Israeli public life and education. He has [called](#) Reform Judaism a “fake religion” and [portrayed](#) secular schools as producing “shallow and confused children” detached from their Jewish identity. His distrust extends to science: in 2017, he [dismissed](#) the Big Bang as “delusional” and falsely claimed that Darwin’s theory and evolution were no longer accepted by

science.

His record on LGBT rights is equally consistent. In 2006, he [helped organize](#) the anti-Pride “Beast Parade,” in which goats and donkeys depicted homosexuality as deviant. In 2023, he was [recorded](#) saying, “I won’t stone gays, and you won’t force me to eat shrimp,” while sarcastically describing himself as a “homophobe, racist [and] fascist.”

Smotrich enters the election in a precarious position. His party has often [polled](#) below Israel’s 3.25 percent electoral threshold, increasing pressure for another alliance with Ben-Gvir to avoid wasting right-wing votes. Netanyahu [supports](#) such a reunion, though Ben-Gvir has [resisted](#) it. Smotrich also has few options beyond Netanyahu’s bloc. Major opposition leaders, including [Gadi Eisenkot](#), have ruled out governing with him, while [Naftali Bennett](#) has been less categorical.

Other profiles:

[Benjamin Netanyahu: From Puppet Master to Puppet – but not yet beaten – FokusIsrael](#)

^[1] Religious Zionism, as a branch of Zionism, is politically diverse and has also produced pragmatic and pro-democratic currents, such as the former National Religious Party and the left-leaning Meimad. On its far-right flank are the RZP and Otzma Yehudit, the latter rooted in the outlawed Kahanist movement.

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