



Can Yair Golan revive Israel's left, which is on the brink of collapse?

In the run-up to the Israeli parliamentary elections on October 27, FokusIsrael.ch is profiling the Jewish state's most prominent political leaders. This week: Yair Golan of the social democratic party "The Democrats."

By Jan Kapusnak

Yair Golan, 64, embodies a political tradition that dominated Israel for decades but is now struggling to survive: the security-oriented Zionist left. His party, "The Democrats," was formed through the merger of Labor and Meretz in 2024 and defines itself as a Zionist, social-democratic movement committed to a Jewish, democratic, and egalitarian Israel.

Golan is unlikely to become Israel's next prime minister. Recent polls for the Knesset elections on October 27 generally predict that the "Democrats" will win between nine and eleven seats in the 120-member parliament. The party could nevertheless be indispensable to any coalition seeking to oust Benjamin Netanyahu. Golan's task, therefore, is not only to win votes but also to revitalize the political camp that founded the state and has since been reduced to near insignificance.

Political scientists with a military background

Born and raised in Rishon LeZion, Golan studied political science, government, and international relations at Tel Aviv University. He later earned a master's degree in public administration from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

Golan served in the IDF for nearly four decades, rising through the ranks from paratrooper to deputy chief of staff. During the Second Intifada, he commanded the Judea and Samaria Division, as well as the Home Front and Northern Commands. Far from being a pacifist, Golan considers Israel's military defense forces, the IDF, to be indispensable, but emphasizes that they must serve a political strategy.

After leaving the army, Golan entered politics in 2019, joining the Israeli Democratic Party led by Ehud Barak, which formed an alliance with Meretz and the Green Movement under the banner of the Democratic Union. He subsequently represented Meretz in the Knesset and served as Deputy Minister of Economy in the government of Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid. His early political career attracted only limited attention.



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His provocations overshadow his valid arguments

Golan's direct and outspoken manner often brought him into conflict with the political right. At a Holocaust memorial ceremony in 2016, he warned that he could identify "seditious processes" in contemporary Israel that resembled those seen 70, 80, and 90 years ago in Europe in general—and in Germany in particular. While he did not claim that Israel was Nazi Germany, the comparison was nonetheless explosive. Netanyahu called it outrageous, while Golan later suggested that the controversy might have cost him the position of IDF Chief of Staff.

Public speaking reveals both Yair Golan's defining strength and his chronic weakness. Golan is willing to confront intolerance and abuse of power, even when it is unpopular to do so. But he often presents valid arguments in such provocative language that the resulting scandal distracts from the content.

On October 7, he took it upon himself to rescue survivors...

When the first reports of the Hamas attack reached Yair Golan on October 7, 2023, he put on his uniform and drove south without waiting for orders. While the government and military command were still struggling to grasp the magnitude of the disaster, he repeatedly ventured into the area around the Nova music festival and evacuated survivors in his car. This episode became a powerful symbol of his political stance: a left-wing former general who acted decisively while the government seemed paralyzed.

... and was dragged through the mud for it by Sara Netanyahu

In August 2026, Sara Netanyahu, the wife of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, attempted to discredit this courageous act. In an interview with the television station "Channel 14," she said that Golan had been in southern Israel "very early on," already dressed and prepared, while others—including the prime minister—didn't yet know what was going on. Her remarks seemed to imply that he had known something about the Hamas attack in advance.

Golan then accused her of using this outrageous insinuation to try to portray those who defended the country at the time as traitors, while at the same time obscuring the government's shared responsibility for the disaster. His lawyers demanded a public apology from Sara Netanyahu and threatened to file a defamation suit seeking 2.5 million shekels (CHF 0.6 million, EUR 0.8 million), with any



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compensation to be donated to the survivors of the Nova.

Golan emphasized that he had not learned of the attack until the sirens went off at 6:29 a.m. He then took his weapon and drove south. Sara Netanyahu denied that her statement implied Golan had prior knowledge and refused to apologize. Golan later described the accusation as part of a targeted campaign to rewrite the events of October 7 and discredit the government's opponents.

Merger of Left-Wing Parties Enacted

His renewed prominence helped Yair Golan take over the leadership of the Labor Party in 2024 and finalize the long-delayed merger with Meretz. The founding of the "Democrats" reflected both electoral necessity and ideological convergence. In 2022, Labor barely cleared the 3.25 percent electoral threshold, while Meretz failed to do so altogether, thereby squandering votes on the political left that helped Netanyahu's bloc secure a majority.

The new party, "The Democrats," combines Labor's traditions of nation-building, social solidarity, and security with Meretz's focus on civil rights, secularism, minority rights, and ending the prolonged occupation of the Palestinians. It has also welcomed activists from the anti-government protest movement and made the defense of the judiciary and other independent institutions a central part of its identity.

Unwavering faith in a liberal-democratic Israel

Golan rejects the claim that Israeli society has permanently shifted to the right. He believes that most Israelis support personal freedom, equal responsibility for military service, a functioning welfare state, and diplomatic arrangements that consolidate military successes. He therefore portrays the central divide in the country not so much as left versus right, but rather as a competition between an authoritarian-corrupt camp and a liberal-democratic one.

Yair Golan advocates for a written constitution, a two-term limit for prime ministers, and greater decentralization of power to local municipalities. "The Democrats" promise to establish a state commission of inquiry into the failures surrounding October 7 and to repeal laws related to judicial reform. Their domestic policy platform also includes gender equality, LGBTQ rights, civil marriage, and public transportation on Shabbat.



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Social Welfare Instead of Subsidizing the Ultra-Orthodox

Economically, Golan positions the party firmly to the left of most of its Zionist rivals. He calls for a stronger welfare state, affordable early childhood education, and greater public investment in healthcare, schools, and housing. Funds currently used for settlements and to subsidize full-time Torah study for ultra-Orthodox men exempt from military service should, in his view, instead support working families. He believes that universal military or civilian service is both economically necessary and a prerequisite for civic equality.

Separation from the Palestinians, but without a separate state for the time being

As for the Palestinians, Golan remains committed to separation but has adjusted his position since October 7. He acknowledges that immediate Palestinian statehood is unrealistic because the Israelis no longer trust the other side. Israel, he says, must retain the freedom to take military action as long as terrorist organizations remain active. At the same time, the annexation of the West Bank and the absorption of millions of Palestinians would destroy Israel both as a Jewish state and in terms of its democratic foundation.

Golan's approach toward the Palestinians is more in line with the traditional security-oriented left of Yitzhak Rabin than with the optimism associated with the Oslo Accords in the early 1990s. For him, one thing is clear: The IDF must strike at terrorists, prevent arms smuggling, and maintain defensible borders, but its achievements must ultimately be enshrined in regional and diplomatic agreements.

In the Gaza Strip, Golan rejects both permanent Israeli rule and the return of Hamas. He advocates for the establishment of a reformed Palestinian Authority with the support of Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, while Israel's ability to counter security threats must be preserved.

Criticism of extremist settlers as a national threat

Yair Golan is an outspoken critic of the violence perpetrated by extremist Jewish settlers, whom he refers to as Jewish terrorists. Such attacks, he argues, distract soldiers from defending Israel's borders, fuel unrest among Palestinians, and damage the country's international reputation. Unlike some in the traditional left, however, he frames the issue primarily as a threat to national security, state authority, and the rule of law, rather than as an expression of solidarity with the



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Palestinians.

Yair Golan's criticism of the Gaza War has at times sparked fierce controversy. In May 2025, he said that a "reasonable country" does not fight against civilians or "kill babies as a hobby." Golan later clarified that this statement did not refer to IDF soldiers, but rather to ministers who advocated for the destruction of Gaza or a famine there. However, this explanation did little to mitigate the damage he had inflicted on himself with his remarks. His opponents portrayed the remarks as blood libel, and even Netanyahu's other critics condemned them. The statement also provided ammunition to Israel's international opponents.

With his unrestrained rhetoric, he alienates his voters

Golan is known for his courage and strategic seriousness. His greatest political weakness is his unfiltered language. He phrases statements intended to warn Israelis against moral decline so clumsily that he ends up alienating the very voters he actually needs.

The coalition arithmetic, which will be decisive in the outcome of the parliamentary elections, nevertheless gives Yair Golan influence. He rules out forming a government with Benjamin Netanyahu and his far-right partners Itamar Ben-Gvir or Bezalel Smotrich, and rejects a coalition with Likud even under potential new leadership. He is willing to cooperate with Naftali Bennett, Avigdor Lieberman, and Gadi Eisenkot despite ideological differences.

Open to Arab participation in the government

Yair Golan is also more open to the participation of Arab parties in the government than most leaders of the Zionist opposition. He rejects the automatic exclusion of Israel's Arab citizens and their representatives from a governing coalition as undemocratic. A few weeks ago, Golan described Mansour Abbas, the chairman of the Arab Ra'am Party, as a loyal partner of the then-Bennett-Lapid government. Abbas, Golan said, had clearly recognized Israel as the national homeland of the Jewish people. "I am not ashamed to say that, in order to save Israel, we would include an Arab party in this coalition," Golan declared, presenting Jewish-Arab cooperation as essential for the healing of Israeli society.

Potential Coalition Partner Without Decisive Influence



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Such flexibility could prove essential to ousting Prime Minister Netanyahu from power. This is because, while the anti-Netanyahu parties could win more seats than Netanyahu's allies in the Knesset elections scheduled for October 27, But unless they secure 61 seats in the 120-member parliament, that will not be enough to form a new government. "The Democrats" could therefore be indispensable to a new coalition government—though without enough influence to significantly shape its direction.

Golan has already united Labor and Meretz and rebuilt an active party organization. More than 97,000 members participated in the "Democrats'" primary in July, selecting lawmakers, protest leaders, former military officers, and Arab and civil rights activists. Nevertheless, the party's projected nine to eleven seats remain far below Labor's former strength.

Yair Golan's task, therefore, is to preserve the Zionist Left as an independent force and to help form a coalition government that can replace the current government led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Whether he succeeds in this depends on the image voters have retained of him. That of the courageous former general who, on October 7, traveled south on his own initiative and despite the danger to save lives. Or that of the politician whose provocative choice of words repeatedly overshadows his (sound) arguments.

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