Deri, Goldknopf, Gafni: Ultra-Orthodox minority leaders with disproportionate influence

In the run-up to the Israeli parliamentary elections on October 27, FokusIsrael.ch is profiling the most important political leaders. This week: Aryeh Deri, Yitzhak Goldknpf, and Moshe Gafni, the leaders of the three ultra-Orthodox parties.

By Jan Kapusnak

Aryeh Deri, Yitzhak Goldknopf, and Moshe Gafni will likely never become Israel's prime minister themselves. However, the parties they lead won a total of eighteen of the 120 Knesset seats in the 2022 elections, thereby becoming an indispensable pillar of Benjamin Netanyahu's government.

The three men represent Israel's ultra-Orthodox population, the Haredim, but their parties appeal to different voter groups. "Shas," led by its chairman Aryeh Deri, is supported by Sephardi and Mizrahi Haredim—ultra-Orthodox Jews of Middle Eastern and North African descent—as well as by traditional and working-class Mizrahi voters who are not strictly religious. "United Torah Judaism (UTJ)," on the other hand, unites Yitzhak Goldknopf's Hasidic "Agudat Yisrael" party with Moshe Gafni's "Degel HaTorah" party, which serves as the political voice of the non-Hasidic Lithuanian Jewish community (see: The Positions and Significance of "Shas" and "UTJ").

Aryeh Deri: Convicted Multiple Times, but Politically Powerful

Aryeh Deri is the most powerful and politically successful of the three leaders. Born in Morocco in 1959, he immigrated to Israel as a child and rose through the ranks of "Shas" under its founder and spiritual leader, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef. Shas was founded in 1984 in response to the marginalization and underrepresentation of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in Israeli society at the time by the Ashkenazi-dominated Haredi establishment. "Shas" worked to restore Sephardic religious pride and to establish schools, social organizations, and welfare programs in disadvantaged communities.

This history gives "Shas" a broader political identity than that of the "United Torah Judaism (UTJ)." It is both a Haredi party and a movement for the advancement of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews—in other words, a socially conservative force. Many "Shas" supporters are traditional or religious—but not ultra-Orthodox—and identify strongly with Israel and Zionism. Reflecting this broader electorate, in 2010 Shas became the first Haredi party to join the World Zionist Congress. In the past, "Shas" was politically flexible and joined both left-wing and right-wing governments. But

under Deri, “Shas” has firmly shifted into Netanyahu’s right-wing bloc.

Aryeh Deri became Minister of the Interior at the age of twenty-nine and quickly established himself as an exceptionally skilled political negotiator. His career, however, is inextricably linked to corruption. In 1999, he was convicted of bribery, fraud, and breach of trust and spent twenty-two months in prison. In 2013, Deri returned to the Knesset and soon resumed leadership of Shas.

In 2022, Deri admitted to tax offenses and resigned from the Knesset once again. However, he received only a suspended sentence and a fine. Although he had never explicitly promised to leave politics permanently, the court believed he would do so based on his statements. This turned out to be a mistake, as Deri returned to the Knesset that same year and became Minister of the Interior and Health in Netanyahu’s new government.

In January 2023, the Supreme Court subsequently ruled that Deri’s appointment was “highly inappropriate” and cited his repeated convictions. Several judges also criticized him for deliberately giving the impression during his closing argument that he was stepping back from politics. Ultimately, Prime Minister Netanyahu was forced to dismiss Deri. However, Deri remained a member of the Knesset and chairman of Shas, and has continued to wield considerable influence ever since, even without a ministerial post.

The massacre of October 7, 2023, illustrated this fact: Although Deri no longer held a ministerial post, he was a regular observer at the Security Cabinet and remained closely involved in decisions regarding the war. In 2025, outrage ensued when he described the massacre—in which 1,200 people were brutally murdered—as “part of God’s plan.” He argued that, ultimately, the massacre had saved Israel because it exposed Iran’s comprehensive strategy to destroy the Jewish state. The victims’ families condemned this remark as a “slap in the face.”

Deri also opposes an independent government commission of inquiry into the October 7 massacre. In July 2026, he attacked IDF Chief Eyal Zamir for speaking out against laws protecting Haredi conscientious objectors and accused him of interfering in the election campaign. The IDF responded that such accusations were damaging to the entire army.

Yitzhak Goldknopf: An Argument Against Mandatory Military Service for Haredim

The “United Torah Judaism (UTJ),” comprising the “Agudat Yisrael” and “Degel HaTorah” parties, is—unlike “Shas”—not Zionist and is primarily committed to protecting the Ashkenazi Haredi community. Although UTJ accepts the State of Israel as a practical reality, it denies its religious and historical significance. For decades, UTJ politicians therefore refused to accept ministerial posts in order to avoid formal shared responsibility for a Zionist government.

Yitzhak Goldknopf was born in Jerusalem in 1950. His “Agudat Yisrael” party represents Hasidic communities organized around their spiritual leaders (“Rebbes”). Moshe Gafni’s “Degel HaTorah” represents the Lithuanian, non-Hasidic yeshiva tradition, in which senior Torah scholars exercise the highest authority. Internal disagreements within the UTJ tend to concern rabbinic hierarchies, appointments, budgets, and the allocation of parliamentary seats rather than public policy.

Goldknopf has been a member of the Knesset only since 2022. Before becoming UTJ chairman and Minister of Housing, he headed a large network of Haredi kindergartens and led campaigns against businesses that operated on Shabbat. His political style combines local grievances with provocative rhetoric. Goldknopf has also publicly questioned whether teaching English and math is important for the Israeli economy. His main demand is to exempt ultra-Orthodox Jews from military service. He compared the proposed sanctions against Haredi draft dodgers to the yellow star that the Nazis forced Jews to wear. Such Holocaust rhetoric has also surfaced at extremist Haredi demonstrations, where ultra-Orthodox protesters have referred to Israeli police officers as “Nazis” and “Hitler.”

In June 2025, Goldknopf resigned as housing minister after the government failed to grant an exemption acceptable to his Hasidic faction.

Moshe Gafni: a politically experienced hardliner

Moshe Gafni, born in 1952, is a far more experienced and effective parliamentarian than Goldknopf. He joined the Knesset in 1988 and chaired its powerful Finance Committee for many years. His relationship with democratic institutions is often pivotal. Gafni defends parliamentary authority when it benefits his community, but rejects judicial authority when courts enforce equivalent obligations. In January 2026, he called on the government to ignore the Supreme Court’s rulings regarding Haredi military service. After the police began arresting draft dodgers, he instructed Degel HaTorah representatives in local government to suspend cooperation with the police so as not to “become complicit against those who read the holy Torah.”

Gafni avoids directly attacking IDF soldiers and has publicly prayed for their safety. Nevertheless, he insists that Torah study is just as essential to Israel's survival: "Without Torah students, we have no future." His faction has used stronger language, accusing the authorities of having "declared war on Torah scholars." In July 2026, Gafni, along with Goldknopf and Deri, helped declare Torah study a "fundamental value" of Israel. Opponents such as opposition leader Yair Lapid called this "a law to fund draft evasion" and accused the governing coalition of "spitting in the face of IDF soldiers."

"Shas" Could Help the Opposition Gain a Majority

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu remains the preferred partner of Shas and UTJ. For his part, he needs them to stay in power. Haredi voters are exceptionally disciplined, which enables their parties to provide reliable parliamentary support in exchange for funding and political concessions. This was once again made clear when Netanyahu's coalition government passed several pro-Haredi laws. In return, Shas leader Deri declared that his party would support him "with all its might" in the elections.

Former Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot, who, according to polls, is leading among the opposition parties with his newly founded "Yashar!" party, has hinted that he might cooperate with Shas if he were to become prime minister. An influential Shas rabbi subsequently suggested that such cooperation might be possible. However, party leader Deri publicly rejected the offer.

Shas's final decision could be decisive for the formation of the future government. A recent voter poll by the Kan television network projected eight Knesset seats each for Shas and the Haredi UTJ. Together with these 16 seats, Netanyahu's bloc would have a total of 51 seats in parliament after the election.

According to the same poll, the Zionist parties would hold a total of 59 parliamentary seats. However, a majority in the 120-member parliament requires the support of at least 61 Knesset members. Shas, with eight members of parliament, could therefore provide the opposition with the majority needed to form a new government. However, deep-seated differences of opinion on conscription and religion would make such an alliance extremely difficult.On Tuesday, October 27, three men—who together represent less than 15 percent of the Israeli population and will therefore never lead the Israeli government themselves—could once again have a decisive influence on who becomes the next prime minister of

the Jewish state and the direction the country will take over the next four years.

Jan Kapusnak is a political analyst and author. He lives in Tel Aviv.

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