



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: Ofer Winter of the newly founded party "Amcha Yisrael."

By Jan Kapusnak

When Ofer Winter announced the founding of his new "Party of the People of Israel" (Amcha Yisrael) and his party's participation in the parliamentary elections on October 27, his supporters wore T-shirts bearing the slogan "Winter is coming"—a menacing announcement inspired by the well-known fantasy TV series "Game of Thrones."

The threat "Winter is coming" was directed primarily at the existing far-right parties. They reacted immediately: Bezalel Smotrich and Moshe Feiglin formed an alliance between their two parties—the religious-Zionist "HaTzionut HaDatit" and the right-wing Zionist "Zehut." Benjamin Netanyahu, for his part, reportedly attempted to integrate Winter's parliamentary candidates into the Likud.

There was a good reason for these reactions. Winter's "People's Party of Israel" brings together positions associated with Israel's nationalist and religious right. And it seeks to appeal to both Jewish and Arab Israelis, as well as religious and secular voters. In particular, it targets those who are dissatisfied with the current government because of its conduct before and after the massacre of October 7, 2023, as well as its refusal to consistently draft ultra-Orthodox Jews (Haredim) into the army.

A Soldier of the Religious Right

Ofer Winter was born in 1971 and grew up in Kiryat Ata. He served for more than three decades in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and fought as a volunteer near Kibbutz Be'eri during the massacre carried out by the Palestinian terrorist organization Hamas on October 7, 2023.

Winter joined the IDF in 1990 and served first in "Sayeret Matkal" and later in "Maglan," two elite commando units of the Israel Defense Forces. He subsequently commanded the Givati Reconnaissance Battalion "Duvdevan," the Northern Brigade of the Gaza Division, and the Givati Brigade. He subsequently served as Chief of



Staff of the Central Command, military secretary to four defense ministers, and commander of the 98th Fire Brigade.

Credible, but also polarizing

Winter's military experience gives him exceptional credibility among right-wing voters. However, his religious rhetoric and his criticism of the IDF establishment also make him a polarizing figure. During the 2014 Gaza War, Winter gained nationwide recognition when he wrote in a message to his officers that Hamas is an enemy "that defies the God of Israel, curses Him, and despises Him." He quoted the "Shema Yisrael," Judaism's central creed, in support of this.

These words, contained in an official military message, were unusual and controversial. They framed the State of Israel's defense against the terrorist organization as a struggle in the name of God. Critics subsequently accused Winter of turning a national military operation into a religious war. His supporters, however, viewed his words as a legitimate expression of the Jewish faith intended to inspire his soldiers.

Although Winter continued to rise through the ranks of the IDF, he was subsequently passed over several times for promotion to major general. He concluded his command of the division in September 2022, was not offered another permanent position in the army leadership, and was informed in May 2024 that he would be discharged from the IDF.

A Doer Against the Procrastinators

Winter was not in command on October 7, 2023. After learning of the Hamas attack, he drove from Galilee toward Gaza with his personal weapon and joined the fighting near Be'eri. This action reinforced his image as a commander who acted decisively while others hesitated.

In his current political campaign, Winter accuses "Israel's elites" of having been trapped in flawed assumptions prior to October 7 and of having been unable ever since to achieve a decisive victory over Hamas. It is no coincidence that one of the Knesset candidates for the "People's Party of Israel" is Sigal Kraunik-Atiya, whose husband Arik was killed while defending Kibbutz Be'eri.



Opponent of the Two-State Solution

In terms of foreign policy, Winter is firmly anchored on the extreme political right. He rejects a Palestinian state and advocates the doctrine of decisive military victory. When he founded his party, he declared that “there is only one solution for Gaza—emigration.” He argued that an enemy that starts a war against Israel must pay a territorial price.

Supporters of military service for the ultra-Orthodox

On domestic policy, Winter advocates for stronger measures against organized crime. His most prominent issue, however, is military service. On September 2, he stated that his party, “Amcha Yisrael,” would only join a government that would abolish the blanket exemption for the ultra-Orthodox from military service and require every young person to serve. This demand puts him in direct conflict with Netanyahu’s ultra-Orthodox partners.

Reaching Out to Arab Voters

Winter’s attempt to reach beyond a narrow religious base is most clearly evident in his selection of Yoseph Haddad as the second candidate on the party list for the Knesset elections. Haddad is an Arab Christian, a wounded Golani veteran, and a prominent international advocate for Israel. He has criticized Arab parties for focusing on the Palestinians rather than on Israel’s Arab citizens. When announcing his candidacy for the Knesset, Haddad said he wanted to become the first Arab member of Israel’s security cabinet. Winter introduced him as a future minister of public diplomacy, and Haddad endorsed Winter as defense minister.

Haddad’s greatest asset for the “Party of the People of Israel” may lie with Jewish voters: He helps Winter present an inclusive Jewish-Arab party without toning down its Palestinian policies. This strategy was put to the test for the first time when Rabbi Shlomo Aviner, a prominent figure on the religious right, said it was forbidden to vote for Winter’s party because Haddad is not Jewish. Even a “righteous non-Jew,” Aviner argued, could not hold a leadership position over the Jewish nation.

Winter responded by recalling the Druze, Bedouins, and Christian soldiers with whom he had served. Those who are worthy enough to fight and die for the country

are also worthy of leading it, he replied to Aviner. Other leading candidates from Winter's party include former journalist Netali Shem Tov and the former deputy mayor of Jerusalem, Fleur Hassan-Nahoum.

Supporters and Critics of Netanyahu

Winter declared Benjamin Netanyahu to be the only candidate his party would endorse for the office of prime minister. However, he also criticized the current government for failing to allow a credible investigation into the October 7 massacre, for failing to achieve a decisive victory against Hamas in Gaza, and for failing to consistently draft the Haredim into the army. Winter is thus both Netanyahu's potential ally and his challenger.

Uncertain Election Success

The latest voter polls show that it is by no means certain whether his "People of Israel Party" will make it into parliament on October 27. A new poll by the TV station i24NEWS projected eight seats for Winter's party, and according to a poll by Channel 13, "Amcha Yisrael" would still secure four seats. However, a Walla poll predicts that Winter's party will receive only 2.3 percent of the vote—well below the 3.25 percent threshold required to enter the Knesset.

If Winter and his "People of Israel Party" clear this hurdle, he could strengthen Netanyahu. But if he fails to do so, the "wasted" votes cast for his party could cost the current prime minister his reelection.

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