



SHUSHAN STREET: Meet the Israeli Organization Behind the Legislation to Subvert Israeli Democracy, and the American Billionaires that Fund It

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Less than a month into the new Netanyahu government, Israelis are embroiled in a high-stakes battle over the fate of their democracy. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu took longer than anticipated to assemble a ruling coalition, but his government has made up for lost time by moving forward expeditiously with a program for radical reform of Israel's judiciary that has roiled the country. An [estimated 130,000 people](#), over one percent of Israel's population, converged on Tel Aviv and other major Israeli cities this weekend for the largest yet in a series of weekly protests against the moves – enlisting in what renowned Israeli author David Grossman called “a fight for Israel's destiny.”

Just beginning to elicit [attention](#) is the fact that a handful of conservative American donors are playing a major role in that fight by financially underwriting a network of right-wing organizations that are quietly driving the Netanyahu government's plan to reshape Israel's judiciary. The Kohelet Policy Forum is the most active of these organizations.

Kohelet reportedly [wrote](#) the legislation submitted by Justice Minister Yariv Levin and Chair of the Knesset Constitution, Law, and Justice Committee Simcha Rothman. The organization is merely a decade old, but its staff [envisions](#) it as “not just a successful policy institute but a revolutionary advocacy agency.” Its founder Moshe Koppel, an Israeli computer science professor who purportedly wrote the original draft of the extremely [problematic](#) Basic Law on the Nation-State of the Jewish People that Knesset passed in 2018, [boasts](#) it is “the brains of the Israeli right wing.” Reportedly, it was the Kohelet Forum that gave Donald Trump's Secretary of State Mike Pompeo the tenuous legal [arguments](#) on which he based his 2019 announcement that the US would [no longer regard](#) Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank as violating international law. Like the [American Legislative Exchange Council](#) (ALEC) which drafts model bills on a range of conservative issues and then pushes for their introduction, Kohelet writes legislation and then finds Israeli lawmakers to champion it.

Minister Levin's draft plans would dramatically weaken Israel's Supreme Court, undermining judicial oversight of the government and drastically weakening the only institution that can act as a check on Israel's governing coalition. Levin's [reforms](#) would hand the government complete control over judicial appointments, severely curb the Court's ability to strike down legislation, and institute an “override clause” for cases in which the Supreme Court does strike down legislation. It would allow a bare majority of Israel's 120-member Knesset to overturn decisions by the Supreme Court. This move [would mean](#) that a ruling coalition could advance legislation that curtails Israelis' political rights and civil liberties, clamps down on opposition parties, or “legalizes” settlement outposts established without government authorization – and

provided that 61 Knesset members were determined to push through those laws, there would be no way to challenge them.

In addition, Levin's draft abolishes the "reasonableness doctrine," which the Court [used](#) to disqualify Shas Party Chair Aryeh Dery, a [twice-convicted criminal](#), from serving as Health and Interior Minister. Significantly, [Palestinians in the occupied West Bank](#) will be impacted by the weakening of the Court, the only institution to which they can turn to defend their rights. Further, MK [Rothman's proposed law](#) would allow government ministers to choose their own legal advisers whose opinions – abolishing the current oversight system in which each ministry's legal adviser reports to the attorney general and provides legally binding guidance to their respective ministry.

The Kohelet Forum-designed judicial revolution has sparked fierce backlash, with [Attorney General Gali Baharav-Miara](#) cautioning, "Without judicial oversight and independent legal advice, we will be left with just the principle of majority rule, and nothing else. Democracy in name, but not in essence." The [Israeli Law Professors' Forum for Democracy](#) stated that, "The weakening of the balance and control mechanisms will enable the coalition majority to take, unhindered, additional steps that will entrench its rule for many years to come," and therefore, "the changes being promoted by the government to the governmental and legal regime may be irreversible." [Supreme Court President Esther Hayut](#) warned that the proposed reforms would be a "fatal blow" for Israeli democracy.

The Kohelet Policy Forum has two Pennsylvania-based principal donors who sustain its operations. In 2021, an investigative reporter for Israel's *Haaretz* newspaper [revealed](#) that the backers were Jewish-American business partners, Jeffrey Yass and Arthur Dantchik, founders of the global quantitative trading firm Susquehanna International Group. Both are multi-billionaires, with Yass registering 38th on the [Bloomberg Billionaires Index](#) of the richest people in the world. While Kohelet founder Moshe Koppel first met with Yass or Dantchik (he won't reveal which) to talk about an algorithm he had developed for use in capital market investments, they soon realized they shared a hard-right vision for the future of the Jewish state. Koppel put together a budget for a new organization capable of achieving their vision; within a few days, his American patron sent the funds.

Yass and Dantchik have contributed extensively to American organizations, candidates, and Super PACs that advance their conservative worldview. According to [Open Secrets](#), Yass ranked sixth on the list of donors to all Republican presidential candidates in 2020. A longtime supporter of the "pro-growth, limited government" Club for Growth, Yass [donated](#) 30 percent of the funding to its Super PAC in 2020. During the same cycle, Yass provided 65 percent of the funding for Protect Freedom PAC, which is tied to Senator Rand Paul and supported House freshmen Lauren Boebert and Madison Cawthorn – who voted against certifying the results of

the 2020 presidential election. Yass and Dantchik are [involved](#) in funding a network of conservative research centers in the US.

Kohelet fuses maximalist free-market principles with a [commitment](#) to “secure Israel’s future as the nation-state of the Jewish people.” It is part of a burgeoning ecosystem of right-wing organizations, among them the [Kohelet-founded Shiloh Forum](#), whose mission is to “enrich knowledge” about the “moral justification” for “Jewish settlement in all parts of the Land of Israel... and to provide tools and data for its strengthening, developing, and expanding it.” In turn, Kohelet is funded through, and works closely with, the US-based Tikvah Fund. In 2020, Tikvah [launched](#) the Israel Law and Liberty Forum, which works with and emulates the Federalist Society, to which Republican presidents turn for candidates to fill seats on the Supreme Court. Israeli right-wing organizations are not only forming close relationships with their American counterparts; they are also looking abroad for other conservative allies – including in [increasingly authoritarian Hungary](#). Last week, Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orban [tweeted a photo](#) of himself meeting with Tikvah’s Israel director. Orban wrote, “Building a conservative community is a tough job. But both [Hungary] and [Israel] have some great results already. I had the chance today to compare notes with Amiad Cohen on this noble mission.”

During the 2022 midterm election, Jewish Americans [cited](#) “the state of democracy” as the most important issue informing their vote. Freedom House [makes clear](#) that the threat to democracy is global: “In every region of the world, democracy is under attack by populist leaders and groups that reject pluralism and demand unchecked power to advance the particular interests of their supporters, usually at the expense of minorities and other perceived foes.”

A couple of conservative American billionaires are devoting bottomless resources to undermine democracy at home and in Israel. That makes it all the more necessary for the rest of the American pro-Israel community to fight for the “[shared values](#)” and democratic institutions that are vital, and under siege, in both countries.