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Europe's Right-Wing Populists Find Allies in Israel The Likud Connection

By Charles Hawley

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Islamophobic parties in Europe have established a tight network, stretching from Italy to Finland. But recently, they have extended their feelers to Israeli conservatives, enjoying a warm reception from members of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition. Some in Israel believe that the populists are Europe's future.

Anders Breivik's 1,500-page manifesto is nothing if not thorough. Pages and pages of text outline in excruciating detail the ideological underpinnings of his worldview -- one which led him to kill 76 people in two terrible attacks in Norway last week.

It is a document which has led many to question Breivik's sanity. But it has also, due to its myriad citations and significant borrowing from several anti-immigration, Islamophobic blogs, highlighted the deeply entwined network of right-wing populist groups and parties across Europe -- from the Front National in France to Vlaams Belang in Belgium to the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ).

But recently it has become clear that Europe's populist parties aren't merely content to establish a network on the Continent. They are also looking further east. And have begun establishing tight relations with several conservative politicians in Israel -- first and foremost with Ayoob Kara, a

parliamentarian with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party who is also deputy minister for development of the Negev and Galilee districts.

The reason for the growing focus on Israel is not difficult to divine. "On the one hand," Strache told SPIEGEL ONLINE in a recent interview, "we are seeing great revolutions taking place in the Middle East. But one can't be totally sure that other interests aren't behind them and that, in the end, we might see Islamist theocracies surrounding Israel and in Europe's backyard."

In other words, in the battle against what right-wing populists see as the creeping Islamization of Europe, Israel is on the front line.

'More Sensitive to the Dangers'

Many in Israel see it the same way. Eliezer Cohen, known in Israel by his nickname "Cheetah," says that leftist parties in both Europe and Israel have lost their way. Cohen, a decorated Israeli air force colonel now in retirement, is a former member of the Knesset with Yisrael Beiteinu, the hardline nationalist party led by Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman that currently governs together in a coalition with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party.

"Right-wing politicians in Europe are more sensitive to the dangers facing Israel," Cohen, who gave a keynote address during Dutch right-wing leader Geert Wilders' visit to Berlin last October, told SPIEGEL ONLINE. "They are talking the exact same language as Likud and others on the Israeli right. I'm too old for bullshitting -- we hope the right wing wins out in Europe."

Kara sounds no different. "I am looking for ways to lessen the Islamic influence in the world," Kara told the Israeli daily *Maariv* in June. "I believe that is the true Nazism in this world. I am the partner of everyone who believes in the existence of this war."

At first glance, the European populists' relationship with Israel would hardly appear to be a marriage built on love. Many see the FPÖ as being just one tiny step away from classic neo-Nazi groups and the same holds true for their partners throughout Europe. While such parties insist that they are not anti-Semitic -- Strache claims that he takes a close look at populist parties' stances toward Israel and Jews before he enters into partnerships with them -- it is not difficult to find indications of extreme, anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic vitriol from within the populist party membership rolls.

Andreas Mölzer, for example, a member of the European Parliament for the FPÖ who has recently changed his tune to defend Strache's approaches to Israel, edits a weekly called *Zur Zeit* which is replete with attacks on Israel. Following its incursion into the Gaza Strip in late 2008, the paper accused Israel of acting in "the Talmudic spirit of annihilation" and that it was trying to

"finally annihilate the open-air concentration camp of the Gaza Strip in the spirit of the Old Testament."

'Neo-Nazi Millionaire'

Indeed, when it comes to the FPÖ, observers of the party say the embrace of Israel, however far to the right it is taking place, is an insincere effort to establish foreign policy credibility. "The strategy is clearly that of normalizing itself, of becoming socially acceptable," Heribert Schiedel, an expert on the FPÖ with the Documentation Center of Austrian Resistance, a foundation which monitors right-wing extremism, wrote in an e-mail. "We presume that anti-Semitism remains a fundamental part of the party's ideology."

Many in Israel would tend to agree. And Kara was blasted in the Israeli press for a recent meeting in Berlin he held with Patrick Brinkmann, a German right-wing populist. "Deputy Minister Meets Neo-Nazi Millionaire," read a headline in the Israeli daily *Yedioth Ahronoth* earlier this month, noting that Brinkmann, while now insistent that he is not anti-Semitic, once had close ties with the right-wing extremist National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD). Following a visit to Vienna in December to meet with Strache, Vienna Jewish community leader Ariel Muzicant published an open letter in which he demanded that Netanyahu fire Kara.

The primary focus of the FPÖ's political message, however, is -- like that of populist parties from the True Finns in Finland to the Lega Nord in Italy -- one of extreme skepticism of Muslim immigration. The groups are opposed to the construction of minarets, convinced that Europe's future is threatened by high Muslim birth rates and certain that the Christian West must defend itself from Islam.

"For decades, politicians in Europe have ignored demographic developments and we are now in a situation where we have to warn that we are experiencing the Islamification of Europe," Strache says. "We don't want to become an Islamic society."

Geert Wilders, who hit the headlines in 2008 with his virulently anti-Muslim film "Fitna" in 2008, pioneered the European populist-Israeli connection that same year. He has been back to visit Israel several times since.

Allied with the Settlers

Broader relations began in earnest late last year. Strache, together with Vlaams Belang party boss Filip Dewinter, Kent Ekeröth from the Swedish Democrats and [René Stadtkewitz](#), who founded a German Islam-critical party called "Freedom" last October, traveled to Israel in December. The visit was quickly reciprocated with a trip by Kara and others to Vienna at the very end of December. Other exchanges, including Kara's visit with Brinkmann in July, have followed.

The partners that the European right-wing has sought out in Israel are, perhaps not surprisingly, well to the right of center. Kara himself, a member of the minority Druze religious community who enjoys close ties with Netanyahu, opposed the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and is a loyal supporter of Jewish settlements in the West Bank. Gershon Mesika, a settler leader in the West Bank, received the populist delegation in December. Hillel Weiss and David Ha'ivri, both proponents of "neo-Zionism," a movement which holds the belief that it is impossible to live in peace with Arabs, traveled to Germany last April for a conference hosted by the small, German right-wing populist movement Pro-NRW.

Their hope is that a pan-European platform will begin to emerge that values Israel as an important bastion in resisting the advancing tide of Islam. And they think, with the populist right making [electoral gains across Europe](#) in recent years, the smart bet is on Strache and Co.

'Europeans Cannot Sleep'

"The reasonable right parties have their roots at home. The Germans in Germany, the Swedes in Sweden and so on," says David Lasar, a member of the Vienna city government for the FPÖ. "I think that Israel is also a country that says this is our homeland and we can't open the borders and let everyone in as happened in Europe. That is a reason that Israel today has more trust in the right-wing parties in Europe than in the left-wing parties."

Lasar himself is Jewish and is one of the key players in ongoing efforts to tighten relations between Israel and the Europeans. And his view on Israel is one which would seem to be at odds with his party's past positions on the Middle East. Whereas Lasar is skeptical of peace negotiations which would require Israel to give up East Jerusalem or to withdraw from the settlements, the FPÖ has traditionally been allied with Arab leaders such as Moammar Gadhafi and remained skeptical of America's hard-line position on Iran.

That, though, Strache made clear, is changing. "There are areas where we Europeans cannot sleep, where we can't remain silent," says Strache. "Israel is in danger of being destroyed. Were that to happen, it would also result in Europe losing its foundation for existence."