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Israel to end engagement with far-right parties

Pinchas Goldschmidt tells MKs that cozying up to populist groups, if even they espouse pro-Israel views, endangers local Jewish communities

By TOI STAFF

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Pinchas Goldschmidt. (Flash90)

A leading European rabbi this week called on Israel to end its engagement with far-right parties in Europe, regardless of their position on the Jewish state.

Conference of European Rabbis president Pinchas Goldschmidt warned Israeli lawmakers at a meeting at the Knesset on Thursday that cozying up to nationalist groups in Europe was putting the local Jewish community at risk

“If a party is intrinsically racist, bigoted against large parts of society and intolerant of minorities, if Jews are not the target now, they will be in the near future,” Goldschmidt said in a statement released Friday.

He told lawmakers at the Knesset’s Committee for Immigration, Absorption and Diaspora Affairs that Israeli politicians should consult with local Jewish communities before engaging with far-right officials.

“It is not worth a short-term endorsement or for Israel to receive political support, only to put the Jewish community at risk,” Goldschmidt said.



Demonstrators hold posters “Nazis get off” during a demonstration against the Austrian Freedom Party FPÖe in Vienna, Austria, Friday, Oct. 13, 2017. Austria will hold national elections on Sunday, Oct. 15, 2017. (AP Photo/Ronald Zak)

In the statement, he announced the Conference had established a new ambassador role dedicated to countering the resurgent far-right extremism in Europe.

The statement comes days after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu cancelled a planned trip to Austria, which would have been the first by an Israeli prime minister since 1997.

The scheduled trip signaled the increasingly close ties between Jerusalem and Austria’s right-wing government, which includes the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖe).

Israel officially boycotts the FPÖe due to its Nazi past and xenophobic policies. But in recent years, the party has made strides to distance itself from pro-Nazi views and has adopted strong pro-Israel positions since its rise to parliament in Austria’s 2017 election.





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Austria's Chancellor Sebastian Kurz visits Israel's Western Wall in Jerusalem, June 10, 2018. (Avi Hayun/Israeli Foreign Ministry)

Recent years has seen a sharp rise in populist movements in Europe, many capitalizing on the growing discontent from the migration crisis across the continent.

FPOe's current leader, Heinz-Christian Strache, now Austria's vice chancellor, visited Israel earlier this year at the invitation of Netanyahu's Likud party. During the visit, he said Vienna was "striving for an honest, sustainable, and friendly contact with Israel," and vowed his far-right party would be "an essential partner in Europe's fight against anti-Semitism."

In June, Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz visited Israel where he vowed to advocate for the Jewish state in Europe, which often takes an anti-Israel stance.

"We Austrians know that in light of our own history, we have a special responsibility toward Israel and the Jewish people," Kurz said at the time "I can assure you that Austria will fight all forms of anti-Semitism in Europe with determination, be it still an existing one, or also newly imported anti-Semitism."

Last month, Housing Minister Yoav Gallant broke Israel's longtime boycott of the FPOe by meeting with Austria's Foreign Minister Karin Kneissl. Though Kneissl is not a party member, she is affiliated with the FPOe and was nominated by it to serve as foreign minister in the current government.

