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Tel Aviv Rising

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"I don't believe in a leadership that makes decisions based on [messianic feelings](#) [2]," Yuval Diskin, the former head of the Israeli Secret Service said this past week. The gathering was to celebrate Israeli's Independence Day in the Tel Aviv suburb of Kfar Saba. He was speaking in code.

One cannot use the word "messianic" in Israel today and mean it purely metaphorically. Diskin did not just mean that Netanyahu was acting zealously or with an arguably exaggerated sense of mission. His criticism reportedly focused on what he took to be Prime Minister Netanyahu's threats against Iran. But he also expressed concern about a government that apparently has "no interest" in negotiations with the Palestinians, and he stressed concern about relations with Washington.

The problem—which Diskin's double entendre conveyed perfectly—is that Israel's current leadership either believes, or has made itself hostage to people who believe, that a messianic era really has been at hand since the 1967 war: that a sacred land has been liberated for Jews to "return" to and the country is protected by something like a divine plan. These ideas, praise God, are finally starting to drive more nearly educated Israelis—centrists, even peace skeptics—a little nuts.

Diskin has spent his adult life commanding forces responsible for the occupation—that is, developing collaborator networks and coddling settlers—for two generations. His language suggests what polls show, that the settlers have not been so unpopular since the days following the Rabin assassination.

Unpopular, I mean, not just among the 40% of Jews who are often called “leftist” but who are really the secular, worldly core of the population, often the descendants of the original Zionist revolution in its Hebrew culturalist ethos—the kind of people who now tell pollsters [3] that they identify more as “Israelis” than as “Jews” and, crucially, deny that “a Jew who doesn't follow the commandments endangers the Jewish People.”

I am talking about the much larger number who can betray reactionary fears—of “Arabs,” of “futile” peace initiatives—but who believe that, in principle, Israel should rather be “a country with a Jewish majority” than “rule the whole Land of Israel west of the Jordan.” Today more than 75% of Israelis feel this way, and only about 15% insist on the Whole Land.

The key here is that this center can swing some, though ethnic loyalties and long-standing political identities (Mizrahim, Russians, etc.) will limit how much. Mizrahi families mostly vote Likud and Russians vote for Russians. The question, as it usually is in Israeli politics, is what *in general* is there to fear more, showing “weakness” in the “neighborhood,” or international isolation provoked by settlers. Israel’s centrist elites—officers, entrepreneurs, scholars—are finally feeling the urgent need to put a thumb on the scales: Diskin, former Mossad chief Meir Dagan, former Cellcom CEO Yaacov Perry, TV celebrities turned politicians like Yair Lapid, Warren Buffett favorite and Iscar founder Step Wertheimer—the list is snowballing—are awakening to the risk that the very existence of their country is being determined by people who can’t tell the difference between *realpolitik* and apocalypse.

The settlers’ mindset is more than an attitude toward land, after all. It is an expansive sense of cosmic righteousness, even election, and the opportunity costs are mounting. President Abbas, whom every Israeli knows is on the defensive, just handed the Israeli government general proposals for a final status agreement, by all accounts very much like the ones he negotiated with Ehud Olmert—who is himself appealing to the government to take them seriously. Egypt just cancelled its deal with Israel to supply natural gas. A major food chain [4] in England just announced that it would not do business with any Israeli agricultural enterprise that could not prove it was not including produce from the West Bank. Moreover, the Obama administration would be furious about any new Israeli settlement, though the president must keep his powder dry until after the election. In the face of all of these signals, the Netanyahu government just “legalized” three new outposts.

What can these people be thinking? That every opponent is a “Nazi”—an epithet they throw around like candies at a Bar Mitzvah? That fierce devotion and piety inevitably win? That Palestinians will ultimately get the message, cross the river into Jordan, and make their state there, while Arab states will be cowed by Israel’s nuclear monopoly, which it is determined to protect? That democracy is useful only to enforce the general will of a “Jewish majority” whose halachic law should have precedence over the Supreme Court?

Diskin is saying, bluntly and appalled, that the answer is yes to all of the above—that time is running out, especially given the settlers’ addiction to violence. Diskin is even willing to say that more efforts to displace settlers will mean more political assassinations [5].

The point is, Diskin is not the only Israeli centrist who is fed-up. Tel Aviv is finally stirring. And the summer is just beginning.

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[3] http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Society_&_Culture/Bet_poll.html

[4] <http://www.commondreams.org/headline/2012/04/29-1>

[5] <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/yuval-diskin-west-bank-evacuations-could-lead-to-another-political-assassination-1.426979>