



# **GOP MEGADONOR IS FUNDING A FAR-RIGHT ISRAELI THINK TANK — AND ESTABLISHMENT DEMOCRATS**

Pennsylvania billionaire Jeffrey Yass is bankrolling groups dedicated to shutting down critiques of Israeli human rights abuses.

[AkeLa Lacy](#)

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A Likud party supporter holds a poster of Benjamin Netanyahu as he delivers an election campaign in Migdal HaEmek, Israel, on Oct. 23, 2022. Photo: Ariel Schalit/AP

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**THE SOLE DONOR** to a [political action committee](#) created to bolster the Democratic Party's establishment flank is also funding a conservative Israeli think tank at the helm of the country's rightward lurch.

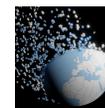
Pennsylvania billionaire and Republican megadonor Jeffrey Yass is a key benefactor behind both the [Moderate PAC](#), which fights progressive primary challengers in the United States, and the [Kohelet Policy Forum](#), which is working to [reshape the political system](#) in Israel.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's [new administration](#) has taken unprecedented steps to undermine democratic checks and balances, weaken the country's Supreme Court, and further entrench the power of far-right politicians, all while ramping up violence against Palestinians. Those moves have been guided in part by Kohelet – at least one of whose members is also trying to influence congressional activity in the U.S.

Kohelet's stated aims are to “secure Israel's future as the nation-state of the Jewish people” and “broaden individual liberty and free-market principles in Israel.” Pulling from the playbook of the American Legislative Exchange Council – a Koch-backed group that [writes model legislation for conservative lawmakers](#) across the U.S. – Kohelet's founder [helped draft](#) the law that became Israel's Basic Law on the Nation-State in 2018. The controversial policy established Jewish people as having the sole right to self-determination, downgraded Arabic from its status as an official language, and declared the development of Jewish settlement a “national value.” Kohelet also drafted a new law that gives Israel's Parliament the power to override Supreme Court decisions, grants the government [complete control](#) over judicial appointments, and abolishes the courts' [reasonableness doctrine](#), which was most recently used to disqualify a thrice-convicted criminal and Netanyahu ally from serving as health and interior minister.

“A couple of conservative American billionaires are devoting bottomless resources to undermine democracy,” [wrote](#) Debra Shushan, director of policy at J Street, in a recent brief on Kohelet's work to reconfigure the Israeli judiciary.

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But Kohelet’s aims are not restricted to Israel’s domestic politics. Lara Friedman, president of the Foundation for Middle East Peace, noted that the group’s director of international policy has supported U.S. legislation that would make boycotts against Israel illegal and has worked “to effectively change U.S. laws so that we no longer view boycotts of Israel or settlements as a legitimate form of protest.”



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Eugene Kontorovich, head of Kohelet’s international law department and director of the Center for the Middle East and International Law at George Mason University’s Antonin Scalia Law School, has been involved in efforts to pass domestic legislation opposing protests of Israel. Kontorovich has [helped provide policy drafts](#) and counsel for [state](#) and federal [legislation](#) opposing the [boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement](#) against Israel. He has testified in at least eight congressional hearings on issues including antisemitic [domestic terrorism](#), the relocation of the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, Israel’s control over the [Golan Heights](#), and Palestinian [attempts](#) to join the International Criminal Court. Kontorovich is [active](#) in conservative political circles in the U.S. and overseas, [appearing](#) on stage at the Conservative Political Action Conference in Budapest, Hungary, last year. According to Friedman, he has been instrumental in Kohelet’s push to reframe all criticism of Israel in the U.S. as antisemitic.

“My involvement in anti-BDS legislation issues is not in my capacity at Kohelet, but rather part of the participation in American public life that is common among law professors,” Kontorovich said in a statement to The Intercept. Kontorovich also said he had assisted in drafting amicus briefs as part of his work at George Mason. He did

not respond to a question about why his work with Kohelet is not mentioned in his university bio.

**WHILE ISRAEL'S NEW GOVERNMENT** works with Kohelet to push the country further to the right, the group's benefactor is undertaking similar aims in the U.S. It's not a coincidence, Friedman said, that one of Kohelet's sponsors is now funding a new PAC targeting progressive candidates.



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Yass, a libertarian and one of the country's biggest GOP donors, is the [only contributor to the Moderate PAC](#). The group is led by operatives with no political experience who are

little known in Washington: Ty Strong, a former financial and business analyst, serves as president alongside his mother, the chief financial officer. With President Joe Biden's former campaign manager as its sole consultant, the PAC pledged last month to raise \$20 million to defeat progressive primary challengers this cycle and "scare off" progressive groups like Justice Democrats. Yass did not respond to a request for comment.

The billionaire's support for radicalizing conservative politics in Israel is well known, but his domestic political ventures have only recently involved tamping down on progressives in Congress, who have consistently been the only elected officials willing to criticize U.S. support of Israel. His bankrolling of the Moderate PAC comes as international good governance groups are increasingly recognizing Israel as an apartheid state, and officials in Congress are censuring members who speak out against Israeli violence. The House of Representatives [voted earlier this month](#) to remove Rep. Ilhan Omar, D-Minn., one of the body's most [vocal critics](#) of

Israel's human rights abuses in Palestine, from the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

Kohelet and the Moderate PAC are both part of a broader project to silence criticism of Israel in Congress and bolster institutional support for the Netanyahu regime, Friedman said. Kohelet has been behind many of Israel's illiberal policies, she noted, adding that Congress has stifled critiques of the same policies, which have been condemned by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. "Now the common refrain in Congress is, 'Oh, this is antisemitic,' which is then used to shut down critics of Israel like Ilhan Omar. There's something rather elegant about this."

"It suggests that on this issue, we all stand together arm in arm on what it means to be pro-Israel today," Friedman said. "This is why they're so worried about progressive candidates coming up in the ranks. You've gotta nip this in the bud."

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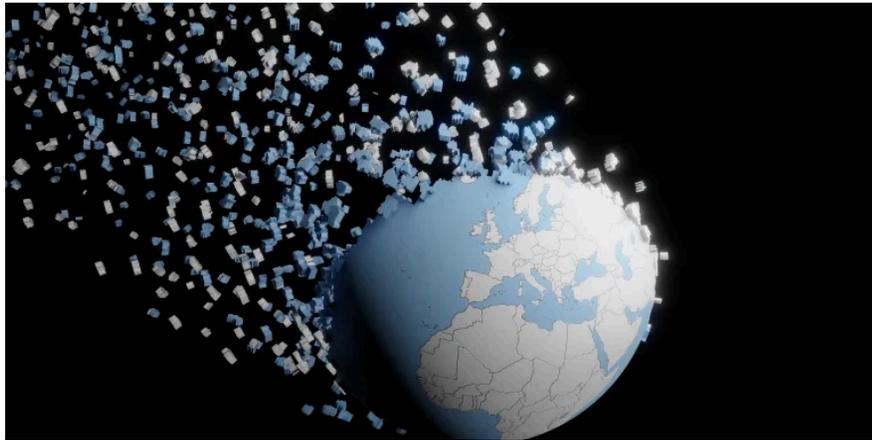


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