

Benny Gantz Did the Right Thing by Putting His Country First

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Articles & Testimony

The Blue-White leader's former allies have denounced him for caving to Netanyahu, but his conciliatory gesture is a sign of statesmanship, not weakness.

Israel will very likely have a new government soon. Benny Gantz made this possible by agreeing on March 26 to form a national unity government under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Gantz's critics have savaged him for doing so. They are outraged because, after the election, Gantz was in a relatively strong position. Netanyahu's right-wing bloc had 58 seats, but the anti-Netanyahu bloc had 62—including 15 seats from the largely Arab Joint List. The Joint List's leader, Ayman Odeh, made clear the list was prepared to give Gantz the mandate to form the government and provide a critical parliamentary safety net for it even though the Joint List would remain outside of the new government.

However, within Gantz's alliance, Blue and White, there were two members, Yoaz Hendel and Zvi Hauser, who declared they would not vote for a government that would depend on a party containing some leaders who have publicly supported Palestinian violence against Israel, meaning Gantz would fall short of the 61 votes needed to form a government.

Still, Gantz had enormous leverage because he controlled a majority of votes within the Knesset, and his critics are lambasting him for giving it away. In their eyes, he had the numbers to pass legislation—denying anyone indicted from being able to form a government or run for election—that would have dealt a knockout blow to Netanyahu; instead, he broke his campaign promise not to serve in a government under Netanyahu. His former partner in Blue

and White, Yair Lapid, charged that “Benny Gantz surrendered without a fight,” and another member of his alliance, Ofer Shelah, declared that “at the moment of truth, Gantz crumbled.”

But Gantz, a former chief of staff of the Israeli military, didn’t really crumble. He put his country first. Yes, he could have pressed for the legislation denying Netanyahu a role, but he believed that would have dramatically deepened the divisions in Israel rather than overcome them. Moreover, because he knew he could not form a government without Netanyahu, he acted—and his party split in response.

He explained his decision to the Knesset succinctly: “These are unusual times and they call for unusual decisions...This is not the time for controversy and divisions. This is the time for responsible, committed, patriotic leadership. Let’s join hands and get Israel out of this crisis.”

Israel is indeed facing a crisis. The country is locked down. COVID-19 has exploded in Israel and, like in the United States, people are being laid off, worrying how they will pay their rent, and fearing what will happen to the economy and the health system. Gantz saw a crisis and the need to respond, rather than continue to politically maneuver and force a dreaded fourth election.

Gantz put unity and the country first, despite the heavy political cost he knew he would pay. Gantz’s decision reminded us of what we described in **[our recent book \(https://www.publicaffairsbooks.com/titles/dennis-ross/be-strong-and-of-good-courage/9781541767645/\)](https://www.publicaffairsbooks.com/titles/dennis-ross/be-strong-and-of-good-courage/9781541767645/)** on Israeli leaders who made wrenching decisions for the sake of the country. David Ben-Gurion, Menachem Begin, Yitzhak Rabin, and Ariel Sharon were far apart ideologically, but shared the same view of a prime minister’s responsibilities and the necessities of leadership.

They understood what was important and acted accordingly; they saw the need to make decisions and not avoid them or defer them to their successors; they accepted responsibility and always saw the costs of inaction—not just the cost of action. Most importantly, whenever they had to choose between what the country needed and what their own political base wanted, they chose the country.

Begin was accused of betrayal by those who had been his closest political comrades for accepting the Camp David Accords in 1978. Sharon, too, was charged by his base with betrayal for his decision to withdraw from Gaza in 2005. He, of course, made his decision knowing that similar charges led to the assassination of Rabin in 1995—an assassination triggered by extreme incitement against Rabin for having launched the Oslo peace process with the Palestine Liberation Organization and concluded an interim agreement in which the Israeli military withdrew from most cities in the West Bank.

That’s not to say that Gantz’s move last week rises to the level of the decisions that those four leaders made. But his motivation was the same: He was driven by his belief that the country, not politics, must take precedence in a time of emergency. And he knew that in making this decision, he would split his party and perhaps cost himself any real political future.

In a new unity government, Gantz would likely serve as defense minister and deputy prime minister with ostensible veto power over much of what Netanyahu can do. Given his beliefs, there may well be an opportunity to reverse some worrying trends in Israel, including on challenges to core Israeli institutions such as the Supreme Court and moves toward West Bank annexation. The former threatens Israeli democracy and the rule of law. The latter, if not prevented outside of the major existing settlement blocs, will make it geographically impossible for Israelis and Palestinians to create two separate entities, leaving one state for two peoples. Gantz’s decision must be measured against this trajectory, and not against utopia.

Historically, Israel’s greatest leaders did not fool themselves. They saw reality as it was and sought to change it.

We wrote our book, ***Be Strong and of Good Courage: How Israel’s Most Important Leaders Shaped Its Destiny*** (**<https://www.publicaffairsbooks.com/titles/dennis-ross/be-strong-and-of-good-courage/9781541767645/>**),

because of our fear that if Israel does not have a leader who is willing to make tough decisions and take on his political base, a two-state solution for Israelis and Palestinians will become impossible, leaving one state for two peoples—a situation that could imperil Israel’s identity as a Jewish-majority democratic state while depriving Palestinians of basic political rights. Gantz has demonstrated that he was willing to make the tough call; it is unclear whether Netanyahu will match Gantz’s nobility of purpose in putting the country first and stopping the erosion of Israel’s institutions and the march toward a binational state.

More trouble is coming, whether it is during the brinkmanship in finalizing the formation of a new government or in the coming months. After members of the Israeli political right momentarily hailed Gantz for his statesmanship and for breaking the impasse after three inconclusive elections, they have already begun chipping away at his standing. Some Likud parliamentarians are now questioning the unity deal, asking how there can be parity in a government when there is a disparity in seats. (The right-wing bloc has anywhere from 52 to 58 seats, depending on Netanyahu’s fractious ties with the pro-settler faction led by defense minister Naftali Bennett. Gantz’s bloc will have 20, counting three seats from Labor.)

In addition, those on the right, including Bennett and Ayelet Shaked, are insisting that Netanyahu must use the presidency of U.S. President Donald Trump and the highly controversial Trump peace plan to press ahead with immediate annexation of the settlements and the Jordan Valley before the U.S. election in November. These lawmakers are calling for Netanyahu to unilaterally annex the Jordan Valley, the eastern frontier of the West Bank abutting Jordan, which is particularly sensitive for Israelis, Palestinians, and Jordanians alike.

The differences over unilateral annexation constitute the biggest issue still to be resolved before finalizing the new government, with Netanyahu pressing for a timeline for annexation and Gantz resisting that for two reasons: First, he believes Israel must put all its energies over the next six months into dealing with COVID-19 and all its implications; and second, he feels the annexation called for in the Trump plan should only be implemented in coordination with the Egyptians, Jordanians, and Palestinians. In other words, annexation must not take place unilaterally.

Until now, Gantz has maintained that position, though there are reports that the two have reached a compromise, with Netanyahu permitted to raise annexation in July—but only able to implement it if there is both agreement with the Trump administration and international consultations. The latter condition reflects the Gantz position, particularly because no one other than the United States has supported unilateral annexation.

Assuming the government forms, Netanyahu will be committed to stepping down as prime minister in September 2021, in accordance with the rotation agreed upon in the unity government deal. But doubts remain strong that he will actually live up to the agreement. He will certainly have to resist people whispering in his ear that Gantz has no options and can be easily marginalized, having burned bridges with his own alliance.

So the question remains how Netanyahu will use the next 17 months. Will he adopt a “country first” approach in order to prepare a dignified exit, by seeking to focus on the coronavirus emergency and then looking for a gradual way out of the deep impasse with the Palestinians?

Or will he instead adopt a “base first” approach—which is how he has governed since 2015? A base-first approach would ensure that this power-sharing arrangement with Gantz either does not materialize or is short-lived. Now Netanyahu has to decide whether the relationship with Gantz is merely a tactical maneuver, or whether it reflects a change of heart for a leader nearing the end of his career who wants to leave a mark in the tradition of Israel’s great historic figures. Gantz has made his choice; now, Netanyahu must make his.

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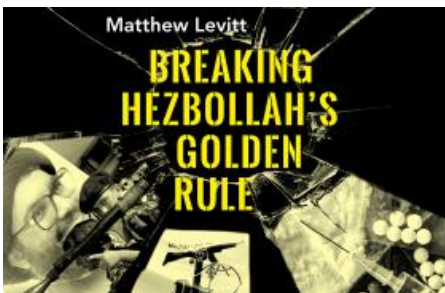
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