

Why Israel's Generals Are Taking on Netanyahu

by [Neri Zilber \(/experts/neri-zilber\)](/experts/neri-zilber)

Jul 2, 2019

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/lima-ythdy-jnralat-asrayyl-ntnyahw\)](/ar/policy-analysis/lima-ythdy-jnralat-asrayyl-ntnyahw)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Neri Zilber \(/experts/neri-zilber\)](/experts/neri-zilber)

Neri Zilber, a journalist and analyst on Middle East politics and culture, is an adjunct fellow of The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

Almost all of them believe the prime minister is destroying the country's democratic values and sacrificing the Zionist dream by avoiding a two-state solution.

After six years away, Ehud Barak, Israel's most decorated soldier and a former prime minister, last week made a dramatic return to political life ahead of September's repeat election. Barak is hardly alone. In recent months, a slew of ex-generals and former heads of the Israel Defense Forces have entered politics with one common goal in mind: ousting corruption-plagued Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. And, for some of them, the broader goal is saving Israel's future as a Jewish and democratic state by separating from the Palestinians.

"The future of the Zionist movement is on the line here," Barak, who served as prime minister from 1999 to 2001, declared at the launch of his as-yet-unnamed political party. At the side of the 77-year-old former general was another retired officer who previously served as the IDF's deputy chief of staff, Yair Golan.

Call it the brass revolt. With Netanyahu in deep political trouble after his failure in May to pull together a new government following a squeak-through election victory, the officers-cum-politicians hope to succeed this time where they have failed before. But they likely face an uphill campaign: Despite the near total mobilization of Israel's security establishment against him in recent years, Netanyahu keeps winning.

Playing on his own image as "Mr. Security," the long-serving premier has paid lip service to the idea of peace while in effect mothballing any steps toward resolving the conflict. Lately he has even begun voicing support for annexing swaths of the West Bank, a move that could doom prospects for a negotiated two-state solution. Netanyahu knows, like few Israeli politicians before him, how to pander to his right-wing base and keep supporters loyal—no matter the long-term damage to institutions that push back, like the judiciary, media, and in some cases even the army.

Yet it's not just the very top echelon of Israel's security establishment that thinks such policies are self-destructive.

Nearly 300 retired officers from the army, police, Shin Bet security service, and Mossad spy agency with the rank of brigadier general (or its equivalent) and up have joined Commanders for Israel's Security, a movement established in 2014 that calls for preserving the future option of a two-state solution. "The illusion of a status quo, and the current stalemate are detrimental to Israel's security, wellbeing and character as a Jewish democracy," its **platform** (<http://en.cis.org.il/about/>) says.

How, then, to explain all these senior military professionals all saying the same thing? "I call it 'the reality principle, stupid!'" Ehud Barak **told me** (<https://www.thedailybeast.com/israels-ex-prime-minister-ehud-barak-says-keep-the-iran-nuclear-deal>) last year. "These people are dealing with life and death on a daily basis, protecting our people, so they make judgments on how to be most effective to protect the country to save lives. They don't think politically. And it ended up that their positions are on the center-left side—it means something about the reality, not about them."

The reality for the center-left is clear: Without separation from the Palestinians, Israeli Jews can expect to find themselves demographically outnumbered as a percentage of the population one day, calling into question Israel's ability to maintain either its Jewish or democratic character.

In addition to Barak, the anti-Netanyahu forces are today led by multiple former IDF chiefs of staff, three of whom head the centrist Blue and White party: Benny Gantz, Moshe Yaalon, and Gabi Ashkenazi. Their initial foray into politics earlier this year brought a solid result in the initial April ballot—they effectively tied Netanyahu's right-wing Likud party—but victory eluded them. (The fact that Netanyahu subsequently failed to form a governing coalition and dragged the country to another election had little to do with Blue and White.)

Despite their decades of military experience, the generals of Blue and White—along with former Finance Minister Yair Lapid—failed to dislodge Netanyahu. Two days before Israelis went to the polls in April, Blue and White held its closing campaign rally at the Tel Aviv fairgrounds. For its final electoral push that evening, Blue and White enlisted additional firepower, including another former IDF chief of staff and defense minister, Shaul Mofaz; a former head of military intelligence, Amos Yadlin; and a former regional commander in the West Bank, Avi Mizrahi.

Six retired generals all on one stage together, all saying the same thing: Israel under Netanyahu's direction had lost its way. The Zionist project was in peril.

Mofaz spoke of the erosion of basic values in public life, Yadlin emphasized that national security was contingent on unity inside the country, and Mizrahi summed up the ethos that had driven Gantz and the others to enter politics: "Either we do something or we stay silent," suggesting that inaction would have serious consequences. Israeli voters weren't convinced.

It was all an eerie replay of the previous election campaign in 2015. Then, just a few days before the polls opened, another seasoned general, former Mossad head Meir Dagan, went up on stage in front of cheering crowds in Tel Aviv's Rabin Square. At times on the verge of tears, Dagan blasted Netanyahu and said the crisis in leadership was the worst in the state's history.

"We have a leader who fights only one campaign—the campaign for his own political survival," Dagan said then. "In the name of this war he is dragging us down to a binational state and to the end of the Zionist dream." A former head of the IDF's Northern Command and deputy Mossad chief, Amiram Levin, also spoke that night, echoing Dagan's dire warnings.

Netanyahu easily won reelection. Arguably the only difference between that election and this past April's is that the security establishment made its criticism formal and overt via the creation of Blue and White: Gantz and Ashkenazi entered politics for the first time, Yaalon joined the party, and the other generals mentioned above weighed in from the sidelines.

Indeed, every retired IDF chief of staff since the mid-1990s (save Dan Halutz and the very recent Gadi Eisenkot) has officially run against Benjamin Netanyahu, calling into question his judgement and leadership.

Amnon Lipkin-Shahak, Barak's successor as top military commander in the 1990s, was also a severe Netanyahu critic who ventured briefly into politics before his death at age 68 in 2012.

Much like Dagan, other former heads of the Mossad and Shin Bet have come out in harsh terms against both government policy and the overall trajectory of the country, usually having to do with the Palestinian question. Former Shin Bet chief Yuval Diskin in 2015 [said \(https://news.walla.co.il/item/2864893\)](https://news.walla.co.il/item/2864893) Israel was moving toward "an impossible reality ... a de facto binational state ... and the disappearance of the Zionist dream—[that is], a democratic and Jewish state here in the Land of Israel." Former Mossad head Tamir Pardo [claimed \(https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4848023,00.html\)](https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4848023,00.html) in 2016 that the only existential threat arrayed against Israel was internal, not external. "Netanyahu said there would be two states between the [Mediterranean] Sea and the Jordan [River], and he was correct," Pardo added, a callback to Netanyahu's past statements, since recanted, regarding a two-state solution.

Even so, many of the security establishment figures critical of Netanyahu can hardly be described as dovish. Dagan was [infamous \(https://www.jpost.com/Features/Magazine-Features/The-art-of-espionage-265000\)](https://www.jpost.com/Features/Magazine-Features/The-art-of-espionage-265000) for his specialty in "severing an Arab's head from his body." After entering politics, both Mofaz and Yaalon served as defense ministers for the Likud party, the latter remaining a staunch opponent of the two-state solution.

There is a sense, though, that something has changed in recent years. The more rightward the Israeli government moves, the more outspoken and critical—and, dare we say, left-wing—those charged with protecting the state appear to be.

It wasn't, in truth, always like this. In previous generations, retired generals like Ariel Sharon and others entered politics at the vanguard of the hard-line right. Yet Sharon famously shifted his thinking in later years, pushing through the 2005 disengagement from the Gaza Strip and, in the process, quitting the Likud and forming his own party.

These days, only two senior security officials—former Shin Bet head Avi Dichter and retired IDF Gen. Yoav Galant—hold public office as part of the Israeli right. Yet even these two figures began their careers in more centrist parties and previously espoused softer opinions on the Palestinian issue.

As part of the bruising April election campaign, Netanyahu tried to tar Gantz and the other generals arrayed against him as "leftist" and "weak." "What determines security isn't the chiefs of staff, but the policies of politicians," Netanyahu said at one point. "These chiefs of staff had a policy that was wrong. If they become politicians, we're sunk. They have almost no understanding, I would say less than zero, of these issues."

Israeli politics are, of course, a scorched-earth battlefield. Netanyahu will repeat the same accusations (and worse) in the current campaign.

Yet the overwhelming consensus—some would say frantic clarion calls—from nearly every senior security professional who has entered political life is remarkably constant: The divisions and polarization inside Israel are growing, while the prospects for separating from the Palestinians are shrinking. Nothing less than the country's future is at stake, they say.

So are the generals skewing reality, like Netanyahu claims, or are they simply dealing with reality as it is, as they've been trained to do their entire military careers?

This question is especially pertinent for Barak. Far from helping end Netanyahu's long reign, his new party could cost Blue and White votes and fracture the opposition. Barak last week dismissed the scenario out of hand,

implausibly maintaining that his party could help the center-left garner more seats overall. But Barak does have something that the other claimants to the throne do not: experience as prime minister, innate political skill, and a familiarity with Netanyahu that goes back five decades when both were still commandos in uniform.

Netanyahu is now facing off against an iron wall of generals, compounding rumored inauspicious poll numbers, looming corruption indictments, and his recent failure to form a government. Yet he has bested them before, albeit not so many at one time. For Gantz, Barak, and the others, the true test is whether they can unite in their common mission—and persuade the Israeli public that in this campaign defeat isn't an option.

Neri Zilber is an adjunct fellow with The Washington Institute. ❖

Foreign Policy

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab-Israeli Relations \(/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations\)](#)

[Peace Process \(/policy-analysis/peace-process\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Israel \(/policy-analysis/israel\)](#)

[Palestinians \(/policy-analysis/palestinians\)](#)