

# With Gantz Out, Can Netanyahu Resist the Far Right's Pull?

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Brief Analysis

**U.S. officials are wary of Israel's expanding political minefield and prefer to avoid direct intervention on domestically sensitive issues, but the policy implications of Gantz's resignation—particularly the strengthening of the far right—will make it difficult to avoid weighing in.**

On June 9, the leaders of Israel's centrist National Unity party—former military chiefs of staff Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot—announced their resignation from Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's coalition, shrinking the government back to its narrow pre-Gaza war majority of 64 seats in the 120-member Knesset. In explaining his decision, Gantz argued that the coalition was incapable of reaching “true victory” and placed the blame squarely on Netanyahu, accusing him of putting personal politics over the national good. He also called for early elections so that the public can choose new leadership to handle Israel's multitude of pressing issues. In response, Netanyahu publicly chided Gantz for bailing out of the government during a multifront war.

The move marks the end of the post-October 7 “emergency government,” which concentrated power in a select “war cabinet” that favored moderates such as Gantz and Eisenkot while ostensibly marginalizing two far-right figures: National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir and Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich. Indeed, Gantz and Eisenkot wielded extensive influence in the war's early months by conditioning their entrance into the coalition on one clear stipulation: that the military focus its efforts on Hamas in Gaza, not on expanding the conflict to Hezbollah in Lebanon, as Ben-Gvir, Smotrich, and many other figures want. The two generals also played a key role in achieving the brief November ceasefire that saw 105 hostages freed.

Over time, however, Gantz's influence seemed to wane, and he began to believe he could not persuade Netanyahu to announce—let alone make preparations for—a “day after” strategy in Gaza. For his part, Netanyahu became convinced that Gantz and Eisenkot would resign at some point anyway, so he focused instead on shoring up his right flank and keeping his government alive. As Smotrich and Ben-Gvir repeatedly threatened to leave the government if it reached a second hostage deal or took other policy steps they deemed unpalatable, Netanyahu attempted to mollify

them, further eroding any remaining moderate influence.

## Potential Impact on the War

**W**ith Gantz's resignation, Netanyahu has lost his political cover: he can no longer blame centrist pressure for wartime decisions that are unpopular with his right-wing base or far-right coalition partners. In contrast, the decision boosts Ben-Gvir and Smotrich, who have already called for more influence in wartime decisionmaking. If they successfully pressure Netanyahu to dismantle the war cabinet and return authority to the broader security cabinet—where both ministers are full members—their power will grow significantly.

Netanyahu has other options. He could maintain the war cabinet framework with Defense Minister Yoav Gallant and his two close confidants, Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer and Shas Party leader Aryeh Deri, while adding Foreign Minister Israel Katz and Agriculture Minister Avi Dichter, former head of the Shin Bet. Yet the latter two cannot replace Gantz and Eisenkot's senior military experience.

Meanwhile, Ben-Gvir and Smotrich are making no secret of their desire to scuttle President Biden's bid for a new hostage/ceasefire deal (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/improving-overlooked-aspect-gaza-ceasefire-proposal>), which Washington hopes will evolve into a withdrawal from Gaza. Calling the potential deal a "surrender," they have pushed for broad Israeli military occupation and Jewish settlement construction in the Strip, forcing Netanyahu to publicly state that resettlement is "not on the agenda." They also oppose U.S.-brokered normalization with Saudi Arabia (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/war-peace-middle-east-observations-regional-tour>) if it means granting any concessions toward even the idea of Palestinian statehood (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/real-pa-reform-requires-more-just-new-prime-minister>). Smotrich has used his post to further weaken the Palestinian Authority and destabilize the West Bank (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/west-bank-economics-are-key-stabilizing-palestinian-authority-or-forcing-its>) by slashing tax revenue transfers, and he called for "decisive" action against the PA just hours after Gantz's exit. U.S.-Israel tensions over settlement expansion (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/israel-expands-settlements-smotrich-increases-his-authority>), settler violence (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/avoiding-west-bank-explosion-during-ramadan>), and other West Bank issues will likely worsen if Smotrich continues pushing the government in a hardline direction.

In light of these challenges, Netanyahu faces an immediate test: will he stand with the security services, which are reportedly very skeptical of Ben-Gvir and Smotrich's national security aims? If the prime minister yields to the far right to secure his political survival, many establishment figures fear the outcome will be a hasty war in Lebanon, deeper fissures with Washington, and an end to their hopes for a deal with Riyadh that could isolate Iran.

## Government Stability

**I**n theory, the current 64-seat government could remain intact until the next scheduled Knesset election in 2026. In practical terms, however, its tenure will almost certainly be shortened by any number of political minefields—most notably, failure to achieve Israeli war aims against Hamas.

Another key question is whether Gantz and Eisenkot's departure will supercharge ongoing public protests against the government, as some analysts have predicted. How many more demonstrators can the relatively reserved Gantz mobilize in comparison to relentless opposition figures such as Yair Lapid and Avigdor Liberman? Moreover, despite polls ([https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog\\_entry/tv-polls-gantzs-party-slips-slightly-after-government-exit-remains-largest-faction/](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/tv-polls-gantzs-party-slips-slightly-after-government-exit-remains-largest-faction/)) showing that Israelis consistently favor early elections, Netanyahu's numbers have crept up from their absolute low immediately after October 7, so it is too soon to count him out.

Perhaps his most sensitive domestic challenge is the proposed Draft Law, which his ultraorthodox partners have

demanding in order to secure their constituency's permanent exemption from military conscription. Yet the wider public is painfully aware of the need for more military manpower since October 7, and polls show widespread antagonism toward the legislation even among Netanyahu's own Likud Party, as well as surging support for steadfast opponents of the exemption (e.g., Liberman). The Supreme Court is currently deliberating on challenges to the exemption, and the justices have visibly lost patience with the government's repeated requests to defer a decision since March, when the waiver on draft notices expired. A preliminary reading of the bill passed this week, though it is unlikely to come up for a final Knesset vote before the fall session. Tellingly, Gallant was the only coalition member to vote nay during the preliminary reading.

If the government falls or Netanyahu calls for early elections, Gantz's prospects of replacing him as prime minister are unclear. He beats Netanyahu in surveys on suitability for that post, and his party tops the latest polls. Yet much of his strength comes from center-right voters who view him as a unity candidate bent on putting the country first. In an election campaign, he could face stiff competition for these voters, including former prime minister Naftali Bennett and ex-Mossad chief Yossi Cohen.

## Implications for U.S. Policy

In foreign policy terms, Netanyahu's relations with the Biden administration were strained even with Gantz and Eisenkot on board. Yet they acted as a moderate check on the government, and policy disputes could be greatly exacerbated without them. Washington and Jerusalem have clear differences on multiple issues, including the proposed hostage deal, strategic planning for the "day after," potential military escalation against growing Hezbollah aggression (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/mapping-clashes-along-israel-lebanon-border>) in the north, and Smotrich's continued actions against the PA. Secretary of State Antony Blinken likely raised all of these issues during his June 10-11 visit to Israel.

Accordingly, it would make sense for Washington to focus on engaging Gallant. Given Israel's reliance on American security support, its defense ministers are traditionally more sensitive than other officials to the strategic necessity of preserving close bilateral ties. This is particularly true amid the current controversy about providing heavy bombs (<https://thehill.com/opinion/4656096-why-and-how-to-walk-back-bidens-suspension-of-weapons-delivery-to-israel/>) to Israeli forces during the war.

In addition, Gallant has pushed for increasing humanitarian assistance to Gaza (echoing Gantz's stance) and engaging closely with the Biden administration on the military campaign in Rafah. According to U.S. officials, Gallant favored evacuating numerous civilians from Rafah before the operation began and then moving methodically through the area to allow more time for evacuations. An estimated one million Rafah residents have indeed been relocated, and although the administration believes that their current living conditions are inadequate, it has not publicly criticized Israel on this front, instead acknowledging that intense combat operations did not commence until civilians were largely out of harm's way. Initially, Israel focused on establishing control of the crucial Philadelphia Corridor along the Egypt-Gaza frontier and destroying cross-border tunnels, delaying its entry into the most densely populated parts of Rafah.

Going forward, U.S. officials are well aware of Israel's current political minefield and prefer to avoid direct intervention that could explode into a full-scale bilateral crisis. Yet the potential policy implications of Gantz's resignation—particularly the strengthening of far-right coalition members—will make it difficult for Washington to completely avoid making its views known on certain sensitive issues related to the war, especially with U.S. elections looming in November. Netanyahu will have to choose whether to side with Gallant and the security establishment or yield to Smotrich and Ben-Gvir.

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