

The Bibi Slayer?

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

Feb 8, 2019

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

By advocating clean, courteous politics and walking a fine line between centrists and right-wingers, a retired general is giving Netanyahu a run for his money.

If Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu loses his bid for a fourth consecutive term in elections this coming April, an unlikely figure will be responsible: retired Lt. Gen. Benny Gantz, a former army chief of staff still taking his first tentative steps on the battlefield of national politics. Gantz's new political party, Hosen LeYisrael ("Resilience for Israel"), didn't exist two months ago—yet it's now running second to Netanyahu's Likud party in the polls. Even more telling, Gantz is [near even with Netanyahu \(https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/elections/.premium-benny-gantz-is-soaring-in-the-polls-and-voters-will-have-to-choose-between-benjamins-1.6895764\)](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/elections/.premium-benny-gantz-is-soaring-in-the-polls-and-voters-will-have-to-choose-between-benjamins-1.6895764) on the all-important question of suitability for prime minister, the first time in a decade an opposition figure has come within sniffing distance. This is due to Gantz's strong military record, which in security-obsessed Israel still goes a long way. It may also have something to do with his sheer look: tall, slim, with blue eyes and distinguished grey hair, what one political commentator termed "American senatorial."

Gantz may now be the great hope of the anti-Netanyahu forces, a large unformed vessel into which they can pour all their pent-up frustrations. But whatever the outcome of the election, those same polls still currently give the edge to Netanyahu in forming a right-wing coalition under Israel's parliamentary system, making the math behind Gantz's task challenging.

In truth, though, until his party's launch event last week, the question surrounding Gantz wasn't if he could win but whether he would actually speak. A month had passed since snap elections were called in late December 2018, and he remained silent, except for a few short campaign videos touting his command of two wars in Gaza (bombed out buildings, a drone strike on a Hamas military leader, "Only the Strong Win" voiceover) and his hope for future generations ("It's not a disgrace to strive for peace"). The slickly produced launch event at the Tel Aviv fairgrounds was therefore eagerly anticipated, and Gantz by all accounts gave a strong performance, even brushing off a heckler

at the start of his speech. “Now that I started speaking, I’m going to stop?” he joked, referencing the criticism he was under for his weeks of silence.

The speech itself amplified the main theme his strategists had been hammering relentlessly: that there was no longer right or left in politics, but simply “Israel before all.” The branding of Benny Gantz as a centrist candidate, triangulating between the traditional peace and nationalist camps, had begun.

Thus there were paeans to the everyday travails of the average Israeli—the high cost of living, the overcrowded highways and hospital rooms, the lack of public transport on the Sabbath—interspersed with direct threats against Iranian, Lebanese, and Hamas leaders. On the most divisive issue, the Palestinian question, Gantz sounded a lot like other centrists. He vowed to work toward peace while holding on to all of Jerusalem and the West Bank settlement blocs. And he gestured vaguely at the possibility of a unilateral pullback in the West Bank if an agreement was not possible, thereby safeguarding the country’s demographic future. “We will maintain security in the entire Land of Israel,” Gantz said, “but we will not allow the millions of Palestinians living beyond the [West Bank] separation fence to endanger our security and our identity as a Jewish state.”

The most striking aspect of the speech was Gantz’s biting criticisms of Netanyahu—which drew huge cheers from his crowd of supporters. “The current regime encourages incitement, subversion, and hatred,” he said. “Instead of serving the people, the government looms over the people and finds the people to be a bore.” He thanked Netanyahu for a decade of service but added, “We’ll take it from here.”

Hours before the speech, Gantz added another retired army chief of staff and former Likud defense minister, Moshe “Bogie” Yaalon, to his party list, along with two former Netanyahu aides—all right-wing hard-liners on the Palestinian issue. Aside from boosting Gantz’s electoral prospects, the move was meant to deflect the Likud’s inevitable attacks on him as a “leftist”—a common smear in present-day Israeli discourse. Yet it also planted the seeds for a future policy conundrum.

Unlike Gantz, Yaalon doesn’t differentiate between West Bank settlement blocs and outlying settlements; he also rejects unilateral withdrawals and doesn’t view the security fence as a future border of any kind. In fact, Yaalon’s first campaign video under Gantz was filmed from a West Bank outpost, where he highlighted the entire settlement movement’s “strategic security importance” along with what he said was the Jewish people’s right to settle in all parts of the Land of Israel.

It’s unclear if such direct, right-wing pandering will have the desired impact come election day. According to a [recent poll in the Haaretz daily \(https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/elections/.premium-haaretz-poll-half-of-israelis-don-t-want-netanyahu-reelected-1.6909754\)](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/elections/.premium-haaretz-poll-half-of-israelis-don-t-want-netanyahu-reelected-1.6909754), only 12 percent of potential Gantz voters previously voted for Likud. In contrast, the same poll indicated that three-quarters of potential Gantz supporters come from either left-wing or centrist parties—with the plurality (39 percent) derived from the sinking ship that is the Labor Party.

The other big loser for the moment is the centrist Yesh Atid party, led by former Finance Minister Yair Lapid. Prior to Gantz’s speech, he and Lapid were polling almost even; over the past week, Gantz has opened up a substantial lead. Gantz has clearly co-opted the Lapid playbook: a zealous centrism giving rise to a broad anti-Netanyahu coalition that would rally behind him as the sole realistic alternative for change.

Asked to respond to Gantz’s speech, a [senior Yesh Atid official remarked \(https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5455170,00.html#autoplay\)](https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5455170,00.html#autoplay) that most of it was taken from the Yesh Atid charter. (Netanyahu made the same observation, albeit less charitably.) The major difference in the eyes of the public is clearly Gantz’s career as a military commander, contrasted with Lapid’s past as a journalist.

For now Yesh Atid still maintains that it’s the only party with the organization and political figure (Lapid) capable of

beating Netanyahu. Yet its members also admit that talks have taken place with Gantz over a possible merger. The main sticking point is who gets top spot and becomes the party's candidate for prime minister. Absent such a move, it's unlikely that any of them independently can overtake the Likud; running together, however, some polls have them leading.

Ahead of a Feb. 20 deadline for party registrations, Gantz is hoping that his high poll numbers will force Lapid to capitulate. Lapid, on the other hand, is likely waiting for Gantz's post-launch bump in the polls to wither.

Gantz hasn't yet followed up his primetime speech with any additional public remarks. He gave his first press interview to an Israeli rock star (and close friend) who writes a personal column for the *Yedioth Ahronoth* daily. (The artist, Shlomo Artzi, conducted the interview jointly with another columnist.) The local media has begun grumbling, and some outside observers are growing skeptical that such a cautious approach can work.

"They kept him silent as much as they could because they didn't want him to be attacked," Camil Fuchs, a prominent pollster, said on a podcast recently (<https://soundcloud.com/user-579725143/tipping-point-episode-103/s-OsfCz>), referring to Gantz's strategists. "But if he stays silent for another month or so, people will say, 'Come on, it's too much. Let's forget about him and look for another party.'"

More than his policies and his running mates, Gantz's own personality and political skills will be severely tested in the next two months. Ron Ben-Yishai, a veteran military correspondent who has known Gantz for more than three decades, told *Foreign Policy* he never imagined the former general going into politics. "He doesn't like media, it's almost an obsession, and he doesn't like public appearances...so this is all fairly surprising. Apparently there was a burning desire inside of him" to run.

Ben-Yishai commended Gantz for his self-control and discipline, for his ability to listen to other people, for being a team player, and for not being "a soloist or maverick"—all qualities necessary in a political campaign. "You can see that it's still not natural for him," he said. "It's a profession that he doesn't know, it's a minefield, and he's following the advice" of his media advisors.

These days, only when going off-script does the true Gantz come out. Toward the end of his speech last week, a supporter in the crowd loudly cursed Netanyahu. Gantz, campaigning to topple the prime minister, stopped and looked down at the man. "We will remain respectful and respectable," he said. It was a sharp contrast to Netanyahu's scorched-earth politicking—an approach that has worked for the Israeli leader again and again. Gantz is gambling that voters are finally tired of the shtick.

Neri Zilber is an adjunct fellow with The Washington Institute and coauthor of the paper [State with No Army, Army with No State: Evolution of the Palestinian Authority Security Forces, 1994-2018](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/state-with-no-army-army-with-no-state) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/state-with-no-army-army-with-no-state>). ❖

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)



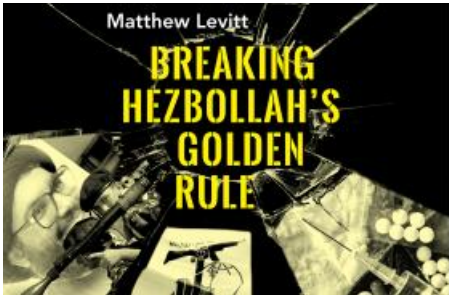
BRIEF ANALYSIS

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)

