

Unity in Israel begins to crack as war effort lingers



By Keren Setton
Journalist

OPINION

October 7 may have temporarily pushed political disagreement aside. However, Israelis who previously opposed the Netanyahu cabinet over the plans to implement a judicial reform are now doubting Netanyahu's intentions about the war. When the war between Hamas and Israel erupted on October 7, 2023, Israelis instantly united. After almost a year of bitter divisions over a cabinet plan to overhaul the judicial system, the scenes of Hamas' offensive on Israel immediately pushed aside all the divisions. Most members of the parliamentary opposition, who had frequently called for the ousting of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, announced they were now backing the cabinet. The second-largest opposition party, led by former military chiefs Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot, joined the cabinet just days after the fighting began. Since then, more than three months into the war, the political fractures are becoming visible again.

Israel's former army chief of staff Gadi Eisenkot (L) and Defense Minister Benny Gantz arrive for a joint press conference to announce Eisenkot's election bid and their political alliance in Ramat Gan, occupied Palestine, on August 14, 2022. ● JACK GUEZ/AFP

"There was a feeling that the war would end swiftly," Roni Rimon, a strategic adviser and partner at the public relations firm Rimon Cohen & Co., told The Media Line. "But now, as even senior officials including Netanyahu say it will last at least a year, those who want to replace him say waiting until the war is over is too long." "The same forces that were operating before the war continue to exist," said Dr. Liron Lavi, an assistant professor in the Department of Political Studies at Bar-Ilan University. "To some extent, the divisions are even more highlighted because there is a war going on and people are paying with their lives." As the unity seems to wane, some are questioning whether Netanyahu's handling of the war is steering Israel in the right direction. Meanwhile, others are questioning the prime minister's motives, suggesting his political interest lies in the continuation of the fighting, which inevitably delays his political demise. While Netanyahu has repeatedly ruled out holding elections during a war, increasingly, more and more voices are saying that elections are needed now. This is one of the reasons — but not the only one — that the Israeli premier and his Likud party are lagging in the polls, with numbers showing the party being cut in half if an election were held today. Gantz's party, Blue and White, has almost tripled in the polls. The ultra-right-wing party, Jewish Power, has also gained some strength. It is led by National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, who has consistently voiced hardline positions about Israel's war on Hamas. Gantz appears to have made his political capital on putting politics aside, including his own personal benefit, and giving the Netanyahu cabinet his backing as Israel faces an uncertain future in the region. "Gantz's poll numbers are unrealistic and reflect the lack of an alternative for voters who are right-wing but do not want Netanyahu or the current Likud party," Rimon explained. "Once there will be new actors from the right wing, this will change." But the undercurrents that reflect unease with the current leadership are gradually growing.

"It is like a water dam that has a small leak, which is gradually growing," Rimon told The Media Line. "This sentiment will likely increase, but it is dependent on developments on the ground." In an interview last week, Gantz's party member Eisenkot said that the Israeli leadership was not telling the public the truth. As part of the five-member war cabinet assembled at the beginning of the war, Eisenkot went on to say that the cabinet was spreading "illusions" by telling Israelis that the captives could be freed through military operations. The former army chief, who himself recently lost his son in the war, said the only way to secure a hostage deal was through an elongated cease-fire. His comments came as relatives of the captives stepped up public pressure against the cabinet. On Saturday, thousands of people gathered in several Israeli cities, calling for the release of the captives being held by Hamas in the Gaza Strip. One of those protests was in front of Netanyahu's home. Demonstrators held signs of the captives, some saying the cabinet wasn't doing enough. The goals of the war, as set out by the Netanyahu cabinet, were to release the captives and topple Hamas. As time inches by, there are increasing divisions about how the war is being handled and whether the fighting is risking the possibility of a hostage deal or promoting one. On Monday, the Knesset was set to vote on three different no-confidence votes against the cabinet. While it is highly unlikely that there will be a majority in favor of them, the notion of unbreakable unity is beginning to crack. When joining the cabinet, Gantz made it clear it was only to be part of the war effort. As this effort wanes, he is likely contemplating the timing of his exit. "As long as there is intense fighting, he will and should stay," said Rimon. "But the longer he stays, the higher the chances that any failures will stick to him." Gantz's departure could signal to the public that the time is ripe for elections. According to Rimon, such a move could set off more intense public pressure to head to the ballots.

The full article first appeared in The Media Line.

Israeli PM's looming political predicament

By Charlotte Lawson
Reporter

OPINION

As fighting in Gaza passes the 100-day mark, making it the country's longest conflict since the 1948 war, many Israelis are expressing growing concerns about cabinet accountability in light of the security and intelligence failures leading up to October 7, the increasingly dire captive situation, and the economic toll of the war. It all spells particular trouble for Netanyahu, who's long branded himself as "Mr. Economy" and "Mr. Security." While some are resolute in their continued support for Netanyahu and his Likud party, many are rethinking their vote or doubling down on their opposition to Israel's longest-serving prime minister. His day of reckoning may come sooner than Bibi had hoped — even as he urges the country to first wait out the war.

"Going to elections would be irresponsible and would badly halt the war effort," Netanyahu said on Thursday night, during a press conference at the Kirya military base in Tel Aviv. "The ones who are hoping for this, and for all the other things we hear in the TV studios night after night, are Hamas and also its backer Iran. We won't give this to them. We will bring complete victory." Yet many Israelis — on the left and right — want cabinet accountability. Crowds of demonstrators have taken to the streets of Israel's major cities in recent days to demand that the cabinet set a date for new elections now. Others want to head to the ballot box as soon as the conflict comes to an end. In a December survey by the Israeli Democracy Institute (IDI), an independent research center, 69 percent of respondents — including a majority of right-wing voters — called for new elections immediately after the war.

Behind-the-scenes divisions are now regularly coming to the fore. While Netanyahu used to host press conferences alongside Gantz, the premier now tends to appear before reporters solo. Reports of War Cabinet meetings devolving into screaming matches headline Israeli media. For many Israelis, it's Netanyahu's continued reluctance to take responsibility for October 7 that's perhaps most damning. Since the war's start, the prime minister has repeatedly obfuscated when asked whether he's at fault for the catastrophic intelligence lapse that enabled the Hamas invasion, subtly shifting blame to the Israeli military for the oversight. In a since-deleted post on X in late October, Netanyahu seemed to criticize the heads of Israel's military and security services for failing to detect and inform him of the impending attack. Netanyahu later apologized for the remarks, but the episode

A protester wears a shirt depicting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during a demonstration to demand the release of the captives taken during Operation Al-Aqsa Storm, in Tel Aviv, occupied Palestine, on January 20, 2024. ● AP



"I always chose Netanyahu, and I am from the right side of the political spectrum, but it will be hard for me to choose him again. I want a change," Mordechai Sasson, the owner of a produce shop in Jerusalem's Mahane Yehuda market, said in an interview. "Everybody should go home, not only Netanyahu." The relative quiet of Mahane Yehuda, the holy city's largest shuk, underscores the financial pain the tense security situation is inflicting on many Israelis. Where hundreds of shoppers typically brave crowds to buy meat, spices, fresh bread, and local produce, vendors outnumbered customers on the weekday morning of my visit. Shlomo Nissan, a produce vendor and long-time Likud supporter, said the cabinet is at fault, adding that he has no plans to back Bibi's party again in the next Israeli elections. "The army and the security forces do everything they can to prevent attacks, but it's not always 100 percent, and the situation is very delicate. It's very complicated for me as a business owner. You can see it's Wednesday morning and usually packed with people, but it's not the case right now," he said. "It's a mess." The longer the war goes on, the worse the economic repercussions are likely to be, and Netanyahu recently predicted the fighting could stretch into 2025. But along with souring public opinion about the cabinet's failures pre-October 7, cracks in the War Cabinet are becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. Days after the initial Hamas attack, centrist lawmakers joined with the prime minister to form an emergency cabinet in a show of solidarity. The move elevated National Unity party leader Benny Gantz, a former IDF chief of staff and onetime defense minister, to Netanyahu's Cabinet. Together with former IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot — an observer in the Cabinet without a vote — Gantz has sought to exert the opposition's influence on

was just one in a series of political clashes his cabinet has had with the IDF as the country has uncomfortable conversations about who's at fault. Earlier this month, a high-level meeting of ministers reportedly erupted after IDF Chief of Staff Herzl Halevi informed lawmakers of plans to launch an internal probe into the military's failures in the lead-up to October 7. The IDF's decision to initiate an inquiry puts pressure on the cabinet to do the same, which could have electoral consequences for Netanyahu. Netanyahu's continued efforts to distance himself from the military may backfire with other voters. A survey conducted in late-October found that Jewish Israelis' trust in the IDF had actually grown in the aftermath of Hamas' attack — from 84.5 percent to 87 percent — making it far and away one of the most trusted institutions in the country. By contrast, just 20.5 percent of Jewish Israeli respondents said they had trust in Netanyahu's Cabinet. At the same time, the question of the estimated 132 remaining captives — 105 alive, 27 dead — continues to hang over the cabinet's head. Family members of the captive Israelis have been among the loudest voices calling for Netanyahu's resignation, holding weekly demonstrations in cities across the country. On Thursday night, family members of captives blocked Tel Aviv's main highway to protest the cabinet's lack of progress toward a deal to secure their release. Brenda Donvi, the owner of a boutique in Jerusalem's elite Moshava neighborhood, said in an interview, "The greatest evil that Israel has is a self-enemy who is taking the country hostage for his own interests and his own benefits to stay in power. [Netanyahu] will do whatever he has to do to stay in power, in my opinion."

The full article first appeared in The Dispatch.