



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات  
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Situation Assessment | 15 January 2024

# Conflicts between Israeli Ruling Elites and the Future of the War on Gaza

Unit for Political Studies

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Series: **Situation Assessment**

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## Unit for Political Studies

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Four months into Israel's relentless war on Gaza, public disputes between the ruling coalition and the war cabinet in Israel have escalated. A notable source of tension was the decision of Army Chief of Staff Herzi Halevi to form an inquiry into the failures of the military establishment since "Operation Al-Aqsa Flood Operation" and Israeli policy towards the Gaza Strip in the post-war period. Personal conflicts have also emerged within the Likud bloc, which leads the government coalition, between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defence Minister Yoav Galant, which worsened when Netanyahu prevented Galant from meeting with the heads of the Mossad and Shin Bet, Israel's two main intelligence bodies, which are officially affiliated with the prime minister.

## Consensus on Continuing the War

Despite the differences at the top of the Israeli political and military pyramid, the various arms of the government coalition, the political opposition, and the military and security establishment remain united in their desire to continue the war on Gaza, and on achieving their stated goals of eliminating Hamas rule and military capability, in addition to the return of Israeli captives. The Israeli leadership's pursuit of these goals also continues to enjoy broad popular support. One hundred days since the start of the war, no significant political, social or economic force has yet emerged in Israel to depart from this consensus and call for an end to the war. While some voices from families of Israeli detainees and their supporters have appeared in recent weeks calling for an end to the war, they are quickly drowned out by the majority. In fact, the ongoing disagreements and competition within the ranks of the Israeli leadership, especially between Netanyahu, Galant, Halevi, and War Cabinet Minister and opposition leader, Benny Gantz are fuelling the drive to continue the war. None of them wants to be the first to call into question the difficulty of achieving the goals of the war and the price that must be paid for it. Consequently, the war continues as it moves to the third stage.

## Launching the Third Phase of the War

Following Al-Aqsa Flood, the Israeli army launched its war against the Gaza Strip in three main stages. The first stage involves bombing Gaza from the air, land, and sea for three weeks. In the second phase, the Israeli army launched a large-scale ground attack on the northern Gaza Strip aiming to seize control of the territory and dismantle Hamas' military structure. The third phase, which under preparation, requires reducing the number of boots on the ground, withdrawing Israeli forces from within cities and towns, and repositioning them at strategic points inside the Gaza Strip and along its boundaries. Meanwhile, the Israeli army is carrying out focused military operations against resistance targets using special military units, drones, and aircraft, based on intelligence information about these targets.

The third phase of the war falls in line with Washington's demand to reduce the frequency of bombing and limit the targeting of civilians, and with the requirements of the economy and Israeli society's



demands to demobilize a large portion of the reserve forces in the Israeli army and return them to their day jobs. There is broad agreement among the Israeli political and military leadership that the third phase of the war may last for many months or even a year.

The Israeli military began implementing the third phase of its military operation on 6 January in the northern Gaza Strip. The army is still trying to establish control over the central and southern Gaza Strip in the face of fierce pushback from Palestinian resistance factions. The second phase in these two regions is likely to continue for several weeks, depending mainly on the conduct of military operations in these two regions, the pressure applied by the White House on Israel, and Israel's response to it.

Israel has not yet decided whether it will move its military operations towards Rafah to the south, where more than a million Palestinians have taken refuge from across the Gaza Strip. Considering the presence of such a large number of refugees, it will be very difficult for the Israeli army to attack and occupy Rafah. This is something that Washington also opposes for fear of major civilian casualties. In any case, if the Israeli army decides to attack Rafah, this will require an understanding with the US administration and Egypt, which will not happen until after the return of the displaced Palestinians from the Rafah area to the northern Gaza Strip, something that Israel has opposed so far.

## Netanyahu's Agenda and the Day after the War

Despite the decline in his popularity and that of his party and government coalition in public opinion polls since the outbreak of the war, Netanyahu is still in charge of the decision-making process related to the war strategy and in determining Israeli policy more generally. Netanyahu strongly opposes the US administration's vision for Gaza once the war is over, which calls for the withdrawal of the Israeli army from the Gaza Strip after achieving the war's goals, returning a "renewed" Palestinian Authority to Gaza, and affirming the political unity of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in the context of a vision for a future Palestinian state. Netanyahu also has strong reservations about the plan presented by Gallant for the day after the war, in coordination with the US administration. His rejection of the US vision aligns with his government coalition based on 64 Knesset members. Netanyahu attaches utmost importance to maintaining his far-right government coalition for as long as possible after the end of the war. In this context, Netanyahu is wary of the positions of the two fascist parties in his government, "Otzma Yehudit" led by Internal Security Minister, Itamar Ben Gvir, and "Religious Zionism" led by Finance Minister, Bezalel Smotrich.

Netanyahu is well aware that the accession of Benny Gantz's state camp to the emergency government. The formation of which was announced after the start of the war on Gaza, is temporary, as Gantz himself announced. The latter will not remain in the government after the end of the war. Gantz will leave as soon as he sees that he has exhausted his role in the government coalition and that remaining in it will harm him electorally. The Prime Minister believes that he can significantly



improve his popularity and the popularity of his party and government coalition if he is able, during the war period, to attract and mobilize large segments of the far-right public and the Israeli right, both religious and secular, behind his agenda, especially since public opinion polls conducted in Israel during the war period confirms the rightwards shift of Israeli society as a whole. In this context, Netanyahu focuses on issues that can mobilize broad sectors of the right and extreme right, including:

- Adherence to the goal of eliminating Hamas and its rule in the Gaza Strip while emphasizing that it will not turn back on this goal no matter how long the war lasts.
- The continued Israeli security control over the Gaza Strip.
- Preventing the return of the Palestinian Authority, whether under its current leadership and composition, or with a renewed leadership and shape, to the Gaza Strip, and maintaining the division between the West Bank and Gaza, regardless of the nature of the authority in each of them.
- Rejecting the establishment of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza.
- The continued implicit and explicit advocacy by his party and camp for displacing the Palestinians from Gaza to the Sinai and other countries in the world.
- The continued oppression of the Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem and the expansion of Jewish settlement there.

## Inquiries

About three months into the war, Halevi formed an inquiry commission composed of former military commanders headed by the Minister of Defence and former Army Chief of Staff, Shaul Mofaz, to investigate the series of military and intelligence failures in the run up to 7 October 2023, as well as the conduct of military operations in the war on Gaza. Chief of Staff Halevi did not coordinate the formation of this inquiry with Netanyahu or Gallant. It aroused the anger of Netanyahu and his supporters, who strongly criticized the Chief of Staff during the political-security cabinet meeting, without Netanyahu saying a word in his defence, while Gallant spoke up to defend the Chief of Staff. The discontent of Netanyahu and his supporters with the formation of this inquiry stems from two main reasons, the first of which is the leadership of Mofaz, who is known for his strong opposition to Netanyahu. The second is the fact their opposition to any inquiry into the negligence and failure that occurred on 7 October before the end of the war on Gaza. This inquiry would strengthen the demand for an official investigation before the end of the war on the Gaza Strip, which Netanyahu strongly opposes. At this stage, Netanyahu is content with the investigation conducted by the Israeli State Comptroller, who is close to Netanyahu, into the shortcomings of 7 October.

Netanyahu is wary of the risks of an official inquiry on his political future. It is likely that the committee will place responsibility for the negligence and failure that occurred on 7 October on Netanyahu and the leaders of the military and security establishment and call for their dismissal. Consequently, Netanyahu is expected to strongly oppose an official commission, and he may instead charge a government appointed committee with the inquiry.



Legally, the government is responsible for forming official commissions to conduct inquiries and to determine their tasks, scope, and topic material. According to this law, the State Oversight Committee of the Knesset also has the authority to decide to form an official inquiry, after the State Comptroller submits their report to the Knesset on a specific case.

Accordingly, Netanyahu aligns himself with the extreme right represented in his government by Ben Gvir and Smotrich. It is expected that he will make every effort to keep the spectre of the Knesset elections at bay for as long as possible, biding his time to regain his and his party's electoral popularity. It is not unlikely that the opposition will fail to advance the date of the Knesset elections once the Gantz camp leaves the government coalition or after the end of the war, if Netanyahu maintains the cohesion of his government coalition. In any case, it is not certain that the anti-Netanyahu camp, led by Gantz and the head of Yesh Atid, Yair Lapid, who public opinion polls show would win a clear majority in the Knesset since 7 October, will be able to obtain a majority in the Knesset. The same public opinion polls also show that the Gantz camp will not be able to do so if the former Mossad chief, Yossi Cohen, runs in the upcoming Knesset elections in a new party, and if the former prime minister, Naftali Bennett, runs in these elections alone with his party or in a new coalition. In addition, Netanyahu is making an effort to split the ranks of the Gantz camp, including his attempts to attract former Minister and Likud defector Gideon Sa'ar, who also holds extreme right-wing views, back to the party. This would weaken Gantz' party.

## Conclusion

The government coalition, the political opposition, and the Israeli military and security establishment are all in agreement to move forward to achieve the goals of the war on Gaza. So far, no agreement has been reached in the Israeli government, nor in the war cabinet or the political-security cabinet regarding Israel's plan for the Gaza Strip on the day after the war, with Netanyahu refusing to discuss this issue with the government or the political-security cabinet.

In light of the existence of an Israeli consensus on the necessity of returning the Israeli captives, the anti-Netanyahu camp attaches greater importance to the issue of the Israeli detainees than the Netanyahu camp, and shows greater willingness to return them by reaching a compromise with Hamas. The longer the war continues and the danger of the Israeli detainees increases, the greater this issue becomes to the Israeli public.