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What Does Gallant Dismissal Mean for Netanyahu Coalition?

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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Taking advantage of the US preoccupation with the presidential elections, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu dismissed Defence Minister Yoav Gallant, following several failed attempts to get rid of him, on 5 November. He has also welcomed the New Hope party into his coalition, led by Gideon Sa'ar, who fills in the post of Foreign Minister Yisrael Katz, who replaces Gallant as Defence Minister. Thus, Netanyahu has disposed of his most prominent Likud rival, while strengthening his parliamentary majority, which increases from 64 to 67 seats with the addition of Sa'ar.

Tensions between Netanyahu and Gallant

Netanyahu's relationship with his Defence Minister began to sour a few months after the formation of his sixth government in December 2022, against the backdrop of Netanyahu's attempts to enact laws that would remove all judicial restraints on the legislative and executive branches. Gallant opposed the judicial "reforms" at the time, publicly calling for their cessation and emboldened by the widespread protests that erupted against them. This prompted Netanyahu to dismiss him.¹ But Netanyahu soon backed down under pressure from the Biden administration, which found Gallant more collaborative than the extremists in Netanyahu's government, such as National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir and Finance Minister Smotrich. Since Operation Flood of Al-Aqsa and the start of Israel's genocidal campaign in the Gaza Strip, Netanyahu's relationship with Gallant has become increasingly tense. It reached a boiling point when Gallant voted with the opposition to against extending the exemption for yeshiva students from military service. Their differences also were exacerbated by issues that arose over the course of the war, whereby Gallant's positions remained consistent with those of the Israeli military and security establishment, conflicting with Netanyahu's doctrine. It has been clear for many months that Netanyahu was waiting for an excuse to strip Gallant of his ministerial portfolio.

Gallant's Dismissal and the Coalition's Expansion

Since the Benny Gantz's National Unity party left the war cabinet last June, Netanyahu has doubled his efforts to strengthen his parliamentary majority. In September 2024, Netanyahu began negotiations to include Sa'ar and his party, which has four seats in the Knesset, in the government coalition. Sa'ar made his agreement to join the coalition conditional on his appointment as defence minister.² But Sa'ar was met with strong opposition from the military establishment, the Israeli public, and from within the Likud party itself, especially since Sa'ar has no military experience. He subsequently dropped his demand for the Defence post as a condition to join the coalition.³ On 29 September

1 "Netanyahu Fails to Push through Judicial Overhaul: What's Next for Israel's Political Crisis?" Situation Assessment, ACRPS, 29/3/2023, accessed on 10/11/2024 at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zPQ7>

2 Yuval Karni and Sheila Fried, "Connections, Condition, Confusion: Netanyahu Has Not Yet Decided to Give Sa'ar the Defence Ministry," *Ynet*, 17/9/2024, accessed on 10/11/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQdF>

3 Yuval Karni, "Sa'ar to Netanyahu: I Am Giving up the Position of Minister of Defence," *Ynet*, 21/9/2024, accessed on 10/11/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQfu>



2024, on the eve of the Israeli army's ground offensive in southern Lebanon, he agreed to join the government without a ministerial portfolio, with the condition that the terms of his party joining the government coalition be agreed upon later.

On 5 November, in the fog of the US elections, Netanyahu quickly reshuffled his cabinet, finally succeeding in getting rid of Gallant.⁴ In addition to Sa'ar, it was agreed that his fellow party member Ze'ev Elkin would be given a cabinet portfolio. Elkin will thus fill the Finance Minister role, responsible for the reconstruction of Israel's northern region bordering Lebanon and the area surrounding the Gaza Strip in the south. The coalition agreement also stipulates that no basic law may be enacted or amended in the Knesset without the agreement of all the heads of the parties in coalition, and that Sa'ar's New Hope party has the freedom to vote on matters related to the judicial system.⁵

Netanyahu justified his removal of Gallant by citing the loss of trust between them and the emergence of disagreements over the war on the Gaza Strip. He noted that many of Gallant's activities and statements contradict his war cabinet's decisions, and that these differences "came to the knowledge of the enemy and our enemies enjoyed it and derived a lot of benefit from it".⁶ In response to his dismissal, Gallant stressed that he was dismissed because of his disagreement with Netanyahu on three main issues: First, his opposition to the enactment of the law that allows the Haredim to evade military service. Second, his commitment to returning the Israelis detained by Hamas and his belief in the possibility of concluding a prisoner exchange deal that requires an end to the war. Third, his demand to establish an official inquiry to investigate failings by the Israeli authorities on 7 October 2023.⁷

The Implications of Gallant's Dismissal for Netanyahu's Government

With Gallant out of the way, Netanyahu has been able to gain some important political ground. He has strengthened his government coalition, which now enjoys a majority of 67 (excluding Galant) out of a total of 120 MKs. This government coalition appears to be largely ideologically and politically cohesive, as all of its party components belong to the radical and fascist right, meaning it is likely to continue ruling until the next Knesset elections in October 2026. Perhaps the main problem facing this government coalition is the matter of Haredi conscription, which Gallant insists on. Despite the seriousness of this problem, Likud and the Haredi parties will likely find a way out or solution to it. It is difficult to imagine the Haredi and Likud parties taking any steps that would lead to the collapse of the government coalition. They are well aware that, according to repeated public opinion polls, toppling the government and holding early elections would lead to the loss of the ruling coalition.

⁴ Michael Hauser [et al.], "Netanyahu Fires Defence Minister Gallant at Height of Regional War, Appoints Yisrael Katz in His Place," *Haaretz*, 5/11/2024.

⁵ Michael Hauser-Tov, "Elkin to be Finance Minister, Official Oath to Grant Freedom of Voting on Judicial Matters," *Haaretz*, 6/11/2024, accessed on 10/11/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zPgB>

⁶ "Israeli PM Netanyahu fires defence minister Gallant, citing lack of trust", *Reuters*, 6/11/2024, accessed on 10/11/2024 at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQ2Q>

⁷ Hauser [et al.].



By replacing Gallant with Katz, Netanyahu not only got rid of a bitter rival, but in his place secured a defence minister who is completely in line with his conflict with the military and security establishment and with his policies more generally. The appointment of Katz as defence minister is also expected to strengthen Netanyahu's hand in this conflict, since the fallout over his judicial reforms was exacerbated by questions of responsibility for failures on 7 October 2023, and other matters of contention related to the war on Gaza.

Furthermore, Netanyahu will be able to rebuild the army leadership, through the legal powers that both the Prime Minister and the Minister of Defence have to appoint the Chief of Staff and senior commanders in different military bodies.⁸ This includes appointing a successor to the current Chief of Staff, Herzi Halevi, whose term ends in January 2026 (after three years in office). At that point the Minister of Defence has the right to terminate or renew, as is customary, the term for one year. This is unless Halevi resigns in the coming months, which is very likely, as Halevi himself has stated more than once, or unless Netanyahu dismisses him.

It is also likely that the government coalition will resume attempts to enact major judicial reforms. His majority in the Knesset allows this, even if Sa'ar's party opposes it. Netanyahu and his government coalition may be encouraged to pursue these reforms by the re-election of Donald Trump as US President; unlike the Biden administration, he has expressed his support for the judicial overhaul. However, he may be surprised to find that opposition in Israeli society remains widespread.

Following Gallant's dismissal and Sa'ar's far right party into the government coalition, Netanyahu's government has become more consistent with his political line regarding the genocidal war in Gaza, his plans for the day after the war, the matter of Israeli prisoners, and the position on concluding a prisoner exchange deal for them. Despite advances made by Netanyahu after firing Gallant, new troubles have recently begun to emerge, most notably the leaks scandal in which his office was implicated.

Netanyahu Office Crisis

Israeli media recently revealed suspicions that some employees of the Prime Minister's Office were involved in criminal cases in order to help Netanyahu in his conflict with the military and security establishment.⁹ The first case relates to an attempt to amend the minutes of meetings between Israeli political and military leaders, which were held at the beginning of the war on Gaza, to match Netanyahu's narrative before being reviewed by any of the investigative committees. The second case relates to employees in the Prime Minister's Office blackmailing the Israeli army's liaison officer in order to obtain sensitive secret military documents with the intention of using them in the ongoing conflict between Netanyahu and the military and security establishment. The third

⁸ Regarding the powers of the Prime Minister and the Minister of Security in this regard, see: Mahmoud Muhareb, *Israel's Nuclear Policy and Its National Security Decision-Making Process* (Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2013), pp. 74 - 104.

⁹ Yehoshua Brenner [et al.], "Suspensions Against the Prime Minister's Office: What is the Connection Between Suspensions of Blackmail and Claims of a Change in Protocols? And Were Suspects Arrested?" *Haaretz*, 9/11/2024, accessed on 12/11/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zPkQ>



case concerns former spokesman in the Prime Minister's Office, Eli Feldstein, who was arrested for allegedly leaking documents that may have undermined a ceasefire and hostage release deal and the case was manipulated in a way that strengthened Netanyahu's position and exonerated him from tanking prisoner exchange deal with Hamas. Israeli General Intelligence also arrested two officers working in the information division of Israeli military intelligence on suspicion of stealing documents containing sensitive information and handing them over to Feldstein.¹⁰

Attorney General Gali Baharav-Miara has authorized the relevant Israeli authorities to investigate Netanyahu, if necessary, regarding the leaked documents.¹¹ It is not yet known what these investigations in may yield, whether Netanyahu himself may be investigated, nor whether and how this could have an impact on him. At the same time, these suspicions and investigations in the Prime Minister's Office indicate the depth and continuity of the conflict between Netanyahu and the military and security establishment.

Conclusion

By dismissing Gallant, handing Katz the defence post, and expanding the government coalition by including Sa'ar's party in the government coalition, Netanyahu has made significant advancements that enhance his hopes of maintaining his government until Knesset elections in October 2026. His government is now more consistent with doctrine all round; whether regarding the genocide in Gaza and the wider Palestine question, or regarding the controversial points of conflict in Israeli society: Israeli detainees, the judicial reforms, and the execution of an official inquiry. Netanyahu is expected to continue with his current policy if his far-right coalition holds together and the Israeli opposition remains weak, divided, and lacking any alternative program. He will also be encouraged to continue as long as the international community, especially the US and Arab states, remain tolerant of his policies and take no real steps to end the genocidal war that Israel is waging against Gaza.

¹⁰ Amos Harel, "After Gallant's Dismissal, the Security Establishment Is Ready to Absorb More than One Concept," *Haaretz*, 8/11/2024, accessed on 12/11/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zQch>

¹¹ "The Attorney General Has Authorized an Investigation into Suspicions against the Prime Minister," *Maariv*, print edition, 8/11/2024.