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# The War on Gaza and the Future of the Netanyahu Government in Israeli Public Opinion

Unit for Political Studies

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Series: **Situation Assessment**

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As the Israeli war on Gaza continues, the government of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu finds itself facing many domestic challenges, most notably the declining public confidence. Israeli public opinion towards the government and its prime minister has been shaped by two fundamental issues, Netanyahu's judicial "reforms", underway since its formation on 29 December 2022, and "Operation Al-Aqsa Flood", which shook Israeli society to the core.

## Questions on Failure

Since the beginning of 2023, a bitter conflict and unprecedented political and social polarization has engulfed Israeli society. The Netanyahu government has been in the driving seat of a "judicial coup", to weaken the judicial authority and subordinate it to the executive authority, in order to rule without any checks and balances. But the majority of Israeli society and elites, especially the military establishment, have opposed this judicial overhaul. The intense conflict between the Netanyahu government, the protest movement, and the entire opposition camp has led to a significant decline in popularity for Netanyahu and his government coalition.

"Operation Al-Aqsa Flood" came amidst a widening rift within Israeli society, leading to the collapse of the Netanyahu government strategy and its overarching assumptions about the Gaza Strip. It accelerated the decline of Israeli confidence in the government and decline in Netanyahu's popularity, reaching rock bottom. A majority of Israeli society held the Netanyahu government responsible for the negligence and failure that facilitated the events of 7 October, and then its failure to respond appropriately. This negligence was represented in the slow response to Hamas' military operation, the delay in reaching the dead and wounded, the inability to identify them, and the confusion about the number of Israeli prisoners and missing persons. Further delays in providing aid, especially economic aid, to the kibbutzim and towns that were attacked, located adjacent to the Gaza Strip, added to the resentment.

Once the extent of the Israeli losses, including from the military, and the Netanyahu government's negligence became clear, expert analysts, especially senior military veterans, on Israeli television and in other media outlets, began criticizing the Netanyahu government and Netanyahu personally. They held him responsible for the utter failure on 7 October and in dealing with the results of "Operation Al-Aqsa flood". Many specialized analysts, especially senior retired military officers, have linked the "judicial coup" led by the Netanyahu government to the major failure on 7 October. These analysts focused on warnings that military and security leaders directed to Netanyahu about the dangers of a judicial coup that Netanyahu rejected. They held him and his government responsible and some called on him to resign immediately.

In this atmosphere, and with the rhetoric of Netanyahu critics dominating the media, whether by specialized analysts or by the families of the dead and missing, and residents of kibbutzim and towns that were attacked, Netanyahu's ministers rarely appeared in Israeli media. Neither Netanyahu nor



his ministers dared to visit the kibbutzim and towns that were attacked. They did not attend the funerals of the dead Israelis, visit their families to offer condolences, nor visit the wounded.

## Public Opinion

The first public opinion poll conducted by the newspaper *Maariv* after “Operation Al-Aqsa Flood” revealed the extent of the damage it did to the popularity of Netanyahu and his government. The *Maariv* poll conducted five days after the Al-Aqsa Flood and published on 13 October revealed that if the Knesset elections were held, the parties of the government coalition led by Netanyahu, which has 64 seats in the current Knesset, would obtain only 42 seats, while opposition parties would receive 78, including 10 for Arab parties. The previous *Maariv* poll conducted several days before Al-Aqsa flood had awarded the government coalition 55 seats in the Knesset against 65 for the opposition.<sup>1</sup>

The poll also showed that Benny Gantz’s National Unity/State Camp, would obtain 41 seats in the Knesset (compared to 29 in the previous poll), while the Likud Party would secure just 19 seats (previously 28), Yesh Atid would get 15 (16 previously), Shas would get 7 (10 previously), United Torah Judaism would get 7 (no change), Meretz would get 6 (4 previously, and the Arab parties would get 10 (10 previously). Gantz’s party, which is supported by the military establishment, is the notable winner in the aftermath of Al-Aqsa Flood with a huge spike in popularity against Likud, gaining 12 projected seats as the biggest loser Likud dropped by 12. Otzma Yehudit and Religious Zionist parties also declined in popularity.

This shows that a rise in right-wing nationalist currents with secular-military leanings. These parties are led by generals who have previously criticized several Israeli governments for hesitating to wage full scale war on Gaza and to eliminate Hamas, instead remaining content with a policy of deterrence.

Netanyahu’s popularity has also witnessed a sharp decline. When posed the question of who is more suitable for the position of prime minister, Netanyahu or Gantz, 48 per cent answered with Gantz against 29 per cent for Netanyahu. In answering the question of who should be prime minister after the war, Netanyahu or someone else, only 21 per cent answered with Netanyahu, against 66 percent for someone else. It is noteworthy that among Likud voters, only 46 per cent answered positively for Netanyahu, while 34 per cent of Likud voters said someone else.<sup>2</sup>

Another public opinion poll published by *Maariv* on 20 October, a week after the previous poll, showed similar results. According to this poll, the opposition parties would win 77 seats (including 10 seats for Arab parties), while the government coalition parties would get 43.<sup>3</sup> This poll also revealed that 80 per cent of Israelis believe that Netanyahu should take responsibility for the failure

<sup>1</sup> “The coalition is collapsing, Likud gets 19, and Gantz is on the rise,” *Maariv*, 13/10/2023. [Hebrew]

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> “Unprecedented results: Gantz widens lead over Netanyahu in suitability to head the government,” *Maariv*, 20/10/2023. [Hebrew]

and negligence of 7 October, as the military and security leaders had done in the aftermath of the attack, including the Minister of Security, the Chief of Staff of the Israeli Army, the Head of Military Intelligence (Aman) and the Head of General Intelligence (Shin Bet). According to this poll, 48 per cent believed that Benny Gantz was most suitable for the position of prime minister, compared to 28 per cent for Netanyahu.<sup>4</sup> The subsequent two opinion polls on 27 October and 3 November<sup>5</sup> revealed similar results.

A public opinion poll broadcast by Israeli TV Channel 13, on 3 November 2023, showed that 56 per cent of Israelis do not trust Netanyahu in managing the war on Gaza, against 28 per cent who do.<sup>6</sup> According to this poll, 44 per cent held Netanyahu responsible for the negligence and failure that occurred on 7 October, while 33 per cent held the Chief of Staff and senior army commanders responsible, and only 5 per cent held Defence Minister Yoav Galant responsible. While 76 per cent believed that Netanyahu should resign as prime minister, 47 per cent of whom stated that this resignation should come after the war and 29 per cent of whom said it should be immediate, only 18 per cent believed that Netanyahu should continue as Prime Minister. Sixty four per cent said new elections should be held for the Knesset when the war ends, compared to 26 per cent who opposed holding early elections. Sixty eight per cent expressed dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the economic situation after Al-Aqsa Flood, compared to 19 per cent who expressed satisfaction. 74 per cent supported the establishment of an official, independent commission with broad powers after the war to investigate failures, compared to 12 per cent who supported the establishment of a government commission with limited powers.<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion

Different Israeli public opinion polls conducted since “Operation Al-Aqsa Flood” and the start of the Israeli war on the Gaza Strip indicate that Israeli confidence in Netanyahu and his government coalition is shrinking, likewise Netanyahu and Likud's popularity. Netanyahu's political future is nearing its end according to public opinion and he senses the grave danger of the three corruption cases looming over him. Not only has Netanyahu seen his popularity sink within the general electorate but he is losing popularity even among Likud voters. More than a third of Likud Party voters want someone else to replace Netanyahu as prime minister when the war ends.

In addition, there is a noticeable increase in restlessness among many members of the Knesset from the Likud Party and even some with cabinet portfolios. Multiple leaks in the Israeli media reveal ministers have criticized and blamed him for the failure. Consequently, Netanyahu is in a rocky

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4 Ibid.

5 Maariv Poll, 3/11/2023.

6 “Channel 13 Poll: Who is responsible for the negligence, and should Netanyahu resign?”, *Channel 13*, 3/11/2023, accessed 7/11/2023, at: <https://tinyurl.com/2bxmns2>. [Hebrew]

7 Ibid.



position, balancing conflict with his own party members and with the military establishment, which could prolong the war on Gaza. If Israel is forced to stop the war on Gaza before achieving its goals, it is likely that Defence Minister Yoav Galant and the military establishment will accuse Netanyahu of stopping short of eliminating Hamas and its rule in the Gaza Strip. But the current alternatives combine a doctrine of extreme nationalism, secularism, and militarism.