

Israel: Ben-Gvir's Ministry Runs 'Like a Crime Organization Has Taken Over'

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The security minister casts fear over his employees and interferes incessantly with their work to promote his political interests, sources say. He surrounds himself with senior police officers to bolster his public image and is 'obsessed with the media', another source describes.

Israel's National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir attends an event at which new weapons are distributed to Israel's police volunteer security teams in Ashkelon, last month. Credit: VIOLETA SANTOS MOURA/ REUTERS

At the end of the month, Itamar Ben-Gvir will conclude a year in the National Security Ministry – with the entire brass of the ministry gone. The esteemed director-general he brought in as a professional left after incessant intervention by the minister. A replacement Ben-Gvir dropped in, contrary to the position of the Civil Service Commission, was made to leave, having been found to fall short of the most basic criteria for the position

An esteemed deputy director-general resigned following harsh disputes with the replacement. The head of the firearms division resigned following irregularities discovered in the distribution of weapons to citizens. The ministry is lacking a deputy director general for strategy, who also left, as have other senior administrators.

“The ministry is in complete chaos and it feels like a criminal organization has taken it over,” says a senior source in one government ministry. The source adds: “Nothing is done for relevant considerations, everything is campaign and media, that’s what they care about, and everything with shouting and an atmosphere of fear.”

The resignation of the previous director-general, Shlomo Ben Eliyahu, still echoes through the corridors of the Jerusalem building, right next to the police national headquarters.

Ben Eliyahu is the uncle of minister Amichai Eliyahu, a member of Ben-Gvir's party, but beyond that he is the only one who knows the public service from the inside: He served in the past as director-general of the Agriculture Ministry and the Construction Ministry, and director-general of the Israel Land Administration. He became part of Ben-Gvir's most inner circle, and the latter appointed him to head the committee to study the minister's flagship project, the establishment of a national guard.

Former National Security Ministry Director-General Shlomo Ben Eliyahu, in 2014. Credit: Eyal Toueg

But last September, Ben Eliyahu surprisingly announced his departure. The background to his leaving were the repeated interventions by Ben-Gvir in his work. Now it turns out that one of the interventions that led to his resignation was an attempt to influence the committee's conclusions

after Ben Eliyahu drafted them.

Ben Eliyahu delivered the final report in recent weeks and, following his resignation, gave it to various government ministries. According to several sources, after the committee members headed by Ben Eliyahu finished writing the report, it was presented to Ben-Gvir, but the latter was displeased with the conclusions reached. He applied pressure on Ben Eliyahu to change things written in the report, with Ben Eliyahu flatly refusing.

Thus, for instance, Ben-Gvir was disappointed by the committee's decision, made unanimously by its 15 members, that the national guard would not report to Ben-Gvir, but be part of the police force. Among other things, Ben-Gvir sought to change the committee's conclusion that the guard be deployed only in emergencies or for immediate police needs to maintain governance. Ben-Gvir sought to have the guard act on everyday police work.

It is no coincidence that Ben-Gvir has yet to publicly release the committee's report, which should be discussed by the government as well. Ben-Gvir's disregard of the report joins another disregard of another report: the conclusions of the governmental examination committee into the escape of the security prisoners from Gilboa Prison.

Although the report by the committee, headed by Judge Menachem Finkelstein, was submitted back in May, to this day Ben-Gvir refuses to bring it to discussion in the cabinet as required by law, and is ignoring its main recommendation – demotion of the commander of the police Northern District, who came under particularly harsh criticism, to a staff position.

“He hoped the conclusions would go against the Prison Service Commissioner, Katy Perry, but the committee members actually supported her position.”

After Ben Eliyahu's departure, Ben-Gvir appointed his crony Dr. Elazar Ben Harush as director-general, but then the Civil Service Commission opposed the appointment vehemently, saying Ben Harush does not meet the most minimal criteria for the position.

Ben Harush, who serves as director-general of the Negev and Galilee Ministry, is considered to hold the most hawkish views of all of Ben-Gvir's inner circle. But his employment history includes mostly the position of chairman of the association of the settlement of Nokdim, where he resides, at a position defined as 30 percent of full time.

Ben-Gvir ignored the commission's position and appointed Ben Harush as replacement, but a petition to the High Court of Justice led to his announcement that he does not intend to remain in the position past December. But in this period of time he has already managed to cause the resignation of the deputy director general for human resources, and to draw severe criticism of his performance during the war. “They do what they want in the ministry, Ben-Gvir doesn't care about anyone,” says a source.

The one who is supposed to act as the barrier to Ben-Gvir is the National Security Ministry's legal counsel, Ariel Sissel, but according to several sources, Ben-Gvir himself has yelled at his legal counsel in more than one meeting and reprimands him and other senior figures. “There are already mimics of him yelling ‘I'm the minister!’ and ‘I decide,’ and banging on the table,” says a source exposed to the behavior of the Otzma Yehudit leader conduct.

According to another source, Sissel himself has said in talks with those close to him that Ben-Gvir “terrorizes me,” and that the minister is in the habit of yelling at him in front of others. “They fear him,” says a senior government source.

Ben-Gvir is also in the habit of instructing his ministry staff not to enter with smartphones, although this does not pertain to any secret discussions, so that he won't be recorded. In fact, Sissel also approved the "Israel Arming" campaign, although he knew its legitimacy was dubious, as it is part of the Otzma Yehudit party's election campaign.

Another testament to the weakness of legal counsel Sissel is his conduct in the weapons distribution affair. Haaretz reported that Ben-Gvir's staff and cronies, including his legislative adviser and three secretaries, received approval to issue weapons permits conditioned upon a range test – although they have not been duly authorized, and despite being in "trust positions" (personal appointments by the minister that are not subject to Civil Service criteria).

Those who gave the green light for this conduct were Sissel himself and the former head of the firearms division, Israel Avissar. Avissar was a Shin Bet operative in the past, but according to a series of sources has yielded time and again to Ben-Gvir's demands.

Following the report in Haaretz, a hearing was held at the State Control Committee, where Avissar confirmed the report and said Ben-Gvir's people are running a gun-permit situation room from his chambers. A day later Avissar and Sissel were reprimanded at a hearing in the attorney general's chambers for allowing such conduct, and two days later Avissar resigned his post, pointing out severe problems.

But sources say Avissar expressed an interest in being appointed to head the witness protection program, to be created in the National Security Ministry. According to several sources, Ben-Gvir told him: "I'm not replacing one rotten apple with another."

Another example of the feebleness displayed by Avissar is that he allowed an adviser on Ben-Gvir's behalf – Amir Schneider, formerly chief of staff to Yisrael Beiteinu chairman Avigdor Lieberman – to work in the firearms department under him in recent months, although in practice he has nothing to do with firearms.

Lieberman and Ben-Gvir have a direct channel of communication, which according to several sources deals quite a bit with the well-being of prisoner Faina Kirschenbaum, once Lieberman's top lieutenant in the party.

One way or the other, Schneider, considered to be Lieberman's man, was accepted at the ministry as a counselor at the firearms division. Although most of his time is spent lobbying for Ben-Gvir and his chambers with the Finance Ministry. "Ben-Gvir forced Avissar to take him because he couldn't bring him in as a trust position to the chambers," says a senior ministry official.

Police forces in the service of the minister

As part of his attempt to position himself in the media, Ben-Gvir increased the number of senior police officers working at the security ministry. "With officers surrounding you and speaking for you, it takes better hold with the public. Ben-Gvir is always dealing with image and media, and not with the substance," says one source. "His preoccupation with the media is obsessive."

With the consent of Police Commissioner Kobi Shabtai, Ben-Gvir transferred Commander Assi Aharoni, formerly of the police spokesperson's unit, to serve as the ministry's spokesperson. However, the Civil Service Commission rejected the appointment of Aharoni, stating that appointing a ministry spokesperson requires an official vote. In spite of this, Aharoni is still currently working as defense secretary and dealing with the ministry's media matters.

Pressured by Ben-Gvir, the police spokesperson is the figure acting as spokesperson for the minister, and publishes photos of him with security squad members titled "joint announcement" from the police and the minister. "The Police Commissioner is Ben-Gvir's puppet, and moreover - the Deputy Police Commissioner Avshalom Peled is his puppet, because he will do anything to inherit Shabtai's position," said a senior police official.

A senior police official also recounted how in a convention held a few months ago, Ben-Gvir's Chief of Staff Chananel Dorfman, made several demands. According to the official, Peled responded to Dorfman's demands saying "your wish is my command."

In actuality, Dorfman acts as overriding chief executive officer who influences the police commissioner and deputy commissioner, a few sources say. "They have dismantled the ministry and are doing whatever they like - and no one is stopping them," described one of the sources.

While writing this article, Haaretz questioned the national security ministry's office, who refused to answer. The office referred Haaretz to a response from the minister's bureau, even though the article deals with the office's function.

The security minister bureau said: "Apparently what bothers Haaretz is not the 'collapse of the ministry', that does not exist, but the ministry's activity, courageously led by Ben-Gvir, under which 50,000 private weapon licenses have been authorized, each of them a life-saving feat."

The bureau added that "Minister Ben-Gvir does not accept the substandard policy that reigned for years, where clerks ran the office matters and the minister is 'just for show'. Those days are over. The minister now delineates the office policy and it is the duty of those beneath him to implement it. Those who do not, do not have a place in this office. On the other hand, we must praise the majority of those working for the ministry, who are implementing the minister's policy and contributing to the war effort."

The Police responded saying that the security squads "act under defined authority that is controlled by the police station commanders within the divisions of their activity, and they fulfill their task of safeguarding our home." They also said that "any attempt to paint the [security squad's] activity as something else is an attempt to harm national unity and the spirit of contribution."

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P.S.

• Haaretz. Dec 14, 2023:

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-12-14/ty-article/.premium/ben-gvirs-ministry-runs-like-a-crime-organization-has-taken-over/0000018c-650f-d798-adac-e5af492e0000>