

POLITICS

# False Alternative - Benjamin Netanyahu, Benny Gantz and the future of the war

Saturday 10 February 2024, by [NOY Orly](#) (Date first published: 8 February 2024).

In launching its assault on Gaza, the Israeli government had three primary aims: to exact revenge, to restore the prestige of the army – which had been severely damaged by the 7 October attack – and to guarantee Netanyahu’s political survival. So far it has proven relatively successful. The IDF has embarked on an effective public-relations campaign to rebuild its credibility as it lays waste to the Strip. And while Netanyahu’s popularity is at a nadir, calls for his resignation remain marginal; the public seem content to wait until the fighting is over to hold him accountable, which gives him an incentive to prolong it indefinitely.

Yet after four months, it is becoming harder to sustain the official narrative that the purpose of the war is to eliminate Hamas and secure the release of the hostages. It is increasingly clear that these goals are contradictory, since the greatest threat to the hostages’ lives is the continuation of the violence. With the number of IDF casualties rising, more than a hundred Israeli captives still being held in Gaza, and no significant gains in weakening Hamas’s operational capacities, public support for the war is declining. A significant majority – 58% – have expressed a lack of confidence in Netanyahu’s management of it. More Israelis now believe that returning the captives should take priority over the destruction of Hamas than vice versa.

Against this backdrop, a series of interconnected questions have come to dominate the Israeli political agenda: the future of Netanyahu, the future of the war, and the settlement that will be established in its wake. The most widely touted candidate to replace Netanyahu is the former army general and Defence Minister Benny Gantz, whose National Unity party is polling far ahead of Likud. Gantz’s political vision has never been particularly coherent. Over the years he has indicated support for some kind of diplomatic solution with the Palestinians, but he has also stressed that the present situation is ‘not ripe for a permanent agreement’. He opposed the Nation-State Law but abstained from voting when amendments were proposed in the Knesset. During the protests against Netanyahu’s judicial reforms he avoided direct confrontation with the Prime Minister and stressed the need for a ‘mutual agreement’ between the two sides. Since October, Gantz has served in the war cabinet as a minister without portfolio. At times he has tried to distance himself from Netanyahu’s belligerent rhetoric, but in practice he has been just as active in prosecuting the military campaign.

Among Israel’s Western backers, Gantz is seen as a welcome alternative who could save the country from the hard right and reestablish its identity as a ‘Jewish and democratic’ state. Washington, in particular, views him as someone who could be persuaded to accept a ‘constructive solution’ to the perennial problem of Palestine. The hope, among Biden and his team, is that once the war winds down Netanyahu will be ousted and replaced by this more reliable and less erratic partner. Yet both Gantz’s record and the current situation in Israel suggest that this is wishful thinking.

For one thing, there is a question mark over how much Gantz truly wants to lead the country. During his short political career, he has twice saved the political skin of the man he is supposedly trying to

replace: first in April 2020, when he helped Netanyahu form an emergency government; then in October 2023, when he joined the war cabinet in the name of 'national duty'. Having passed up these opportunities to topple his opponent, Gantz now finds himself without a clear pathway to power. As Israeli politics have moved rightward, his 'centrist' camp has lost the ability to assemble a Knesset majority on its own. It would need the support of Arab parties, which currently hold ten seats out of 120. But given Gantz's attitude toward both Palestinians and Arab Israelis, winning their trust seems all but impossible.

During the 2019 election campaign, Gantz boasted that he had 'returned Gaza to the Stone Age' during Operation Protective Edge, when he served as the IDF Chief of Staff. He also claimed to have 'eliminated 1,364 terrorists' - the total number of Palestinians killed in the assault, including hundreds of children. Now Gantz is replaying these apocalyptic fantasies on a much larger scale, waging a brutal war against an entrapped civilian population that has already claimed tens of thousands of lives. At the same time, he is overseeing the systematic persecution of Arabs in Israel, whose treatment is reminiscent of the military rule imposed on them in the early years of the state. The legal organization Adalah has documented an ongoing crackdown on any expression of solidarity with Palestine, which has so far led to hundreds of arrests, a wave of unfair dismissals, and the expulsion of hundreds of students from higher education institutions. Earlier this month, four leading Arab politicians, including Mohammad Barakeh - head of the High Follow-Up Committee for Arab citizens of Israel - were detained by police for trying to participate in an anti-war protest.

The government has also pushed through extensive budget cuts for Arab local authorities, which are already suffering from persistent neglect, crumbling infrastructure and an upsurge in organized crime that the state refuses to address. In light of this, it is unlikely that the Arab population will support Gantz's elevation to prime ministerial office, even if he is presented as the 'lesser evil'. In recent years, mainstream Israeli political discourse has become highly personalized, centred on Netanyahu as an individual figure: 'Should he stay or should he go?' But for Arabs his removal would make little meaningful difference.

One need only recall the anti-Netanyahu 'Government of Change', elected in 2020 and led by Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid, to underscore this point. The coalition, which represented almost every part of the Israeli political spectrum - and even won the reluctant backing of the Arab parties - had no plans to break with its predecessor's so-called security policies. It had no interest in ending the conflict or the occupation. After only a year, it dissolved itself in order to save the regulations governing the dual legal system in the West Bank, which were placed in jeopardy when the right refused to vote for their renewal. In the end, the Bennett-Lapid government preferred to return Netanyahu to power than to see the apartheid regime threatened.

The unwillingness of the Israeli 'opposition' to mount a genuine challenge to the present order was reflected in the mass protests last year, where hundreds of thousands took to the streets following Netanyahu's judicial coup. The movement, which was supported by senior figures in the political and military establishment, claimed to be 'defending democracy'. But this did not mean full political and legal equality for all, since that would have to include Arabs. Its image of democracy was rather a technical-procedural one, based on the separation of the executive and judicial branches. The protesters' primary demand was for the courts - those which had ratified the Nation-State Law, along with countless other racist and discriminatory measures - to retain their formal independence. Above all, the leaders stressed that an impartial national legal system was necessary to protect Israeli soldiers from facing international war crimes tribunals. Unsurprisingly, this was a 'democratic celebration' in which Arab citizens refused to take part.

Even if Israel's 'centrist' bloc were to somehow form a new government, with the aim of changing the status quo on Palestine, the obstacles to a Western-backed settlement would still be

insurmountable. Among them is the strength of the Israeli far right, which would fight tooth-and-nail to block any diplomatic 'solution', as well as the drastic decrease in public support for Palestinian statehood after 7 October. There is also the dramatic demographic changes in the occupied territories, caused by the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians and the constant growth in the number of settlers, whom the Israeli government would never agree to relocate. In Palestine, meanwhile, there is the issue of widespread distrust for the PA, which lacks the credibility to implement any such arrangement.

Israel's Arab citizens, who comprise 20% of its total population, are now succumbing to despair as the state continues to slaughter their brethren in Gaza. Large numbers of Israeli Jews have given up on the prospect of a legal settlement: a development that the far right is exploiting by calling for the complete ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from their historic homeland. A government of the 'centre' would not solve this structural crisis. It would only put a thin layer of makeup on the face of Israeli society.

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- "False Alternative". Sidecar. NLR. 08 FEBRUARY 2024:  
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