

# [***Netanyahu leaned on his top rival to help unify Israel. Now, Benny Gantz is more popular***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BG9-JF71-DYMD-62HS-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

JERUSALEM — The top political rival of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is [*meeting with U.S. leaders*](https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-war-kamala-harris-white-house-e86e6f95a0707e290384fcc86367e4fd) in Washington this week to discuss the war in Gaza. Benny Gantz is a key member of Israel's War Cabinet whose popularity is on the rise — and who has a pivotal role to play in the country's future.

Gantz, 64, is a centrist politician who [*joined Netanyahu’s ultranationalist and religious government*](https://apnews.com/article/israel-palestinians-gaza-hamas-airstrikes-hostages-e4ae51a640a3fc04b23ea9561703f874) soon after Hamas' Oct. 7 attack on Israel. The goal was to bring a sense of national unity to the country as it wages [*war against Hamas in Gaza.*](https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war)

The former military chief of staff has seen his public support soar. Polls show he would earn enough support to become prime minister if elections were held today.

In contrast, [*Netanyahu’s backing has collapsed*](https://apnews.com/article/netanyahu-israel-gaza-hamas-war-political-campaign-f40539425a1d6b6928a99a9d2e6d977c). Many Israelis blame the prime minister for failing to prevent the Hamas attack, which killed 1,200 Israelis, most of them civilians.

Amid the rivalry, Gantz' trip to Washington earned him [*a rebuke*](https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-war-news-03-03-2024-3193becf71b8e5a533d38be7973795e7) from Netanyahu, a sign of the growing rift in the government.

Gantz is widely expected to leave the government once the heavy fighting subsides, signaling the period of national unity has ended. The Israeli public will likely see that as a cue to resume the mass anti-government demonstrations that took place before Hamas’ attack.

While the government wouldn't collapse if Gantz leaves, large demonstrations could ramp up the pressure on Netanyahu's deeply unpopular coalition to hold early elections.

Gantz has been a top political rival of Netanyahu's for half a decade. He joined Netanyahu’s coalition in the disorienting days after Hamas’ attack and at a time when Israel was at its most divided after months of protests over [*planned changes to Israel’s legal system*](https://apnews.com/article/israel-netanyahu-protests-overhaul-courts-282e2cd18a2340a067625e148ebda41c#:~:text=Protesters%2C%20who%20make%20up%20a,corruption%20charges%2C%20and%20his%20allies.). He has served on the influential War Cabinet and has acted as a moderating force in the far-right government.

He has sought to promote [*the cause of the roughly 250 hostages*](https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-gaza-war-hostages-cunio-captivity-869241bb259b00a8f98817edf89b0bc8) taken into Gaza, while others in the Cabinet opposed dealing for their release because of the cost it could exact from Israel. He has also sought to foster Israel's alliance with the U.S., which has provided key diplomatic and military support during the war.

Gantz heads the National Unity faction in parliament. After a nearly four decade military career, Gantz entered ***politics*** in late 2018. That was the start of a period of political instability that sent Israelis to the polls five times in less than four years, each one a referendum on Netanyahu’s fitness to serve while [*facing corruption charges.*](https://apnews.com/article/8e0479ea534139e46dc0df2349b95ba3)

After refusing to sit in a government under Netanyahu, Gantz agreed to join a short-lived Netanyahu-led coalition in a bid to stem the political turmoil as the COVID pandemic was taking root. After being ousted in one of the elections, Netanyahu returned to power in late 2022, forming a government of West Bank settlement supporters and opponents of Palestinian statehood.

Gantz has served as defense minister, overseeing brief operations in Gaza. In 2021, he [*outlawed six prominent Palestinian rights groups*](https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-israel-terrorism-96464d7d14c3a1a0b5adb75a45aa6a5e), citing alleged militant links, a step widely criticized by the Palestinians.

He has been vague on his views on Palestinian statehood but he has taken steps to show he is open to the idea, including holding meetings with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas while serving as defense minister.

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