

# [***Why ultra-Orthodox conscription could threaten Israel's coalition***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BH4-KT61-DY7V-G2T9-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; [*Ultra-Orthodox Israelis*](https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/15/world/ultra-orthodox-jewish-communities-coronavirus-intl/index.html) have long held a privileged position in that society.

Their religious schools, or yeshivas, get generous government subsidies. And yet young men of the Haredim, as they are known in Hebrew, are in all practical terms exempt from [*mandatory military service*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/04/middleeast/israeli-soldiers-political-war/index.html#:~:text=Military%20service%20is%20mandatory%20for,as%20diverse%20as%20Israeli%20society.).

That exemption has bedeviled Israeli society since its founding. But a legal deadline to come up with a more equitable social compact, at least in the eyes of the Supreme Court, now looms at the end of March.

Powerful members of Prime Minister [*Benjamin Netanyahu's government*](https://www.cnn.com/2022/12/29/middleeast/israel-benjamin-netanyahu-swearing-in-intl/index.html) have made clear they will not help him kick the can down the road without broad political support.

"This is the one issue that has the biggest potential of bringing down the coalition," Yohanan Plesner, head of the Israel Democracy Institute (IDI), told CNN.

Ultra-Orthodox Jews view religious study as fundamental to the preservation of Judaism. For many of those who live in Israel, that means study is just as important to Israel's defense as the military.

In Israel's nascent days, Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion agreed with Haredi rabbis to exempt from military service 400 men studying in religious schools, or yeshivas. In 1948, there were few Haredim in Israel - many were and remain opposed to the state on religious grounds - and the exemption had little practical impact.

In 1998, Israel's Supreme Court ripped up the longstanding exemption, telling the government that allowing Haredim to get out of conscription violated equal protection principles. In the decades since, successive governments and Knessets have tried to solve the issue, only to be told again and again by the court that their efforts were illegal.

At the same time, the Haredi community has grown significantly. They now make up 24% of recruitment-aged Israelis, according to the IDI. Arab Israelis are exempt from mandatory service. In practice, anyone who tells a recruiter that he studies at yeshiva - anyone who presents themselves to be ultra-Orthodox - can get out of service.

Now, those piecemeal attempts to maintain the Haredi exemption may be running out. The latest government attempt to paper over the problem, in place [*since 2018*](https://www.cnn.com/2018/03/13/middleeast/netanyahu-israel-snap-elections-intl/index.html), expires at the end of March.

The day before Netanyahu's press conference, Yoav Gallant, Israel's defense minister, made clear that he did not have his prime minister's back.

"Any draft bill that will be agreed to by all members of the emergency coalition, I will agree to," he said. "But without an agreement by all coalition members, the security establishment under my leadership will not support the bill."

The implication was that the man that polls suggest is most likely to succeed Netanyahu as prime minister - Benny Gantz, who is part of the emergency coalition, but not the pre-October government - will have veto power over any solution to the issue.

Netanyahu was vague in his response.

"We will set goals for recruiting ultra-Orthodox men into the IDF and civilian service," he told reporters. "The worst thing that can happen to us now is to go to general elections during the war, which means losing the war."

Gantz, who just concluded a highly controversial trip to the United States and United Kingdom that his government declared to be unsanctioned, has made clear that "all parts of society should take part in the right to serve our country," and that "this is not a matter for the court but for the leaders."

What's the view of Israeli public opinion?

Most Israelis agree that the situation is untenable.

In a February poll conducted by the IDI, shared exclusively with CNN, 64% of Israeli respondents and 70% of Jewish Israeli respondents said that the Haredi exemption "should be changed." The pollsters spoke with Israeli adults - 600 in Hebrew and 150 in Arabic.

Israel's attorney general, Gali Baharav-Miara, added more urgency to the matter when she told the Supreme Court last month that as soon as the exemption arrangement expires, the government can no longer legally fund the yeshivas.

"How can you basically dodge service and at the same time be eligible for government subsidies for studying in a yeshiva?" asked IDI head Plesner, who is also a former member of Knesset and has long worked on this issue.

If the government cut off yeshiva funding, Plesner said, it "would create a situation that would prevent the government from being able to stall and procrastinate on this issue, because the ultra-Orthodox parties would not agree to sit in a coalition that does not fund their landmark institutions."

Indeed, Netanyahu's bind is that his government coalition relies on Haredi parties to stay in power. When the government came to power in late 2022, forming the most right-wing coalition in Israel's history, the Haredim sensed an opportunity.

Their coalition agreement, Plesner said, stipulated that they would "define that the exemptions are a constitutional right of the ultra-Orthodox community, and, in a way, to elevate study in the yeshiva to a constitutional level that is above even military service."

Haredi parties dismissed the efforts to conscript them as a political bludgeon used by their political enemies, not a practical need.

"The army never had any need for more manpower," Moshe Roth, a member of Knesset for the United Torah Judaism party, told CNN. "There are many political factions and politicians that use the idea of the draft and the exemption for yeshiva students as some kind of a political benefit, to get more votes."

That idea was dealt a blow after October 7. The Israeli military has had a significant number of soldiers wounded in Gaza and has instituted massive call ups.

"The army's solution for its need to expand after October 7 is to put a lot of burden on the part of the Israeli public that actually serves," said Ofer Shelah, a senior researcher at the Institute for National Security Studies and former member of Knesset who helped draft one of the previous legislative attempts at a solution.

"Now it's a real problem. It's no longer just ***politics***."

A delicate moment

Some in the Haredi political leadership, perhaps recognizing the delicate political moment, have been generally cautious in defining a position.

Before Hamas' attack, Yitzhak Goldknopf, minister of housing and construction, and head of the United Torah Judaism party, had threatened to quit the government unless Haredim were given a permanent exemption.

His position now remains unclear. But Ari Kalman, who serves as spokesperson for Goldknopf, told CNN: "Something needs to change, after we saw October 7."

The Haredim "are talking differently," he said. "They're saying, listen, whoever doesn't learn should go" and serve the country.

That view is far from universal.

In the poll conducted by IDI, 68.5% of Haredi respondents said that their exemption to military service "should not be changed." Just last weekend, Haredi protesters opposed to conscription blocked a major highway near the largely ultra-Orthodox city of Bnei Brak.

Roth, from the United Torah Judaism party, is steadfast in his views.

"We, the Jewish people, are the people of the book. Being a scholar, being a Talmud scholar, is one of the key major pillars of our existence," he said. "Jewish students have to be exempt."

And yet, while very few Haredim serve in the military, not all have proven to be opposed.

Nechemia Steinberger, a Haredi rabbi who has for years worked to integrate mainstream education into his community, signed up to the IDF in the wake of the Covid pandemic.

"People like to blame the Haredi of being these parasites who are waiting for other people to die and be killed for them," he said. "The issue of Haredi joining the army is an issue of identity."

For most Israelis, he explained, military service is an ironclad tradition, instilled from a young age. And service - whether on the front lines, or in one of the many other departments - is a pathway to job training and a career.

"For Haredim, it's not like that," he said. "The educational system supports that we dream that every child by us is going to grow up to be a Torah scholar. That's the dream."

The concern among many Haredim, he explained, is that the military is not built to accommodate people with the social and religious values of the ultra-Orthodox - and that widespread conscription would strip the Haredi of their core identity.

"You serve in a mixed unit with non-Haredim, and you're exposed to the world outside. Eventually you become part of it and you decide not to be part of the Haredi community or not be religious at all."

Even if the Haredi exemption to conscription were scrapped, the practical realities are that we are unlikely to see scenes of military police dragging scores of young men to recruitment offices.

"If you want really to create the change, it's going to take years. It's going to take at least a generation."

CNN's Amir Tal, Lauren Izso and Benjamin Brown contributed to this report.

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