

Fractional Arenas: Netanyahu Dissolves the War Cabinet

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You could almost sense the smacking of lips, accompanied by the rubbing of hands. The departure of Benny Gantz from the Israeli war cabinet, which had served as a checking forum against the conventional security cabinet, presented a perfect opportunity for those who felt his presence stifling. In these febrile times, Gantz, the leader of the opposition National Unity party, passes as a moderate centrist and had been one of its three voting members, alongside Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defence Minister Yoav Gallant.

The resignation was prompted by Netanyahu's tardy attitude towards formulating a plan to end the war in Gaza. Gantz [had given](#) him till June 8 to come up with something satisfactory, "a plan of action" that would include the normalisation of relations with Saudi Arabia and creating "an international civilian governance mechanism in Gaza".

"Unfortunately," [stated](#) Gantz, "Netanyahu is preventing us from achieving real victory. So we are leaving the unity government. With a heavy but full heart."

According to Gantz, he joined the emergency coalition "because we knew it was a bad government. The people of Israel, the fighters, the commanders, the families of the murdered, the casualties and the hostages needed unity and support like they needed air to breathe."

In his resignation letter, Gantz musters praise for his own role and that of his party.

"After the October 7 disaster, we set up together the emergency government. Our joining was not under question at that difficult time... Our entrance contributed several achievements to the government... national unity and conveying a clear message to the international community as well as to our enemies."

If the message had been one of a savage campaign littered with Palestinian corpses, the infliction of conditions of famine, the crushing of the Gaza strip, not to mention ignoring political realities, then it was certainly conveyed. If any moderate influence had been exerted on the part of Gantz and his colleagues, it was a statue yet to escape its marble confines. Much of what he has proposed are distinctions without much difference. He [envisages](#) the return of Israeli hostages still held by Hamas, the destruction and substitution of the organisation in Gaza, the return of residents of the north displaced from their homes and fortifying the US-led effort against Iran.



Secretary Antony J. Blinken meets with Israel's War Cabinet in Tel Aviv, Israel, January 9, 2024. (Official State Department photo by Chuck Kennedy/Public Domain)

Fellow National Unity minister Gadi Eisenkot, who also resigned, [explained](#) that the cabinet led by Netanyahu was prevented from “making key decisions, which were needed to realize the war’s goals and improve Israel’s strategic position.”

Israel watchers speculated on the significance of the move. The Gantz gambit could well stimulate an early conclusion to the conflict. On the other hand, his bluff could be called, enabling the hard right of the coalition to entrench themselves.

Shalom Lipner, non-resident senior fellow for Middle East Programs at the Atlantic Council, [suggested](#) that the resignation placed the PM “at the complete mercy of his right-wing and religious fellow travellers who – in the absence of Gantz’s fig leaf – will steer policy in a direction that is anathema to the Biden administration and puts Israel’s essential ties with the United States at risk.” A bitter Israel Harel, [writing](#) in *Haaretz*, wondered what improvements might be made by Gantz’s departure. Would it, for instance, encourage Netanyahu to behave more responsibly in the face of pressure from the likes of National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir? Or weaken Hezbollah’s will? Or “frighten Yahya Sinwar into giving up the life insurance the hostages are providing him?”

At first instance, Netanyahu urged Gantz to reconsider.

“Israel is in an existential war on multiple fronts,” the Israeli PM [wrote](#) on X. “Benny, this is not the time to abandon the campaign – this is the time to join forces.”

On June 16, Netanyahu confirmed that the ship had sailed. The six-member war cabinet, [described](#) by opposition leader Yair Lapid as a “shameful arena for settling scores, fighting and discussions that lead nowhere”, had outlived its fractious usefulness.

“The cabinet was in the coalition agreement with Gantz at his request,” the PM is [said to have told](#) the Security Cabinet. “As soon as Gantz left – there was no need for a cabinet anymore.”

In its place, [stated](#) a spokesperson from the prime minister’s office, the security cabinet will simply meet with greater regularity, with Netanyahu holding ad hoc “security consultations” when needed.

Abolishing the war cabinet does serve one purpose. It prevents such nationalist demagogues as Ben-Gvir of Otzma Yehudit and Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich of the Religious Zionist Party from adding their troubling names to the outfit. Ben-Gvir had insisted on his addition, [arguing](#) that it was time to bring in ministers who “warned in real-time against the conception and viewpoint that everyone today accepts was wrong.” He also argued against the secrecy of the war as prosecuted.

Both men, who have urged on even greater slaughter in Gaza and the eviction of Palestinians living there, remain members of the broader security cabinet. And they have made no secret about their mixture of delight and loathing at Gantz’s departure. “There is no less stately act than resigning from a government in time of war,” Smotrich haughtily declared.

For the moment, the scene is set for a war to go even more badly than it already has. As Gaza starves and continues to be levelled, Israel’s politicians will be circling in anticipation of an election date. Netanyahu’s primary goal till then, as it has been for some years: survive.

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Featured image: US Secretary of State [Antony Blinken](#) with Israeli Prime Minister [Benjamin Netanyahu](#) and the Israeli war cabinet in Tel Aviv, Israel, 22 March 2024 (From the Public Domain)

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