

## ISRAEL-HAMAS WAR

# As Israel reels, Netanyahu agrees to share power with opposition party



By [Steve Hendrix](#)

October 11, 2023 at 2:00 p.m. EDT

JERUSALEM — As Israel launches a massive counterattack against Hamas in Gaza, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reached a power-sharing deal with his chief political rival to form an emergency unity government expressly to prosecute the war.

Netanyahu and former military Chief of Staff Benny Gantz signed an agreement late Wednesday and announced that the parliament will convene in an emergency session Thursday to approve the deal. The agreement will bring the center-right National Unity party of Gantz into the far-right governing coalition of Netanyahu. Gantz will also join a select war cabinet that will otherwise include only Netanyahu and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant. Other members of the opposition will join a broader security cabinet.

A unity government has been widely expected in recent days amid soaring public anger at the prime minister for failing to prevent the surprise [attack](#) by Hamas that have killed more than 1,200, with even his own party loyalists calling for a new partnership with the opposition. It is one more example of how the shock wave set off by the weekend events has swept away the previous political reality. Before Saturday, Israel was engulfed in the most serious political discord in its history, with mass demonstrations challenging government plans to restrict the power of the judiciary.

Now, as Israel scrambles to get on a war footing, parties at each other's throats just days ago have agreed to govern together, at least for now. "There is a unity government for the State of Israel," Economy Minister Nir Barkat posted on X, formerly known as Twitter. "At a time like this we must unite, support the IDF soldiers and act as one man until the complete victory of the State of Israel over the enemy," he wrote, referring to the Israel Defense Forces.

The deal will immediately infuse the government with decades of military experience: Gadi Eisenkot, also a former Army chief of staff and member of the National Unity party, will serve as an observer on the war cabinet. Ron Dermer, who is a close Netanyahu ally and former Israeli ambassador to the United States, will also be an observer.

The move of bringing in the parties from the opposition may ease a sudden crisis of public confidence in the existing coalition. “This is good news from the Israeli public’s perspective as the legitimacy of the current government is very low because of what happened on Saturday,” said Gideon Rahat, a political science professor at Hebrew University. “The first function of any government is to give people security and it totally failed.”

Netanyahu has come under withering criticism since Hamas fighters streamed past a high-technology barrier undetected and rampaged through numerous Israeli towns. The Israeli military struggled to mount a rapid response as civilians battled infiltrators on their own for hours. Dozens of Israeli hostages are thought to be held in Gaza.

Gantz had immediately called for a unity government to be formed, and Netanyahu may have felt he had little choice as public support for the idea grew over the next four days. While the attacks have generated an outpouring of public support for the Israeli military and the cause of defeating Hamas, many of the families whose sons and daughters have been mobilized are not supporters of Bibi, as Netanyahu is known here.

Partnering with Gantz may ease the public disaffection with the government and the Likud party of Netanyahu. “I don’t think Netanyahu really had a choice,” Rahat said. “For the first time we saw pressure from Likud insiders. Most of them are yes men for Bibi.”

The emergency coalition agreement is set to expire when hostilities are completed. In the meantime, it gives Gantz power akin to that of another prime minister. The small war cabinet will hold most of the authority to wage the military campaign against Hamas. All other political initiatives, with the exception of vital economic measures, will be put on hold without the approval of both Netanyahu and Gantz. Among the government plans shelved for now is the divisive judicial reform overhaul, which would curtail the power of judicial review of the Supreme Court of Israel over government actions.

Gantz and Netanyahu attempted a similar emergency partnership amid the coronavirus pandemic in 2020. The marriage of rivals lasted only six months before the government collapsed, largely because Netanyahu had refused to advance a budget. That move was widely seen as a deliberate maneuver to trigger the dissolution of the government and force elections.

Political experts said it is unclear whether Netanyahu will survive in office once the war is complete and the emergency government dissolves. Much will depend on how events unfold. But there is no question that his reputation for security competence has taken a hit, and Gantz will assume significant authority, the experts said.

“From a public perspective, Netanyahu is now the weaker member of this partnership,” said Yohanan Plesner, president of the Israeli Democracy Institute. “He oversaw the biggest security failure in the country’s history, and Gantz is jumping to help.”

Opposition leader Yair Lapid has voiced support for the emergency government and was reportedly offered an opportunity to join the unity coalition. He has insisted in recent months that no deal with Netanyahu is possible without him removing two extreme right-wing members of the governing coalition: nationalist settler leaders Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben Gvir.

Gantz set aside those demands in the wake of the attack Saturday. But those two extreme members will see their impact diminished because they are being excluded from the new war cabinets, even though they hold some responsibilities involved with overseeing the military and police. “Their influence is dramatically marginalized,” Plesner said. “They have not been kicked out the government, but they have been kicked out of the most important part that manages the war.”