



Benny Gantz: The Former General Who Trusted Netanyahu Too Much and Is Now Fighting for His Political Survival

In the run-up to the Israeli parliamentary elections on October 27, FokusIsrael.ch is profiling the Jewish state's most prominent political leaders. This week: Benny Gantz of the "Blue and White" alliance.

By Jan Kapusnak

Benny Gantz entered Israeli politics in December 2018 as the man poised to replace Benjamin Netanyahu. Eight years later, he is merely fighting for his political survival.

As a former head of the IDF and defense minister, Gantz brought extensive security experience and a reputation for moderation to politics. Yet at crucial moments, he has proven politically naive. He placed his trust in agreements that Netanyahu viewed as tactical maneuvers to ensure his own political survival. As a result, Gantz made questionable decisions and repeatedly missed political opportunities.

Gantz founded the "Israel Resilience Party" in 2018, which soon became the core of the broader "Blue and White" alliance. Today, "Blue and White" occupies the political center in Israel and combines national security with liberal Zionism, support for democratic institutions, and a preference for broad national unity governments.

In addition, Benny Gantz's alliance advocates for greater equality in military and civilian service. Furthermore, the alliance rejects both the far-right's annexationist ambitions regarding the West Bank and the more far-reaching territorial compromises proposed by the traditional left. Nevertheless, the party has lost much of its electoral appeal as other centrist party coalitions and their leaders compete with it.

From General to Netanyahu's Challenger

Benny Gantz was born in 1959 in Kfar Ahim in southern Israel. His mother survived the Holocaust after being imprisoned in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp; his father had immigrated to Israel from Romania.

Gantz joined the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) as a paratrooper in 1977 and spent nearly four decades in uniform. He commanded the Paratrooper Brigade, the Judea and Samaria Division, and the Northern Command; served as military attaché in Washington; and became Chief of Staff of the IDF in 2011. His tenure included the "Pillar of Defense" military operation against Hamas in 2012 and Operation



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“Protective Edge” in Gaza in 2014.

When Gantz entered politics in late 2018, Israel was deeply divided over Benjamin Netanyahu, who had dominated the country’s politics for a decade. The opposition had repeatedly failed to field a challenger who could attract voters beyond the center-left. Gantz now seemed to be that man.

Before the April 2019 election, his party, “Israel Resilience,” joined forces with Yair Lapid’s “Yesh Atid” and Moshe Ya’alon’s “Telem” to form the “Blue and White” alliance. The alliance was deliberately broad in scope. The most important unifying principle was to replace Netanyahu while maintaining a security-oriented political center.

The strategy was initially successful. In April 2019, “Blue and White” won 35 seats in the Israeli parliament (Knesset), matching Netanyahu’s Likud. However, efforts to form a government failed. In the subsequent election in September 2019, “Blue and White” won 33 seats to Likud’s 32, becoming the largest party in the Knesset. Within a few months, Gantz had gone from political newcomer to Netanyahu’s main challenger. Nevertheless, he was unable to secure the parliamentary majority needed to form a government.

An agreement with Netanyahu marked the beginning of his downfall

The political crisis of 2020 exposed Gantz’s greatest weakness. After a third inconclusive election, Israel was politically paralyzed and on the brink of the COVID-19 pandemic. Gantz had repeatedly promised not to serve under Netanyahu while the latter was facing criminal charges. But he changed course and agreed to form an emergency unity government with him.

The plan was based on a rotation system. Under this system, Netanyahu was to remain prime minister at first, while Gantz would serve as deputy prime minister and defense minister. Gantz was then to replace him in November 2021.

This decision destroyed “Blue and White.” Lapid and Ya’alon refused to join the government and accused Gantz of breaking the central promise on which the alliance had been built.



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Gantz defended his decision as an act of national responsibility during a crisis. This reflected a recurring feature of his politics: Gantz tends to view compromise and institutional stability as virtues, even when his opponents are primarily engaged in a power struggle.

Netanyahu proved to be the more skillful player in this situation. The governing coalition collapsed in December 2020 after failing to pass a national budget. This prevented the rotation, and Gantz never became prime minister.

The political damage was severe. “Blue and White” plummeted from 33 seats in 2020 to just eight seats in the March 2021 elections. Many anti-Netanyahu voters had come to the conclusion that while Gantz was trustworthy, he wasn’t shrewd enough to take on Israel’s most experienced political figure.

The centrist defense minister

Nevertheless, he survived. Gantz remained defense minister in the broad coalition formed in 2021 by Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid. He pursued a pragmatic security policy, exerted pressure on Iran and its regional proxies, and supported the strategic relationships established through the Abraham Accords with various Arab countries.

Gantz also met with the president of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas. He argued that cooperation with the Palestinian leadership served Israel’s security interests even without progress toward a final peace agreement.

Gantz’s stance toward the Palestinians reflects his broader centrist position. Gantz is neither an advocate of immediate Palestinian statehood nor of permanent annexation of the West Bank. He supports preserving Israel’s security and freedom of action, but at the same time wants to maintain the possibility of political separation from the Palestinians. For this reason, he rejects the annexation plan associated with Bezalel Smotrich and parts of the settler movement. On the other hand, he is significantly more cautious regarding offers of territorial withdrawal than the traditional Israeli left.

Domestically, Gantz supports the independence of the judiciary and opposed Netanyahu’s judicial reform. Typically, however, he also participated in negotiations with the government to find a compromise. Supporters saw this as evidence that,



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for Gantz, responsibility for the country takes precedence. Critics accused him of once again letting Netanyahu take advantage of him because of his willingness to negotiate.

October 7 and Netanyahu Once Again

The massacre carried out by Hamas and its followers in Gaza on October 7, 2023, presented Gantz with another political opportunity. Although he was one of Netanyahu's main opponents, he joined an emergency government led by Netanyahu shortly after the terrorist attack. Together with former IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot, he became a member of the small war cabinet.

At first, the decision gave him a dramatic boost. At a time of national trauma, Gantz came across as experienced, reserved, and focused on the war rather than on party politics. For months, polls showed that his "National Unity" alliance was ahead of Netanyahu's "Likud." But the agreement led to an old problem: Gantz shared responsibility for government decisions without having control over the overall strategy.

As the war progressed, disagreements grew over the hostages, the future administration of Gaza, and Netanyahu's refusal to define a clear postwar strategy. In May 2024, Gantz issued an ultimatum, demanding a comprehensive plan that included the return of the hostages, the ouster of Hamas, the establishment of an alternative administration in Gaza, and normalization with Saudi Arabia.

When Netanyahu failed to meet his demands, Gantz resigned from the government in June 2024 and accused Netanyahu of preventing Israel from achieving "true victory." But even this resignation proved politically costly. Critics accused him of staying on too long. Gantz himself admitted in 2026 that leaving the emergency government had been a mistake.

Overtaken by Eisenkot

The more serious blow to Benny Gantz, however, came from within his own political camp. Gadi Eisenkot, another former IDF chief of staff, had joined Gantz before the 2022 election and later sat alongside him on the war cabinet. At first, the two generals seemed to complement each other, but as Gantz's popularity waned, his former partner increasingly emerged as a political figure in his own right.



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Eventually, their alliance broke down, and Eisenkot founded the “Yashar” (Upright) party, which quickly established itself as a major force in Israel’s political center.

According to the latest election polls, Eisenkot’s “Yashar” is currently ahead of Netanyahu and “Likud.” In contrast, Gantz’s “Blue and White” party is still well below the 3.25 percent of the vote needed for the coalition to return to the Knesset.

For Gantz now finds himself facing a political landscape that differs greatly from that of the 2019 elections. Today, Eisenkot is competing with him for security-minded centrist voters. Bennett and Lapid have joined forces in “Together.” Yair Golan’s Democrats have consolidated a large portion of the Zionist left. And Avigdor Lieberman has a secular, right-wing electorate behind him.

The political characteristics that once set Gantz apart are now shared by others: Bennett appeals to moderate right-wing voters, Lapid has a loyal liberal base, and Eisenkot has won over a large portion of the security-oriented center. Consequently, there is hardly any voter group left that Gantz alone appeals to, and “Blue and White”—once one of Israel’s two dominant parties—is fighting for its survival.

Still in Search of National Unity

Nevertheless, Gantz continues to defend the principle that has shaped much of his political career: national unity over party politics. In January 2026, he said he was willing to serve in another government with Netanyahu if doing so would prevent a coalition that relies on political extremists (such as Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich at present). This reflects Gantz’s conviction that Israel’s current internal divisions have become a threat to national security and that a broad Zionist coalition could restore stability.

Gantz has also taken a clear stance on Haredi military service: He opposes laws that grant far-reaching exemptions from military service to ultra-Orthodox men. He argues that Israel cannot continue to place the burden of military service disproportionately on other segments of society.

Yet Gantz’s continued openness to working with Netanyahu remains politically dangerous for him. Many voters who supported him in 2019 and 2020 have not forgotten the failed rotation agreement. What Gantz sees as a sense of responsibility, they view as an inability to learn from experience.



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A General Without an Army

Gantz's decline is tragic, as his qualifications remain impressive. He served as IDF Chief of Staff, Minister of Defense, Deputy Prime Minister, and member of the War Cabinet. Moreover, he has always maintained a moderate political style, largely free of the ideological provocations that are generally part of Israeli politics.

At one point, Benny Gantz came close to ousting Netanyahu from the office of prime minister. But eight years after entering politics, the former general is no longer focused on defeating Netanyahu, but rather on simply remaining in the Knesset.

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