



Gadi Eisenkot: The Former General Who Wants to Defeat Netanyahu

Ahead of the Israeli parliamentary elections on October 27, FokusIsrael.ch is profiling the Jewish state's most prominent political leaders. This week: Former Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's toughest challenger.

From Jan Kapusnak

Just a few months ago, it seemed as though former Prime Minister Naftali Bennett would be Benjamin Netanyahu's main rival in the upcoming elections. Now, however, a less charismatic but—quite clearly—more trustworthy figure in the eyes of many voters, the former IDF Chief of Staff, has stepped into the spotlight: Gadi Eisenkot.

His fledgling centrist party, "Yashar," has [already overtaken Netanyahu's "Likud" in some recent opinion polls](#). And according to these polls, Eisenkot also outperforms Netanyahu when Israelis are asked whom they consider better suited to become prime minister. This makes Eisenkot the most serious personal challenger to the longest-serving head of government in Israel's history.

A different style and a different background than Netanyahu's

Eisenkot's rise is not based on dazzling rhetoric. He comes across as reserved on stage, and his speeches lack Netanyahu's dramatic charm. Yet many Israelis see precisely that as his strength. To them, Eisenkot embodies the unassuming professional who neither portrays himself as the savior of the nation nor claims that he alone can protect it.

Gadi Eisenkot was born in Tiberias in 1960 to Jewish immigrants from Morocco and grew up in Eilat. His last name sounds German and has the rather unflattering literal meaning in that language of "iron excrement." However, this is not one of the humiliating names once assigned to Jews in German-speaking countries. The name likely originated when an immigration official mistranscribed "Azenkot"—an Amazigh name meaning "deer"—upon his father's arrival in Israel.

Gadi Eisenkot's background differs significantly from that of Benjamin Netanyahu. While Netanyahu spent part of his youth and college years in the United States, as well as most of his life as a politician, Eisenkot grew up in a working-class family on the geographical periphery of Israel and has spent almost his entire adult life in the military.

In 1978, Eisenkot joined the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and served in the Golani



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Brigade, one of the most renowned infantry units in the Israeli Defense Forces, which he later commanded. When Netanyahu's government appointed him Chief of the General Staff in 2015, he became the first Israeli of Moroccan descent to hold the army's highest position. His four-year tenure was marked by limited military operations against Hamas and Hezbollah, efforts to counter Iranian entrenchment in Syria, and covert operations against Iran's nuclear program, and was relatively uneventful.

A centrist politician and military hawk

Eisenkot is generally regarded as a centrist, but when it comes to security, he is a hawk. He believes that Israel must respond forcefully to attacks and maintain a credible deterrent. For him, it is essential that military measures be based on achievable strategic objectives. He therefore criticizes Netanyahu for his indecisiveness, his lack of a coherent strategy, and his tendency to subordinate security decisions to American pressure and to his own power politics aimed at preserving his governing coalition.

Eisenkot has supported the separation of Israelis and Palestinians, but now describes calls for a Palestinian state as "irrelevant." Instead, he insists that Israel retain control over strategically important areas, including the Jordan Valley and the major settlement blocs in the West Bank.

Eisenkot entered politics ahead of the 2022 election by joining Benny Gantz's "National Unity" alliance—Gantz, too, had served as Chief of Staff of the IDF and later, for a time, as prime minister. Following the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, Eisenkot joined Netanyahu's emergency government as a minister without portfolio and an observer on the War Cabinet.

The Gaza War, triggered by the Hamas massacre, became a personal tragedy for Eisenkot. In December 2023, his 25-year-old son, Gal Meir, was killed in Gaza. The following day, his nephew Maor was killed, and another nephew, Yogev, died later. The loss of three close relatives gave Eisenkot special moral authority in a country where the unequal distribution of military burdens between the majority of secular Israelis and religious Zionists on the one hand, and ultra-Orthodox Jews on the other, has become the most bitterly contested political issue.

Eisenkot's son lost his life in Gaza—Netanyahu's son lives in Miami



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The contrast with Netanyahu's family could hardly be greater. While Eisenkot's son and nephews fought and died, the prime minister's son, Yair, lived in Miami under government-funded protection during the war. From the safety of a foreign country, he repeatedly attacked the opposition and the Israeli security establishment, even claiming that high-ranking officials were guilty of "high treason" or involved in an attempted military coup.

The "National Unity" coalition left the government in June 2024. Eisenkot accused Netanyahu of confusing tactical successes with a coherent strategy and of failing to develop a realistic plan to defeat Hamas, free the hostages, and establish a stable postwar order in Gaza.

In 2025, Eisenkot left the "National Unity" party and founded his own party, "Yashar." In Hebrew, the word can mean "straight" or "direct," but also "honest" or "right." The name was inspired by the freed hostage Eli Sharadi, who had said that the liberation of hostages was not a matter of right or left, but of doing the right thing— *Yashar*.

"Yashar" is attempting to unite security-minded right-wing voters with the liberal center. The party aims to preserve Israel as a Jewish and democratic state based on the values of its 1948 Declaration of Independence. To that end, Eisenkot promises to establish an independent state commission of inquiry into the October 7 massacre—a measure that the current government rejects out of fear of the commission's findings.

Other items on the agenda for "Yashar" include the reconstruction of the north, which was devastated by rocket attacks from the Lebanese terrorist organization Hezbollah, and the south, which was devastated by attacks from Gaza, as well as improved public administration and a term limit for the prime minister of two legislative terms.

Harsh Criticism of Prime Minister Netanyahu

Eisenkot views Netanyahu not only as a political opponent, but as a prime minister who refused to take responsibility after the massacre on October 7. Furthermore, Eisenkot criticizes Netanyahu for consistently subordinating his political decisions to the survival of his coalition—and thus to his own political survival. In doing so, he has deepened the social divide in Israel instead of uniting the country.



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Gadi Eisenkot has described the controversial legislative changes through which the current government seeks to strip the Supreme Court—which it dislikes—of its power as a “regime coup.” Even before October 7, he had warned that this dispute was undermining Israel’s national cohesion and military readiness.

To end the ongoing power struggle between the government and the Supreme Court, Eisenkot’s party, “Yashar,” advocates for the adoption of an Israeli constitution—or at least a Basic Law—that clearly defines the powers of the parliament, the government, and the courts. Unlike most Western democracies, Israel does not yet have a constitution or a basic law.

Mandatory military service for the ultra-Orthodox as a key demand

The biggest political challenge for Eisenkot could be the dispute over mandatory service for ultra-Orthodox men (Haredim). Under the slogan “Service for All,” his party demands that every Israeli citizen, including the Haredim and Israeli Arabs, perform military or civilian service. This is to be carried out under conditions tailored to their communities. Those who do not join the army are to compensate for this by working in healthcare, education, emergency response, or social work.

In July 2026, the Israeli parliament (Knesset) passed a bill introduced by the government that protects ultra-Orthodox conscientious objectors from prosecution. In response, Eisenkot accused Prime Minister Netanyahu of “weakening the army” during a difficult war. He criticized the government for legalizing inequality in exchange for ultra-Orthodox political support, while soldiers and reservists were forced to serve longer.

Eisenkot’s position is not directed against the ultra-Orthodox as such. He has said he could cooperate with the ultra-Orthodox party “Shas,” provided it recognizes Israel as a Jewish and democratic state and endorses the Declaration of Independence and universal military or civilian service. Eisenkot’s own mother voted for “Shas” for 30 years, and he emphasizes that many of its voters serve in the army—unlike those ultra-Orthodox elites who would demand a general exemption from service for the Haredim.

A man with (good) qualities, but little political experience

Eisenkot’s strength lies in a rare combination of qualities. He possesses the military and security expertise of a former Chief of the General Staff; as a descendant of a



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Moroccan family, he has a Mizrahi background that could help him appeal to traditional Likud voters; and he maintains a moderate, level-headed style that is acceptable to the political center. His personal story also embodies the sacrifices made by many Israeli families during the October 7 massacre and the subsequent Gaza War—or in the wars and conflicts that preceded them.

Eisenkot's weakness is politics itself. Netanyahu is exceptionally skilled at delegitimizing rivals and forging unlikely coalitions. Eisenkot is not the first former army chief to challenge him: Ehud Barak defeated Netanyahu in 1999, while Shaul Mofaz and Benny Gantz were unable to unseat him. Gantz's Blue and White alliance, which also included former army chiefs Moshe Ya'alon and Gabi Ashkenazi, won 33 seats in September 2019 compared to 32 for Likud, but was unable to form a government. Gantz ultimately joined a coalition led by Netanyahu—a decision that his ally Ya'alon described as "political suicide."

This story serves as a warning to Eisenkot and the rest of the anti-Netanyahu bloc. They could win more seats in the Knesset elections on October 27, but still fall short of the 61 seats needed for a majority and thus for forming a government. Eisenkot would then have to convince Shas to compromise on military service, or he would have to form an alliance with Arab parties, which would expose him to attacks from the right.

Nevertheless, Gadi Eisenkot's candidacy highlights what has been at stake in Israeli politics since the traumatic massacre of October 7, 2023. As a former Chief of Staff, Eisenkot offers no less of a security-oriented Israel than the current government. On the contrary, he embodies a policy that is safer, more strategic, and more just than that of the Netanyahu government. By seeking to restore trust between citizens, the military, and the political leadership, Gadi Eisenkot presents himself as more responsible and more committed to the national interest of the Jewish state than Benjamin Netanyahu does, in the opinion of a large majority of Israelis.

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