



ISRAEL'S CONSCRIPTION CRISIS – THE DEBATE OVER THE ULTRA-ORTHODOX DRAFT LAW

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What is the role of the ultra-Orthodox/Haredim in Israeli politics and current coalition?

In tightly fought elections where coalition majorities rest on thin margins, the ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) community plays an outsized, consequential role as kingmakers. In Prime Minister Netanyahu's governing coalition, their political parties, Shas and United Torah Judaism (UTJ) have proven to be essential to its long-term survival. Their top political priority is preserving the special privileges of the Haredi society, especially military service exemptions, which Haredi leadership views as vital to maintaining the community's distinct way of life. From their perspective, mandatory enlistment would lead to unwanted integration of Haredi youth into the broader Israeli society.

The ultra-Orthodox parties have used their influence in successive coalition governments to block efforts to end or restrict their exemption. Although Israel's Supreme Court has repeatedly ruled the current exemption unconstitutional, implementation of those rulings has been delayed by political wrangling and government inaction. The pressure has only grown during the war in Gaza, as tens of thousands of Haredi men have not enrolled despite the unprecedented strain on the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and public calls for equal burden-sharing. Interestingly, the national-religious public, represented in the Knesset by Smotrich and Ben Gvir, has begun pressing the issue of Haredi enlistment in a manner equal to – and even stronger than – that of the secular public.

What is the “draft law” and what is all the arguing about?

Israel's conscription program has been a cornerstone of the country's security doctrine since founding – and a flashpoint for decades. While most able-bodied Jewish Israelis are required to serve in the IDF, significant exemptions exist. In 1948, Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion struck a deal with leaders of the Haredi community, allowing a small number of Haredi men to defer service while they studied Torah full-time in the yeshiva (religious seminary). With the formation of Menachem Begin's first government in 1977, Begin decided to grant a blanket exemption to the entire Haredi public, which at the time numbered only a few thousand per year. Over the decades, this exemption expanded dramatically as the Haredi population grew. Today, tens of thousands of Haredi men avoid service entirely by remaining in yeshiva or being registered as students.

Israel's Supreme Court has repeatedly ruled that the exemption is discriminatory and unconstitutional, citing violations of equality under the law. In 1998, the Court urged the Knesset to legislate a solution, leading to the 2002 “Tal Law,” which sought to integrate Haredi men into military or national service, but failed to significantly boost enlistment, and was then struck down in 2012. Subsequent reform efforts collapsed amid political instability and repeated elections, allowing exemptions to continue as the Knesset failed to pass new legislation.

During this time, debates over Haredi enlistment became a central political fault line. The issue helped trigger five elections in four years and was a key motivation for the Haredi-backed push to weaken judicial oversight in the government's controversial 2023 judicial overhaul. After decades of political stalemates, the Court struck down the most recent exemption framework in 2024. As of July 1, 2024 all draft-age men, including Haredim, became legally subject to conscription. With no

permanent resolution in place, the government has issued temporary orders delaying Haredi conscription again – despite past court rulings declaring such measures illegal.

What happened in the withdrawal from the government and where do things stand now?

Last week, Israel's ultra-Orthodox parties withdrew from Prime Minister Netanyahu's government, triggering a deep coalition crisis. UTJ pulled its ministers and Knesset members in protest of the government's failure to pass a law protecting yeshiva students. The crisis escalated when Shas followed suit just days later, with its ministers also resigning from the government, but not the coalition. Their departure left Netanyahu's coalition with only 50 of 120 members in the Knesset – far short of a governing majority.

The ultra-Orthodox parties did everything possible to avoid leaving the government, largely due to the generous budgets they continue to receive despite sanctions on draft evaders. Their resignation was largely symbolic, as they have made it clear that they won't bring down the government for now. With current polls unfavorable to Netanyahu's bloc, and by extension to them, they are trying to delay elections they fear will leave them outside the next government.

With the Knesset entering summer recess on July 27, Netanyahu has gained a temporary reprieve, but his political position remains fragile. The Haredi parties are still expected to push for what they call a "draft settlement law for yeshiva students" – legislation the Opposition dismisses as an "evasion law" – but the chances of passing such a bill in the current Knesset are slim. For now, the controversial draft exemption proposal has been shelved, yet the core conflict – between public demands for equal military service and ultra-Orthodox refusal to serve – remains unresolved. Netanyahu's strategy appears to be buying time. If no compromise is reached and the deadlock persists, Israel could be headed toward elections with the draft issue dominating the campaign.

What does this mean for the viability of the government when they return from recess?

Netanyahu continues to face a strategic bind. If he enacts a law perceived as a blanket exemption, he'll alienate secular and national religious voters, soldiers' families, and IDF leadership. If he forces meaningful recruitment, he risks losing his Haredi partners and his coalition. Therefore, his likely action is to buy more time.

For the ultra-Orthodox, passing a bill is essential as thousands of draft orders have already been issued, and budget cuts to yeshivas have angered ultra-Orthodox voters. Some families now fear both economic and legal jeopardy. Internally, some pragmatists want a symbolic "recruitment outline" with minimal enforcement and low quotas, while hardliners reject any enlistment.

This week, in an apparent effort to ease tensions with ultra-Orthodox factions in the Knesset and pave the way for legislation formalizing the exemption of most ultra-Orthodox men from IDF service, lawmakers from Netanyahu's Likud party voted decisively on Wednesday afternoon to replace Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee chairman MK Yuli Edelstein with fellow Likud MK Boaz Bismuth.

Although the next election is officially scheduled for November 2026, most bets are that a collapse will come sooner. If the Haredi parties remain outside the coalition when the Knesset reconvenes in the fall, elections will likely have to be called – possibly as early as February or June 2026. The timing could significantly influence Netanyahu's ability to shape the race on his own terms. Ultimately, the conscription standoff has become a defining issue – not only for this coalition, but for the next Israeli election. It underscores a larger reckoning: between state and religion, collective sacrifice and exemption, and a growing question of what shared citizenship means in a society increasingly strained by war and inequality.

How does this influence the ceasefire and hostage deal negotiations?

Despite the turmoil surrounding the draft law and the Haredi withdrawal from the coalition, Netanyahu continues to manage hostage negotiations and ceasefire discussions largely on his own terms. These talks are conducted primarily through his inner circle, and any agreement he brings forward is likely to gain majority support in the Knesset – with backing from opposition parties willing to prioritize the return of hostages and an end to the fighting. While the government's stability is in question, Netanyahu retains enough parliamentary flexibility to push through a ceasefire deal if he chooses. The real constraint lies not in numbers, but in political will: whether Netanyahu believes the timing of a deal aligns with his broader strategy for survival and control.