



ISRAEL TWO YEARS ON: POLITICS AFTER THE CEASEFIRE

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Two years after the October 7 massacre, Israel stands at a political crossroads. The fighting is currently at a halt, but the future remains unclear. US envoys and senior officials fly in and out, probing who exactly governs and what direction the country is headed. The hostages who survived are home – a major national relief – but questions about accountability, recovery, and leadership persist.

Public opinion offers one clear signal: most Israelis supported ending the war to secure the hostages' release. A recent [survey](#) found that 76 percent of Israelis favor the ceasefire agreement that ended the war in Gaza, compared with only 11 percent opposed and 13 percent undecided. Among Jewish Israelis, support stands at 73 percent, while an overwhelming 88 percent of Arab citizens back the deal. Notably, a majority of coalition voters – 57 percent – also support the agreement, alongside 91 percent among opposition voters. This rare consensus cuts across political and demographic lines.

With the Gaza war's second anniversary behind it, Israel is already shifting into campaign mode. Elections are expected as early as June 2026, several months before the official deadline. For Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, earlier is better: he would prefer to ride the momentum of the ceasefire, return of the hostages, and military victories against Iran and its regional proxies. He also hopes to showcase diplomatic breakthroughs – potential new signatories of the Abraham Accords – while keeping any reckoning for October 7 safely distant.

A Crowded Agenda and a Restless Knesset

When the Knesset reconvened in mid-October, lawmakers faced a packed agenda. The most urgent items are familiar: the [conscription bill](#) for ultra-Orthodox men, the wartime budget, renewed debates over annexation, and legislation aimed at curbing the independence of Israel's judiciary. Beyond these, little meaningful legislation is expected; the coalition simply lacks the votes.

The two ultra-Orthodox parties, Shas and United Torah Judaism (UTJ), have [withdrawn](#) most of their active participation in the coalition – leaving Netanyahu with a minority government. Every vote now carries existential weight, and the winter session is likely to be dominated by political bargaining rather than lawmaking.

Netanyahu's Calculus

Prime Minister Netanyahu's strategy hinges on balancing three forces pulling in different directions: (1) The ultra-Orthodox parties demand permanent exemptions from military service, while the (2) Religious Zionist bloc views this as a historic opportunity to entrench Israeli sovereignty across the West Bank, officially annex the territory, and bury the idea of Palestinian

statehood. (3) At the same time, Netanyahu must navigate the Trump Administration's increasingly assertive stance and its efforts to redraw regional alignments.

Washington prefers a quiet front in Gaza, gradual regional normalization, and no unilateral annexation – as [emphasized](#) just last week during US Vice President J.D. Vance's visit and in [statements](#) made subsequently by President Trump. Each decision – on the budget, draft law, and settlement expansion – reverberates across this triangle of competing pressures. For now, Netanyahu's goal is to maintain a fragile equilibrium until the timing is right for elections.

Is Annexation on the Table?

The Religious Zionist bloc has emerged as the driving force behind what is no longer “creeping” but accelerated annexation policy. With the Finance, National Security, and Settlements portfolios under their control, as well as MK Bezalel Smotrich's ministerial position in Defense, Religious Zionist ministers have reshaped West Bank governance and land allocation.

Since October 7, the pace of annexation policy has accelerated: unprecedented settlement expansion, a record number of outposts legalized, and the Palestinian Authority's influence deliberately weakened. Yet Netanyahu recently drew a temporary line. The prime minister [instructed](#) his coalition chair “not to advance proposals regarding the application of sovereignty in Judea and Samaria until further notice.” Meanwhile, Education Minister Yoav Kisch [stated](#) during a Knesset debate: “I deeply believe in sovereignty, but it is not achieved through opposition initiatives. We are building it every day on the ground.”

As Minister Kisch stated, de facto annexation proceeds: construction budgets rise, land designations expand, and administrative powers shift from military to civilian hands. Even without a formal declaration, the outcome of these policies could make annexation a fait accompli.

2026 Israeli Election

The upcoming Israeli election will be a contest between five broad camps:

1. **Democratic camp:** Led by opposition figures Yair Lapid, Yair Golan, Avigdor Liberman and former Prime Minister Naftali Bennett. Though they share a commitment to democratic norms and fatigue with Netanyahu's rule, the democratic camp lacks cohesion. This election will see at least two additional parties enter the camp, led by Yoaz Hendel and Gadi Eisenkot.

The camp's success will depend on merging forces and avoiding vote-splitting – a challenge that has repeatedly eluded them. Women remain notably absent from the camp's leadership circle, which reflects Israel's enduring political gender gap. Bennett is still considered Netanyahu's most credible rival. In a [poll](#) taken after the ceasefire deal

this month, Likud is the largest party in the Knesset, winning 31 seats. Bennett's new party wins 18 seats – a decline from previous polling, but still within striking distance.

2. **Netanyahu camp:** Consisting of the prime minister and his loyalists. Their devotion to Netanyahu is personal, ideological, and the source of his durability. Netanyahu's loyalists align themselves with the prime minister's "us versus them" worldview. They benefit from being part of his inner circle. Loyalists are captured by his narrative of perpetual crisis, and also fear the alternative to Netanyahu.
3. **Ultra-Orthodox camp:** Longtime kingmakers in right-wing coalitions led by Netanyahu's Likud, the ultra-Orthodox parties have recently signalled profound discontent with the alliance. UTJ, representing the Ashkenazi Haredi population, formally withdrew from the coalition over the failure to legislate the military-service exemption for yeshiva students. Similarly, the Shas party, representing the Sephardi and Mizrahi Haredi populations, relinquished its cabinet roles. The longstanding exemption from IDF conscription for ultra-Orthodox men has been challenged by recent judicial rulings and public pressure during the Gaza war. Meanwhile, the Haredi population continues to grow and their Knesset parties are grappling with generational tensions. UTJ and Shas risk alienating younger voters to more right-wing nationalist parties, lest they extract additional guarantees from the government. Whether the Haredi parties choose the path of independent challengers or coalition loyalists will determine not only their fate, but the composition of the next governing coalition.
4. **Messianic right:** Led by Ministers Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich, who seek not only sovereignty over the West Bank but a broader legal and cultural revolution – rewriting laws, redefining citizenship, and embedding Jewish supremacy as the organizing principle of the state. Their parliamentary weight is limited, but they have considerable political influence: the right's narrow majority makes Ben-Gvir and Smotrich indispensable, allowing them to punch above their weight and shape the agenda.
5. **The Arab Parties:** Led by Mansour Abbas, Ayman Odeh, and Ahmad Tibi, the Arab bloc will also play a key role in the coming elections. Mansour Abbas' Ra'am party cooperated with the democratic camp to form a government in 2021, and the possibility of renewed cooperation means higher Arab voter participation could tip the balance toward the democratic camp. However, mistrust between Jewish and Arab voters runs deep after two years of war, and right-wing parties are expected to exploit this divide by framing any Jewish-Arab partnership as illegitimate. Beyond voter turnout and alliances, there is also a [growing risk](#) that Netanyahu's government will undermine the electoral process itself by passing disqualification laws that target the Arab parties.

Civic Pressure and the Moral Center

The Hostage Families Forum and the bereaved relatives' movement have played a central role in shaping Israel's national conscience. Their call for accountability – most notably through

demands for a state commission of inquiry into the failures of October 7 – has stirred broad public empathy. When the Knesset panel rejected their proposal, the families [accused](#) the government of “burying the truth.”

Together with the pro-democracy protest movement, which managed to block Netanyahu’s judicial overhaul for now, these networks have shown an exceptional ability to mobilize Israelis who feel unrepresented in the current Knesset. They have also elevated a new generation of civic leaders whose empathy and moral clarity resonate beyond partisan lines. Yet as their influence has grown, so has the backlash. In recent months, right-wing media and coalition figures have sought to discredit the Hostage Families Forum’s leaders, [accusing](#) them of “weakening the army” and “dividing the nation.” Commentators in pro-government outlets blame the pre-war protest organizers for undermining unity before October 7, and the hostage movement for doing so after – a rhetorical inversion that shifts blame from those in power to those demanding accountability.

What began as a movement of compassion and solidarity is being recast as a threat to national strength. The Hostage Families Forum has become both the symbol of Israel’s conscience and the target of efforts to silence it. The challenge moving forward is whether it translates into winning elections, influencing legislative agendas, and shifting public opinion.

Netanyahu’s Legal Shadow

Netanyahu’s corruption trials continue, but their political relevance has largely faded. What once threatened his rule has become background noise, overshadowed by the war and a coordinated campaign to weaken the judiciary itself.

In recent months, ministers and coalition figures have intensified their attacks on Israel’s legal institutions – not only questioning the courts’ authority but attempting to rewrite it. Justice Minister Yariv Levin and his allies now [argue](#) that any commission of inquiry into the October 7 failures should be appointed not by the Supreme Court, as required by law, but by “someone everyone trusts” – meaning, the government. Others on the right, such as MK Amichai Eliyahu, have called for the High Court itself to be investigated, [accusing](#) it of “tying the army’s hands.”

In this context, the trial no longer matters as a constraint; it serves as a symbol. The judiciary itself has become the target, not the venue, of accountability. The outcome of this struggle will determine not only Netanyahu’s personal fate but the balance of power between Israel’s elected government and its independent institutions.

Israel’s Pause

Two years after October 7, Israel is not at peace but at a pause. The guns are mostly silent, though ceasefire [violations](#) abound. And Israel sounds with unfinished business – a fragile coalition, an impending draft crisis, and a society still reckoning with postwar trauma. The coming election will determine not only the future of Israeli leadership but also whether

accountability, pluralism, and restraint can regain footing after years of fear and fragmentation. Meanwhile, the country sorely lacks a meaningful political vision, and its very identity is at stake.