

Netanyahu Has Taken Israel to the Abyss. What Is His Exit Strategy?

With the country in open rebellion, either Netanyahu's government falls or he has to fold and give in to the protesters' demands

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Israel collapsed into virtual chaos over the weekend, after Defence Minister Yoav Gallant [made a dramatic](#) televised address to the nation, calling for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to suspend his government's [extremist political plan](#).

He noted, among other things, that the army was in open revolt against [the draconian legislative agenda](#).

The government's proposals call for the elimination of the Supreme Court's right of review of Knesset legislation; the appointment of court justices by the political echelon, rather than by an independent body; the ending of the attorney general's right to determine if a prime minister was fit for office (Netanyahu would be ruled unfit if convicted on any of the corruption counts he faces, which he denies, at trial); and the permitting of the government to ignore a ruling by the attorney general determining that legislation violates [Israel's](#) basic laws.

These proposals were drafted by an extremist libertarian think tank, [the Kohelet Policy Forum](#). It not only wrote the bills presented to the Knesset, it drafted speeches and op-eds by ministers and MKs advocating them.

Kohelet is funded by [American](#) Jewish billionaires Arthur Dantchik and Jeffrey Yass, the latter one of the biggest [donors](#) to the Republican Party in the US.

In his TV address, Gallant urged Netanyahu to suspend the plans and enter negotiations with the opposition to arrange for a political compromise. Within 24 hours, Netanyahu had

acceded to the most virulent of his ministers, Itamar Ben-Gvir, who tweeted that he should fire Gallant. He did so [within hours of the speech](#).

Furious public reaction

The public reaction was almost immediate and furious. In previous demonstrations, protesters congregated on major public streets and squares, with Tel Aviv providing the largest crowds. A small number would migrate to the nearby Ayalon Highway, a major roadway that cuts through the city, where they would block traffic. Police would attempt to prevent such blockades, confining activists to the city streets.

On Sunday night, the gloves came off. Over 100,000 Israelis marched directly to the highway. They were [met by mounted police](#) who charged them and beat them with long poles. Some protesters charged the police on horseback, driving them back. Others in the crowd screamed: "Shame! Shame!"

Thousands more converged on Netanyahu's government residence on Balfour Street in Jerusalem, where they attempted to break down security barriers around the building. There were demonstrations at 150 locations throughout the country. Major highways outside of Tel Aviv were also blocked and protesters lit bonfires to express their rage. All universities announced they were on strike in protest.

One of the most damaging potential desertions was Netanyahu's lawyer, representing him in one of the four corruption charges he faces, who warned that unless the legislation was stopped, he would stop representing him.

This hit the prime minister in one of his most vulnerable spots. The only thing he cares about is political survival. Losing his lawyer would put him in political jeopardy, since a conviction would almost certainly force him from office. Once he is no longer the country's leader, he will be in no position to pass the legislation necessary to prevent his conviction. He must remain in power to protect himself from prison.

In a speech delivered to protesters, the leader of the country's labour union, the Histadrut, warned that it was planning a nationwide general strike. "This is the country of the citizens, all its citizens. Not of the Kohelet Forum!," chairman Arnon Bar-David declared in a dramatic speech.

"We will not allow the country's descent into the abyss... If the legislation isn't stopped, we are going from here to a general strike in Israel."

Bowing to pressure

As a former general, and the current defence minister, Gallant knew the prevailing views of his officers. His own chief of staff told him that officers were in an almost open mutiny over the governing coalition's agenda. Hundreds have signed public statements [refusing reserve duty](#). Even active-duty officers have made such a commitment.

Gallant acted because he understood Israel must have a cohesive military. When there is dissension in the ranks, the country cannot protect its citizens - not to mention that the Israeli army is the most significant unifying institution in the country.

It defines Israeli identity and most citizens serve in it. For many Israelis, the army and the state are indistinguishable. For that reason, Gallant defined his allegiance to the state via the military. If the army is not with the government, then the latter cannot or should not function.

With his firing, the former minister has become a hero to the millions of Israelis opposing what they call the regime-change government. Netanyahu, normally a shrewd political tactician, not only created a rival, but offered him a huge platform and political visibility. Undoubtedly, Gallant will now become a key player in determining a way forward (if there is one).

The prime minister is known for being a cautious political player. He hardly ever tacks directly into the wind, preferring to zig and zag as he adjusts to the political currents. True to form, after firing Gallant, Netanyahu dropped another bombshell, with Haaretz [reporting](#) that he planned to announce a suspension of the far-right legislative programme on Monday.

After Gallant laid down the gauntlet, other senior Likud MKs expressed support. The former Israeli ambassador to the US, Ron Dermer, perhaps the prime minister's closest adviser and often called "Bibi's Brain", urged him to compromise.

In effect, he is bowing to the inevitable. With the nation in open rebellion, either his government falls or he has to fold and give in to the protesters' demands.

Ironically, the government's leading arsonist, [Bezalel Smotrich](#), the settlements minister, urged Netanyahu to hold firm, warning that the nation would descend into "anarchy" and "violence". Apparently, he's not been watching television or walking the streets of any major Israeli city.

No time to celebrate

But it isn't time yet for Israelis to celebrate. Netanyahu speaks glibly and promises with one hand and takes away with the other. It's not yet clear precisely what is the nature of his strategic retreat.

Further, MK Yariv Levin, architect of the government's legislative package, threatened to resign if it was jettisoned. The prime minister only has a four-seat majority. He cannot afford to lose a key figure like Levin, because others would likely support him and abandon the coalition.

The prime minister may have relented. But as a tactician, he knows that a strategic retreat could fool his opponents into believing that they have won a battle. By lulling them into a false sense of victory, Netanyahu retains the possibility of mounting a counter-attack.

While act one has ended, there will certainly be a lot more drama to follow before this story has concluded.

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