

**Israel-Hamas war**

## **The extremists driving Netanyahu's approach to war with Hamas**

Once seen as fringe figures, ministers Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir oppose a 'reckless' ceasefire deal in Gaza

**Neri Zilber** in Tel Aviv 9 HOURS AGO

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When Benjamin Netanyahu returned to power in Israel, he insisted his hands would be “firmly on the steering wheel” despite the contentious presence of ultranationalists in his coalition government.

Yet 14 months later, with Israel at war with Hamas, the key far-right figures once seen as fringe extremists — Bezalel Smotrich, finance minister, and Itamar Ben-Gvir, national security minister — appear to wield more influence than ever.

The pair, religious Zionists who both live in settlements in the occupied West Bank, have staked out hardline positions on issues ranging from postwar Gaza to US diplomacy and a possible truce deal with Hamas in which Israeli hostages would be freed in exchange for significant numbers of Palestinian prisoners.

Ben-Gvir has repeatedly threatened that any “reckless agreement” would lead to the dissolution of the government, placing Netanyahu in a position where agreeing to a pause in the fighting and major Palestinian prisoner release could end his time in power.

Netanyahu last week withdrew his delegation from talks in Cairo about a potential deal, angering the families of hostages at home and Israeli allies abroad.





Demonstrators in Tel Aviv protest about the lack of a deal to free the Israeli hostages in Gaza © Getty Images

The veteran prime minister depends on the support of Smotrich and Ben-Gvir to maintain his governing coalition. But the pair were seeking to differentiate themselves from Netanyahu, outflanking him from the right while catering to a nationalist base in no mood for compromise over the Gaza war, said Nadav Shtrauchler, a political strategist who has worked with Netanyahu.

“Smotrich and Ben-Gvir see how much the base is angry with Netanyahu. The right is clearly against any deal [on the terms being reported],” Shtrauchler said.

“If Netanyahu goes for this kind of deal, he knows it will be his last day in power.”

Netanyahu has vowed to push on towards “total victory,” adding last week that only “strong military pressure and tough negotiations” would free hostages and that Hamas must “drop its delusional demands”.

The fate of the hostages and a possible ceasefire are the biggest, but not the only, areas in which the far-right pair have helped drive a wedge between Israel and its allies, including the US, the Jewish state's staunchest backer.

Ben-Gvir and Smotrich have long opposed not only a Palestinian state but also the Palestinian Authority, which governs pockets of the West Bank; both have called for the PA to “cease to exist”.

But the Biden administration has called for the PA to be “revitalised” and to play a role in any postwar order in Gaza. More recently, the administration has sought to tie a move towards Palestinian statehood with a wider regional gambit aiming to secure diplomatic relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia, along with ending the Gaza conflict.

Ben-Gvir said earlier this month: “America is our friend . . . [and] our ally, but the Biden administration has to stop pressuring us.”





Benjamin Netanyahu looks on as his ultranationalist minister Bezael Smotrich delivers a speech © Bloomberg

Netanyahu, politically constrained by Ben-Gvir and Smotrich, has constantly rejected any future PA role in Gaza.

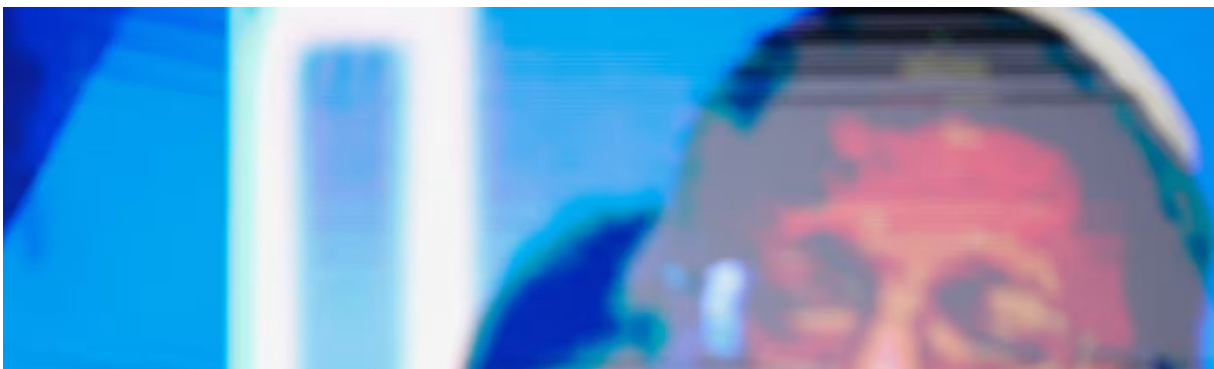
On Sunday his cabinet passed a declaratory motion rejecting any “international dictates” regarding a permanent settlement with the Palestinians, including unilateral recognition of a Palestinian state.

Ben-Gvir and Smotrich have spearheaded their own “postwar” agenda, leading a Jerusalem conference last month aimed at “resettling the Gaza strip”, along with a third of Netanyahu’s ministers. Netanyahu said he did not support such a move.

The pair also recently lashed out at the US for putting sanctions on violent settlers in the occupied West Bank.

Smotrich termed the move an “antisemitic lie” and dared the Biden administration to sanction him as well. Ben-Gvir has publicly sided with former US President Donald Trump, criticising Biden in an interview with the Wall Street Journal for not giving Israel his “full backing”.

Natan Sachs, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, a Washington think-tank, said: “The damage the far-right is inflicting on US-Israel relations is clear . . . [Ben-Gvir and Smotrich] represent, in so many ways, politically abhorrent trends for many Americans, and especially Biden supporters.”





Itamar Ben-Gvir speaks at a convention last month aimed at resettling the Gaza strip © Reuters

But Netanyahu has refused to call Ben-Gvir and Smotrich to order. A former senior government official said: “The message is clear: there is zero ministerial responsibility and zero repercussions. You can say anything . . . and it doesn’t matter. Netanyahu won’t do anything and everyone knows it.”

The rise of the two settler leaders was from its inception a product of Netanyahu’s own political needs. With the country mired in endless election cycles, Netanyahu sought to maximise rightwing votes by brokering a merger between Smotrich’s Religious Zionism party and Ben-Gvir’s Jewish Power party.

The move secured Netanyahu the premiership but in the process made Ben-Gvir, previously convicted for anti-Arab incitement, more mainstream. Smotrich himself has a history of slurs against Palestinians and the LGBTQ community.

Ben-Gvir and Smotrich hail from different streams of the settler movement, which aims to expand Jewish communities in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and now, potentially, Gaza — territories earmarked by the international community for a future Palestinian state.

Netanyahu has at times been at odds with the far right. At several points in his three-decade career he has engaged with the Palestinians in peace talks, frozen settlement construction in the West Bank and paid lip service to the idea of a Palestinian state.







Aid trucks pass through the Kerem Shalom crossing into Gaza after Netanyahu bowed to US pressure to open the entry point © Enes Canli/Anadolu/Getty Images

More recently, in December, he bowed to US pressure and opened the Kerem Shalom crossing to Gaza to enable more aid to reach the besieged territory. But the aid effort has been hindered by ultranationalist protesters, many from West Bank settlements, who have protested at the crossing point and delayed the entry of goods.

Despite Washington's pleas, Israeli police under Ben-Gvir's direction have failed to intercede. Netanyahu has remained quiet, as on most other major points of friction involving the far right.

The former official said: "Netanyahu is only concerned about his coalition's survival, he's bleeding in all directions [politically] and desperate."

Netanyahu knows he needs support from Ben-Gvir and Smotrich not only to stay in power but to have any hope of returning after elections expected to follow the end of the war.

Netanyahu and Likud have cratered in opinion polling in recent months, with analysts noting Israel's longest-serving leader has not been this unpopular in nearly two decades.

With his political future and the direction of the Gaza war hanging in the balance, further conflict — inside the Israeli cabinet and with Washington — appears likely.

"Netanyahu in 2024 is far more afraid of Itamar Ben-Gvir than he is of Joe Biden," prominent Israeli commentator Ben Caspit wrote in the Maariv daily this month. "The Israeli government is the Ben-Gvir government, at the expense of all of us."









