

Israel

Israeli cabinet trades insults over 'Jewish terrorism' warning

Far-right security minister accused by defence minister and intelligence chief of endangering nation



Itamar Ben Gvir heads the Jewish Power party and was given expanded powers last year over the police as part of his cabinet portfolio © Menahem Kahana/AFP/Getty Images

Neri Zilber in Tel Aviv YESTERDAY

Israel's government descended into bad-tempered infighting on Friday, as the defence minister accused his "irresponsible" far-right cabinet colleague of putting the nation's security at risk.

The barbed exchanges followed reports that the head of the Shin Bet intelligence agency warned about the risk of "bloodshed" from the actions of national security minister Itamar Ben Gvir and the growing phenomenon of "Jewish terrorism".

Ben Gvir, who heads the Jewish Power party and is a key coalition ally of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, was given expanded powers last year over the police as part of his cabinet portfolio.

He has consistently demanded harsher measures against Palestinians and has increased settlement construction in the occupied West Bank, as well as greater Jewish control over Jerusalem's al Aqsa mosque compound.

Yoav Gallant, defence minister, wrote on social media platform X that Ben Gvir's "irresponsible actions . . . endanger the national security of the State of Israel and create an internal division in the nation".

His intervention came as extracts were leaked of a letter Shin Bet chief Ronen Bar

The letter, which came as Barak was accused of a letter that was leaked to the public, was circulated to Netanyahu, Gallant and several other government ministers, warning about Ben Gvir's conduct and his recent visit to the al Aqsa mosque compound. The letter was first reported by Israel's Channel 12 news.

Bar wrote that settler attacks against Palestinians in the West Bank had increased as a result of the war in Gaza and "the weak hand of the police, and possibly even a sense of support to a certain extent". The intelligence chief reportedly charged that unnamed parliament members, almost certainly from far-right parties, were providing money, legitimacy, and "words of praise" to Israelis suspected of such attacks.

"I am writing you this letter with pain, with great fear, as a Jew, as an Israeli, and as a security officer," Bar wrote.

Last week, at the flashpoint site, known to Jews as the Temple Mount, Ben Gvir said that the decades-long "status quo" whereby Jews could visit but not pray there had been changed.

The hardline minister was filmed walking in the compound as religious-nationalist Jews prostrated themselves on the ground, with Israeli police officers looking on. Netanyahu quickly denied that any change had been implemented.

Two days later, dozens of extremist settlers rampaged through the Palestinian village of Jit, in the northern West Bank, torching homes and cars. One Palestinian was killed and another critically injured by live fire, according to local health authorities. Four Israelis were detained by the police and Shin Bet on Wednesday on suspicion of "terrorism against Palestinians," including the attack on Jit.

Bar stressed in his letter that provocations such as Ben Gvir's visit to the Temple Mount would "lead to much bloodshed and will change the face of the State of Israel beyond recognition".

"The leaders of this phenomenon seek to bring the system to a loss of control. The damage to the State of Israel is indescribable," he added, according to Channel 12.

Ben Gvir responded to the leak by alleging that Bar was trying to "create spin and attack" the minister to deflect from his own responsibility for the intelligence failure surrounding Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel. At a subsequent cabinet meeting on Thursday night Ben Gvir reportedly demanded that Netanyahu fire Bar.

Gallant came to the defence of Bar on social media, writing that: "the head of the

[Shin Bet] and his people perform their duty and warn against the serious consequences” of Ben Gvir’s actions.

Ben Gvir, in response, wrote: “Instead of attacking me on Twitter, start attacking Hezbollah in Lebanon.”

The Shin Bet and defence minister Gallant’s office declined to comment.

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