

Benjamin Netanyahu

Benjamin Netanyahu's polls rebound after aggressive Israeli operations

Since approving assassinations in Beirut and Tehran, premier's Likud party has taken lead in national surveys

James Shotter in Jerusalem 6 HOURS AGO

Benjamin Netanyahu's poll standing has recovered from post-October 7 lows to put his Likud party back at the top of national surveys, in a partial turnaround that has followed Israel launching more aggressive operations in Lebanon and Iran.

The recovery in Likud's fortunes began earlier this year, but has become more pronounced since the end of July, when Israel assassinated senior Hizbollah and Hamas leaders in Beirut and Tehran within 24 hours, marking a dramatic escalation of its war with regional foes.

The upturn has been sustained in recent weeks, as Israel has dealt a series of debilitating blows to Hizbollah and ramped up attacks on Lebanon. This included an air strike on Friday that killed numerous commanders from the militant group's elite Radwan force. And it was followed on Monday by the deadliest Israeli bombardment of Lebanon since the 2006 war between the two countries.

The surge in violence has sparked consternation abroad, with the UN calling for de-escalation and Israel's allies warning about the risks of a full-scale war. But in Israel, polls suggest Likud has clawed back much of the ground it lost in the wake of Hamas's attack, widely seen as the worst security failure in Israel's history.

Netanyahu's coalition with ultrareligious and far-right parties would still fall short of a majority in fresh elections. But surveys in the past two weeks put the seats Likud could win in fresh elections to Israel's 120-seat parliament in the low to mid 20s, up from a nadir of 16 in the months after October 7.

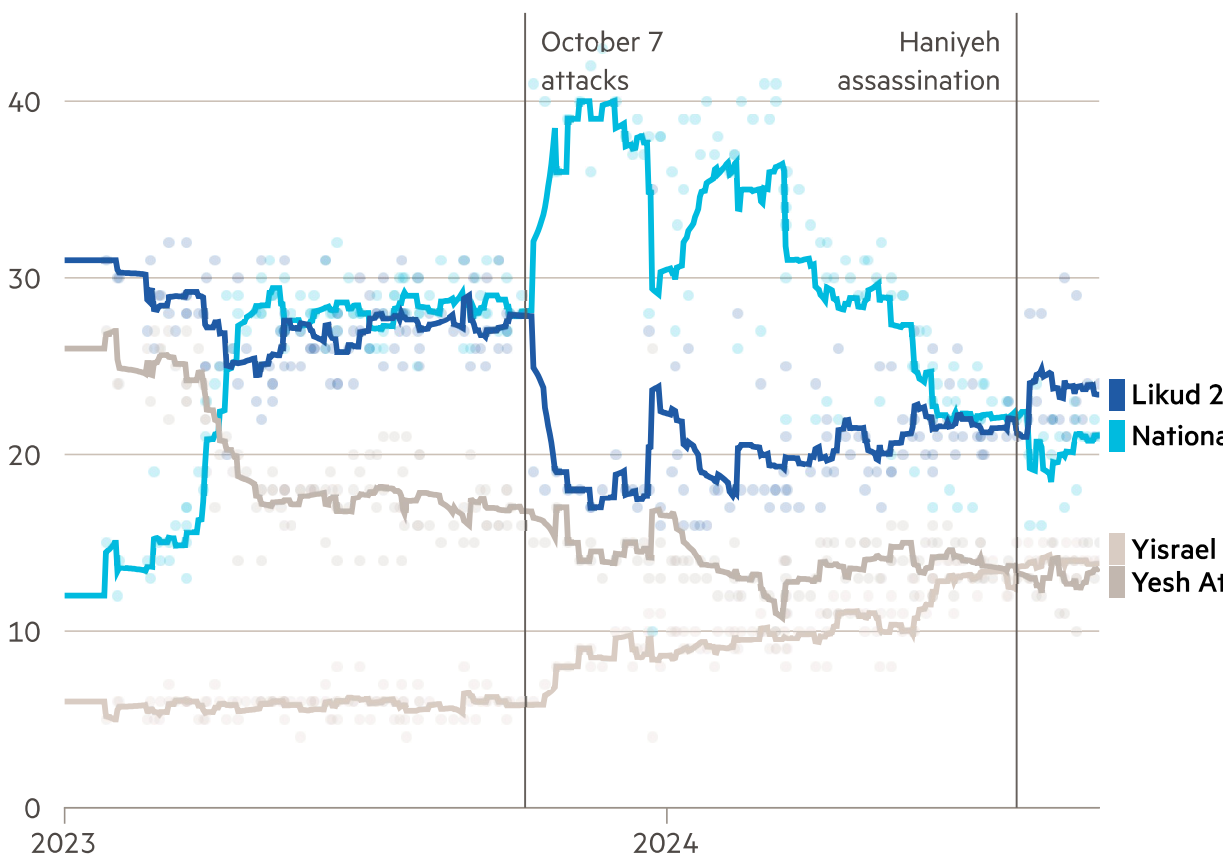
"Netanyahu has definitely recovered from the postwar crash," said Dahlia Scheindlin, a pollster and political analyst, arguing that Israel's increasingly aggressive action "at a regional level" had played a role in his rehabilitation.

"It looks like Israel is taking the initiative," she added. "It's true everybody gets terrified about the consequences. But each time they have ultimately been far less than the Armageddon many worried about. And a lot of people come out of it thinking Netanyahu has . . . regained Israel's footing."

Netanyahu's **Likud** party has regained the lead in polls

Voting intention (%)

Lines represent weighted moving averages, points represent polls



FINANCIAL TIMES

Latest poll Sep 19
Excludes smaller parties

The escalation of Israel's confrontation with Hizbollah — and the risk that it could spill over into a regional conflict — has dominated the news cycle in recent weeks, drawing attention from the war with Hamas in Gaza, which has been the dominant theme for most of the past 11 months.

Scheindlin said this shift worked in Netanyahu's favour, since Israel was still far short of achieving its war goals in Gaza of destroying Hamas and freeing the roughly 100 Israeli hostages still held there. By contrast, the spiralling confrontation with Hizbollah and Israel's other enemies in Iran's so-called axis of resistance had a greater rallying effect.

Recent polls suggest a majority of Israelis favour military action against Hizbollah, although they differ in their appetite for steps that could ignite a regional war.

“Netanyahu is losing credibility [on Gaza] because he overpromises ‘total victory’, and . . . poll after poll shows people think his decision making is driven by his political needs rather than the public interest,” she said.

“There is a much stronger sense of rallying around the flag when it comes to Hizbollah and [the threat of] a regional escalation.”



The funeral of Hizbollah commander Ibrahim Akil was held on Sunday © Bilal Hussein/AP

Nadav Strauchler, a political strategist who has previously worked with Netanyahu, said the premier had also been helped by the weakness of the opposition, with his parliamentary rivals unable to lay a glove on him, and street protests not having reached a scale that could threaten him.

“Believe me, if Netanyahu was in opposition, the opposition would look different. You saw what it was like last time he was in opposition. He worked day by day and he drove [government] mad,” Strauchler said, referring to the relentless attacks launched by Netanyahu and his allies during his brief stint out of power in 2021-22.

Netanyahu has arguably faced more damaging attacks from within his own government in recent months, with defence minister Yoav Gallant increasingly critical, including of his failure to agree a truce with Hamas that would free the hostages still in Gaza.

Netanyahu has mulled replacing Gallant with Gideon Sa’ar, a former ally turned rival. Sa’ar announced on Saturday that he would not take up the role, saving a change of

Sa'ar announced on Saturday that he would not take up the role, saying a change of defence minister in the middle of an escalation with Hizbollah would be an unnecessary distraction.



Gideon Sa'ar, head of Israel's New Hope party, has turned down the position of defence minister © AFP via Getty Images

But Aviv Bushinsky, a political analyst who served as Netanyahu's chief of staff in the early 2000s, said that even though Sa'ar had not joined the government, the episode had left Netanyahu with more political options than before. "He can now call Gideon Sa'ar into the government on a rainy day," he said. "He has a plan B option. His coalition is solid."

Despite the upturn in Likud's fortunes, however, analysts cautioned that the picture could still change radically by the next election, which does not have to be held until October 2026.

Politicians such as former prime minister Naftali Bennett, who are currently outside politics, could return to the fray, which would shake up the electoral map. And the course of the war will play a crucial role in determining Netanyahu's fate.

"If you ask if he can be re-elected, it depends on the results on both fronts, north and south," said Bushinsky. "He will be judged on the final outcome, not on the midterm."





Former PM Naftali Bennett could return to take on Netanyahu © Noam Galai/Getty Images

But Strauchler said that — since Netanyahu would remain in office as incumbent in the event of a hung parliament — his fortunes would also depend on the ability of Israel's opposition to form a coalition to oust him.

In 2021, the last time Netanyahu was ejected from office, it took a coalition spanning much of Israel's political spectrum, from Jewish nationalists to Islamists, to defeat him. In the aftermath of Hamas's October 7 attack, such a combination was unlikely to be repeated, Strauchler said.

“People think that Netanyahu needs to win the next election. But that is the wrong way to look at it,” he said. “He needs to not lose. And this is a whole different game.”

Data visualisation by Steven Bernard

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