

Middle East war

Benjamin Netanyahu's allies call for purge as Israeli PM's power grows



Emboldened leader is in his strongest position at home since war began despite ICC arrest warrant

Neri Zilber in Tel Aviv 8 HOURS AGO

In a historic first, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is a wanted man overseas. But at home, he is stronger than at any point since Hamas's devastating October 7 2023 attack threw his political future into doubt.

Buoyed by Donald Trump's US election triumph, battlefield gains across the Middle East and the successful ousting of defence minister and longtime antagonist Yoav Gallant, Netanyahu's allies are urging him to seize the moment and consolidate his power.

In recent days, they have called for the sacking of Israel's attorney-general, military chief and head of the Shin Bet internal security agency, all of whom they view with suspicion, and are making plans to revive an effort to overhaul the country's judicial system, which critics say would imperil Israeli democracy.

"I always thought it was a choice between either a terrible endless war or creeping authoritarianism — but apparently you can have both," said Amos Harel, a defence analyst and author of a book on civil-military relations.

Netanyahu's domestic position has for now been unharmed by the ignominy of becoming the first western-backed leader to face an arrest warrant by the International Criminal Court for alleged war crimes related to Israel's offensive in Gaza. The court's move was condemned across Israel's political divide as an attack on the country's right to defend itself.

Several people close to Netanyahu describe a leader bolstered in recent months by successes on all fronts. As one person familiar with [Israeli government](#) deliberations put it, he is "euphoric" over the victory of Trump, who pursued staunchly pro-Israel policies in his first term, as well as over Gallant's removal.





The sacking of Yoav Gallant as defence minister triggered less widespread protests than last year's attempt to oust him © Francisco Seco/AP

The defence minister's sacking, and replacement with loyalist Israel Katz, triggered only tepid public protests, in contrast to the mass demonstrations and nationwide strike that scuppered Netanyahu's first attempt to oust Gallant last year.

“[Netanyahu](#) is really holding the reins here,” the person said. “Now no one in the government is restraining them.”

Mass street protests over the failure to secure a deal to release Israeli hostages held by Hamas in Gaza have also withered since their peak in early September, as the military began landing a series of successive blows against foes in Lebanon, Gaza and Iran.

Nadav Shtrauchler, a political strategist who has previously worked with Netanyahu, said the prime minister “couldn't have asked for a better result over the past three months — on security, politically and diplomatically [in the US]”.

“He wakes up in the morning with a smile on his face. It's the best point he has been in since the start of the war,” Shtrauchler added. “There are still challenges, but his situation is completely different in all respects.”

While his governing coalition still trails opposition parties in the polls, support for Netanyahu's ruling Likud party has continued to tick upwards, making up ground lost after the October 7 attack.

The prime minister's parliamentary majority was bolstered this month by the arrival of a small right-wing faction led by the new foreign minister Gideon Sa'ar, who defected from the opposition. With the next election two years away, political analysts say this will help stave off the risk of the government's collapse and snap elections.





Benjamin Netanyahu and defence minister Israel Katz, right © GPO/AFP/Getty Images

Nonetheless, Netanyahu faces perils ahead. He is due to testify in his own long-running corruption trial early next month. And his office is also embroiled in scandal over an investigation into whether his media adviser and other close aides stole classified intelligence documents and leaked them to the foreign press in a bid to undermine protests over the hostages. One of his aides was indicted on Thursday.

The ICC's warrant also means that Netanyahu is at risk of being arrested if he travels to any of the court's member states, which include most European countries as well as many in Latin America, Africa and Asia, and reinforces the sense of Israel's growing international isolation.

But the US, Israel's most important ally, is not a member. Both President Joe Biden's administration and incoming Trump officials have condemned the court's decision and vowed to shield Israel from international sanction over its ferocious campaigns in Gaza and Lebanon.

Netanyahu's allies expect Trump to remain strongly pro-Israel after he nominated figures such as Pete Hegseth and Mike Huckabee, who were already adored on the Israeli right, to his administration.

Netanyahu's renewed confidence has prompted fervent speculation over who may be next in the political firing line after Gallant.

The easiest target may be Herzi Halevi, the chief of staff of the IDF, which has

strongly opposed military rule in Gaza and consistently favoured a hostage-for-
ceasefire deal, much to the chagrin of Netanyahu's far-right political allies.
Removing Halevi would only require a decision by the prime minister and the new
defence minister Katz.

Netanyahu's allies have also escalated their rhetoric against Ronen Bar, head of the
Shin Bet, which is leading the investigation into leaks from Netanyahu's office.
Israeli media reported this week that Bar had also rebuffed calls from Netanyahu's
lawyers to back delaying the premier's court testimony on security grounds.

Yair Netanyahu, the premier's son and adviser, has repeatedly denounced the leak
investigation as a "blood libel" and called the country's security chiefs a "junta"
that are fomenting a coup against his father's government. (The Shin Bet provides
Yair, who lives in Miami, around-the-clock personal protection.)

And senior government ministers such as far-right national security minister
Itamar Ben-Gvir and finance minister Bezalel Smotrich have called on Netanyahu
to fire the attorney-general Gali Baharav Miara, the country's top legal official who
has consistently ruled against the government, deeming large parts of its agenda
illegal or unconstitutional.



Protesters demonstrate outside the home of the Israeli attorney-general © Israel Hadari/ZUMA Press Wire/dp

Guy Lurie, a research fellow and expert on judicial institutions at the Israel
Democracy Institute, says it is clear the government is "building a case" to fire
Baharav-Miara. But he warned that such a move would be complicated and cause

an unprecedented legal quagmire, not least due to Netanyahu's corruption trial.

"It's hard to see how [firing the attorney-general] can be seen as reasonable and not a severe conflict of interest," Lurie said. An attorney-general, like an IDF chief of staff, has never in Israeli history been officially sacked.

For its part, Netanyahu's office has denied that he intends to fire his security chiefs. It has not commented on speculation about the attorney-general, but his allies have also shown renewed appetite to resume their bid to reform Israel's legal system, especially the Supreme Court, which critics say would undermine judicial independence.

An earlier attempt to do so in 2023 was stymied by weekly mass demonstrations over what was widely perceived as an executive branch power grab.

After the outbreak of the conflict in Gaza, the emergency wartime government agreed to shelve all non-military matters in a bid for national unity. But those days are over, Yariv Levin, Netanyahu's hardline justice minister, said in a statement on Sunday.

"The time has come to . . . rehabilitate the court system and the legal systems, to put an end to the anarchy, to the craziness," he wrote.

Harel, the defence correspondent, said that the speculation and threats to fire Halevi, Bar, and Baharav-Miara could just be a move to "undermine their authority" and deflect blame away from Netanyahu for the October 7 2023 attack, the deadliest day and worst security failure in the country's history.

Even so, he said, the campaign was already "normalising" their removal and could dampen the public outcry if they came to pass, threatening to push Israel into a dangerous new chapter.

"The concept of 'gatekeepers' in Israel are all those who uphold the concept of *mamlachtiut*," he said, referring to a Hebrew concept of statesmanship. "They are the only thing standing between us and the collapse of democracy."

