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# country report

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Demonstration in front of the Knesset in Jerusalem, July 24, 2023 / IMAGO / ZUMA Press Wire

## Israel's Election Campaign Begins A major upheaval?

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Israel is facing one of the most important elections in its recent history. Events during the current legislative term—particularly the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023—have profoundly transformed Israeli politics and society. At the heart of the October 27, 2026, election is the question of the country's future political direction, as well as whether the era of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu—now 76 years old—will continue or come to an end.

### 1. A look back: The Netanyahu VI Government

The current legislative term began with the Knesset election on November 1, 2022—following four parliamentary elections held in rapid succession over the course of just under three years. In December 2022, a coalition was formed consisting of parties aligned with the right-wing to far-right spectrum in Israel: *Likud* (Union), *HaTzionut HaDatit* (Religious Zionism), *Otzma Jehudit* (Jewish Power), *Yahadut HaThora* (United Torah Judaism), and *Shas*. One of their first initiatives was a comprehensive judicial reform. The goal was to redefine the Supreme Court's relationship with the Knesset and the government, including making sweeping changes to the process for selecting judges. Israelis protested against this nationwide, sometimes on a weekly basis. At the height of the protests, over 100,000 people gathered in Tel Aviv.<sup>1</sup>

On October 7, 2023, the terrorist organization Hamas attacked Israel. More Jews died in a single day than at any time since the Holocaust. 251 hostages were taken to the Gaza Strip.

The Hamas attack was followed by a two-year war and a humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza. Hundreds of thousands of Israeli reservists were called up in response. On October 8, 2023, Hezbollah launched heavy rocket attacks from southern Lebanon, followed later by the Houthis from Yemen and other Iranian proxies. In April 2024, the Islamic Republic of Iran launched a direct attack on Israel with drones and missiles for the first time in its history. This was followed by another direct attack in October 2024, Israel's Twelve-Day War against Iran in June 2025, and the renewed war by Israel and the U.S. against Iran, which began on February 28, 2026. In Lebanon, Israel had inflicted a severe defeat on Hezbollah in the summer of 2024 (including the Pager attack and the elimination of Hassan Nasrallah). Since March 2026, Israel has once again been engaged in direct military conflict with the terrorist organization.

In November 2023, a segment of the Israeli population began demonstrating for the release of the hostages through negotiations with Hamas. They accused the government of not prioritizing the hostages in the fight against Hamas. In September 2024, according to organizers, over 300,000 Israelis demonstrated in Tel Aviv in favor of a hostage deal.<sup>2</sup> With the help of U.S. President Donald Trump's influence, the release of all surviving hostages was achieved in early 2025 and in October 2025. In January 2026, the last body of an Israeli was recovered.

The social upheavals triggered by October 7, 2023, and the events of the past three years in Israel will continue to shape the country for a long time to come. Polarization in Israel increased sharply. During this legislative term, there were major protests against judicial reforms, for the release of hostages, and both for and against the integration of ultra-Orthodox Jews into the armed forces. The indictments and related court proceedings against Prime Minister Netanyahu also played a significant role throughout the entire legislative term. Last but not least, this period saw the onset of Israel's profound international isolation, accompanied by calls for boycotts and a global rise in antisemitism.

## 2. How is the election date determined?

In Israel, there must be a minimum of 90 and a maximum of 150 days between the dissolution of the Knesset and new elections.<sup>3</sup> The current legislative term ends on October 27. Elections will also take place on that day.

On average, a government in Israel remains in office for 2.3 years.<sup>4</sup> The stability of the current government was therefore a remarkable exception. For the first time since 1988, an election will take place on the regular election day.

The media regularly speculated about an early end to the coalition; even in recent weeks, reports circulated about an earlier election date and a possible breakup of the coalition. At the center of these reports are various legislative proposals, some of which are highly controversial. Instead of an early end, however, the coalition partners appear to have agreed to use their majority in the Knesset until its dissolution. This includes equating military service with Torah study—a provision that could allow ultra-Orthodox citizens to avoid military service—as well as reforming the Office of the Attorney General and making political adjustments to the state commission of inquiry. The Knesset had until July 17<sup>th</sup> time to pass legislation in its entirety before the parliament decided on that day to dissolve itself and entered a transitional phase. It is likely that some of these legislative proposals will end up before the Supreme Court and will be highlighted and criticized by the opposition during the election campaign.

### 3. What issues will dominate the election campaign?

The election campaign now getting underway in Israel will be shaped largely by issues of national security and the aftermath of the Hamas terrorist attack on October 7, 2023. Due to the country's centralized electoral system, regional issues or constituency interests do not take center stage. Since voters can only vote for a party list on Election Day, the campaign is typically dominated by fundamental issues that often revolve around internal and external security.

The central line of conflict runs along the assessment of the current government's security policy. The coalition parties are placing the military successes against Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran, as well as close cooperation with the U.S., at the center of their campaign. They argue that Israel has partially restored its strategic deterrence capability and sustainably strengthened its security position. The opposition acknowledges the military successes and the security necessity of the actions taken, but questions the government's strategic track record, including with regard to Iran. It criticizes the lack of a long-term strategy for Gaza and Lebanon, accuses the government of failures in the run-up to the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, and calls for a comprehensive, independent, government-led investigation into those politically responsible.

In addition to national security, domestic policy issues will dominate the election campaign. The opposition's central demand is the clear implementation of the Supreme Court's ruling on mandatory military service for ultra-Orthodox Jews, without any exemptions. For a long time, ultra-Orthodox Jews were exempt from military service. In June 2024, the Supreme Court ruled that the exemption was unlawful and that ultra-Orthodox Jews must also serve. The governing coalition has not implemented the ruling, as part of a strategy to maintain balance with its ultra-Orthodox partners. This strategy culminated just three days before the Knesset was dissolved with the passage of a law temporarily preventing the arrest of ultra-Orthodox conscientious objectors. The Supreme Court has already blocked this law via a preliminary injunction. Ultra-Orthodox groups regularly call for demonstrations against mandatory military service. Given the ongoing strain on the Israeli Defense Forces, the issue has enormous social relevance. At the same time, the debate touches on fundamental questions regarding the relationship between religion and state, Israel's character as a Jewish and democratic state, and the powers of the judicial system.

Another campaign issue is the fight against organized crime in Arab communities, as well as the security situation in mixed Jewish-Arab cities. The government points to intensified measures against criminal networks, while the opposition questions their effectiveness and accuses the government of failing to restore internal security. The issue is also gaining prominence due to the Minister of National Security, Itamar Ben-Gvir of the far-right *Otzma Yehudit* party, who is controversial both in Israel and internationally because of his political positions.

Since this is the first nationwide election since the Hamas attack, political accountability for October 7, 2023, and Israel's future strategic direction will shape the election campaign. At the same time, Benjamin Netanyahu himself is once again becoming a major source of polarization between the government and the opposition. The legal proceedings against him, which have been ongoing for several years, further exacerbate this. Issues such as the economic and social situation or Israel's growing international isolation will, if at all, be discussed only as secondary concerns.

## 4. Who is running?

At the start of the election campaign, the political landscape continues to be characterized by a highly fragmented party system with several competing political parties and coalitions.

On the side of the governing coalition, all current party leaders are expected to run for re-election. The coalition is led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his *Likud* party. *Likud* is one of the few Israeli parties that determines its party list through internal elections. These are expected to take place in August. However, Netanyahu is demanding guaranteed seats that he can fill without an election. According to media reports, he is concerned that candidates who are popular among the party's grassroots may not be able to win over voters outside their own camp.<sup>5</sup> This can be seen as an indication that Netanyahu himself is no longer enough of a draw.

In addition to *Likud*, the governing bloc includes the national-religious parties led by Bezalel Smotrich (*HaTzionut HaDatit*) and Itamar Ben-Gvir (*Otzma Yehudit*), as well as the ultra-Orthodox parties *Shas* and *United Torah Judaism*. A joint electoral list between Smotrich's and Ben-Gvir's parties is possible but is currently considered unlikely. So-called "technical lists" are joint electoral lists formed by several parties to overcome the 3.25 percent electoral threshold. After the election, the participating parties can retain their political independence. The two parties are considered political representatives of the national-religious movement in Israel, which is very popular among settlers in the West Bank. The ultra-Orthodox parties, in turn, primarily represent the Sephardic and Mizrahi communities (*Shas*) and the Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox community (*United Torah Judaism*), respectively. Their key issue is the potential for mandatory military service for the ultra-Orthodox. This is a major obstacle to their cooperation with opposition parties.

Since the 2022 election, the political forces in the opposition have undergone a significant realignment, and they will continue to shift during the election campaign. Former Prime Ministers Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid, who served in quick succession for a short time, are running on a joint list called *BeYahad* (Together). Bennett is the lead candidate. At the same time, former Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot is running with his newly founded party, *Yashar!* (Honest), positioning himself as an independent alternative in the political center. Also running are Avigdor Lieberman with *Yisrael Beiteinu*, who tends to come from the right wing of the opposition camp, and Yair Golan with the left-leaning *Democrats*. Currently, only the *Democrats* are expected to hold internal elections for their party list on July 20, 2026.<sup>6</sup> The Arab political landscape is also undergoing a transformation. *Hadash*, *Ta'al*, and *Balad* intend to run on a joint list, while *Ra'am*, as things stand, will run independently to help the opposition camp secure the necessary majority for a change in government in the event of a close election.

The fate of Benny Gantz's *Blue and White* party will be particularly interesting. According to media reports, Gantz is negotiating with various groups regarding possible alliances.<sup>7</sup> It remains to be seen with whom and in what form he will run. Yoaz Hendel's *Reservists Party* is also seeking partners but, unlike Gantz, categorically rejects a coalition with ultra-Orthodox parties.<sup>8</sup> Yuli Edelstein, former Knesset Speaker and minister under Netanyahu, has announced that he is leaving *Likud* to form his own party. According to media reports, former Minister of National Security Gilad Erdan, former Minister of Justice Ayelet Shaked, and current Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Sharren Haskel are also seeking a new political home.<sup>9</sup> It remains to be seen which parties will emerge and which bloc they will join, should they clear the electoral threshold. Newly formed parties running for the first time

must officially register at least 60 days before the election. The final party lists must be submitted 47 days before the election and cannot be changed after that. Accordingly, the registration deadline is September 10.

According to most polls, the current governing coalition has not had a majority since October 8, 2023. A few exceptions, such as Channel 14—which strongly identifies with the current ruling camp—predict that the current coalition will retain a majority in the Knesset even after the election, albeit a shrinking one. However, the majority of polls show not only that the current coalition lacks a majority, but also that an opposition alliance excluding the Arab parties lacks a majority. Bennett, Lapid, and Lieberman, in particular, have publicly rejected a coalition that depends on votes from the Arab parties. This is why the fate of parties like Blue and White is so intriguing, as they have not yet committed to any bloc and are advocating for a broad majority that transcends today's political divides.

It is also unclear who will be Netanyahu's main challenger. While Bennett enjoyed the most support within the opposition for months, his alliance with Lapid has lost public support. Currently, according to polls, Eisenkot's party leads the opposition bloc; in some polls, it is neck-and-neck with *Likud* and Netanyahu. The competition for leadership within the opposition will continue to intensify until Election Day and will hinge primarily on the ability to defeat Netanyahu.

## 5. Outlook

Israel is at the start of an election campaign that will most likely be intense, emotional, and at times highly confrontational. Israelis will vote on whether Benjamin Netanyahu remains the right person to lead the country or whether a change is needed. Some trends are already apparent:

1. *Likud* currently holds 32 seats in the Knesset but is expected to lose a significant number of them. Nevertheless, if *Likud* remains the largest party in the next Knesset, Netanyahu will have a real chance of remaining head of government—even if his bloc fails to reach 61 seats—as long as the opposition does not have a majority of its own. This is because in Israel, no term of office ends automatically. Netanyahu and his coalition will remain in office until a new government is elected by the Knesset with a majority of the members present.
2. The number of potential seats within the governing and opposition blocs has hardly changed in over a year. When one party gains support, another from the same bloc loses it. However, if a party from one of the blocs manages to win support from the other bloc, that could decide the election.
3. Since the blocs show little change in the polls, the parties that can align themselves with either bloc will help determine the outcome. For this reason, *Blue and White* or potential new party formations, such as those led by Yuli Edelstein or Yoaz Hendel, could play a decisive role in the election.
4. The aforementioned players are also relevant because they are struggling to clear the electoral threshold in the polls. If many small parties run but ultimately fail to make it into the Knesset, they will still draw votes away from their respective political camps. In this case, they could be decisive in determining whether one of the blocs secures a majority on its own or not.

5. The voting behavior of Arab Israelis will also be relevant. Arab Israelis traditionally vote neither for *Likud* nor for ultra-Orthodox or national-religious parties. If many of them turn out to vote and cast their ballots for Arab parties, this will, ironically, increase the likelihood of Netanyahu's reelection, since some opposition parties, such as Yisrael Beitenu, have ruled out forming a governing coalition with the Arab parties. However, if the other opposition parties succeed in winning a larger share of the Arab vote, this will reduce the likelihood of Netanyahu's reelection.

In Israel's history, prime ministers have lost their office five times due to election defeats, four of which occurred between 1992 and 2001. Whether Netanyahu succeeds in winning reelection—and if so, with what coalition—or whether, in October, a prime minister will lose office for the sixth time due to an election defeat—the coming months of the election campaign will reveal whether and how the balance of power will shift and what Israel's future will look like.

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