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# Deposing the King of Israel

America wants Binyamin Netanyahu out. But his exit is fraught with dangers



IMAGE: REUTERS

**A**FTER WEEKS of Israel flouting America's advice on making greater provision for civilians in [Gaza](#), on March 14th something snapped. [Chuck Schumer](#), the Senate majority leader and one of Israel's staunchest supporters in the Democratic Party, accused the country's prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, of having "lost his way" and being "too willing to tolerate the civilian toll in Gaza, which is pushing support for Israel worldwide to historic lows". Crucially, Mr Schumer, who is Jewish, called for early elections in Israel. Shortly after, Joe Biden endorsed this message, calling the remarks "a good speech".

American presidents have had blazing rows with Israeli prime ministers before. But it is hard to think of a time when the occupant of the Oval Office has come so close to publicly endorsing the deposing of Israel's elected leader. On March 17th Mr Netanyahu struck back, arguing Mr Schumer's comments were "totally inappropriate" and that an election would "paralyse the country for at least six months."

At first glance the objective of deposing Mr Netanyahu might seem straightforward. According to one recent survey, over 70% of Israelis want their country's elections brought forward from their scheduled date in late 2026. Rivals to Mr Netanyahu including Benny Gantz, a member of his war cabinet, are on active manoeuvres, including talking bilaterally with America's government.

But the mechanics of a change of leadership in Israel are fraught, and in the most likely scenario they open up the danger of a three-month transition period when Mr

scenario they open up the danger of a three-month transition period when Mr Netanyahu would still be in charge and even less constrained by coalition partners and pragmatic members of the current war cabinet. Given that this three-month window would overlap with anarchy in Gaza, a possible invasion of Rafah in southern Gaza and perhaps also escalations of violence with Hezbollah in the north and the Palestinians in the West Bank, it should give pause for thought.

There are three main ways in which an Israeli government can be replaced. First, by the prime minister's resignation. Mr Netanyahu, despite having led Israel into one of its most dismal episodes, has no intention of resigning and no inclination to call an early election either. Second, the Knesset, or parliament, can replace the prime minister through a "constructive" no-confidence motion. It would not be enough for a majority of Knesset members to vote against the prime minister; they would also have to vote in favour of his replacement. At the last election in November 2022 the bloc of parties currently supporting Mr Netanyahu won 64 seats in the 120-member chamber. There may well be five potential rebels who would vote to depose Mr Netanyahu but the chances that they, along with the entire opposition, would coalesce around an agreed-on candidate are nil.

The most likely option is that a number of defectors from the coalition join the opposition in a vote to dissolve the Knesset and hold early elections. The catch is that Mr Netanyahu would remain as caretaker prime minister for perhaps three more months, the shortest time the law allows for an election campaign. Were he able to fire his powerful centrist rivals, including Mr Gantz, from the government just before any Knesset vote, the result could be a cabinet entirely dominated by Mr Netanyahu backed by right-wing parties. In other words, before any redeeming change of government Israel could take a temporary lurch even further to the hard right.

Given these constraints, what is likely to happen next? One threat to Mr Netanyahu,

paradoxically, comes from the more extreme elements of his coalition. Ultra-Orthodox parties are a pillar of his government and are anxious to perpetuate the exemption from conscription of students of religious seminaries, which is currently under threat. Unless the Knesset can come up with legislation, unlikely at a time of war, the students will be liable for the draft and their government funding will be cut off by a court order. Their political representatives may well then leave the coalition. Meanwhile Mr Netanyahu's far-right nationalist partners have warned that a hostage-release agreement which included a lengthy truce with Hamas in Gaza, or a scenario in which Israel handed over control of parts of Gaza to a security force aligned with the Palestinian Authority (PA), would cross "red lines" for them.

The other threat comes from the centrists, who insist on prioritising the hostages' release and along with the security establishment favour more provision for civilians and exploring PA participation in Gaza. Mr Gantz and his small party, National Unity, rushed to join an emergency government under Mr Netanyahu immediately after the Hamas attack on October 7th that triggered the war in Gaza. Now he is openly flouting Mr Netanyahu's authority. He recently flew to Washington and London for high-level meetings against Mr Netanyahu's express wishes. Yoav Gallant, the defence minister and a member of the centre-right Likud Party (which Mr Netanyahu leads), has recently convened meetings of the security chiefs to formulate an independent position on a possible truce and hostage deal in Gaza.

The risks for both men, and for Israel, are high. Mr Gantz, according to most polls, would, after an election, be the leader of the largest party in the Knesset and in a position to form a new governing coalition. Yet if he pushed for an early election he and his colleagues would almost certainly be fired by Mr Netanyahu. During one of Israel's biggest crises since its creation, three months of exclusive rule by a hard-right government without Mr Gantz and other pragmatists would be alarming. In the worst case it could lead to an even more reckless approach to aid reaching Gaza; further

clampdowns in the West Bank; escalation on the northern front with Hizbullah and a full-throttle invasion of Rafah with another round of civilian deaths. That might break Israel's relationship with America and strain the country's constitution if the more centrist security establishment refused to co-operate.

As a result the opposition to Mr Netanyahu is divided over the best timing for a strike against him; and since the Knesset's winter session is set to end on April 7th, no serious movement on the matter can be expected until it reconvenes in late May. "This is the most awful government Israel has ever had," says a senior member of Mr Gantz's party. "But it would be even worse if we left now." ■

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