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[Bibi Netanyahu is the wrong man in the wrong place \(economist.com\)](https://www.economist.com)

Hamas and Israel

Bibi Netanyahu is the wrong man in the wrong place

Israel's prime minister is ill-equipped for war and peace



image: imago

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Five days into Israel's ground invasion of Gaza, its armoured and infantry battalions are deepening their presence in the northern and central sectors of the Strip, while starting to take casualties. Civilian deaths continue to spiral to horrific levels with reports of dozens of Palestinians killed by the bombardment of several buildings in Jabalia, north of Gaza city. Israel claims it killed 50 militants in the same location, including Ibrahim Biari, one of the commanders of Hamas's October 7th attack. Footage from Palestinian sources appears to confirm that many bystanders died, too.

Inside Israel a political battle is raging over the conduct of the war, its aftermath and who makes decisions. At its heart is Binyamin Netanyahu, the dominant figure in Israeli politics for over two decades, who may now be the wrong man in the wrong place at the wrong time. He is widely perceived to have lost the confidence of the Israeli public and is struggling to run a war cabinet effectively. He is also an implausible candidate to deliver the two-state solution that America is implicitly demanding in return for its support of the offensive. On October 31st Antony Blinken, America's secretary of state, told Congress that he supported a "revitalised" Palestinian Authority (pa) running Gaza after Israel leaves, with international help.

Start with public opinion. Mr Netanyahu is being held responsible by much of the public for the failures leading up to Hamas's attack. Despite the culpability of the army and intelligence chiefs, they remain much more popular than him. According to one recent survey, half of Israelis trust the commanders of the Israel Defence Forces (idf) to lead the country in war, only a fifth of them trust the prime minister and the generals equally. Just a tiny minority trusts Mr Netanyahu more.

This has enraged Mr Netanyahu, compounding the second problem, divisions within the Israeli war cabinet. Officials present at its meetings have described a "traumatic" atmosphere. Mr Netanyahu has taken to attacking his generals in public: the day after ground forces entered Gaza, he took to X (formerly Twitter) and blamed the heads of military intelligence and the Shin Bet security agency for an assessment before the October 7th attacks that "Hamas was deterred and sought accommodation." He deleted the post after public criticism from members of the war cabinet.

The divisions are affecting military decision-making. They explain why idf soldiers sat in staging areas near the Gaza Strip for two weeks until the order to go in was given. "The army took a terrible hit but is

now standing on its two feet,” says one senior official. “The same can’t be said for the rest of the government.” Israel’s stated objectives remain to destroy Hamas’s military capabilities and topple its government in Gaza. But if those are achieved, the generals need to be prepared for the power vacuum on the day after. Who will ensure that Hamas does not return and assume responsibility for over 2m civilians in a war-ravaged area? The security chiefs complain that they have received no directives from the government on this matter. Israel has mobilised 360,000 reservists at huge cost to the economy and the war-planners need to know when some of them can return to civilian life.

Infighting is also hampering relief programmes for Israeli citizens. Tens of thousands of families have been uprooted from communities around Gaza’s borders and in the north, where Hizbullah has been shelling Israel from Lebanon. Local-council leaders complain they have not received any assistance from the government in arranging temporary housing. The head of a civil-service taskforce to co-ordinate relief has only just been appointed. The finance minister, Bezalel Smotrich, leader of the far-right Religious Zionism party, has tried to divert funding away from relief programmes to Jewish settlements in the West Bank and other special interests.

Mr Netanyahu’s biggest vulnerability may be the third problem: he has become a symbol of implacable hostility to a two-state solution at a time when Israeli commitment to it in some form is essential as part of any “day after” plan. That is so as to maintain American support and to sustain the Abraham accords, which established diplomatic links with a group of Arab states. In the absence of clear government direction the Israeli defence establishment is doing all the planning. Its preferred solution is to see the pa ultimately return to Gaza, which it controlled until Hamas’s coup in 2007. The Palestinian leadership is clear that any return to Gaza would require Israeli assurances on reviving a moribund diplomatic process towards a two-state solution. Despite this some of the hard-right members of Mr Netanyahu’s coalition adamantly oppose any co-operation with the pa. On October 30th Mr Smotrich announced he was freezing the transfer of tax revenue that Israel collects on behalf of the pa due to what he claimed was support by senior figures there for the Hamas attack.

How much longer can Mr Netanyahu survive? Widespread protests against the government and its illiberal legislative agenda took place for many months before the attacks of October 7th. These have been paused and his coalition has suspended “non-war-related” legislation. Rebellious stirrings from within it are no threat yet as toppling Mr Netanyahu would require a majority in the Knesset for an alternative prime minister. In Israel’s fractured political system no other candidate could command such support at present. The war cabinet includes Benny Gantz, who leads the second-largest party in the opposition. Those close to Mr Gantz say that he is swallowing his frustration “in the national interest”. For now, Mr Netanyahu hangs on. Israel is capable of fighting a war in Gaza and may even succeed in toppling Hamas. But at one of the most testing moments in Israel’s history the man in charge has no answers for what happens next.