

Benny Gantz's Year in Politics: Netanyahu's Complete Opposite Inches Closer to PM Seat

Gantz almost quit after the Iranians hacked his phone – but quickly learned to navigate Israeli politics

By

[Chaim Levinson](#)

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On December 27, 2018 at 2:38 P.M., public relations consultant Itay Ben Horin issued a terse message that in retrospect marked the beginning of political whirlwind that Israel finds itself in: “This is to announce that a short time ago, Benny Gantz’s Israel Resilience Party was registered. Details to follow.”

Exactly a year later, it’s possible to characterize the political conduct of this former army chief of staff. This relaxed man, who at first glance would appear to be light-years from the political cunning characterizing Prime Minister Benjamin [Netanyahu](#), has become the first person since Ehud Barak in 1999 to threaten the prime minister politically. On the current political map, Gantz is the person closest to becoming Israel’s next prime minister.

[Gantz](#) is no Netanyahu. In fact he’s Netanyahu’s opposite, which is also the secret of his power. Voters who are sick of Netanyahu and who have switched parties with every election have jumped on his bandwagon.

Gantz’s political behavior is deceiving. Netanyahu is passionate about politics. Gantz can’t stand politics. Netanyahu jumps from one intrigue to the next, from plan to plan, based on the latest news flash. Gantz is organized.



Gantz during a meeting of his party, Kahol Lavan, in December 2019. Tomer Appelbaum

A palpable difference

The difference between the two is palpable from the very first encounter. When people meet with Netanyahu, he has to make sure they leave feeling that they have met one of the greatest figures in history. He courts his guests like a Latin lover on testosterone.

He pounds his fist on the desk. He shouts. He fires off strategic analyses that can be all over the place, from the dimmest reaches of history to his latest meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

Gantz, by contrast, exudes drowsiness. He doesn't talk much. It's hard to understand where his mind is going. People who have met him tend to wonder why he went into politics at all.

The former army chief of staff is known for his hesitancy. In his campaign leading up to last September's election, the people in Yesh Atid, the party headed by Yair Lapid that joined forces with Gantz on the [Kahol Lavan](#) joint ticket, pulled their hair out over Gantz's inability to make decisions.

Referring to Gantz, and the two other Kahol Lavan leaders who are former army chiefs of staff, Moshe Ya'alon and Gabi Ashkenazi, one Yesh Atid

source remarked: “Three chiefs of staff in a room. It’s frightening to think how the army is run.”

After President Reuven Rivlin tapped Gantz to try to form a government after the September election, and when Gantz’s time to complete the task was about to expire, Lapid pressed him to form a coalition with the Joint List of Arab parties, but Gantz continued to equivocate.

He mulled it over and over and finally fell in love with fellow Ya’alon’s idea that they would only form a coalition with the Arab parties if Yisrael Beiteinu, led by right-wing Avigdor Lieberman, also came on board.

Spared a decision

Lieberman ruled out the idea and saved Gantz from having to make a decision. But along the way, Gantz’s political partners nearly lost their minds.

Sometimes the inability to make decisions has its upside, however. On the night of March 14, when Channel 12 political reporter Amit Segal reported that Iranians had hacked Gantz’s cell phone, Gantz thought about getting out of politics. In speaking to associates, he sounded frightened.



Benny Gantz, right, is seen next to Yair Lapid, who joined forces with Gantz on the Kahol Lavan joint ticket. Tomer Appelbaum

“It was the first time he realized how brutal politics could be,” one of his advisers told Haaretz. “He knew it would be tough, but the first time you get

it in the face is different.” Gantz hesitated but ultimately opted to stick it out, deciding that this wasn’t a real skeleton in his closet.

Gantz “is more sophisticated than people think,” a senior Kahol Lavan figure told Haaretz. “Look what he did to Lapid. In a war with Lapid, he would have won, but at the same time, he would also have been wounded. Instead Gantz had Lapid surrounded until he raised a white flag.”

The linkup with Lapid was the most significant political decision that Gantz has made, but even Gantz’s most ardent supporters realize that the alliance poses a problem between the two. Gantz hadn’t wanted it.

He had thought he could win over voters from Yesh Atid without cooperating with Lapid himself. At the initial meetings in advance of the establishment of the Israel Resilience Party, Gantz’s goal wasn’t to become prime minister. It was to head the second largest party and to become defense minister in a Netanyahu-led government.

He brought Moshe Ya’alon on board to prevent him from joining Yesh Atid, which was wooing him, and to create a party with the image of being led by army chiefs of staff. Then he thought about bringing Gesher, headed by Orli Levy-Abekasis, on board as well.



Gantz is no Benjamin Netanyahu (pictured). In fact he’s Netanyahu’s opposite, which is also the secret of his power. Ohad Zwigenberg



Yisrael

Beiteinu leader Avigdor Lieberman. Ohad Zwigenberg

Gabi Ashkenazi as game changer

His plans changed as a result of opinion polling two days before the deadline for to finalize the party slates. The survey predicted that Kahol Lavan would get 35 seats in the 120-seat parliament. Gantz, who had aspired to be defense minister, could now aspire to be prime minister.

Bringing Gabi Ashkenazi into Kahol Lavan was the game changer. Until then, the approaching election was due to be a dream for Netanyahu. His Likud party was facing a bunch of new and mediocre parties that were expected to achieve low double-digit numbers of seats at most, and he could play coalition building games at will.

Yisrael Beiteinu, Zehut, Hayamin Hehadash, the Israel Resilience Party, Geshet and Labor were expected to squabble with one another. But Kahol Lavan created a real counterforce to Netanyahu.

Under Gantz, Lapid looks like a pale imitation of a prime minister. Although people think Gantz isn't happy with Lapid's political attacks, the opposite is true. Gantz has learned to appreciate Lapid's belligerent character and is happy to have him do the dirty work. He is also happy that in the process Lapid is eroding his own credibility as prime ministerial material.



Gants

during a visit to Israel's border with Lebanon, in November 2019. Gil Eliahu

In the campaign ahead of the September election, Netanyahu again accused Lapid of frustrating the establishment of a coalition government. In practice, however, Gantz wasn't comfortable joining a coalition with Netanyahu, and it was the combined opposition of Lapid and Ya'alon that won him over.

In the campaign leading up to September's vote, Lapid didn't want to forgo his agreement with Gantz that the two would rotate as prime minister. From Lapid's standpoint, it would have been an admission that he wasn't fit for the job.

In advance of the third round of elections in a year – now scheduled for March 2 – Lapid has understood that insisting on the rotation would do him more harm than good. He has told associates that Gantz promised him the job of foreign minister and Lapid believes that four years in that position, during which he would rehabilitate Israel's foreign relations, would make him a realistic candidate for the leadership.

Allying with Lapid has made Gantz into a prime ministerial candidate but it also made him the candidate of one distinct political camp. Even before the campaign for the first election in April, Netanyahu had told his associates that Gantz's stature needed to be inflated and then he could be shot down. Netanyahu, who is a believer in the American model of two-headed politics, would like to create the same dichotomy in Israel. As far as he is concerned, Israeli society should be divided between "us" and "them": we Jews and those Arabs.

The nation-state law

Netanyahu embraced the nation-state law to force the left wing to vote with "the Arabs". As far as he is concerned, the worst thing of all is centrist parties that can attract votes from the big parties and anoint someone else to lead the country.

In retrospect, Netanyahu did manage to inflate Gantz, but he didn't manage to shoot him down. He did manage to brand Gantz as center-left but when Moshe Kahlon's centrist party Kulanu fell apart and its supporters had to switch to other parties, polls indicate they opted to move left of Likud.

When Gantz entered the political fray, he was shown discouraging polling data. The number of Israelis defining themselves as left-wing is in the single digits. And about 20 percent affiliate with the right wing. Between those two extremes, there are all kinds of fluid definitions – center, center-right, center-left, right leaning towards center, and so on.

Netanyahu has been making use of the division between left and right for 30 years. In that battle, Gantz was defeated in no time.



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Kahol Lavan likes to present other numbers. As they see it, a quarter of the people calling themselves center-right vote Kahol Lavan. These are apparently people who supported Moshe Kahlon in 2015.

Kahol Lavan admits to having failed to make inroads in Likud's base. The party's goal is to win over the Jewish public so it doesn't need active support from the Joint List of Arab parties to form a government. In the September election, the parties that joined forces with Netanyahu had a combined 55 seats, versus a total of 52 for Kahol Lavan, Meretz, Labor-Gesher and Yisrael Beiteinu.

A majority in the Knesset is 61 seats and if two seats shift to Kahol Lavan, Gantz believes he could be prime minister a week after the upcoming March election.

In any event, sources in Kahol Lavan say they don't anticipate major changes in the third election – simply battles over small groups of voters who might move a seat from one camp to the other and win the day – the 15,000 farmers who voted for Tzomet, liberal observant Jews on the soft-right in the style of Yoaz Hendel and Chili Tropper and so on.

“The blocs [that formed after the last election] won’t last a week,” a source in Kahol Lavan said. “We’re almost a month into the campaign and none of the parties in Netanyahu’s bloc has sworn their loyalty. If Gantz draws one more seat, he will be Israel’s next prime minister.”