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War and Politics Dynamics

How the Israel–Iran War Is Reshaping
the 2026 Knesset Elections



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H A B T O O R R E S E A R C H . C O M



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The Israeli political system has undergone profound structural shifts following the launch of Operation Roaring Lion between Israel and Iran in late February 2026. This conflict marks a transition from traditional deterrence policies and proxy warfare to a doctrine of comprehensive confrontation and pre-emptive strikes targeting nuclear and military infrastructure deep inside Iran. These military developments have coincided with the approaching constitutional deadline for the twenty-sixth Knesset elections, due no later than October 2026, amid a politically fragile environment for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his governing coalition. The confrontation has unfolded at a time when the executive leadership is experiencing a decline in political support, shaped by the continuing repercussions of intelligence and security failures linked to the events of 7 October 2023.

These challenges are compounded by declining domestic economic indicators, sharp societal divisions over legislation mandating military conscription for ultra-Orthodox Jews, and the ongoing trajectory of judicial proceedings. In this context, analytical evidence suggests that the executive leadership is seeking to leverage the state of national emergency to consolidate cohesion within its right-wing electoral base and to affirm the centrality of the current leadership in managing security threats within a complex parliamentary system. The intersection of protracted military conflicts with democratic electoral cycles imposes complex structural pressures on voting behaviour and the prospects of incumbent leadership. The demands of national mobilisation increasingly intersect with deeply rooted crises of institutional trust in the public consciousness. This analysis examines electoral calculations before and after the outbreak of the confrontation, reviews historical precedents in which extended wars have shaped successive Israeli governments, and analyses the strategic and personal drivers of decision-making, culminating in an assessment of potential trajectories for the reconfiguration of the electoral landscape ahead of the 2026 vote.



The Pre-War Political Landscape: Crisis and Deadlock

The Israeli political landscape on the eve of military operations against Iran was marked by clear structural fragility within the governing coalition led by Netanyahu, comprising the Likud party, religious nationalist parties, and conservative Haredi factions. This alliance faced a growing legitimacy crisis and a steady erosion of public trust, driven by mounting political and security pressures. These pressures began with the societal fallout from attempts to pass judicial reforms in 2022 and intensified sharply following the intelligence and security failures associated with the events of 7 October 2023, as well as the ongoing judicial proceedings against the prime minister on corruption charges. These combined factors were reflected in public assessments of the government. A 2025 opinion poll conducted by Maariv found that 62% of respondents had lost confidence in the current government's ability to manage state affairs effectively. These dynamics produced political paralysis, as the coalition struggled to maintain internal cohesion and secure the level of public support needed to remain in power.

This structural crisis was clearly reflected in statistical indicators and opinion polls conducted in January and February 2026. Most independent measurements, including surveys by the Lazar Research Institute and polling data from major news outlets such as Channels 12 and 13, as well as Zman Israel, indicated that the governing coalition was stagnating within a range of 46-51 seats, a figure that falls well short of the absolute parliamentary majority of 61 seats required to form a government. By contrast, the data showed the opposition bloc approaching the 60-seat threshold. These figures were consistent with projections issued by the Arab Center Washington DC, which anticipated an opposition victory with a majority of approximately 58 seats.

Polling Organisation / Publisher	Date	Likud Seats	Bennett 2026 Seats	Coalition Bloc	Opposition Bloc	Arab parties
Zman Israel / Yossi Taktika	22 January	25	36	50	60	10
Channel 13 / Maagar Mochot	20 January	25	23	51	56	13
Channel 12 News / Midgam	15 January	26	22	51	59	10
Channel 14 / Direct Polls	1 January	35	11	66	44	10

Despite the emergence of some outlier polls, such as Channel 14's measurements granting the coalition a notional lead, the overall trend clearly indicated that reliance on the traditional right-wing base was insufficient to secure continued rule. This was particularly evident with the rise of former political and military figures, such as Naftali Bennett and Gadi Eisenkot, as viable alternatives capable of attracting segments of centre-right voters opposed to the current government's policies.

Alongside electoral challenges, Israel's domestic arena has witnessed a marked escalation in contentious issues that have systematically undermined governmental stability. The question of military conscription for ultra-Orthodox Jews has emerged as one of the most pressing and consequential issues affecting social cohesion, particularly amid the ongoing strain on Israeli reserve forces deployed across multiple combat fronts. This issue has widened the divide between secular and traditional segments of society, which bear the practical burdens of military service and its associated pressures, and religious factions that benefit from institutional exemptions secured by the governing coalition.

In parallel with these social tensions, macroeconomic challenges have come to the fore, including slowing growth, rising living costs, and escalating disputes over the state budget's approval. These intertwined economic and social pressures have fuelled public discontent and reinforced negative perceptions of governmental effectiveness, leaving the governing coalition facing a domestic political impasse that demands fundamental remedies.

Amid this domestic impasse, security and geopolitical expectations were undergoing a notable shift in public perception, creating a more receptive societal environment to strategic military action. Data from the National Security Survey, published by Israel's Institute for National Security Studies in January 2026, indicated that more than 62% of the Israeli public anticipated a renewal of hostilities with Iran within a period not exceeding six months.

The data also revealed a near-even division in public opinion regarding the viability of a pre-emptive military strike, with 45% in favour and 43% opposed. By February of the same year, the institute recorded an increase in support for a unilateral Israeli strike against Iran, surpassing the 50% threshold, alongside a high level of confidence, reaching 72%, in the readiness and adequacy of Israel's air defence systems to counter any potential retaliation. These statistical indicators point to a growing psychological and political readiness within Israeli society to accept scenarios of direct military escalation, thereby providing the enabling environment for the subsequent launch of military operations as a new variable within an already complex domestic and regional equation.

Coalition Erosion and Declining Support

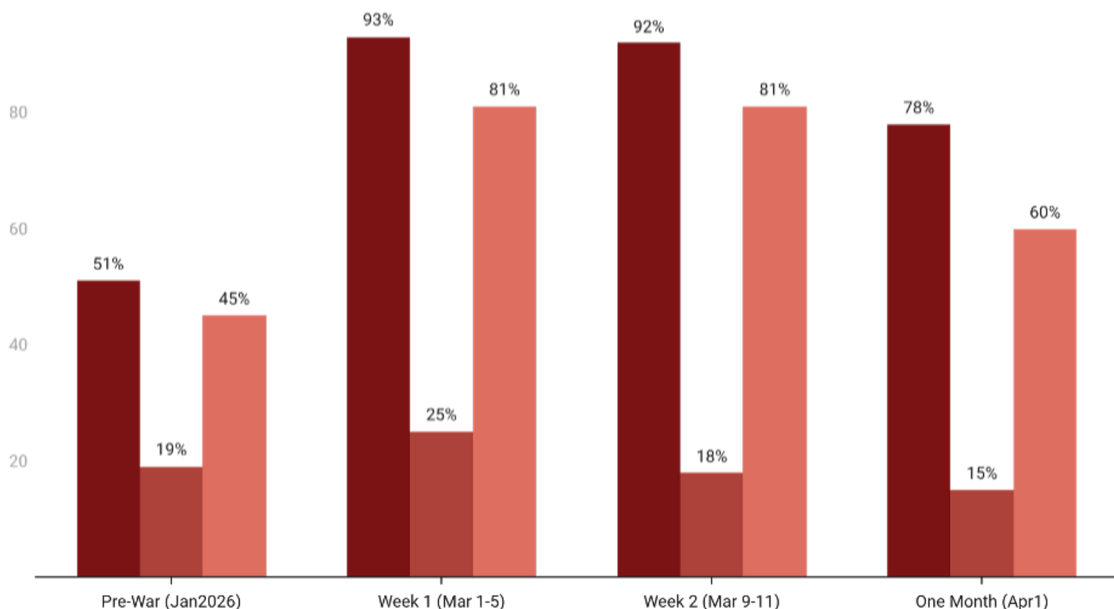
Building on the structural crisis that had surrounded the governing coalition prior to the onset of military operations, the launch of Operation Roaring Lion in February triggered an immediate shift in Israeli public opinion. This psychological shift manifested in the activation of what political science literature defines as the “rally round the flag” effect, a systematic and familiar behavioural response that occurs when democratic systems face external threats, prompting citizens to temporarily set aside political divisions and align fully behind the executive leadership and the military establishment.

Opinion polls clearly reflected this phenomenon. A rapid survey conducted by the Israeli Institute for Social Research between 1 and 5 March recorded overall public support for the military operation at 81%, with particularly high backing among Jewish Israelis, reaching 93%, of whom 60% expressed strong support.

Support for Strikes on Iran

By Demographic Groups, 2026

■ Jewish Israelis
■ Arabs Israelis
■ Total Population



These findings were consistent with data from the Israel Democracy Institute, published between 9 and 11 March, which confirmed that overall support remained stable at 81%, with 92% backing among Jewish Israelis. The data further indicated that consensus extended to 96% of voters within the governing coalition, while 77% of opposition voters also supported the military campaign in its first week. In parallel with this initial consensus, personal evaluations of the prime minister’s performance rose markedly, with 74% of respondents expressing the view that Netanyahu was effectively managing the course of the war. This aligns with political science research suggesting that such effects are particularly pronounced in response to attacks targeting civilians and tend to be most evident during periods of conservative government.

These behavioural indicators were immediately reflected in shifts in party support levels amid the intensifying US-Israeli bombardment and the targeting of prominent Iranian leadership figures. A poll conducted by Zman Israel on 4-5 March, just days after the launch of the operation, projected an increase in Likud’s representation to 31 seats, a notable rise from the 27 seats forecast in the previous week’s survey. This upward trajectory persisted throughout March, with Likud’s projected share stabilising within a 26-29 seat range according to polls conducted by major polling organisations. Meanwhile, surveys by Direct Polls, affiliated with Shlomo Filber and conducted for the conservative Channel 14, reported higher estimates approaching the 34-seat threshold.

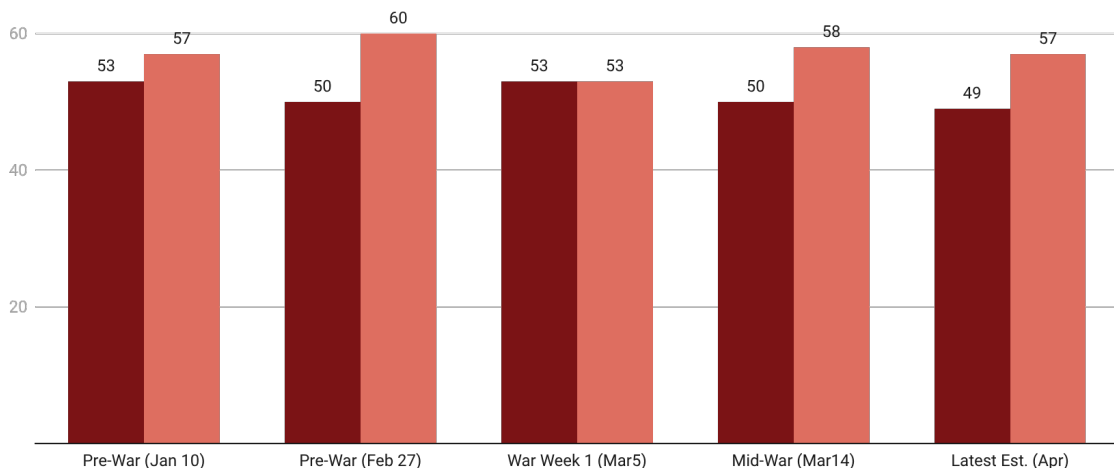
Polling Organisation	Date	Likud Seats	Yashar! (Eisenkot)	Coalition Bloc	Opposition Bloc	Opposition Bloc
Lazar / Maariv	31-30 March	25	14	49	61	10
Kantar, Kan 11	29 March	28	13	53	56	11
Yossi Taktika / Zman Israel	26 March	29	17	53	57	10
Midgam / Hadashot 12	19 March	28	12	51	59	10
Zman Israel	5-4 March	31	14	51	59	10

However, a systematic reading of the data from the second half of March reveals a more complex political dynamic. The notable rise in Likud's seat projections did not stem from gains among opposition or centrist voters; rather, it resulted from an internal reconfiguration within the right-wing camp itself, as voters returned to Likud's broader umbrella at the expense of its allied far-right and Haredi parties. A review of the polling data indicates that the overall size of the governing coalition remained broadly stable at 49-53 seats, while the opposition bloc retained a clear numerical advantage, recording between 56 and 61 seats. This confirms that the initial momentum failed to produce any substantive shift in the broader political landscape that will ultimately determine the composition and direction of the next government.

Projected Seats: Coalition vs. Opposition

Pre- and Mid-War with Iran

■ Netanyahu Coalition ■ Opposition Bloc



Alongside these political limitations, the impact of wartime support was marked by a stark ethnic and national divide, reflecting a deep structural fracture within Israeli society. Field surveys conducted by the Israel Democracy Institute indicate that overwhelming support for the continuation of military operations, even at its peak, was concentrated almost exclusively within the Jewish majority. In sharp and revealing contrast, the data showed that fewer than 20% of Arab citizens in Israel supported the course of the war, while a dominant majority viewed the underlying motivations for the confrontation as driven by the prime minister's personal and political interests, aimed at securing his continued hold on power. This deep demographic and political polarisation highlight the significant challenges facing the authorities in using the war as a tool to generate a comprehensive national consensus. It underscores that the current conflict has not succeeded in forging a cohesive and unified civic identity; rather, it has further complicated the electoral landscape by entrenching divisions and deepening mistrust among different segments of society.

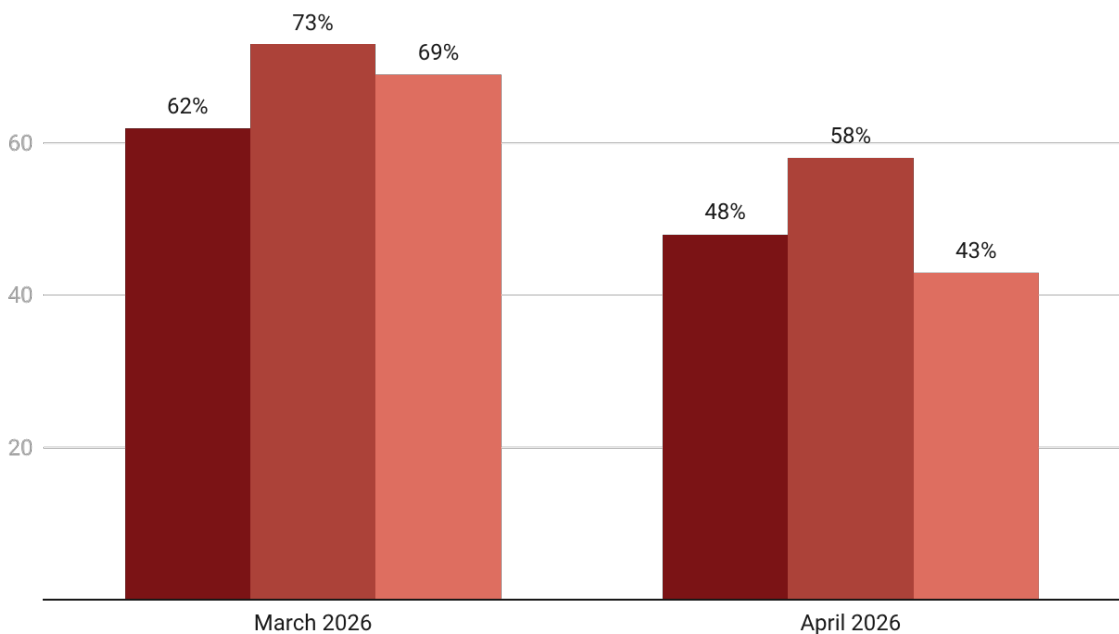
Despite the initial surge of alignment behind the leadership, subsequent public opinion trends showed that this support was transient and time-bound. By 1 April, after a full month of military operations, statistical indicators showed a noticeable decline in support levels. Backing for the military operation among the Jewish majority fell from 93% to 78%, while overall support dropped to around 60%. More tellingly, in an indicator of eroding public confidence, support for the war's maximal strategic objective, namely the continuation of operations until achieving a fundamental change in the Iranian regime, declined significantly from 63% to 46%.

In parallel, public expectations regarding the effectiveness of military outcomes declined. The proportion of respondents optimistic about inflicting substantial structural damage on Iran's nuclear programme fell from 62% to 48%, while expectations of neutralising the ballistic missile system dropped from 73% to 58%. Similarly, confidence in the ability to deal decisive damage to the Iranian regime declined from 69% to 43%. This downturn reflects a state of strategic fatigue and growing scepticism regarding the leadership's capacity to achieve its ambitious tactical objectives over time, thereby diminishing the viability of leveraging the war trajectory as a reliable electoral asset for the governing coalition in the forthcoming elections

Israeli Expectations of War Outcomes

(March - April 2026)

■ Nuclear Program Destruction ■ Ballistic Missile Elimination ■ Regime Change



Strategic Imperatives or Political Survival Calculations

The decision by the political and security leadership to launch a comprehensive military confrontation against Iran was grounded in security justifications tied to strategic imperatives aimed at dismantling the infrastructure of Iran's nuclear programme and neutralising the operational capabilities of the regional axis threatening Israel's multiple fronts. These justifications gained additional momentum amid successive intelligence assessments indicating an accelerated pace in Tehran's progress towards the nuclear threshold, alongside the expansion of its ballistic capabilities. This threat constitutes a constant pillar of Israeli security doctrine and has long occupied a central position in the political discourse of Netanyahu over many years. Accordingly, these determinants provided institutional cover for the launch of the military operation, framed as a pre-emptive measure dictated by national security requirements to ensure the state's survival and stability within a hostile and shifting geopolitical environment.

In contrast to this strategic narrative, preliminary assessments supported by strong political indicators suggest that Netanyahu's management of the war's duration and scope, and his rejection of diplomatic exit options, are driven, to an equal or greater extent, by strict utilitarian calculations linked to his ongoing legal crisis. The Israeli prime minister is facing a continuing criminal trial on charges of bribery, fraud, and breach of public trust, posing a direct threat to both his political future and personal freedom. In this context, the state of national emergency and the declaration of special measures for the home front have provided a legal and political pretext to delay judicial proceedings and suspend court hearings, on the grounds that the executive leadership is fully engaged in managing an existential regional conflict. The continuation of the war and general mobilisation allows Netanyahu to freeze the domestic political arena, prevent the opposition from mobilising public support effectively, and delay the formation of official and independent investigative committees into the failures of 7 October, thereby ensuring his continued tenure in office, shielded from immediate accountability and parliamentary scrutiny.

The dimensions of this political and personal instrumentalisation of the current military crisis are evident in Netanyahu's persistent efforts to capitalise on the initial tactical gains achieved by the air force and the international coalition to reinforce his self-portrayal as an indispensable historic leader. This aligns with a parallel and consequential objective of securing an exceptional presidential pardon that would fully terminate his legal prosecution. These efforts coincide with intense political pressure and ongoing leverage exerted by his far-right allies, who recognise that any regional diplomatic settlement or ceasefire agreement falling short of their radical ideological ambitions would inevitably and immediately trigger a withdrawal of support, the collapse of the governing coalition, and the government's fall in a swift parliamentary vote.

Accordingly, Netanyahu finds himself constrained by a harsh political equation that compels him to prolong the conflict and avoid any strategic or political concessions that might provoke his extremist partners, opting instead for continued military escalation as a political shield against legal accountability and potential parliamentary collapse. This dynamic renders the regional war a political instrument in which national interests and the personal fate of the political leadership are unusually intertwined, in a manner rarely seen in modern parliamentary democracies.

Prolonging the War: Electoral Bet or Trap for Political Collapse

Campaign strategists within the governing coalition believe that keeping the state under a condition of maximum emergency and comprehensive societal mobilisation provides an ideal political cover to freeze internal accountability efforts and delay the formation of official investigative committees into accumulated intelligence failures. This classic electoral strategy rests on the psychological assumption that the Israeli voter, when confronted with a direct existential threat, will instinctively gravitate towards the incumbent executive leadership and avoid the risk of replacing the ruling elite amid an unprecedented regional crisis. Through this pragmatic approach, the governing coalition seeks to reproduce the national security narrative long monopolised by Netanyahu and effectively used to present himself as an indispensable historic figure, wagering that the continuation of the war will ultimately overshadow civil opposition voices and compel undecided voters to return to the familiar right-wing fold rather than risk an uncertain political alternative.

However, this calculated electoral wager collides with the realities on the ground and the profound repercussions of direct military responses on Israel's home front, where persistent security threats constitute a structural barrier to any government efforts to shift the electoral mood in its favour. The gradual shift from a swift pre-emptive war to a multi-front war of attrition may lead to an unprecedented breach of Israel's civilian depth, with major urban centres and critical economic facilities becoming daily targets of ballistic missiles and drones.

This severe security exposure is accompanied by the continued displacement of hundreds of thousands of citizens from peripheral settlements, who are living in a state of uncertainty and exhausting internal displacement without any clear timeline for a stable return. This lived reality of insecurity and social disruption generates a profound cognitive dissonance among Israeli voters. While the government's media apparatus projects ambitious promises of absolute deterrence and the definitive elimination of external threats, ordinary citizens experience daily life marked by tangible fear and repeated recourse to shelters.

As a result, the continuation of the war and the depletion of resources shift from a presumed tool for unifying support behind the leadership into a catalyst for rising public resentment towards an authority perceived as unable to safeguard its territorial sovereignty and the actual security of its citizens, thereby undermining any prospect of a shift in public sentiment in favour of the governing coalition.

In light of these complex structural contradictions, the trajectory of the “security and safety” narrative becomes clear: it is likely to be the very narrative that undermines the legitimacy of Netanyahu and his coalition at the ballot box, rather than rescuing them from their deep crisis. Drawing on theories of retrospective voting in democratic systems, it becomes evident that voters assess governments during prolonged conflicts based on tangible security outcomes and the human and economic costs incurred, rather than on rhetorical ideological narratives.

The accumulated failure to provide a comprehensive protective shield, coupled with the inability to achieve a swift military resolution, has stripped the current political leadership of its longstanding credibility as the guardian of national security. Opposition forces, particularly those led by figures with strong military and security backgrounds, have recognised this strategic vulnerability and moved to seize the security narrative from Likud, demonstrating to the public that the coalition’s policies are prolonging hardship within a conflict lacking a defined exit strategy. Accordingly, an excessive insistence on prolonging the war and deploying the security narrative amid continuing losses and domestic instability will not secure the political survival of the traditional right. Rather, it will turn that narrative into a harsh public indictment paving the way for its inevitable decline, while enabling the rise of alternative currents committed to restoring deterrence without exploiting national crises for personal political survival.



Protracted Attrition and the Risks of Punitive Voting

As operations have shifted from rapid pre-emptive strikes to a pattern of comprehensive attrition warfare, the strategic and material costs have begun to weigh on Israel's home front. The widening scope of the confrontation and the activation of regional fronts have disrupted international shipping routes and energy supplies, particularly following the closure of the Strait of Hormuz. This has generated macroeconomic shocks that have strained Israel's economic structure, already under pressure from declining credit ratings and rising public debt levels.

This deterioration has translated into rising inflation, prompting the executive leadership to adopt an austerity-driven emergency budget in spring 2026, centred on sharp reductions in allocations for essential public services such as education, healthcare, and social welfare. These contractionary fiscal measures have coincided with the ongoing internal displacement crisis affecting hundreds of thousands of citizens from the northern and southern border regions, contributing to a systematic erosion of public confidence in the government's ability to uphold the social contract and ensure citizens' economic security.

Alongside the military and economic repercussions, the crisis surrounding conscription legislation and the exemptions granted to ultra-Orthodox Jewish youth (Haredim) has been a decisive factor in deepening social and political polarisation. The prolonged state of comprehensive mobilisation has produced a structural disparity in the distribution of national burdens, with secular and traditional segments bearing the direct human and economic costs of sustained military service. Meanwhile, the governing coalition continues to provide legal and material protection for the privileges granted to religious factions to preserve its parliamentary cohesion, disregarding repeated warnings from the military establishment about acute manpower shortages and the risk of exhausting reserve forces.

This institutional contradiction has created significant political space for opposition forces to recalibrate their electoral strategies, centred on demands for equality in the distribution of civil and military burdens and an end to the political exploitation of national resources. This discourse has contributed to shifting a substantial portion of public attention away from an exclusive focus on external threats towards scrutiny of internal imbalances and the preferential policies adopted by the government to sustain its hold on power.

It is evident that executive leadership engaged in protracted wars of attrition often faces punitive voting in subsequent elections, regardless of the initial strategic justifications invoked to legitimise such operations. The 2026 war intersects with pivotal historical crises such as the 1973 war, the First Lebanon War, and the Second Lebanon War in 2006, episodes in which subsequently revealed strategic failures, high human costs, and the absence of clear exit strategies proved capable of toppling established governments and prompting judicial inquiry commissions that led to profound shifts in the political landscape.

Accordingly, the continuation of the comprehensive conflict without achieving a decisive military outcome or establishing a domestically acceptable diplomatic settlement exposes the governing coalition to the risk of replicating those historical failures. Under the combined pressures of inflation, austerity measures, and persistent security instability, Israeli voters may be unwilling to renew their confidence in a political leadership whose policies have contributed to deepening international isolation and creating structural societal fractures that will be difficult to repair in the foreseeable future.

Electoral Outcome Scenarios

Amid these geopolitical complexities and intertwined domestic crises, three main scenarios emerge that will shape the trajectory of the electoral process and the governing coalition's tactics in confronting the ballot box.

The first scenario involves a determined effort to postpone the elections beyond the constitutional deadline set for October 2026, relying on the continuation of the war and the expansion of emergency measures governing the home front. Under this scenario, Benjamin Netanyahu aims to effectively freeze the democratic process on the grounds that safe electoral campaigning and the security of polling stations cannot be guaranteed amid ongoing missile attacks and multi-front regional threats. This option represents the most favourable political refuge for the right-wing coalition, as it grants the current leadership open-ended time to reorganise its position, attempt to secure a marketable military achievement, and delay investigative committees into past failures. However, this scenario faces a near-insurmountable constitutional and political obstacle. Israeli Basic Laws, particularly the Basic Law: The Knesset, require an exceptional supermajority of 80 members of parliament to approve any postponement of elections beyond their fixed date. Such a consensus is virtually unattainable given the categorical rejection by opposition forces, which view any attempt to delay elections as a seizure of state institutions under the pretext of national security and an unjustified reward for the prime minister.

In contrast to postponement efforts, the second scenario centres on bringing elections forward and heading to the polls before October, a path that may emerge either as a voluntary strategic choice or as a forced political outcome resulting from coalition fragmentation. From a voluntary strategic perspective, Netanyahu may opt to dissolve the Knesset and call for early elections if he succeeds in securing a sudden, decisive military victory at the conclusion of the war, such as the destruction of a highly significant Iranian nuclear facility or the imposition of a US-backed political settlement marketed domestically as a historic achievement. In this specific scenario, the governing coalition would seek to capitalise on the peak of fleeting national euphoria and rapidly translate it into parliamentary seats before that momentum dissipates, the economic and human costs come to the fore, and judicial committees begin their work. From a coercive perspective, early elections may instead result from the internal collapse of the governing coalition, whether through the withdrawal of Haredi factions if the government fails to pass conscription laws protecting their privileges, or through a revolt by far-right nationalist parties if Israel is compelled to accept a settlement or ceasefire that falls short of their expansionist ambitions. This would lead to the government's fall and to early elections in a context marked by fragmentation and division.

The third scenario involves clinging to power until the final moment and holding elections on their strict constitutional schedule in late October 2026, amid a highly polarised political environment and an ongoing war of attrition or the unresolved aftermath of a conflict. In this context, Netanyahu would direct his full political and legislative efforts towards maintaining the cohesion of his fragile coalition on a day-to-day basis, offering tactical concessions to his far-right and religious partners to prevent their withdrawal, while exploiting the state of emergency to pass temporary budgets and defer major national decisions. This path relies on a strategy of buying time and managing crises incrementally, as the government effectively becomes an administration of both war and politics, seeking to absorb public anger and contain civil protests, while betting on the prime minister's longstanding ability to manoeuvre and reshape alliances in the decisive moments preceding the unavoidable return to the ballot box.

Conclusion

The Israeli parliamentary elections scheduled for October 2026 present an exceptional case in the complex interaction between intense regional warfare and domestic democratic practice. The military operation against Iran is not merely a transient geopolitical event, but a structural shock reshaping the determinants of electoral behaviour and party alignment. The pre-war landscape revealed a right-wing coalition suffering from structural fractures and a deficit of institutional trust, crises that the executive leadership sought to override by leveraging national mobilisation and activating a collective survival instinct in the face of external threat. Despite short-term tactical success in regaining part of Likud's support base, the war's dynamics and its evolution into a prolonged war of attrition have shown that the "rally around the flag" effect was fragile and temporary. It failed to break the bloc-level stalemate or secure a sustainable parliamentary majority, instead deepening demographic and political divisions across Israeli society.

The deep intertwining of strategic national security imperatives with utilitarian calculations of personal survival has stripped the traditional security narrative of its historical effectiveness, transforming it from a shield protecting political leadership into a public indictment of failures to safeguard the home front and the absence of clear exit strategies. As mounting economic pressures driven by energy crises and the repercussions of selective conscription intensify, the moral and political legitimacy of Netanyahu's government is rapidly eroding, undermining any reliance on external crises as an electoral lifeline. With the constitutional timing of elections effectively immune to manipulation due to stringent legal constraints and opposition pressure, the Israeli leadership will be compelled to face the electorate at an unavoidable juncture, in a vote defined by retrospective accountability for the management of accumulated crises.

Ultimately, these elections will not merely constitute a process of recycling traditional political elites, but rather a historic turning point likely to favour the rise of a new pragmatic, technocratic, security-oriented current, capable of transcending sharp ideological polarisation and restoring a fractured social contract. The outcome at the ballot box will mark the final chapter in a decisive democratic and institutional test, one that may signal the inevitable end of the current era of right-wing dominance and usher in a new transitional phase in Israeli political history, in which all leadership will be subject to strict accountability that does not recognise the justifications of war, regardless of the severity of external threats.

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