

ROUGH DRAFT

Odds of early Israeli elections rise as Haredi conscription debate strains Netanyahu's coalition

A deadline looms for the coalition to solve a previously intractable political problem or have to start forcing Haredim into the army

By [Lahav Harkov](#) March 26, 2024



ALEXI J. ROSENFELD/GETTY IMAGES

Female soldiers walk past a group of Haredi boys and men during a protest against the expiration of a law preventing them from being drafted into the IDF by blocking the main road in and out of the city on March 18, 2024 in Jerusalem.

The ongoing political debate over whether and how to conscript Haredi men into the IDF is shaping up to be a far more likely catalyst for an early election in Israel than the government's policies relating to the war in Gaza.

Israel's government is careening towards a deadline to pass a law on the matter or send conscription notices to Haredi men. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has thus far followed his usual political instinct to satisfy his Haredi coalition partners Shas and United Torah Judaism, but may not have the votes to keep the disparate parts of his government together for long.

Netanyahu is in the awkward position of having to choose between embracing a very unpopular policy to keep his coalition together, or doing what most of his voters want while destabilizing his coalition and potentially launching an early election.

The Haredi enlistment exemption has been highly controversial in Israel for decades. Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, agreed not to conscript 400 Haredi yeshiva students in the early years of the state, but after their ranks multiplied over a half-century, the Supreme Court determined in 1999 that the unofficial exemption was illegal. That spurred the Knesset to pass the Tal Law in 2002, exempting full-time yeshiva students from IDF service. Yet, in 2012, the Supreme Court declared that law unconstitutional. Since then, the issue of Haredi enlistment has been front and center on the Israeli political agenda. A Netanyahu-led government with now-Opposition Leader Yair Lapid as finance minister and without Haredi parties passed legislation in 2014, setting annual Haredi conscription quotas and cutting funding to yeshivas who don't meet them – but an election held the following year brought into the coalition the Haredim, who promptly gutted the law. One of the issues that led to the downfall of Netanyahu's coalition in late 2018 was disagreements between Haredi parties and then-Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman over conscription. The frequent elections in subsequent years – five between 2019 and 2022 – gave the Supreme Court little choice

but to allow the deferral of passing a new law, but the judges in Jerusalem have run out of patience.

The court's order for the government to end the inequality in IDF conscription coincided with the Defense Ministry announcing that, given the acute need for more manpower in the war in Gaza, it needs to extend the service of active duty and reserve soldiers and start to call up students in the middle of their pre-army programs, making support for the Haredi exemption even more politically treacherous.

The law allowing the IDF to exempt 66,000 Haredi men from serving last year – a record high – expires on March 31; after that, the military will have to start sending conscription letters to Haredim.

Netanyahu's proposed solution was still under negotiation with Attorney General Gali Baharav-Miara on Tuesday morning, postponing a planned cabinet vote on Tuesday – the day before the government's deadline to give an answer to the Supreme Court in petitions against the current enlistment exemption. The proposal is similar to the 2013 law in that it backs a bill setting increasing annual quotas for recruiting Haredi yeshiva students, while reducing funding for yeshivas that do not meet the targets.

It also instructs the IDF not to conscript full-time yeshiva students while the new law is being legislated. The proposal sets a schedule for passing the law: Draft legislation would have to be submitted to the Knesset by May 22, and would have to pass a final vote by June 30 or the IDF could conscript Haredim.

Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, who is in Washington this week, and war cabinet Minister Benny Gantz oppose the bill, but Netanyahu has enough votes in his cabinet for it to pass. The cabinet decision would allow him to stave off any political fallout from the Haredi conscription issue for three months.

Whether a majority of the Knesset would support the bill, and whether the legislature could pass such a controversial law in the short timeline laid out in Netanyahu's proposal, remains to be seen.

With the departure of Gideon Sa'ar and the three other lawmakers in his New Hope party on Monday, Netanyahu's emergency coalition currently has 72 out of 120 members of Knesset: 64 from his prewar religious-right alliance and eight from Gantz's National Union party.

A vote on a Haredi enlistment exemption would not get Gantz's support and would likely be an opportunity for him to leave the coalition even if the war does not end by then. Some in Likud have voiced concerns about a continued exemption, along with leading figures in coalition parties to the right of Likud, which could prolong the legislative process.

If the law doesn't pass, conscription letters will be sent and yeshiva funding will be slashed, and the Haredi parties will almost certainly leave the coalition.

More than three-quarters (76%) of Israelis support Haredi conscription, according to a survey conducted by Mano Geva for the organization Pnima, which seeks to bridge divisions in Israeli society. The vast majority of Gantz voters – 89% – support enlisting Haredim in the IDF. Most Likud voters (56%), and even more Religious Zionist Party voters (60%) support it, as do significant numbers of voters for other coalition parties: Otzma Yehudit (48%), United Torah Judaism (33.4%), and Shas (40.5%).