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**Israel: How Gadi Eisenkot Has Taken The
Lead Of The Anti-Netanyahu Front**

By

Brunello Rosa and Simon Anquetil



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For information about Rosa&Roubini Associates, please send an email to info@rosa-roubini-associates.com or call +44 (0)20 7101 0718.

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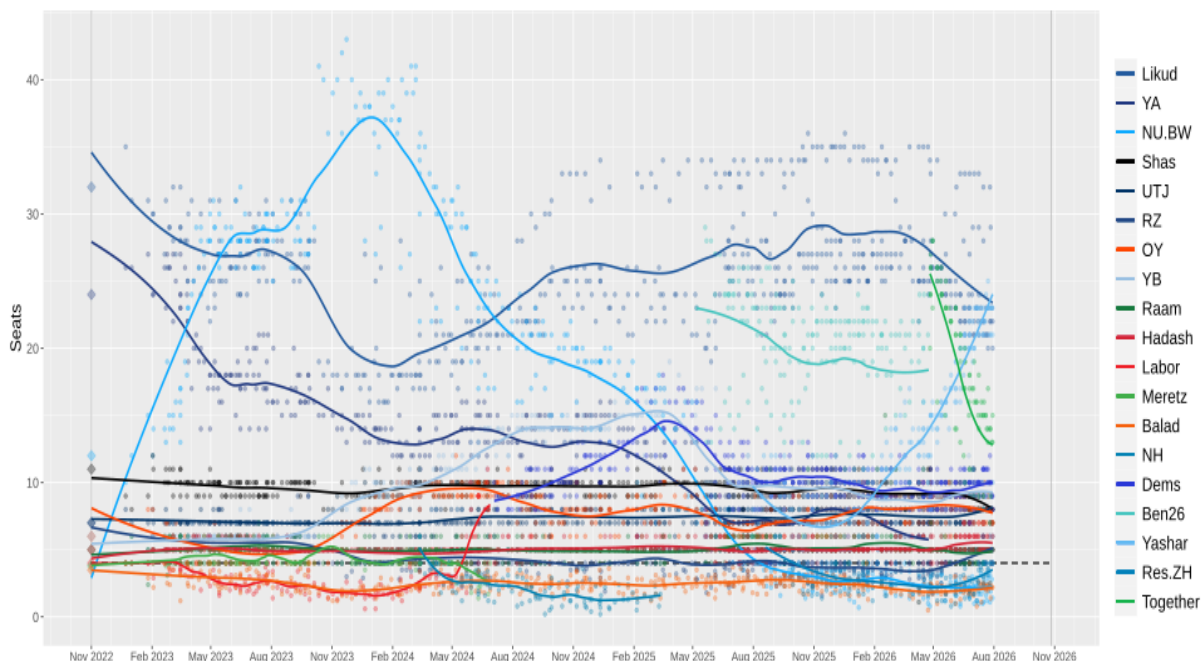
25 August 2026

Executive Summary

- ✦ On 30 June 2026, former IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot launched the party *Yashar* ("straight"), surging in polls to tie or narrowly lead Netanyahu's Likud (at 22–24 seats) and establishing a 10-point lead over Netanyahu as the preferred Prime Minister ahead of the 27 October 2026 Knesset elections.
- ✦ Israel's 3.25% electoral threshold punishes fragmented blocs. The anti-Netanyahu opposition suffered from small parties wasting votes and a strategy limited to "anyone but Bibi." Consolidation attempts—specifically Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid merging into the *Beyahad* ("Together") list—failed to gain seats, creating space for Eisenkot to rise by staying out of political maneuvering.
- ✦ Eisenkot represents a complete contrast to Netanyahu. Unlike Netanyahu's cosmopolitan elite background and telegenic style, Eisenkot is reserved and comes from working-class Moroccan immigrant roots. He carries unique moral standing after losing his son and two nephews in the war, contrasting with Netanyahu's ongoing criminal trials and evasion of responsibility for October 7.
- ✦ Following a historical tradition of military leaders entering politics (invoking figures like Yitzhak Rabin), Eisenkot uses military credibility to demand institutional repair. His core platform includes a mandatory state commission of inquiry into October 7, ending ultra-Orthodox conscription exemptions, instituting a two-term limit for prime ministers, and defending judicial independence.
- ✦ Eisenkot faces severe parliamentary arithmetic: reaching the 61-seat majority requires either tacit or explicit support from Arab-majority parties (Hadash-Ta'al, Ra'am), which risks alienating his right-leaning and centrist base. Additionally, Eisenkot is an untested first-time coalition manager leading a party built around a single individual without deep organizational roots.

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Key Picture: Opinion Polls 2026



Source: [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2026_Israeli_general_election)

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1. Introduction

On 30 June 2026, in the central Israeli town of Hod Hasharon, a plain-spoken retired general launched a campaign that would have looked like a long shot a year earlier. Gadi Eisenkot, former chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces, and his party Yashar, Hebrew for “straight,” or “upright,” accused Benjamin Netanyahu’s government of refusing to take responsibility for its failures, and pledged a full state commission of inquiry into October 7 if elected.¹ Over the past few months, poll after poll have established Yashar level with, and in several surveys narrowly ahead of, the prime minister’s Likud, the two parties trading the lead at around 22 to 24 of the 120 seats of the Israeli parliament, the Knesset.

More telling still, Eisenkot has overtaken Netanyahu as the public’s preferred prime minister, leading him by roughly ten points in one major survey.² With Israelis due to vote on 27 October 2026, a man with barely two years in politics and no party machine to speak of has become the most serious threat to the longest-serving leader in the country’s history. The obvious story is that of a war-weary electorate turning to a decorated soldier. Another view is that Eisenkot’s rise owes as much to the disarray of the camp he now leads as to his own considerable strengths.

This is the paradox of the 2026 election. For three years the anti-Netanyahu camp has been defined less by what it stands for than by whom it opposes, splintered across rival leaders who agree on little beyond the wish to remove the same man. The great consolidation was meant to be the merger of former prime ministers Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid into the “Together” coalition.³ Instead, the vacuum at the head of the opposition was filled by the one figure who stayed out of the manoeuvring altogether. Eisenkot’s ascent is therefore a story about the opposition’s miscalculations as much as his own appeal, about a fragmented, threshold-bound system that punished the coalition-builders and rewarded the outsider who offered a posture: straight.

2. The Opposition’s Political Miscalculations

Israel elects its 120-seat Knesset by nationwide proportional representation, with a 3.25 per cent electoral threshold and governments assembled from coalitions of many parties. In that system, the anti-Netanyahu camp’s chronic failure has been fragmentation: too many centrist and centre-right leaders chasing broadly the same voter, and too many small lists flirting with the threshold below which votes are simply discarded. Surveys testing prospective formations around figures such as Benny Gantz, Yuli Edelstein, Gilad Erdan and Ofer Winter have repeatedly shown them failing to clear the bar, each a potential sinkhole for anti-Netanyahu ballots that would never convert into seats.⁴ Gantz’s National Unity, the very list that got Eisenkot elected to the Knesset in 2022, has itself slid towards irrelevance as voters have lost interest in Gantz.⁵

The centrepiece of the opposition’s strategy was meant to solve exactly this. In April 2026, Bennett and Lapid merged their parties into a single list called Beyahad, “Together,” led by Bennett with Lapid in a senior position, and presented as the consolidation of the only reform bloc capable of unseating Netanyahu. On the polling numbers, it did nothing of the sort. Most polls found that Bennett and Lapid running together won one or two fewer seats than they had apart.⁶ Lapid’s liberal profile risked repelling the right-leaning, anti-Netanyahu voters Bennett needed to win from the Likud base, while Bennett’s own religious-Zionist base grew uneasy about an alliance with the centre. Beyahad started strong and then quickly slipped, overtaken through the summer by Eisenkot’s Yashar.

Beneath the tactical errors lies a deeper, recurring one. The opposition has spent years framing the contest as “anyone but Bibi,” fighting on coalition arithmetic and personality rather than on a positive alternative anchored in a platform of its own. That strategy turned out to have a ceiling. It is a lesson the recent past should have taught: the “change government” of 2021, the Bennett–Lapid coalition stretching from the settler right to the Arab party Ra’am, briefly ended Netanyahu’s run only to collapse within eighteen months because of internal disagreements and tensions, handing Netanyahu a route back to power.⁷

Eisenkot's success is best understood against this backdrop. When Bennett and Lapid were assembling Beyahad, there had been talk of a broader centrist "super-party" spanning all three men. It never materialised because Eisenkot did not join it.⁸ Rather than join other opposition leaders' list behind Bennett, he stayed above the fray and built his reputation as an independent, principled leader. The opposition's disorder created the space an outsider needed. Its leaders exhausted themselves negotiating with one another, while Eisenkot simply stood apart and rose in the polls.

3. Eisenkot Represents The Opposite of Netanyahu

If the opposition's failures opened the door for Eisenkot, what spurred his popularity is that he is Netanyahu's opposite. Netanyahu, at 76, is the ultimate political performer: telegenic, fluent in English, close with Republican leaders in the United States, and a master on the international stage. Eisenkot is his mirror image. He is deliberate to the point of slowness, a self-described bookworm who weighs every word, shy and sometimes awkward on camera. His personality traits are precisely his asset. His party's name, Yashar, is the whole positioning: Eisenkot is straight and authentic.

The contrast runs deeper than style, into biography and class. Netanyahu was born in Tel Aviv into an intellectual, ideologically nationalist family, was raised in part in the US, and was educated at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he is the profile of a cosmopolitan Ashkenazi elite. Eisenkot is the son of working-class Moroccan Jewish immigrants who grew up in Kiryat Shmona, near the Lebanese border, and rose from foot soldier to chief of staff of the IDF, a post he held from 2015 to 2019. Eisenkot's trajectory is itself a political message, and one that reaches deep into segments of the electorate, the Sephardic groups, that Likud has long treated as its own.

Then there is sacrifice. Eisenkot's youngest son, Gal Meir Eisenkot, was killed in northern Gaza on 7 December 2023, during an operation to recover the bodies of hostages, and two of Eisenkot's nephews also died in the war.⁹ For many Israelis his public image is inseparable from that loss, and it confers a moral standing no rival can match. It stands in sharp relief against a prime minister widely seen as having spent the years since October 7 evading personal responsibility for the worst security failure in the country's history. At the same time, he is the first sitting Israeli prime minister to stand trial as a criminal defendant, facing charges of fraud, bribery and breach of trust across three separate cases.¹⁰

This is why the first component of the Yashar platform is a demand for accountability: a full state commission of inquiry into the failures that led to October 7.¹¹ The choice is deliberate, because it echoes one of Israeli society's key demands, and is aimed straight at Netanyahu's greatest vulnerability. The prime minister has opposed an independent commission for almost three years, which critics have denounced as an attempt to escape accountability. Eisenkot's other commitments extend the same theme of institutional repair: universal conscription that would end the ultra-Orthodox exemption, a two-term limit on the premiership, and a defence of judicial independence against the government's tentative overhaul of the legal system.¹² Eisenkot is not just running against Netanyahu, he is running as the systematic negation of everything the Netanyahu era has come to represent.

4. Eisenkot's Personal Story Resonates With Israeli Society

Eisenkot is also drawing on one of the most durable templates in Israeli political history: the soldier who becomes a statesman. The country has a long line of them. Yitzhak Rabin went from chief of staff in the Six-Day War to the premiership.¹³ Moshe Dayan, Ariel Sharon, Ehud Barak, Yitzhak Mordechai and, most recently, Eisenkot's own former ally Benny Gantz all made the same journey from high command to high office. The uniform confers a legitimacy to govern in Israel, and the IDF remains one of the few public institutions Israelis broadly trust at a moment when they trust their politicians the least, an asymmetry that has only sharpened since October 7. Moreover, Hamas's terrorist attacks shattered Netanyahu's decades-old brand of the guarantor of Israeli security. The military narrative is strong but is not a guarantee of success. For instance, Gantz made it into government and then watched his support evaporate, and Barak's premiership lasted less than two years.

The model is Rabin, and the timing is powerful. Rabin tried to implement transformative change in Israel and the Middle East with the Oslo Accords in 1993.¹⁴ November 2025 marked thirty years since his assassination by a far-right extremist opposed to the peace process with Palestine.¹⁵ That anniversary supplied an emotional backdrop to the campaign that quietly indicts the present era: it recalled a moment of national trauma, of political violence, and of a country torn apart by division. These are the themes the opposition now presses against a government it accuses of deepening Israel's internal fractures and undermining its democracy. Netanyahu first rose to the premiership in 1996, in the aftermath of Rabin's killing, and to his critics he embodies the antithesis of what Rabin represented.¹⁶ Eisenkot, the soldier who lost a son on the battlefield, casts himself on Rabin's side of that clash.

The emotional core of the campaign is this fusion of sacrifice and repair. In a country where military service touches almost every family, and where the wounds of October 7 remain raw, the figure of a commander who gave a son to the nation and asks for accountability carries a powerful message. Bennett captured the mood when he declared at his campaign launch that the era of division was over and the era of repair had arrived. But it is Eisenkot, more than anyone in the opposition, who has come to personify that idea. Where earlier challengers to Netanyahu offered only the removal of one man, Eisenkot offers a clear direction.

5. Eisenkot's Weaknesses

Eisenkot's path to power runs into an arithmetic that has defeated every challenger to Netanyahu for years.¹⁷ Leading the polls is not the same as commanding a majority. As of now, in most surveys, neither bloc reaches the 61 seats required to form a government.¹⁸ The Zionist opposition, Yashar together with Beyahad, Yair Golan's Democrats and Avigdor Liberman's Yisrael Beiteinu, tends to hover around 58 to 61 seats, which means it cannot govern without the tacit or explicit support of the Arab parties, Hadash-Ta'al and Mansour Abbas's Ra'am.

Here lies Eisenkot's central dilemma. In April 2026 he called for a "Zionist majority" and convened opposition leaders without inviting the heads of the Arab parties, wary that any open reliance on them would jeopardise the centrist, centre-right and right-wing voters' support that has fuelled his rise.¹⁹ Abbas has signalled that he could eventually reach an agreement with the opposition, but Eisenkot has so far declined to say publicly whether he would build a government with Arab parties. Netanyahu has seized on the ambiguity relentlessly, warning that the opposition would form a coalition with those he casts as enemies of the state. Bennett, for his part, has ruled out relying on the Arab parties outright, deepening the issue.²⁰ The bloc that most wants to remove Netanyahu may be unable to assemble a majority without crossing a line it for now refuses to consider.

Beyond the arithmetic sits a question of governing skills. Eisenkot is a soldier and a first-generation politician who has never built or managed a governing coalition. The last anti-Netanyahu government in 2021-2022 offers the cautionary tale, as it imploded after eighteen months. Netanyahu, meanwhile, retains major advantages. He is well identified, has experience on the international stage, has a disciplined base, and loyal ultra-Orthodox and far-right partners in Shas, United Torah Judaism, Otzma Yehudit and Religious Zionism. Whether Eisenkot can succeed in the bargaining that governing requires is entirely untested.

There is also a fragility in Yashar's structure. It is assembled around the single figure of Eisenkot, and it has none of the organisational roots that carry Likud or the religious parties through a long campaign. Movements built on one man's reputation are exposed to key threats: a poor debate, a misstep on the question of the Arab parties, or a turn in the security situation that plays to Netanyahu's strengths. In Israeli politics, a promising summer poll has a long history of evaporating by the autumn.

Eisenkot nonetheless represents one of the most credible threats to Netanyahu's grip on power in years, and the reasons are not accidental. His lead rests on the two things the prime minister cannot easily attack: a security record and a reputation for integrity that throws Netanyahu's corruption trials and his evasions over October 7 into sharp relief. His surge is a consequence of the opposition's failures and his own political strengths. The decisive question of the campaign is not whether Eisenkot can lead the polls until election day, but whether he

can convert a plurality of opinions, views, and interests into 61 seats and a functioning coalition. Doing so will force him to confront the decision he has spent months avoiding, building a government on Arab parties and risking undermine the centrist and right-wing support that carried him this far. He could decide to keep the Arab parties out of his coalition and watch a winnable election slip into another Netanyahu term.

NOTES

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