



## PERSPECTIVES

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# Gantz's Challenges and Agenda as Israel's New Defense Minister

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Former IDF chief of staff Benny Gantz officially took up his position as defense minister a week ago. His first challenges will be to wage a bitter struggle for a defense budget and promote a cautious approach to Donald Trump's peace plan.**

In his remarks at his formal appointment ceremony as defense minister last Monday, Benny Gantz recalled the hundreds of times when he, as IDF chief of staff, walked into the defense minister's bureau, which straddles the bridge that connects IDF headquarters to the Defense Ministry building at the Kirya complex in Tel Aviv.

Gantz complimented his predecessor, Naftali Bennett, saying, "I could not but be impressed by your decision to think outside of the box and to challenge the system out of a desire to improve it."

He also sounded a word of caution about the dangers of inflexible thinking, saying, "We now mark 20 years since Israel's departure from the security zone in Lebanon ... we drowned there to a certain extent in rigid thinking, which left us stuck in the same place for decades. Today, we must look at the wide picture and always examine ourselves."

Gantz's comments addressed many of the issues set to dominate his agenda and hinted at the kinds of policies he will promote as defense minister.

### **Setting the Momentum plan into motion**

Gantz's first priority will undoubtedly be securing a suitable defense budget to extend for the next five years. This will be to enable, at least to some extent, implementation of the IDF's multi-year program, dubbed "Momentum."

Gantz spoke of the need to promote Momentum, which is a flagship project of IDF chief of staff Lt. Gen. Aviv Kochavi. Kochavi's plan is meant to enable the IDF to "deal with present threats, as well as future threats," said Gantz.

With Israel entering a period of major budgetary deficit due to the coronavirus crisis, and competition over state funds from other ministries expected to be fierce, Gantz will try to salvage as much of the Momentum plan as he can.

According to a report by *Ynet*, Kochavi recently told associates of the need to save "at least 70 percent of Momentum," describing it as "the insurance policy for our children and grandchildren, our vaccine against existing [and future] security threats."

The plan envisions the creation of a sharper, more lethal, network-based IDF that could destroy unprecedented quantities of enemy assets and facilities in record time. It would create field units that receive a wealth of new capabilities, meaning individual battalions would be digitally connected to all the relevant forces in their sectors as well as to the Intelligence Directorate. A company commander would be able to activate his own drones and use the IDF's digital command network to activate tanks, helicopters, or electronic-warfare units immediately upon detection of time-sensitive targets.

### **A "stormy sea" rages around Israel's borders**

As far as his powers go, Gantz, like all defense ministers before him, cannot decide on his own to launch large-scale operations or go to war. Those decisions must be made by the prime minister and receive cabinet approval in a vote before they can proceed.

But Gantz, who is also serving as vice premier in a unity government, can significantly influence the cabinet's decision-making process by making recommendations and representing the defense establishment's positions to the government.

He can also recommend that smaller covert operations be conducted against developing threats, particularly against those that are designated as "ticking bombs."

In his speech, Gantz warned that the situation beyond Israel's borders is not stable, describing it as a "stormy sea." He spoke of threats both near and far and said the defense establishment must be prepared to tackle them all. "We will locate them, cut them off, and destroy them," he said.

Lebanon, where Hezbollah—Israel’s foremost military adversary—is based, is host to a massive arsenal of surface-to-surface projectiles that places the whole of Israel within range. The Shiite Lebanese terror force is working with its Iranian patron to acquire precision guided missiles as well, which would enable it to threaten strategic civilian and military targets deep inside Israel.

In Syria, Hezbollah is trying to establish a foothold on the border with Israel. At the same time, Iran is attempting to create its own military front against Israel in Syria. This includes building missile and drone bases and assembling an army of tens of thousands of militia members recruited from across the region. These efforts have been hindered by a series of low-profile Israeli preventative airstrikes, but Iran remains determined.

Gantz will receive in-depth briefings to keep him up to date on the latest events in the “campaign between the wars”—the Israeli campaign to roll back the Shiite axis in Syria.

In Iran itself, the Islamic Republic is making alarming progress on its nuclear program, enriching uranium and developing new centrifuge types. Iran is edging ever closer to break-out capacity, which means that developing the IDF’s long-range strike capabilities must be a priority.

In the Gaza Strip, meanwhile, Hamas continues to build up its terrorist army at the expense of the needs of its own civilian population. Gantz will be reviewing the IDF’s latest operational contingency plans for Gaza while likely exploring policies that are designed to make the coastal enclave less explosive and more stable.

### **A cautious approach to Trump’s peace plan**

One of Gantz’s first major policy responsibilities will be to recommend an approach to the question of how to navigate the Trump Mideast peace plan, which will entail formulating a position on PM Netanyahu’s call to extend sovereignty over part of the West Bank.

Gantz hinted in his remarks that he will take a cautious approach on this front. He said, “We will promote the [Trump] plan with everything it includes. Responsible and important political steps require a strong security establishment that knows how to prepare for the strategic reality that faces the State of Israel, and that has the attentive ear of decision-makers.”

He stressed his dedication to promoting diplomacy and striving after peace, describing this as an important and longstanding Zionist ambition. This could suggest a desire to avoid steps that might destabilize neighboring Jordan, which is seen as a strategic asset due to its security coordination with Israel

along the Israeli-Jordanian border and bulwark position against Iranian efforts to infiltrate the West Bank from the east.

Gantz will also supervise and make recommendations on the IDF's force accumulation. This includes the acquisition of capabilities like, for example, next-generation Israeli transport helicopters; further purchases of fighter jets; and the production of advanced armored vehicles that can autonomously detect and engage enemies.

He will oversee his ministry's programs to shape national security objectives and complete military force build-up at the industry, technology, weapons development, and foreign-defense relations levels.

One of Gantz's first moves upon taking up his position was to appoint former Israeli Air Force commander Maj. Gen. (res.) Amir Eshel as director-general of the Defense Ministry to replace the outgoing director-general.

Gantz paid tribute to the defense establishment's critical role in dealing with the coronavirus pandemic. That included a global emergency acquisition campaign that brought in planeloads of medical equipment, as well as kickstarting a local medical equipment mass production program via [Israeli defense companies](#).

He underlined the presence of IDF soldiers on the ground to assist communities in need, including Arab and ultra-Orthodox areas. Gantz can be expected to oversee preparations for further assistance programs to the civilian sector in the event of future outbreaks.

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