



# ISRAEL'S HIGH COURT SAYS THE GOVERNMENT MUST STOP FUNDING SEMINARIES. COULD THAT TOPPLE NETANYAHU? - ASSOCIATED PRESS

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*Photo: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu attends the weekly cabinet meeting in the prime minister's office in Jerusalem*

Israel's Supreme Court ruling curtailing subsidies for ultra-Orthodox men has rattled Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's governing coalition and raised questions about its viability as the country presses on with the war in Gaza.

Netanyahu has until Monday to present the court with a plan to dismantle what the justices called a system that privileges the ultra-Orthodox at the expense of the secular Jewish public.

If that plan alienates the ultra-Orthodox lawmakers on whose support he depends, his coalition could disintegrate and the country could be forced to hold new elections.

Here's a breakdown of the decision and what it might spell for the future of Israeli politics.

## WHAT DOES THE DECISION SAY?

Most Jewish men are required to serve nearly three years in the military, followed by years of reserve duty. Jewish women serve two mandatory years.

But the politically powerful ultra-Orthodox, who make up roughly 13% of Israeli society, have traditionally received exemptions while studying full time in religious seminaries, or yeshivas.

This years-old system has bred widespread resentment among the broader public — a feeling that has deepened during nearly six months of war. More than 500 soldiers have been killed in fighting, and tens of thousands of Israelis have had their careers, studies and family lives disrupted because of reserve duty.

The Supreme Court ruled that the current system is discriminatory and gave the government until Monday to present a new plan, and until June 30 to pass one. Netanyahu asked the court Thursday for a 30-day extension to find a compromise.

The court did not immediately respond to his request. But it issued an interim order barring the government from funding the monthly subsidies for religious students of enlistment age who have not received a deferral from the army. Those funds will be frozen starting Monday.



While the loss of state subsidies is certainly a blow, it appears the yeshivas can continue to function. Israel's Channel 12 reported Friday that the state provides only 7.5% of all funding for the institutions. Netanyahu's coalition could also search for discretionary funds to cover the gaps.

#### HOW IS THE DECISION BEING RECEIVED?

Many Israelis are celebrating the court's decision, believing it spells an end to a system that takes for granted their military service and economic contributions while advantaging the ultra-Orthodox, or "Haredim" as they are called in Israel.

The religious exemption dates back to Israel's founding, a compromise that the country's first prime minister, David Ben Gurion, made with ultra-orthodox leaders to allow some 400 yeshiva students to devote themselves fully to Torah study. But what was once a fringe Haredi population has grown precipitously, making the exemption a hugely divisive issue to Israeli society.

Many ultra-Orthodox continue to receive government stipends into adulthood, eschewing getting paying jobs to instead continue full-time religious studies. Economists have long warned the system is unsustainable.

"The next government will have to hold a long overdue conversation about the future of the Haredi relationship to the state," commentator Anshel Pfeffer wrote in Israel's left-leaning daily, Haaretz.

"Now, the Haredim will have no choice but to take part in it. It won't be just about the national service of its young men, it will also have to address fundamental questions about education and employment," he said.

Ultra-Orthodox leaders have reacted angrily.

Aryeh Deri, head of the ultra-Orthodox Shas party, called the court's decision "unprecedented bullying of Torah students in the Jewish state."

The ultra-Orthodox say that integrating into the army will threaten their generations-old way of life, and that their devout lifestyle and dedication to upholding the Jewish commandments protect Israel as much as a strong army. Although a small number have opted to serve in the military, many have vowed to fight any attempt to compel Haredim to do so.

"Without the Torah, we have no right to exist," said Yitzchak Goldknopf, leader of the ultra-Orthodox party United Torah Judaism. "We will fight in every way over the right of every Jew to study Torah and we won't compromise on that."

#### WHY DOES IT THREATEN NETANYAHU?

Netanyahu, Israel's longest-serving prime minister, is known as a master political survivor. But his room for maneuver is limited.

Vowing to press forward with a war that has harmed the Israeli economy and asked much of its soldiers and reservists, Netanyahu could lose the support of the more centrist elements of his fragile national unity government if he tries to preserve the exemptions for the ultra-Orthodox.

The two centrists in his fragile War Cabinet, both former generals, have insisted that all sectors of Israeli society contribute equally. One, Benny Gantz, has threatened to quit — a step that would destabilize a key decision-making body at a sensitive time in the war.

But the powerful bloc of ultra-Orthodox parties — longtime partners of Netanyahu — want draft exemptions to continue.

The ultra-Orthodox parties have not said what they will do if they lose their preferential status. But if they decide to leave the government, the coalition would almost certainly collapse and the country could be forced into new elections, with Netanyahu trailing significantly in the polls amid the war.

