

# With its soldiers mired in Gaza, Israel fights a battle at home over drafting the ultra-Orthodox

JERUSALEM (AP) — As Israel battles a prolonged war in Gaza, broad exemptions from mandatory military service for ultra-Orthodox men have reopened a deep divide in the country and rattled the government coalition, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's fellow War Cabinet members staunchly opposed to his proposed new conscription law.

By the end of the month, Israel's government must present legislation aimed at increasing recruitment among the religious community. As the deadline approaches, public discourse has grown increasingly toxic — a departure from demonstrations of unity early in the war.

Netanyahu's government so far has survived the public angst sparked by Hamas' Oct. 7 attack that ignited the war, but the draft issue has put him in a bind. The collapse of the three-member War Cabinet would undermine the country's stability at a sensitive time in the fighting. But a loss of the ultra-Orthodox parties would bring down his broader governing coalition and plunge the country into new elections as he and his Likud party are badly trailing in opinion polls.

"Politically, this is one of the most concrete threats to the government," said Gilad Malach, an expert on the ultra-Orthodox at the Israel Democracy Institute, a Jerusalem think tank.

Most Jewish men are required to serve nearly three years 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 if they are studying full-time in religious seminaries. The exemptions — and the government stipends many seminary students receive through age 26 — have infuriated the wider general public.

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