

Israel's Political Crisis: Polarization, Incitement, and the Shadow of Violence

In April 2025, Israeli Opposition Leader Yair Lapid issued a dire warning during a press conference in Tel Aviv: "There will be political assassination. Jews will kill Jews." Citing "unequivocal intelligence information," Lapid pointed to escalating incitement against Shin Bet chief Ronen Bar and Attorney General Gali Baharav-Miara, blaming Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government for fueling a dangerous political climate. This warning, reported by *The Jerusalem Post* and *The Times of Israel*, reflects a broader crisis in Israel's political landscape, characterized by deep polarization, institutional distrust, and the specter of violence. As of June 27, 2025, while no direct updates confirm an imminent assassination plot, the underlying tensions—particularly between the government and the Shin Bet—persist, shaped by decades of political evolution, recent crises, and ongoing conflicts. This article provides an overview of the factors driving Israel's current condition, with a focus on the Shin Bet's role and its fraught relationship with the government.

The Warning: A Looming Threat of Political Violence

Lapid's April 20, 2025, press conference sounded an alarm about a potential "disaster" reminiscent of the 1995 assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, which followed intense political incitement over the Oslo Accords. He cited inflammatory rhetoric from coalition figures, including Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, who called Ronen Bar, head of the Shin Bet (Israel's domestic intelligence and security agency), a "dangerous man" acting "criminally to carry out a coup," and Yair Netanyahu, the Prime Minister's son, who accused Bar of orchestrating a "coup through an armed organization" (*The Jerusalem Post*). The Likud party further claimed Bar and Baharav-Miara had turned the Shin Bet into a "private militia of the deep state" (*The Times of Israel*). These accusations, amplified by threatening social media posts, have necessitated heavy security for both officials, not due to external threats like terrorism but domestic incitement.

Lapid's claim of "unequivocal intelligence information" about a potential assassination lacked specific details, making it difficult to verify. However, the historical precedent of Rabin's murder by a Jewish extremist and the current climate of hostility lend weight to his concerns. He argued that the government's rhetoric, particularly from Netanyahu and his allies, is primarily responsible, dismissing comparisons to threats against the Prime Minister as a "fake symmetry." Education Minister Yoav Kisch countered, accusing Lapid of inciting against Netanyahu, citing an attack on the Prime Minister's residence (*The Jerusalem Post*). This exchange underscores a vicious cycle of blame in a deeply divided nation.

The Shin Bet: Role and Rift with the Government

The Shin Bet, officially the Israel Security Agency (Shabak), is Israel's domestic intelligence service, tasked with counterterrorism, counterintelligence, VIP protection, and monitoring internal threats, including domestic extremism. Established in 1948 and operating under the Prime Minister's Office, it functions similarly to the FBI or MI5, focusing on internal security while the Mossad handles external intelligence. Led by Ronen Bar since 2018, the Shin Bet has become a focal point of tension with Netanyahu's government due to several key conflicts:

- **Investigations into Netanyahu's Associates:** The Shin Bet has been involved in probes targeting Netanyahu's aides, notably in the "Qatargate" and leaked documents scandals. These investigations, conducted alongside Baharav-Miara's office, led to Netanyahu's unlawful attempt to fire Bar in early 2025, a move the High Court ruled invalid in May 2025 due to a conflict of interest (*The Times of Israel*). This action fueled coalition accusations of a "deep state" conspiracy, with Smotrich and Yair Netanyahu labeling Bar's actions as a "coup" (*The Jerusalem Post*).
- **Post-October 7 Fallout:** The Hamas-led attack on October 7, 2023, which killed over 1,200 Israelis, exposed intelligence failures by the Shin Bet and military. Lapid's warning two weeks prior to the attack, referenced in April 2025 (*The Jerusalem Post*), highlighted government negligence. Netanyahu's refusal to accept responsibility shifted blame to agencies like the Shin Bet, intensifying criticism of Bar.
- **Inflammatory Rhetoric:** Coalition rhetoric, amplified on platforms like X (@moshecoheneliya, @faniaoz), has led to online threats against Bar, necessitating heightened security. Lapid noted that these threats stem from domestic incitement, not external terrorism, placing the Shin Bet in the paradoxical position of being both a protector and a target (*The Times of Israel*).
- **Institutional Distrust:** The Shin Bet's operational independence and its role in countering domestic extremism, including from Jewish radical groups, have made it a lightning rod for criticism from far-right coalition members. This tension echoes the 2023 judicial reform controversy, where the government's push to curb judicial power strained relations with state institutions, including those working with the Shin Bet.

The Shin Bet's rift with the government reflects a broader struggle over institutional autonomy, with Netanyahu's coalition viewing its actions as overreach, while Bar's defiance of his dismissal underscores the agency's commitment to its mandate.

Roots of the Crisis: A Polarized Political Evolution

Israel's current state is the culmination of long-standing and recent developments that have eroded trust and fueled animosity. Key factors include:

1. **Decades of Polarization:** Since Rabin's assassination, Israel's political divides—between left and right, secular and religious—have widened. The 2019–2021 election cycle, with five inconclusive elections, highlighted this fragmentation. Netanyahu's long tenure (2009–2021, 2022–present) has been a polarizing force, with his leadership style and legal battles deepening societal rifts.
2. **Netanyahu's Legal Battles:** Netanyahu's corruption trials, beginning in 2019 for bribery, fraud, and breach of trust, have cast a shadow over his leadership. His allies' claims of a "deep state" conspiracy, targeting institutions like the Shin Bet and Attorney General, have fueled distrust. The 2025 scandals involving Netanyahu's aides have intensified this narrative, with the Shin Bet's investigations seen as a direct challenge to his authority (*The Times of Israel*).
3. **Judicial Reform Controversy:** In 2023, Netanyahu's coalition proposed judicial reforms to limit the Supreme Court's power, sparking massive protests and accusations of democratic erosion. These reforms, perceived as protecting Netanyahu from legal accountability, set the

stage for ongoing conflicts with Baharav-Miara, who has been accused of obstructing government policies (*The Jerusalem Post*).

4. **October 7, 2023, Hamas Attack:** The Hamas-led attack was a pivotal moment, exposing security failures and intensifying political blame. Lapid's claim that the government is "responsible for October 7th" (*The Jerusalem Post*) ties the current crisis to the attack's fallout, with the Shin Bet caught in the crossfire of blame-shifting.
5. **Inflammatory Rhetoric:** The normalization of terms like "coup" and "deep state," amplified on social media (@moshecoheneliya), has created a volatile environment. The Shin Bet, tasked with countering domestic threats, faces increased hostility from coalition rhetoric, as Lapid warned.

Recent Context: External Crises and Persistent Tensions

By June 2025, Israel's focus has shifted to an escalating conflict with Iran, involving Israeli strikes on nuclear facilities and Iranian missile attacks (*The Times of Israel*). Lapid's X posts from June (@yairlapid) emphasize resolving the Gaza war and addressing the Iran threat, suggesting a pivot to external security concerns. However, domestic polarization persists, as seen in a June 24 Knesset hearing where Likud's Ofir Katz labeled MK Ayman Odeh a "security threat" (*The Times of Israel*). This incident reflects the ongoing divisiveness Lapid warned about, though no new reports directly address assassination threats or incitement against Bar and Baharav-Miara.

The Iran conflict may have temporarily overshadowed domestic issues, but the government's reliance on the Shin Bet for security makes attacks on Bar contradictory and destabilizing. The absence of updates on Lapid's April warning could indicate either de-escalation or a lack of public disclosure amid external crises.

Implications and Outlook

Israel's political crisis, as highlighted by Lapid's warning and the Shin Bet's tensions with the government, is rooted in a toxic blend of historical divisions, legal battles, security failures, and inflammatory rhetoric. The Shin Bet's investigations into Netanyahu's associates, its role in the October 7 fallout, and its independence have made it a target of coalition ire, exemplified by Smotrich's and Yair Netanyahu's accusations. While no concrete evidence of an imminent assassination plot has emerged by June 27, 2025, the parallels to 1995 and the documented threats against Bar and Baharav-Miara underscore the risks of unchecked rhetoric. Lapid's call for Netanyahu to silence his ministers and son reflects a broader need for leadership to de-escalate tensions. However, the bidirectional nature of incitement, as seen in Kisch's counteraccusations and attacks on Netanyahu, suggests that responsibility extends beyond the government. As Israel navigates external threats, the internal fractures—particularly the Shin Bet's strained relationship with the government—remain a critical challenge, threatening the stability of a nation under strain.

Sources:

- *The Jerusalem Post*, April 20, 2025
- *The Times of Israel*, April–June 2025
- X posts (@yairlapid, @moshecoheneliya, @faniaoz, @MOSSADil)