

# How Fighting With the Palestinians Gave Israel's Netanyahu a Political Lifeline

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## The most imminent threat to his rule has fizzled since the shooting began, but domestic anger toward him remains widespread.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been waging two wars recently—a shooting one in the Gaza Strip and a political battle at home against opponents from across the spectrum, who just last week seemed ready to set aside their differences in order to unseat him. But he now appears to have neutralized the political threat, thanks in part to the escalation with the Palestinians—which has stoked nationalist passions and made it more difficult for the opposition parties to come together.

Naftali Bennett, a right-wing lawmaker and a key figure in the negotiations between the opposition factions, told party members in a closed-door meeting Thursday that the option was “off the table,” according to Israel’s Channel 12. The report, later widely confirmed, said he doubted such a government could deploy the necessary force to quell the clashes between Arab and Jewish citizens that have flared since fighting in Gaza began this week.

The anti-Netanyahu coalition would have spanned the political gamut from left to right—with Bennett serving as prime minister—and included an Islamist party representing Arab Israelis. The motley group was united mainly by the goal of toppling Netanyahu, who has led Israel for 12 straight years and is standing trial on multiple corruption charges.

The report indicated that Bennett, head of the pro-settler Yamina party, was resuming negotiations with Netanyahu’s Likud party. Political analysts said Bennett caved to pressure from his own party and his right-wing base, whose members could not abide cooperation with left-wing and Arab factions while fighting with the Palestinians, whether in Gaza or at home, raged.

At least 120 Palestinians and eight Israelis have been killed in the fighting—mainly in Israeli airstrikes on the Gaza

Strip and Palestinian rocket attacks on Israeli cities. “The events of the past week showed that you can’t simply ignore the Palestinian question or security issues, and Yamina collapsed and rebelled against Bennett,” Tal Shalev, chief political correspondent for *Walla News*, told *Foreign Policy*. “If we were in Switzerland [such a government] may have worked, but the public debate right now is extremely polarized and nationalistic.”

Lawmaker Yair Lapid, who leads the opposition and would have governed alongside Bennett in a power-sharing agreement, criticized his erstwhile partner in a primetime television address Thursday night. “Bennett is wrong...change isn’t done when it’s convenient, it’s done when the path is the right one,” Lapid said. “I have no intention of giving up. I will keep turning every stone to form a government.”

According to parliamentary regulations, Lapid has 19 days left until his mandate to form a government expires. A deal to seat an anti-Netanyahu government was thought to be mere days away, with complex coalition talks moving ahead between the various parties—that is, until the eruption of violence beginning last weekend, first in Jerusalem, then Gaza, and now in many mixed Arab-Jewish cities inside Israel.

The timing of the unrest came just as Netanyahu’s long grip over Israeli politics seemed to be loosening, leading many left-wing commentators to charge that the prime minister had orchestrated the crisis in order to divide the opposition. “Was Netanyahu controlling things from A to Z? No. It was more likely half conspiracy and half contingency,” Amos Harel, the *Haaretz* daily’s veteran military affairs reporter, told *Foreign Policy*.

Critics point in particular to the Israel Police’s provocative handling of protests in Jerusalem and at the Al-Aqsa Mosque at the beginning of Ramadan last month, leading to weeks of unrest and clashes between Palestinian worshippers and security forces. The minister in charge of the police is a known Netanyahu loyalist from the Likud. Tensions in the city were later enflamed by gangs of far-right Jewish extremists affiliated with the Religious Zionist Party, which is allied with Netanyahu.

Such conspiracy thinking is tempered by the fact that Netanyahu could not have anticipated Hamas’s rocket fire on Jerusalem on Monday that sparked the conflagration in Gaza, nor the tensions between Arabs and Jews in the Israeli city of Lod that triggered ethnic violence. “All Netanyahu needed to do was maybe give things a little push, and the dice rolled in his favor,” Harel said.

Opposition lawmakers acknowledged that the prospects of a non-Netanyahu government still being formed were remote. Instead, Israel was likely to hold yet another general election in the coming months, the fifth in two and a half years.

“Despite Bennett’s clear commitment to avoid another needless election at all costs, this is where we are,” a senior opposition source told *Foreign Policy*, asking not to be named discussing the coalition negotiations. “And the results will be exactly the same as the previous four,” the source said, alluding to Israel’s inconclusive prior votes.

Alternatively, Netanyahu could potentially coax individual opposition members to defect. He needs just two in order to secure a parliamentary majority. His own initial bid to form a government fizzled earlier this month, but the security crisis and the prospect of another election could change the arithmetic for some lawmakers.

“Netanyahu will work to try to form a government, but his fallback option will be elections, even perhaps direct elections only for prime minister,” Shalev said, highlighting a convoluted scenario whereby legislation would be passed allowing for a new vote solely to elect a prime minister; the winner would have a mandate to govern separately from parliament, which would be retained in its current makeup.

The opposition source said this scenario, first floated by Netanyahu several weeks ago, was legally questionable; it was also unclear whether Netanyahu even had the votes in parliament to do so. “This is even before we get into the issue of changing our entire system of government in order to save one man,” the source added.

Netanyahu has remained prime minister of caretaker governments throughout the period of Israel's inconclusive elections over the past two years. Some analysts believe the growing anarchy at home and latest fighting with Gaza, whose militant factions have fired thousands of rockets at Tel Aviv and other Israeli cities, could erode Netanyahu's support.

"Bennett defecting back to Netanyahu is extremely significant because he split the opposition. But we shouldn't pretend Netanyahu is in a great political position," Shalev said. "There is a lot of criticism and anger, especially so long as the fighting continues."

A week ago it looked like the Netanyahu era was coming to an end, with Bennett poised to lead Israel. Instead, Netanyahu continues to serve as prime minister, while Bennett's future is uncertain. The opposition source predicted Bennett would pay a political price for his decision.

"He's no longer a serious political player or relevant," the source said. "He's now, at best, a lackey of Netanyahu's, and we all know how that ends up."

*Neri Zilber is a journalist based in Tel Aviv and an adjunct fellow with The Washington Institute. This article was originally published on the Foreign Policy website (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/05/14/israeli-palestinian-fighting-netanyahu-political-lifeline/>).* ❖

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