

# In Israel, a Coalition of the Barely Willing

by [Neri Zilber \(/experts/neri-zilber\)](#)

Nov 20, 2018

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Neri Zilber \(/experts/neri-zilber\)](#)

Neri Zilber, a journalist and analyst on Middle East politics and culture, is an adjunct fellow of The Washington Institute.



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## Netanyahu outmaneuvers rivals, heads off early election.

**F**or Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the past week must have felt like an eternity. A two-day escalation with the Islamist Hamas group in Gaza last Monday set off a chain of events that threatened to topple his government.

But the long-serving premier staved off early elections for now by outmaneuvering coalition partners and raising the specter of a looming military crisis—without actually describing what that crisis might be.

The victory served as a reminder that Netanyahu, despite his legal trouble and his occasionally rebellious coalition partners, remains firmly in control of the Israeli political realm almost 10 years into his premiership with not a single rival on the left or right who can challenge his leadership.

The threat to Netanyahu's rule came this time from politicians to his right, who complained that a quick cease-fire with Hamas amounted to a surrender to terrorists. Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman resigned and his Yisrael Beiteinu party departed the coalition, leaving Netanyahu's government with a wafer-thin, 61-seat majority in the 120-seat Knesset. Education Minister Naftali Bennett, leader of the pro-settler Jewish Home party, added to his troubles by demanding the defense portfolio and a hawkish shift in policy—or else his faction, too, would leave the government.

Both Lieberman and Bennett were hoping to capitalize on public anger at the more than 460 rockets fired at Israeli territory from Gaza last week, killing one and wounding at least 20 others. [According to a poll \(https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/poll-74-percent-of-israelis-dissatisfied-with-netanyahu-s-performance-in-gaza-1.6655496\)](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/poll-74-percent-of-israelis-dissatisfied-with-netanyahu-s-performance-in-gaza-1.6655496) released last Wednesday, 74 percent of the public is unhappy with the government's handling of the crisis. Referring to Bennett's ultimatum, [Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked declared \(http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/254879\)](http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/254879) that “the public is fed up with voting right and

getting left.”

But Netanyahu, who has another year to serve before a scheduled election, struck back, warning the wayward ministers that the public would hold them responsible for the downfall of a right-wing government.

In a histrionic prime-time address from Israeli military headquarters in Tel Aviv late Sunday, Netanyahu described early elections as “unnecessary” and “irresponsible,” drawing direct parallels to previous coalition crises in 1992 and 1999, when a government led by his Likud party was brought down from within. After both, Netanyahu warned, the left came to power and brought on the “disasters” of the Oslo Accords and the Second Intifada. “We must not repeat those mistakes,” he implored his political base.

More ominously, Netanyahu—now acting defense minister—suggested a security crisis was afoot, the exact details of which he couldn’t share with the public. “You only see a partial picture of a wide-scale campaign that we are in the middle of,” he lectured. “We find ourselves in one of the most complex security periods. In such a moment you don’t topple a government... and you don’t desert.”

Even some hard-liners saw the logic, despite their own misgivings with Netanyahu. “It’s not correct to fell a government when we don’t know what the alternative is,” said Benny Katzover, a veteran West Bank settler leader, interviewed on Israeli radio.

By Monday morning, Bennett withdrew his threat. Flanked by Shaken, his ashen-faced party deputy, at a press conference, he listed all of his disagreements with Israeli defense policy under Netanyahu over the past decade but then abruptly stated that Netanyahu had promised a radical change in his speech the night prior. The prime minister, in truth, had done no such thing—but Bennett pressed on. “We will stand by the prime minister, so that Israel starts winning again,” he said. “I prefer that the prime minister defeats me in a political battle than [ Hamas leader Ismail] Haniyeh defeating the State of Israel.”

Bennett and Shaked claim that the ball is now in the prime minister’s court—they will be watching for a shift in strategy. Lieberman immediately [took to Twitter](https://twitter.com/AvigdorLieberman/status/1064441091372523520) (<https://twitter.com/AvigdorLieberman/status/1064441091372523520>) to blast his erstwhile colleagues: “Now we all understand why we lost the deterrence” vis-à-vis Hamas.

Netanyahu countered with a message of his own. “We’ll meet in November 2019,” his spokesman tweeted out, referencing the official date for the next parliamentary election.

Netanyahu may very well still feel pressure from his right flank next time there is an escalation in Gaza or on other fronts. To his credit—and contrary to his public image as a security hard-liner—Netanyahu avoided a major conflagration this past week while retaining his seat as prime minister.

His opponents did not fare as well. Lieberman has now been exiled to the opposition; his wish for early elections as quickly as possible hasn’t come to pass. Bennett may have done himself irreparable political damage, his public image as an inexperienced hothead buttressed by his humiliating walk-back. Even Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon, who predicted the coalition would not hold for more than a few weeks, had to withdraw his threat to pull his center-right Kulanu party from the coalition.

“You win some, you lose some,” Bennett said Monday, shrugging off his failed maneuver. For Netanyahu, it’s been mostly wins.

*Neri Zilber is an adjunct fellow with The Washington Institute and coauthor of the paper [State with No Army, Army with No State: Evolution of the Palestinian Authority Security Forces, 1994-2018](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/state-with-no-army-army-with-no-state).*

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