

Middle East

Amid political turmoil, Israeli government holds together. For now.

By [Ruth Eglash](#)

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JERUSALEM — In another twist to a roller-coaster five days for Israeli politics, a key ally of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu decided not to quit on Monday as had been expected, allowing the right-wing government to limp along and possibly avoid new elections.

Even in the best of times, Israeli politics is polarized and fractious, but the events of the past few days have been particularly fraught and stormy.

Sparked by an intense bout of fighting with militants in Gaza last week and capped by a nail-biting ultimatum from Education Minister Naftali Bennett, it was still unclear whether the government would survive even the next few days, let alone reach its full term a year from now.

Although Bennett retracted his demand to become defense minister, opposition parties were still planning to file a motion of no-confidence in the government on Wednesday. It was anyone's guess whether those once loyal to Netanyahu's now-shrinking coalition would be able or even willing to fend off the move, which could ultimately dissolve Israel's parliament, the Knesset, and lead the country to an early national election.

If he does make it through the next few weeks or even months, Netanyahu faces a serious challenge with a razor-thin majority of 61 seats out of a total of 120. His government will have a tough time passing controversial legislation and could even face political blackmail over more hard-line issues.

It was the surprise resignation last week of Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman that set in motion the biggest coalition crisis Netanyahu has faced to date.

The hawkish Liberman cited his ongoing disagreements with the prime minister over how best to tackle the never-ending cycle of violence with Hamas, the Islamist group that rules Gaza. He said he had pushed for wider military action to stem rocket fire, violent protests, and incendiary kites and balloons that have caused havoc and destruction to communities in southern Israel for most of the past year.

But Netanyahu, as he indicated last week, opted for a more nuanced approach to maintain the security situation, while at the same time preventing the complete collapse of the humanitarian situation for the 2 million residents of Gaza, "held hostage" by Hamas.

Following last week's flare-up, which was prompted by a botched Israeli operation into Gaza and resulted in militants firing more than 460 rockets and mortar shells into Israel and Israeli jets

striking some 160 targets in the Palestinian enclave, Netanyahu was accused of capitulating to Hamas by accepting a cease-fire less than 48 hours after the fighting had begun.

Residents of southern Israel, a large portion of whom form Netanyahu's base, have held daily protests over the failure to find a viable military or diplomatic solution to the tensions with Gaza.

In his much-anticipated news conference Monday, ultranationalist minister Bennett focused on security. There had been speculation that Bennett, head of the Jewish Home party, along with his deputy, Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked, would follow Liberman's lead and resign from the government.

For days, Bennett asked to be given the now-vacant defense portfolio, insisting he had the answers to Israel's Gaza conundrum. If not appointed defense minister, he said boldly, his faction of eight Knesset members would quit the government, causing it to collapse.

But by Monday, he had dropped his political demands, saying he would stay on as education minister to "help you in the great mission of making Israel win again."

"I know I may pay a political price, it is not the end of the world, you win some, you lose some," he said. Explaining his backtracking, Bennett referred to calls among his own supporters not to bring down the current government, considered the most right-wing in Israel to date.

His reversal, however, may also have been due to Netanyahu's masterful orchestration of the political turmoil to his own benefit.

On Sunday night, after a weekend of speculation that an election was on the way, Netanyahu called an impromptu news conference. Already referred to as genius by political commentators and even drawing comparisons to Netanyahu's own hero, former British prime minister Winston Churchill, the Israeli leader not only invoked his past and present sacrifices for the country but also alluded to the dangerous security threats Israel faces.

Announcing that he would keep the defense portfolio for himself, Netanyahu dared Bennett and other coalition partners to bring down his government in the face of security threats and citing previous right-wing Israeli governments that were succeeded by more left-leaning political coalitions.

On Monday morning, despite the political storm, a statement from his office said that Netanyahu had already taken on the Defense Ministry, meeting with the army's current chief of staff, Gadi Eizenkot, and incoming army head, Aviv Kochavi.

"As I said last night, we are in a battle that has not yet ended. In such a sensitive period of security, it is irresponsible to topple the government," he said.

Yehuda Ben Meir, a senior associate at the Institute for National Security Studies, said it was "clear Netanyahu wants to push off elections as much as he can."

With important dates coming up, such as the American Israel Public Affairs Committee conference at the end of March, Israel's national days in early May and even the forthcoming Eurovision Song Contest in Tel Aviv, there will be many opportunities for Netanyahu to regain some of his lost support.

"Netanyahu took a huge risk and a hit to his popularity agreeing to the cease-fire," said Emmanuel Navon, senior fellow at the Jerusalem-based Kohelet Policy Forum and a member of the Likud Central Committee.

"Netanyahu has always presented himself as Mr. Security. It would be suicidal to go to the polls now after an extremely unpopular decision and a humiliating cease-fire with Hamas," he said. "He just wants to push off elections as much as he can."



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