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Situation Assessment | 26 November 2018

Israeli Cabinet Crisis

Winners and Losers

Policy Analysis Unit

Israeli Cabinet Crisis: Winners and Losers

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Policy Analysis Unit

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In November 2018, Israel faced a political crisis that almost ousted the fourth government of Benjamin Netanyahu, yet he managed to avert early general elections for the Knesset, which are scheduled for November 2019. On 14 November, the Yisrael Beiteinu party leader Avigdor Lieberman resigned from his ministerial position and withdrew his party from the coalition government, calling for the dissolution of the Knesset and early elections to be held as soon as possible. After Lieberman withdrew his five representatives, the Netanyahu government was left with five parties, numbering 61 of the 120 seats in the Knesset, a majority of just one member. The government now consists of Netanyahu's Likud party with 30 representatives, Moshe Kahlon's Kulanu party with 10 representatives, Naftali Bennet's Jewish Home Party with 8 representatives, Aryeh Deri's Shas party with 7 seats, and United Torah Judaism, a coalition led by Yaakov Litzman and Moshe Gafni, with 6 seats. Once Lieberman announced his resignation, Naftali Bennett issued a public warning to Netanyahu that if he did not acquire the position of defense minister, he too would withdraw from the government coalition, leading to a cabinet collapse and early elections.

Lieberman's Resignation

In a press conference held by Lieberman, he attributed his resignation to his differences with Netanyahu and the security cabinet headed by the Prime Minister about Israeli policy towards Hamas and the Gaza Strip. Lieberman denounced the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip mediated by Egypt, after two days of mutual bombardment, claiming the move "surrendered to terror". Lieberman referred to his recent disputes with Netanyahu and the security cabinet, including the issue of permitting the entry of fuel and financial support to the Hamas authority in the Gaza Strip, and the government's postponement of the demolition of the village of Khan Al-Ahmar in Jerusalem. Israel had previously decided to evict the residents of the village in order to expand the Ma'aleh Adumim settlement⁽¹⁾.

Lieberman seems to have decided to resign in the past weeks in response to Netanyahu and the security cabinet's obstruction of his policies and their revocation of his unilateral decisions on Gaza, unwilling to submit to the decisions of the cabinet. When the marches of return from the Gaza Strip set off in March 2018, Lieberman aligned with the position adopted by Netanyahu, the military, and the security cabinet towards the Gaza Strip. This gave priority to countering Iranian military influence in Syria and avoiding a confrontation on both the northern and southern fronts at the same time. But this accordance did not last long. The dispute broke out in August 2018, when Netanyahu, with the support of the military, began to seek a long-term ceasefire agreement between Israel and the Hamas authority in Gaza under Egyptian mediation.⁽²⁾

1 Haim Levinson and others, "Lieberman announces his resignation: 'The Ceasefire Surrenders to Terror,'" Haaretz, 14/11/2018, last accessed 24/11/2018 at: <https://bit.ly/2DDNSkD>

2 Amos Harel, "As if it Never Was: Lieberman's Term Did Not Leave the Impression He Had Hoped For", Haaretz, 14/11/2018, last accessed 24/11/2018 at: <https://bit.ly/2Pqum16>



In early August 2018, the security cabinet discussed the policy that Israel should adopt towards Gaza, discussing two proposals. The first suggested working towards a settlement that would include the return of the Palestinian Authority to the Gaza Strip and its control over the border crossings. The second was to work towards a compromise based on a mutual understanding with the Hamas authority in Gaza. The Cabinet decided to adopt Netanyahu's position calling for a settlement with Hamas under Egyptian mediation.⁽³⁾

Lieberman, who opposed both proposals, made an attempt to obstruct the settlement with the Hamas Authorities. Over the past few months he imposed short-term sanctions on the Gaza Strip through unilateral decisions without referring to the security cabinet or the prime minister. These sanctions included reducing the Gaza Strip fishing zone, the closure of the Kerem Shalom and Beit Hanoun (Erez) crossings and halting fuel shipments. Lieberman backed down from these decisions under pressure from Netanyahu and the military establishment. Recently, the cabinet decided that without its prior approval, Lieberman could not make decisions on these matters alone. Lieberman also noted that since he assumed the post of defense minister, neither his, nor his party's popularity had increased; in fact, it has fallen slightly in public opinion polls. It is well known that the position of defense minister usually increases the popularity of whoever holds it. He consequently decided to resign for electoral considerations, as the Knesset elections expected in the spring of 2019 approach.

Netanyahu's Attempts to Contain the Crisis

Immediately after Lieberman's resignation, and the onset of the cabinet crisis, Education Minister Naftali Bennet warned that he would also withdraw from the government if he was not appointed the new minister of defense. Netanyahu held intensive talks with the leaders of the coalition parties, calling on them to stay and maintain the government and not hold early elections. Contrary to the crises his government experienced in the last year, during which Netanyahu threatened his coalition partners that he would hold early elections, he appeared determined to keep his government this time.

Netanyahu stressed in his meetings with the party heads and in his statements to the media that it is in the interest of Israeli security to maintain the government and avoid early elections. He claimed that Israel is still fighting a battle that is not yet over, during which the country should not be playing politics and overthrowing the government. He also insisted that national security is far more important than party politics and personal interests. The prime minister announced that he would retain the position of Minister of Defense position for himself for security reasons, and stressed that he did not want to hold unnecessary elections at a stage that requires a show of responsibility.⁽⁴⁾

3 Avi Dabush, "The Cabinet Discusses the Settlement: Lieberman Obstructs it 14 Times", Haaretz, 19/11/2018, last accessed 24/11/2018 at: <https://bit.ly/2OZklgV>.

4 Noa Landau and Jonathan Lis, "Netanyahu: We Are at One of the Most Complex Security Junctures, During Which We Will Not Hold Elections", Haaretz, 18/11/2018, last accessed 25/11/2018 at: <https://bit.ly/2DIE3Rx>

Meeting the leaders of the ruling coalition parties as well as those who hold sway within right-wing and extreme right-wing ranks, particularly the most important settler rabbis who influence Bennett, Netanyahu emphasized that ousting the government at this stage could lead to the defeat of the right-wing camp. This happened in 1992 when the extreme right-wing members withdrew from government, which greatly cost the Israeli right-wing in the 1992 elections.

This campaign worked on Bennet, whose threat did not obtain a consensus among his party's Knesset members. On 19 November he announced that he had withdrawn his demands from the prime minister and that he would remain in the government coalition. At the same time, Bennett criticized Netanyahu for not, in his mind, adopting a tough policy toward the Palestinians. He also disparaged Netanyahu's failure to achieve a decisive victory over the Hamas Authority in Gaza and blamed him for the erosion of Israeli deterrence while not evicting the Palestinian residents of Khan al-Ahmar, and not demolishing homes of Palestinians who carry out military operations Against Israel.⁵

Netanyahu's Motivations

Unlike previous government crises, Netanyahu did his best to preserve his government and postpone the early elections of the Knesset as long as possible. He seems to believe that postponing elections at this stage serves his interests on a range of issues. Chief among them are the criminal cases against him, and the timing of the Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit's decision to indict him in three corruption cases. Mandelblit will make his decision no later than February 2019 and should Netanyahu, as expected, be indicted he is not obliged to resign under Israeli law. Netanyahu wants to be a prime minister, not a head of a transitional government embroiled in an election campaign.

In addition, Netanyahu wants to announce the date of "the deal of the century" with US president Donald Trump before the dissolution of the Knesset. It is expected that the timing of the announcement of an agreement between Trump and Netanyahu will be arranged in order to serve the agenda of the latter. The announcement of the deal is expected to be accompanied by intense American pressure to accelerate the normalization of Arab relations with Israel, increasing Netanyahu's electoral strength. Netanyahu and Trump also hope that the deal will help Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman emerge from his own crisis stemming from the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. The US administration and Israel will try to portray the Saudi crown prince as a "moderate supporter of Middle East peace" rather than the bloody dictator that he has represented ever since Khashoggi was killed.

Netanyahu is also trying to enact many of the laws that serve his interests before the current Knesset is dissolved, such as the law obliging the head of state to appoint the leader of the party which boasts the highest number of Knesset members. In the event of an indictment against Netanyahu,

⁵ Jonathan Lis, "Bennet and Shaked: We Will Not Resign: We Withdraw Our Demands and Will Help Netanyahu As Minister of Defense", Haaretz 19/11/2018, last accessed 25/11/2018 at: <https://bit.ly/2Tlbfy3>



he fears that his rival, the head of state Reuven Rivlin, will not appoint him to form a government after the upcoming Knesset elections, but rather appoint a different Likud party leader to form a government. Similarly, Netanyahu wants to enact a law that would reduce the 3.25% threshold for representation in the Knesset to 2 or 2.5% of the vote, believing that this serves the right-wing camp in Israel, especially the extreme right. He sees that it would disband religious parties such as Shas, which might dare to form separate lists for the elections. Netanyahu hopes that this will also lead to the dismantling of the joint list of Arab parties, and that these elections will run on more than one list, which could lead to a reduction in the number of their seats.

Conclusion

Netanyahu has managed to maintain his government, despite the withdrawal of a major party, and without being weakened by the ensuing crisis. Perhaps the events even strengthened his position; he took charge of the Ministry of Defense alongside his position as prime minister, the first time he took the post. Netanyahu is expected to surrender the post of foreign minister he has held in recent years to a leader within the Likud party. He also seems likely to maintain his government in the coming months, and an election date will be set it will suit him. In this case, the “national camp” led by Netanyahu will have a clear majority, according to public opinion polls; one that can form a government of the so-called national camp (made up of right-wing and religious currents). Moreover, there does not appear to be a serious threat to Netanyahu’s leadership within Likud itself.