

Recent tensions between the Gaza Strip and Israel seemed to have pushed Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in some kind of domestic political turmoil, as his right-wing Chief of Defence, Avigdor Lieberman, left office and called for early elections on the 14th of November.

The buildup to this story started on the 11th of November, when a covert unit of the Israeli Defence Unit was found in the Palestinian city of Khan Yunis, south of the Gaza strip. Claimed to be on an intelligence gathering mission by Israeli officials, the unit's mission turned sour as it clashed with militant Hamas fighters who insist the soldiers were there to kill their commander. A 24 hour-long intense fight ensued, with dozens of Palestinians killed as a result of nearly 150 Israeli airstrikes, and several Israeli civilians injured by the many rockets sent by Hamas, one of whom is reported to have died.

The Prime Minister stepped in and accepted a ceasefire with Hamas, which has not been particularly well-received by Israelis on the southern border, who believe that their government has lost its deterrence power and accepts temporary ceasefires to avoid doing what it takes to wipe out the threat of rockets. Lieberman therefore left office to be part of the popular dissent against the government, thus regaining the hawkish status that he gradually had lost during his time as Chief of Defence.

Lieberman's resignation could well have forced Netanyahu's hand in calling for early elections, considering that the Prime Minister now rules from a threadbare majority of 61 over 120 in the Knesset. Indeed, other political allies of the Prime Minister, such as Jewish Home's Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked, who respectively hold the office of Education Minister and Justice Minister, threatened to leave the coalition if the Defence Ministry was not handed to them.

However, Jewish Home did not deliver on its promise to break the coalition. On the 18th of November, Netanyahu issued a statement resembling an election speech. Recounting his experiences during the 5 years he spent serving in the military, the Prime Minister carefully sought to repair his image as a tough politician with strong security credentials, as a way to cast aside the negative publicity that his ceasefire with the Hamas caused. Arguing that early elections would be "irresponsible" in light of the "complex security period" in which Israel finds itself, Netanyahu cunningly forced Jewish Home's hand in staying in the coalition and not causing early elections.

Indeed, Bennett later talked to the press and admitted he was giving Netanyahu a second chance by

staying in his government and foregoing the alluring title of Defence Minister. On paper, the legislative elections are to be voted in November 2019, but it is highly likely that Netanyahu will call early elections as soon as Spring 2019 and as soon as his security credentials are fully repaired. Until then however, the leader of the Likud will have to rely on every single parliamentarian from his coalition to pass new laws, and will have to juggle between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Health and Defence in addition to his Prime Ministership.

This latest development in Israeli politics highlights the dominant position that Netanyahu has been able to carve for himself in recent years. None of his right-wing coalition partners see themselves as strong enough to antagonise him and run against him, especially considering that Netanyahu's popularity remains strong among Israelis. In addition to Israel's strong economic performance, the Prime Minister has also been able to compete ideologically with parties like Jewish Home, by offering a similar platform to his voters.

Sources:

The Independent, Bel Tree, 14 November 2018, "Israel defence minister Avigdor Lieberman resigns 'over Gaza ceasefire agreed with Hamas'."

Haaretz, Anshel Pfeffer, 19 November 2019, "Netanyahu's Non-election Election Speech."