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Israel: Netanyahu's coalition government collapses, forcing early elections

The resignation of Defence Minister and Israel Beiteinu (Israel is Our Home) party leader Avigdor Lieberman Wednesday has forced Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud-led coalition—left with a one-seat majority—to bring forward national elections to early next year.

Lieberman resigned in protest over a ceasefire with Hamas in Gaza. The next day, Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon of the Kulani Party and Interior Minister Arye Deri of the Shas Party called for an early election, while Naftali Bennett of the Jewish Home Party demanded the defence portfolio for himself as the condition for continuing his support for the coalition—a demand Netanyahu rejected.

The collapse of the coalition government amid furious denunciations of the most right-wing Prime Minister in Israel's 70-year history, for being too "soft" on Gaza comes in the wake of his agreement to a ceasefire with Hamas, the bourgeois Islamist group that controls the impoverished Israeli-occupied Palestinian territory.

The ceasefire followed a series of armed clashes after an Israeli commando unit was exposed during a covert operation inside Gaza—one of more than 70 reported ground incursions this year. The clashes killed at least 15 Palestinians, an Israeli lieutenant colonel and a Palestinian inside Israel and looked set to spiral into an all-out war.

With political commentators already talking of an early general election ahead of that scheduled for November 2019, and Israel's fascistic parties vying with each other over

who has a tougher policy against the Palestinians, Lieberman sought to make political capital out of Netanyahu's apparent retreat.

Lieberman has long advocated another war on Gaza to enforce Israel's blockade. He unilaterally halted Israel's fuel deliveries to Gaza, bringing essential services such as health and sanitation to the point of collapse, until Israel's security cabinet reined him in. He justified the slaughter of hundreds of defenceless Palestinians in recent months saying there were "no innocent people in the Gaza Strip" and voiced support for an Israeli soldier who was filmed shooting a protester.

He also opposed Netanyahu's deal with Qatar last month, whereby the oil-rich state pledged \$150 million in aid for Gaza, including shipments of fuel as well as \$15 million as back pay for thousands of unpaid civil servants. When the latest round of fighting erupted, he demanded a "harsh, decisive" move against Hamas.

Netanyahu, with his typical cynicism, had defended the agreement with Qatar and the ceasefire as a means of avoiding an "unnecessary war." This has absolutely nothing to do with any anti-war sentiments. Israel's Defence Forces Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot warned him that a "successful" war in Gaza to "eliminate" Hamas would entail a large loss of life and either the military occupation of Gaza or its handover to the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority.

Netanyahu is the political heir to the fascist Vladimir Jabotinsky, whose Revisionist Party—allied to Europe's far right parties in the 1930s—was the forerunner of his Likud outfit. He has his sights firmly set on establishing a Greater Israel, expanding Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem, inciting divisions within the Palestinian national movement to prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state and building an alliance with the reactionary Sunni Gulf petro-monarchies against Iran and its regional allies.

Unwilling to court further international opprobrium for a war that had no prospect of successful resolution and would make things politically difficult for his Arab allies, he reluctantly accepted an Egyptian-brokered ceasefire. He hopes that this stance in calling off the war with Hamas will enable him to posture as "the only responsible adult in the room" during elections next year, under conditions where he and his associates are under investigation in numerous major corruption cases, and his wife Sarah is currently on trial for the misuse of public funds.

At the same time, Netanyahu is busy inciting anti-Arab and anti-Muslim racism both at home and abroad to mobilise his own right-wing political base. To this end, he approved

the introduction of the apartheid-style nation-state law that gives priority status to Israel's Jewish citizens at the expense of its Palestinian citizens.

He is also supporting a bill going through the Knesset that makes it easier to impose the death penalty for Palestinians accused of "terrorism." The death penalty presently requires a unanimous decision by three judges, as well as a request for the death penalty by the military prosecutor. The day Netanyahu's government collapsed, Israeli forces wounded at least 40 Palestinians, including three in dangerous condition, protesting near the fence with Israel as part of the Great March of Return.

Lieberman has pushed Netanyahu into an election campaign that will be fought over the Gaza debacle and the prime minister's "weakness." His office denied media reports that he had supported an end to Israeli strikes on Gaza last weekend. He called Netanyahu "gutless" and denounced the truce and the Qatar aid package as a "capitulation to terror" whose price was "severe long-term damage to national security."

Not to be outdone, Lieberman's rival, Jewish Home leader Bennett, who has for years sought to present Netanyahu as an irresolute prime minister that lacks the courage to "do the right thing" and obliterate Hamas, also denied he supported any kind of cease-fire.

Tourism Minister and Likud legislator Yariv Levin called Lieberman's resignation a "gift to Hamas". Hamas political leader Sami Abu Zahri called it a "recognition of [Israel's] defeat" in last weekend's military confrontation—particularly as Lieberman had once demanded Hamas' leader Ismail Haniya hand over two detained Israeli civilians and the bodies of soldiers killed in a 2014 war within 48 hours, "or you're dead."

The so-called centrist and leftist Zionist parties were no less vociferous in their noxious militarist attacks on Netanyahu. Yesh Atid's Yair Lapid, Labour's Avi Gabbay and others all rushed to compete in criticising Netanyahu's "gutlessness" in confronting Hamas. Former Labour leader Ehud Barak said, "Netanyahu is bankrupt and has caved in to Hamas under fire." As prime minister, Barak sabotaged the Camp David talks with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in July 2000, authorised the ruthless suppression of the Palestinians in the second intifada that started two months later, and then as defense minister presided over the 2008-2009 "Operation Cast Lead," which killed at least 1,400 Palestinians in Gaza.

Knesset opposition leader Tzipi Livni of the Zionist Union, which includes Labour, called on the entire government to resign, saying, "The government, which has failed in defense, needs to go. There is no peace, no security." She called for an "emergency coalition"

under the Zionist Union to put forward “a new defense strategy combining military strength and a diplomatic initiative.”

These fetid conditions mark a fresh stage in the rightward shift of the entire Zionist political establishment that is hell bent on militarism abroad that threatens to ignite a wider war with potentially catastrophic implications for the entire region, including Israel itself. Such militarism can only be financed by the further impoverishment of Israeli workers and youth who live in one of the most unequal societies on the planet.

As elsewhere, the working class can find no political vehicle to express its concerns about the lack of affordable housing, poverty, unemployment and badly maintained and inadequate infrastructure, much less the non-stop war against the Palestinians. The Israeli working class can only resolve these economic, social and political problems by uniting with its class brothers and sisters across the region in the struggle for a Socialist Federation of the Middle East as part of the struggle to put an end to capitalism all over the world.