

MIDDLE EAST

## Netanyahu to Meet With Trump While Facing Probes at Home

The investigations have damaged the Israeli leader's standing, as he prepares to meet the new U.S. president



An Israeli police car outside Mr. Netanyahu's residence in January. The prime minister is being investigated in two criminal cases. PHOTO: GALI TIBBON/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

By RORY JONES

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TEL AVIV—Corruption probes have left Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu weakened and vulnerable at home on the eve of his first summit with President Donald Trump .

The scandals have dented Mr. Netanyahu's standing, according to polls, and emboldened opposition politicians to seek his ouster.

Police have questioned Mr. Netanyahu several times in recent weeks about whether he received unlawful gifts while in office and in a second case about whether he attempted to negotiate favorable coverage with a top Israeli newspaper. An opposition lawmaker is petitioning Israel's highest court to order authorities to open a third criminal investigation into a potential conflict of interest for Mr. Netanyahu in the government purchase of submarines.

Mr. Netanyahu has repeatedly denied any wrongdoing, labeling the allegations a campaign by Israeli media to force him from power.

"If Netanyahu is indicted, then he might be forced to step down and the process to replace him would begin," said Emmanuel Navon, a former parliamentary candidate for Mr. Netanyahu's Likud Party and a political analyst. "In another country he would already have been forced to resign."

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The investigations are weakening Mr. Netanyahu's grip on power just as he is trying to negotiate Israel's relations with a new administration in Washington. He and Mr. Trump are due to meet at the White House on Wednesday.

Mr. Netanyahu is hoping the U.S. will ease pressure on Israel to reach a deal that would create a Palestinian state and to curb Jewish settlement on land in the West Bank. Hard-line lawmakers in his coalition government are putting intense pressure on Mr. Netanyahu to abandon the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or risk losing their political backing.

Likud lawmakers have made public statements of support for the leader. But party members are also considering options in case of an indictment, according to lawmakers

in other parties.

“The investigations are not something that we are happy about. But I believe the prime minister when he says that nothing will come out of them,” said Yoav Kisch, a Likud lawmaker.

Israelis aren’t so sure. More than half of the public doesn’t believe the prime minister’s statements that he hasn’t broken any laws, according to a poll conducted by Channel 2, a major television station. That compares with 28% who think he is being honest. The majority of Israelis believe Mr. Netanyahu should step down if he is indicted, according to another poll last week by the Israel Democracy Institute, a Jerusalem-based think tank.

Opposition politicians, frustrated with a long stalemate in peace negotiations with Palestinians, sense an opportunity to force Mr. Netanyahu to resign after eight years in power. Criminal charges in any of the police cases wouldn’t automatically force the premier to step down by law. But many lawmakers predict the country’s second longest serving leader would have to resign, at least temporarily, until he could clear his name.

Erel Margalit, a member of the opposition Labor Party, and political activists last month issued a petition signed by 19,000 Israelis asking the high court to open a criminal investigation into the Israeli government’s purchase of submarines from German firm Thyssenkrupp AG. Mr. Netanyahu lobbied for the deal against recommendations by some defense officials, according to Israeli media. His personal lawyer, David Shimron, acted as the legal representative for Thyssenkrupp’s local agent.

A high court hearing on the petition is scheduled for early March. Mr. Netanyahu filed a response to the petition last week through another lawyer, Yossi Cohen. It argued that it was an “organized plan whose goal is to harm the prime minister and topple him.”

The most likely beneficiary of an indictment of the prime minister would be the leader of the opposition Yesh Atid party, Yair Lapid. The former finance minister’s party would likely win the most seats in the Israeli parliament, or Knesset, should elections be held at the moment, according to multiple recent polls.

“I want to win this in the poll booth, not in the police station,” Mr. Lapid said in an interview.

Police first questioned Mr. Netanyahu in early January about whether he received unlawful gifts in return for favors. They have also said they are investigating whether Mr. Netanyahu negotiated with the publisher of Yedioth Ahronoth, Arnon Mozes, to gain more favorable coverage in return for limiting the influence of a rival newspaper, Israel Hayom, which is owned by U.S. billionaire Sheldon Adelson.

Israel Hayom didn’t respond to request for comment. Yedioth’s editors and journalists have denied any involvement in a deal between the publisher and Mr. Netanyahu.

“Nobody could tell anybody in the newspaper what to write and not to write,” said Ben Dror Yemini, a columnist at Yedioth.

Mr. Mozes couldn’t be reached for comment.

Allegations of misconduct aren’t new to Mr. Netanyahu, who for years has been accused of using his position to fund his lifestyle. Mr. Netanyahu first served as prime minister from 1996 to 1999 and is in his fourth term after again winning power in 2009.

But the latest accusations against him are the most serious in his more than two decades in the political limelight.

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