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## WORLD

# Netanyahu Bets on Security, Foreign Policy to Win Snap Israeli Election, but Victory No Sure Thing

Economy, tense Gaza situation and possible corruption indictment all cast shadows over prime minister's future



Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, has moved up the date of the next election. Will it pay off politically for him?  
PHOTO: NIR ALON/ZUMA PRESS

By *Dov Lieber*

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TEL AVIV—Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu could become the longest-serving premier in Israel's history—if his gamble to call snap elections pays off.

Mr. Netanyahu has a comfortable lead in the polls on the strength of his success with security issues and foreign policy, including forging a strong tie with President Trump after eight years of sometimes fraught relations with the Obama White House. At the same time, Mr. Netanyahu's candidacy could be undercut by economic difficulties in Israel, his handling of the tense situation in Gaza and his own legal trouble stemming from corruption probes.

Mr. Netanyahu, 69 years old, has been prime minister since 2009, after having earlier served in the role from 1996 to 1999. He announced the decision to move up the election to April from November on Monday. Since the last election, in 2015, he has focused on improving international relations, especially in Africa and the Arab Gulf region, often by wielding Israel's expertise in security and technology as a diplomatic tool. The tech industry has fueled Israel's economic growth, and unemployment has steadily declined.

Meanwhile, Mr. Netanyahu has worked to address international concerns over Israel's frequent use of force to defend its borders with Hamas-ruled Gaza and its extensive operations against Iranian attempts to entrench militarily near its border in Syria.

"We have turned Israel into a rising world power," said Mr. Netanyahu in a speech to his Likud party after the election announcement. "Of course the alliance with the U.S. has never been stronger," he added, highlighting Mr. Trump's decision last year to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

Mr. Netanyahu's "main claim is that I am the most experienced diplomat and security leader," said Yohanan Plesner, the president of the Jerusalem-based Israel Democracy Institute, an independent think tank. "He likes to say our security situation here is relatively good. We're strong. The economy is strong. This is no time for any new experimentation."

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Monday's decision to move up the election came after it became clear Mr. Netanyahu's coalition would be unable to pass a bill to create obligatory quotas for ultraorthodox to join the military before a Jan. 15 deadline set by Israel's Supreme Court.

With the prime minister's coalition holding only a razor-thin majority after former defense minister Avigdor Lieberman pulled his right-leaning Yisrael Beiteinu party out of the ruling coalition in November, Mr. Netanyahu was unable to get the law passed because of ultraorthodox opposition.

With the coalition unable to pass important laws, an emergency meeting of the coalition partners was held and together they decided to go to elections. Mr. Netanyahu said on Monday he was seeking a "clear mandate" from the public to continue leading the country his way.

The decision wasn't unexpected, according to analysts, who say what likely prompted Mr. Netanyahu to call for snap elections was his desire to pre-empt any indictment against him—which is possibly the single biggest threat to his re-election bid.

Police have recommended Mr. Netanyahu be charged with criminal bribery, fraud and breach of trust following three corruption probes. Two of the cases center around allegations Mr. Netanyahu traded favors or attempted to trade favors, in return for improved news coverage. It is now up to Israeli Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit to decide whether to bring charges. Mr. Netanyahu has denied any wrongdoing.

Mr. Mandelblit has already indicted Mr. Netanyahu's wife, Sara, in June for allegedly spending tens of thousands of dollars of taxpayer money on meals from expensive restaurants.

Mr. Plesner argued that Mr. Netanyahu chose April for snap elections because the time frame could put Mr. Mandelblit in a bind. If the attorney general chooses to indict Mr. Netanyahu before April, the Israeli leader will have a chance to win the election before he is ever taken to court because months of hearings will be required first.

Should he win another term, Mr. Netanyahu will be able to argue that the public, despite knowing the charges against him, has given him a new mandate to rule.

The new election date also could force Mr. Mandelblit to wait until after the vote, for fear that an announcement too close to the election would be seen as meddling in the democratic process.

Either way, Mr. Netanyahu's opposition will continue to use the investigations to argue he is no longer fit to rule the country.

The other threat to the right-wing leader is the possible emergence of a revitalized center-left bloc with rival defense credentials. This could emerge in some combination of opposition leader Tzipi Livni, Labor head Avi Gabbay, Yesh Atid leader Yair Lapid, former Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon, with the possible addition of former Prime Minister Ehud Barak and former Israeli army chief of staff Benny Gantz.

With the recent U.S. decision to leave Syria, Israel faces the prospect of an emboldened Tehran, which Mr. Netanyahu has said might lead Israel to intensify its military campaign in Syria.

Israel also has one of the highest costs of living in the developed world, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. The prices of food, electricity and water are all expected to rise early in 2019.

"[Netanyahu's] leadership might be in danger if there is deterioration in the security situation or if the consumer prices keep going up," said Emmanuel Navon, a Senior Fellow at the Jerusalem-based Kohelet Policy Forum and a Likud Central Committee Member.

One of Mr. Netanyahu's main challengers could be Mr. Gantz, the Israeli army chief of staff from 2011 to 2014. But Mr. Gantz, whose political views he thus far has kept hidden from the public, has yet to formally declare whether he will run. A spokeswoman for Mr. Gantz declined to comment.

Mr. Barak, the former prime minister and defense minister who is now 76 years old, said Monday he would join any center-left block that opposes Mr. Netanyahu.

In his own party, polls show Mr. Netanyahu has one possible challenger in Gideon Saar, a former interior and education minister who has been on a political hiatus for the last four years. He announced Tuesday he would be running in the Likud primaries. Mr. Saar has twice topped his

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party's primaries and is a leading candidate to replace Mr. Netanyahu should he leave the political scene.

Still, Mr. Netanyahu remains the favorite to win as no challenger seems capable of uniting enough of the country to form a government without him.

To form a government in Israel, a potential prime minister must form a coalition with other parties that make up a majority of the 120 seats in the Knesset. Since 2009, only Mr. Netanyahu has proved capable of doing that.

On Monday, Mr. Netanyahu said he expected the current coalition to form the core of his next government.

But if he wants to form a government without any left or centrist parties, he likely will need to bring the ultraorthodox parties back into his government, setting up another showdown over the ultraorthodox draft bill.

The latest poll, released Tuesday and conducted by Panels Politics for the Walla news site, showed that only a tie-up between Mr. Gantz and Yair Lapid, whose Yesh Atid party is polling a distant second from Likud, could come close to beating the Likud party.

The survey, which relied on respondents and didn't provide a margin of error, showed the Gantz-Lapid union reaching 26 seats, while Likud would still be out in front with 31 seats.

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