

MIDDLE EAST

## Netanyahu Becomes Israel's Longest-Serving Premier

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*By Felicia Schwartz*

TEL AVIV—Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu becomes the country's longest-serving premier on Saturday with his legacy under scrutiny and his political future on the line ahead of a tough election.

His 4,876th day at the peak of Israel's fragmented political landscape—a period interrupted by a decade out of office—surpasses the tenure of founding father David Ben-Gurion.

Mr. Netanyahu first took office in 1996 as Israel's youngest prime minister at 46 years old, but lost his re-election bid three years later. He returned in 2009 and won the next two ballots, touting his records on foreign policy, security and the economy.

Mr. Netanyahu says one of his biggest achievements is elevating Israel's status in much of the world by forging ties with world leaders such as President Trump.

“We've proven that it's possible to transform Israel from a small country in the corner of the Middle East into a central power in the world,” Mr. Netanyahu said in an interview published Thursday in *Israel Hayom*, a pro-Netanyahu paper.

But the 69-year-old prime minister faces a challenge in extending his record in September's election, after narrowly failing to form a majority government in May.

Mr. Netanyahu's opponents say the secular politician is beholden to the religious right for electoral support,

laying bare tensions that have pulsed through Israeli society since the country's founding in 1948.

Critics have also sought to paint him as a leader corrupted by his long years in office. The country's attorney general has recommended he be charged for bribery, fraud and breach of trust, and he is expected to argue his case in an October pretrial hearing before formal charges are laid. "No one can deny he did some good things...but the checks and balances between national needs and personal needs of a prime minister were violated in a very hard way," said Yoaz Hendel, who previously served as Mr. Netanyahu's communications director and is now running against him in the rival Blue and White Party.

Mr. Netanyahu has denied any wrongdoing and describes the investigations into him as a witch hunt. Some detractors say Mr. Netanyahu's time in office has been marked by few big accomplishments beyond his own political survival. The prime minister, they say, hasn't made any personal efforts to restart any peace discussions at a time when the country could use its warmer relations with Arab countries and strong ties with the Americans to make peace with the Palestinians on its own terms. Still, Mr. Netanyahu—whose political skills have earned him the nickname "the magician," remains largely in favor in his own Likud party.

"You will only see people pulling their knives out if he does very badly in the election," said Emmanuel Navon, senior fellow at the Jerusalem-based Kohelet Policy Forum. "As long as he keeps Likud in power, people feel like, let's keep going with him."

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Recent polls show Likud winning more seats than any other party, about 30 or 31 of 120, but unable to form a right-wing ruling coalition without Avigdor Lieberman, who wants to force a unity government between Likud and Blue and White. Blue and White says it won't join a government with Mr. Netanyahu at the helm.

Mr. Netanyahu's supporters say that no matter what happens in the September ballot, the prime minister will be remembered for overseeing Israel's economic expansion. Gross domestic product was \$370 billion in 2018, compared with \$207 billion in 2009, driven in part by its security industry and a flourishing tech scene that has earned Israel the nickname Startup Nation. "Everything that is connected to cyber and high-tech during his time, he invested much thought and money into this issue," said David Bitan, the former Knesset Whip and a right-hand man of Mr. Netanyahu.

In recent years, Mr. Netanyahu has made gains through his relationship with President Trump, especially after fraught relations with the previous Obama administration.

Mr. Netanyahu successfully lobbied Mr. Trump to leave the 2015 multilateral Iran nuclear accord. The White

House also recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital and Israeli sovereignty of the Golan Heights.

Trump administration officials have suggested that the political part of its peace plan, to be released after Israeli elections, will be closer to Israeli positions than any previous efforts. Palestinian officials say Mr. Netanyahu's efforts to increase Israeli control of the West Bank have made the internationally accepted two-state solution all but impossible.

"He believes he buried the peace process," Saeb Erekat, the Palestinians' chief negotiator, said on Thursday. "Every day he is asking, three times a day, is it buried? Is the two state solution over?" Mr. Netanyahu's international outreach includes a visit to Oman last year and presiding over quietly warming ties with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and other Arab Gulf states.

Mr. Netanyahu formally entered the public sphere in 1982, when he was appointed deputy in the Washington embassy. After earning a reputation as a forceful defender of Israel on American television, he became Israel's ambassador to the United Nations in 1984. He was elected to Israel's parliament in 1988.

Mr. Netanyahu defeated Shimon Peres to become prime minister in 1996, but lost to Ehud Barak of the Labor Party in 1999. He was re-elected as premier in 2009 and extended his tenure by winning the top spot again in 2013 and 2015.

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