

BREAKING NEWS

Trump names Robert O'Brien, a top hostage-affairs official with the State Department, to succeed John Bolton as national security

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/netanyahu-facing-uphill-battle-after-israel-vote-11568813276>

WORLD

Netanyahu Facing Uphill Battle After Israel Vote

Israel's leader is locked in race to form new coalition after close-run election



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at his Likud party headquarters on Sept. 18. PHOTO: AMMAR AWAD/REUTERS

By *Felicia Schwartz*

Sept. 18, 2019 9:27 am ET

TEL AVIV—Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu faced an uphill battle to remaining in power Wednesday after the country's voters appeared to deny him a parliamentary majority and likely handed his rival, former Gen. Benny Gantz a chance to become the country's first new prime minister in a decade.

Mr. Netanyahu woke up to a dramatically different political landscape after Tuesday's election, with few secure options for remaining in power. With about 60% of the vote counted in the early afternoon, Israeli media projections showed Mr. Netanyahu's alliance short of the 61 votes he needs to form a government, meaning he would need to convince rivals who campaigned against him to change their minds and switch to his side.

If Israeli media projections hold firm, Mr. Gantz, a popular former military chief who formed a new political party to dethrone Mr. Netanyahu, could be the first to get a chance to form a coalition government.

In unofficial results from Israel's public broadcaster Channel 11, Mr. Gantz's Blue and White party received enough votes for 32 seats in the 120-seat parliament, to 31 for Mr. Netanyahu's Likud party. Mr. Gantz's larger bloc of centrist, left-wing and Arab parties would get 56 seats to 55 for Mr. Netanyahu's alliance of right-wing and religious parties.

The results leave both men short of achieving a majority, making them dependent on Avigdor Lieberman, who isn't committed to either side and campaigned for a unity government combining Blue and White and Likud. Mr. Lieberman defected from Mr. Netanyahu's coalition after an election earlier this year, complaining about the prime minister's reliance on religious parties to stay in power and prompting Mr. Netanyahu to move for a second vote.

The gambit appeared to backfire for Mr. Netanyahu and rewarded Mr. Lieberman, who is now Israel's kingmaker. President Reuven Rivlin will decide in the next few days whether Mr. Gantz or Mr. Netanyahu will get the first chance to form a coalition, after talking to Mr. Lieberman and other parties.

The early results reflected voters' growing frustration with Mr. Netanyahu. The prime minister appeared to lose a key part of his base, secular right-wing voters who were tired of his dependence on Israel's ultra-Orthodox parties. And he appeared to have galvanized Israel's Arab citizens, who turned out in higher numbers for a unified group of Arab parties that mobilized voters around what they said were Mr. Netanyahu's efforts to intimidate them.

In addition, Mr. Gantz has said he wouldn't sit in a coalition with Mr. Netanyahu as prime minister if he is indicted on corruption charges relating to allegations that he tried to influence media coverage of himself and his family, along with accepting gifts from two billionaire businessmen in return for favors.

Those possible bribery and fraud charges – which Mr. Netanyahu has dismissed as a witch hunt – are now a serious threat to his political and personal future. If he can't find a way to remain prime minister, he faces the prospect of a forced resignation if he is indicted next month following a pretrial hearing.

Mr. Netanyahu's allies previously floated proposals to pass a law giving him immunity from charges, but those efforts were nixed last spring when he failed to form a government after winning April's elections and called a new vote. Some analysts suggested he might try to invoke court precedent that urged ministers, but not necessarily prime ministers, under indictment to resign.

"He looks pretty much cornered at this point," said Emmanuel Navon, a senior fellow at the Jerusalem-based Kohelet Policy Forum.

Mr. Netanyahu's story isn't over. His reputation for outmaneuvering political opponents and preserving his hold on power as Israel's longest-serving prime minister earned him the nickname "the magician."

For now, Likud officials say they are sticking with Mr. Netanyahu, giving him a large political base of support. Likud has pressured Mr. Gantz and his Blue and White party to form a unity government with Mr. Netanyahu.

Mr. Netanyahu could also try to convince political parties such as Mr. Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu or the Labor party to abandon their campaign promises and sit with him.

But both Mr. Lieberman and Labor seemed unwilling to do that on Wednesday, potentially looking instead to the potential for fresh leadership in Israel for the first time in a decade, with a new crop of leaders promising a less divisive politics.

—Dov Lieber contributed to this article.

Write to Felicia Schwartz at Felicia.Schwartz@wsj.com

Copyright © 2019 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.