
MIDDLE EAST

New Threat Looms for Israel's Leader: a Rival Party Chief

As Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu fights for his political life, his most immediate threat is emerging from within his own party, as a popular younger rival tries to unseat the premier as Likud's leader.

By Felicia Schwartz and Dov Lieber

TEL AVIV—As Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu fights for his political life, his most immediate threat is emerging from within his own party, as a popular younger rival tries to unseat the premier as Likud's leader.

That scenario could upend months of political wrangling after two elections ended in a political stalemate, with neither Mr. Netanyahu nor his opposition rival Benny Gantz able to form a governing coalition. The deadlock is now sparking turmoil within the Likud party, threatening Mr. Netanyahu's stewardship and raising the possibility that it will depose its leader for the first time.

The man seeking to remove Mr. Netanyahu is Gideon Saar, a former interior and education minister long considered a standout among a rising generation of politicians.

Over the weekend, Mr. Saar, 52, broke ranks with the party and called for a leadership challenge to Mr. Netanyahu, 70, a bold move given the political savvy and enduring support that Israel's longest-serving premier still enjoys.

Mr. Saar has appealed to party members tired of the scandals and judicial travails that have hobbled Mr. Netanyahu, who was indicted last week on bribery,

scandals and judicial travails that have hobbled Mr. Netanyahu, who was indicted last week on bribery, fraud and breach of trust charges that he denies. Talks between Likud and Mr. Gantz's Blue and White have repeatedly failed. Mr. Gantz refuses to sit in a government with Mr. Netanyahu while he faces prosecution. Mr. Netanyahu, meanwhile, refuses to step aside as prime minister, a role he can keep even while under indictment. The position strengthens his defense in the case.

To Mr. Saar and his supporters, shaking up Likud is the easiest way to resolve the impasse. Mr. Saar is now pushing for a leadership primary in Likud before a Dec. 11 deadline for a majority of Israel's 120-member parliament, the Knesset, to put forward a candidate. He said it could stave off an unprecedented third vote in less than a year, likely to be held in March, and is Likud's best shot at staying in power.

"Netanyahu will not be able to form a government even if there are third, fourth elections or a fifth," he said in a radio interview Monday.

Mr. Saar said Likud has agreed to a leadership vote in the next six weeks, but not necessarily within the deadline for Knesset to decide on a new leader. A Likud leadership vote is expected in the coming weeks, but many party members say a vote before Dec. 11 is highly unlikely, in part because Mr. Netanyahu opposes that time frame. "It's difficult or nearly impossible," senior Likud minister Ze'ev Elkin said in a radio interview Monday. Likud last held a leadership vote in 2014, when Mr. Netanyahu won handily with 75% of the vote. Political analysts said Mr. Saar is popular among the 130,000 Likud members eligible to vote in a primary and could pose a formidable challenge.

He was first elected to the Knesset in 2003 and was quickly viewed as a potential star. Mr. Saar was easily re-elected to the Knesset earlier this year after earlier taking a three-year break from politics, partly because of tensions with Mr. Netanyahu. The Israeli leader attempted to pass a measure aimed at blocking anyone who doesn't lead a party from forming a government—a move seen as trying to block Mr. Saar's ascent.

Mr. Saar holds views to the right of Mr. Netanyahu and has said he wants to immediately apply Israeli sovereignty to Jewish settlements in the West Bank. Mr. Netanyahu has said he would seek to annex the Jordan Valley before looking at other areas.

His supporters say that while Mr. Netanyahu is a strong leader, he has been in power for too long, and that Mr. Saar is the best candidate among the younger generation to take the reins.

"Netanyahu, with all his great attributes, is in a place right now that the chance he'll form a government is, in my eyes, inconceivable," said Alon Elroy, 58, the head of the Likud branch in the city of Netanya. He said that

he has been an activist in the party since the 1970s, and that Mr. Saar reminds him of how the party was then, a conservative-nationalist movement. “[Saar] is the one with the most experience, and one the most personally capable. I trust his integrity, his ability to be statesman-like,” he said.

Ortal Perelman Shmueli, a 34-year-old former city councilwoman in Beersheba, said she sees Mr. Saar as Likud’s best hope to remain in power.

“Saar has proved himself as a right-wing ideologue,” she said.

But Mr. Saar faces an uphill battle to topple Mr. Netanyahu, who remains popular in Likud, and among many ordinary Israelis. “What Saar is doing to Netanyahu is a coup,” said Aharon Natanov, 47, a Tel Aviv resident. “Israelis will cry for generations if they get rid of a leader like Netanyahu in this way.”

The party is famously loyal to its leaders. It has had only four since Israel’s founding in 1948, and none have ever been removed.

Mr. Netanyahu also has largely succeeded in keeping his core supporters and convincing them that the corruption investigations are a conspiracy against him, analysts said.

“The question is, really, will [Saar] be able to overcome this personality cult in the Likud?” asked Emmanuel Navon, a senior fellow at the Kohelet Policy Forum who has served on Likud’s central committee.

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