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Netanyahu Challenger Saar Launches Likud Leadership Bid

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Asharq Al-Awsat

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu faced his most serious threat from inside his right-wing Likud party in a decade Tuesday, as former minister Gideon Saar launched a leadership challenge.

Already facing a third general election in 12 months and a corruption indictment, Netanyahu will first seek to win a primary vote within his party on December 26.

"People want change," Saar said at a launch event on Monday evening in Or Yehuda, an Israeli town close to commercial capital Tel Aviv.

The 53-year-old with greying black hair and glasses has been a senior figure in the Likud for a decade and has held multiple ministries.

Netanyahu has long viewed him as a threat because he has repeatedly accused the prime minister of sidelining him from top appointments.

Last month, Netanyahu was indicted for fraud, bribery and breach of trust in three corruption cases, each of which he strongly denies.

Saar called for the primaries shortly after.

General elections in April and September resulted in deadlock, meaning the country will again head to the polls on March 2.

"He (Netanyahu) has failed twice, but it is not because of the Likud's ideas," Saar said on Monday evening, calling for a "renaissance" of the Israeli right.

"If we do not make a change, we are getting close to a left-wing government," he warned, according to AFP.

"Only Saar can," his few hundred supporters supporters chanted.

Netanyahu, who also met with supporters Monday night in a series of events in central Israel, did not say anything about Saar's event and has largely refrained from publicly addressing his younger challenger.

Right-wing unifier?

Saar is perceived as being to the right of Netanyahu on many key issues, including relations with the Palestinians.

On Monday he praised the legacy of Netanyahu, in power continuously since 2009, but called on him to go further on judicial reforms and to apply Israeli sovereignty to Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories.

He did not, however, mention the corruption indictment against Netanyahu.

"Within Likud it is counterproductive to talk about it, because a large portion of Likud voters think these files are made up," said Emmanuel Navon, professor of political science at Tel Aviv University.

"He (Saar) is to the right of Netanyahu 100 percent," Navon added.

Saar has so far sought to play the unifier between the Israeli right and others deeply opposed to Netanyahu.

He has suggested he could cut a deal with Benny Gantz's Blue and White alliance, which finished neck and neck with Likud in both elections.

After the corruption indictment, Gantz, who has campaigned for cleaner politics, called on Netanyahu to step down.

Recent polls have suggested if Saar were to lead the Likud, the right-wing bloc in parliament might increase in size.

"If you believe the Likud and its path should lead the state of Israel, vote for me," Saar said, arguing he had the "knowledge and experience... to lead Israel into the next decade."

Israel's system of proportional representation means parties must build broad coalitions to command a majority.

"Gideon Saar can actually build the next coalition," said Sharren Haskel, one of the few Likud MPs to publicly announce their support for him.

"I hope we are not going to lose the government -- that is the risk," she told AFP.

She admitted she was was risking a "political price" by going against Netanyahu.

Saar has called on Netanyahu to hold a debate on policy, but the premier has so far not responded.

The Likud has had only four leaders in its seven-decade history and Saar appears to have an uphill task to win enough support by December 26.

He currently has the public support of fewer than five of the Likud's 32 MPs and no ministers.

But if "Netanyahu is elected as the leader of the Likud, we are going into opposition," said Yehuda Glick, a firebrand former Likud MP currently campaigning for Saar.



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