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MIDDLE EAST

Prime Minister Netanyahu's Allies Come to His Public Defense

Pressure on the prime minister continues to build after former aide turns state witness



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, shown Sunday, denies any wrongdoing and has labeled the monthslong police investigations into corruption a witch hunt to force him from power. PHOTO: GALI TIBBON/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By Rory Jones

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Fearing the collapse of Israel's delicate governing coalition, allies of embattled Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Sunday came out in his defense after a former aide agreed to turn state witness in twin police corruption probes.

"I trust the PM 100%," Miri Regev, culture minister and member of Mr. Netanyahu's right-wing Likud party told reporters Sunday. "The media and the opposition are doing everything to topple the right, to topple Netanyahu."

Although Mr. Netanyahu denies any wrongdoing—and has labeled the monthslong police investigations a witch hunt to force him from power—the pressure on the prime minister has continued to build. Mr. Netanyahu was dealt a significant blow Friday when Ari Harow, former head of the prime minister's bureau, became a state witness into allegations of bribery and fraud.

There would be "no witness agreement, if there is nothing" serious to investigate, Yoaz Hendel, chair of the Institute for Zionist Strategies, a right-of-center think tank, and a former spokesperson for Mr. Netanyahu, said Sunday of the cases against his former boss. "Ari is game changing."

Israeli investigators offered Mr. Netanyahu's former aide a deal to become a witness after police in February, recommended indicting Mr. Harow on charges of fraud, breach of trust, bribery and money laundering. He is accused of using his public role to benefit his private consulting business. The investigation into Mr. Harow was launched separate from those into Mr. Netanyahu.

As part of the deal to become state witness, Mr. Harow agreed to confess to the charges and to serve six months community service with a fine of 700,000 Israeli shekel (\$193,000), police said. An Israeli court also issued an order banning further publication of Mr. Harow's involvement in the investigation.

A lawyer for Mr. Harow didn't respond to request for comment.

Mr. Netanyahu called the Harow development "background noise" in a Facebook post over the weekend. His spokesman on Sunday referred to that statement in response to questions about Mr. Harow's decision.

An indictment for corruption wouldn't legally obligate Mr. Netanyahu to resign but is bound to unleash calls across Israel's political spectrum for the prime minister to step down.

"The coalition partners right now don't want early elections so Netanyahu has political capital to expend," said Emmanuel Navon, a political analyst and lecturer at Tel Aviv University. "But I think an indictment might be too much."

For Israel, Mr. Netanyahu's departure from the prime minister's office would be akin to a political earthquake. He has been at the center of politics for more than two decades and served as the country's leader since 2009, his second stint at the helm. He has held together a fractious right-wing government often by the dint of his personality. His coalition maintains a slim majority, with 66 seats in the 120-member Israeli parliament, known as the Knesset.

Elections currently aren't due until 2019. But as the police probe into Mr. Netanyahu has gathered steam, polls in recent months have shown the Likud would lose seats in parliament in a fresh election.

Police first questioned Mr. Netanyahu in early January about whether he received unlawful gifts in return for favors for business moguls.

Police also have said they are investigating whether Mr. Netanyahu negotiated with the publisher of Yedioth Ahronoth, Arnon Mozes, to gain more favorable coverage in return for limiting the influence of a rival newspaper, Israel Hayom, which is owned by U.S. billionaire Sheldon Adelson. Messrs. Mozes and Adelson haven't commented publicly on the issue.

Under the Israeli legal system, the police would have to recommend an indictment to the country's attorney general who would then file the formal indictment against the leader. That procedure could take months.

Mr. Harow, who turned state witness, first served as an adviser to Mr. Netanyahu ahead of the leader's 2009 election win. Mr. Harow then left the prime minister's office in 2010 before returning in 2014 to help mastermind Mr. Netanyahu's victory in national elections a year later.

Police found a recording of a conversation between Messrs. Netanyahu and Mozes about newspaper coverage in the home of Mr. Harow while investigating him, Israeli media reported. Police have declined to comment on the existence of the recording.

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