



# SPOTLIGHT

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## Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu Indicted

Michał Wojnarowicz

Israel's Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit on 21 November charged Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu with corruption, breach of trust, and fraud. The indictments exacerbate the political crisis in Israel but do not necessarily mean the swift removal of Netanyahu from office.

### What were the charges against Netanyahu?

The charges include corruption, fraud, and breach of trust in several cases, codenamed in the police investigations. In "Case 1000," AG Mandelblit accuses Netanyahu of receiving expensive gifts (e.g., cigars, champagne) worth about \$200,000 and acting in the interests of the businessmen involved in the case. In "Case 2000," Netanyahu is alleged to have asked for favourable coverage from the publisher of the newspaper *Yedioth Ahronoth* in exchange for weakening the paper's main competitor *Israel HaYom*. "Case 4000" has a similar nature—it concerns Netanyahu issuing decisions in his dual-role as communications minister that would be favourable to the chief of the telecommunications company Bezeq in exchange for positive articles on his news portal *Walla!*. Mandelblit announced the indictment shortly after the deadline for Netanyahu's main rival, Benjamin Gantz, to form a government had passed. It was timed to avoid accusations of influencing the political process of building a new coalition.

### What are the next legal stages?

Netanyahu, as a member of the Knesset, can within 30 days ask a special committee to grant him immunity as an MK. However, a decision on this matter may be in limbo given the ongoing post-election deadlock—the lack of a governmental coalition prevents the creation of parliamentary committees. Although the chances that Netanyahu can obtain immunity while lacking a majority in the Knesset are small, procedures allow for several months of delay in starting the trial, especially if further elections are called. Following the official indictment Netanyahu might be forced to relinquish all ministerial posts he holds in parallel with the prime ministership. The trial, along with the entire appeal process, probably would take several years, during which time Netanyahu could still lead the government, according to the law.

### **How do the indictments affect Netanyahu's political position?**

Netanyahu rejects all of the charges. In speeches, he has harshly attacked the police and the prosecutors, describing the indictment as an attempted "coup". The first declarations after the AG's announcement indicate that Netanyahu is still supported by his political camp. The PM has the backing of political partners from right-wing religious parties and from politicians from Likud as well. His political future depends largely on the attitude within his party. Despite initial consolidation around the leader, his legal problems strengthen opposition within the party, represented by Gideon Saar, the popular former interior and education minister, who openly undermines Netanyahu's leadership. Public opinion can also influence a change, given the decrease in support for the PM; according to polls, nearly 50% of Israelis demand his resignation.

### **Will Israel face a third round of parliamentary elections?**

The indictments of the PM coincide with the unprecedented post-election deadlock after the September parliamentary election. None of the candidates selected by the president, neither Netanyahu nor Gantz, have been able to establish a majority necessary to form a government. As a result, the initiative has passed into the hands of the Knesset. Until 11 December, any MP who receives the support of 61 MKs will receive a mandate to form a government (within 14 days). The chances of this though are low due to the lack of willingness to compromise between the parties. Therefore, the likelihood of a third round of elections in March 2020 is increasing. This would mean a further deepening of the political crisis in Israel, especially since early polls again show neither electoral bloc has a clear lead.