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## *Netanyahu's trial: corruption, war crimes, and an Israel in crisis*

Benjamin Netanyahu's corruption trial unfolds against a backdrop of bribery and fraud allegations, international war crimes charges, domestic scandals, and mounting global condemnation – all while he continues to fuel devastating wars with no end in sight.



Photo Credit: The Cradle

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's entrance into a Tel Aviv courtroom yesterday was anything but understated. Facing trial as the first sitting prime minister prosecuted for corruption, Netanyahu seized the moment to brand his ordeal a “witch-hunt.” Outside the courthouse, tensions simmered as some 100 protesters gathered, blaming him for the deaths of Israeli war prisoners in Gaza, while an equal number of staunch supporters faced them across a police barrier.

The embattled premier, set to testify over three days before facing cross-examination, continues to vigorously deny attempts to evade trial since his 2019 indictment on charges of bribery, fraud, and breach of trust.

Accused of accepting gifts from wealthy businessmen and granting favors to media moguls in exchange for positive coverage, Netanyahu had ignored his lawyer's advice to step away from politics at the time.

Declaring on the eve of his hearing that he had "waited eight years for this moment to say the truth as [he] remember[s] it," Netanyahu launched a preemptive attack on the judiciary, police, and media in a televised press conference on Monday.

### **Years of political ploys to evade justice**

His critics, however, swiftly countered. Opposition leader Yair Lapid condemned Netanyahu's self-serving focus amid mounting war casualties, calling his press conference "a shameful collection of lies." Lapid accused Netanyahu of deploying "every trick possible" in his delay tactic to avoid facing justice, saying the prime minister had prioritized personal survival over the country's security and stability. He even blamed him for the 7 October Palestinian resistance's Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, "the [subsequent] war, and the fact that the kidnapped people have not yet returned."

For nearly five years, Netanyahu maneuvered to postpone this judicial reckoning, citing COVID-19 disruptions, procedural delays, and political gridlock during repeated elections as reasons to delay the hearings. After securing a hardline coalition in December 2022, he intensified efforts to undermine and politicize the judiciary system, proposing "reforms" that sparked mass protests throughout 2023.

Those protests dwindled only after Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, when Netanyahu's response – an unprecedented and brutal military campaign – rightfully drew accusations of genocide and war crimes from the International Criminal Court (ICC). By the time he entered the underground, secured courtroom, the prime minister was under mounting pressure at home and abroad.

Together with his former defense minister Yoav Gallant, he faces the allegations of war crimes – the first of their kind within the western alliance of states - along with the repercussions of a collapsing economy and the mass "displacement" of settlers in the north due to Hezbollah's early involvement in the regional conflict.

But domestic and international pressure had escalated so much that Netanyahu ran out of excuses by the time he attended yesterday's hearing to spin his side of the story in Tel Aviv.

The Israeli prime minister walked into the courtroom with an ICC arrest warrant hanging over his head for war crimes in Gaza, and a broad international consensus that Israel is guilty of apartheid and genocide that has left nearly 45,000 Palestinians killed, the majority of them women and children.

Yet, of more concern to Israelis has been the fleeing of nearly half a million Israeli Jews from the occupation state, the potentially permanent displacement of a quarter of a million from the Gaza and Lebanese border since October 2023, tens of billions of dollars in economic losses, and the shuttering of up to 60,000 businesses in 15 months of war.

### **Domestic scandals and ‘The Bibi Files’**

Further tarnishing Netanyahu’s credibility is a recent security scandal involving his aide, Eli Feldstein, who leaked – or fabricated – a classified intelligence document to Germany's *Bild* newspaper and the UK's *Jewish Chronicle*.

Ostensibly, its aim was to seed in the public's mind that Hamas' late commander Yahya Sinwar planned to smuggle Israeli prisoners out of the Gaza Strip – information which Netanyahu would then use to convince Israelis that unless their army remain entrenched on the Philadelphi Corridor along the Gaza–Egypt border, the captives could end up in the Sinai or “pop up in Iran or Yemen.”

When Israeli authorities arrested Feldstein and four others in connection with the leaks last month, Lapid accused the prime minister’s office of leaking “faked secret documents to torpedo the possibility of a hostage deal – to shape a public opinion influence operation against the hostages’ families.”

Israeli media reported on 3 December that Feldstein told police he had notified Netanyahu of the document two days before he leaked it to *Bild*. Feldstein's lawyer, Oded Savoray, went even further, saying that Netanyahu was aware of both documents and the plan to leak them. Savoray accused the prime minister of “shirking responsibility for an event he caused” and declared that Feldstein would no longer remain silent over the snowballing scandal. The lawyer told Israel's Broadcasting Corporation (KAN) that “there was a stage in the investigation where he [Feldstein] decided to stop taking the fall for the prime minister and his office.”

Adding to Netanyahu's woes, the banned documentary *The Bibi Files* will be premiered during his trial, exposing raw interrogation footage from 2019, scathing accounts of his self-serving leadership, and the corrosive influence of his wife Sara and their son Yair on the prime minister's decision-making.

### **Personal survival over state stability**

The film's director, Alexis Bloom, has indicated on several occasions that the policies of Netanyahu – the longest-serving Israeli prime minister in the state's short history – are driven by personal interests and “his determination to avoid prosecution and trial on corruption charges that could result in imprisonment,” adding that “this could explain many of his political decisions, maneuvers, and war.”

Echoing his opponents' criticisms, she acknowledged that his ruling coalition and “primary motivation of governance is protecting Netanyahu's personal interest,” including continuing and expanding the Gaza war on multiple fronts “to enable his own political survival.”

The film includes testimony from prominent Israeli politicians, journalists, and close friends who describe Netanyahu as being “an architect of chaos” and say that he “survives in a state of war, in a state of instability.” Former prime minister Ehud Olmert, who himself had resigned before his prosecution in Israeli courts, is heard in the documentary film saying that by resisting his lawyer's advice to resign, Netanyahu “was challenging the system. He said, ‘No, I’m above, I’m beyond. No one can touch me.’” In doing so, Netanyahu designed and established the most far-right and racist government in the existence of Israel – for the sole purpose of clinging to power.

As Netanyahu faces his legal battles, *The Bibi Files* captures a stark portrait of a leader accused of prioritizing personal survival over the future of the state.

Whether this trial marks a turning point for Israel or becomes yet another chapter in Netanyahu’s polarizing legacy remains uncertain. What is clear, however, is that the political and social fractures he has deepened may take far longer to heal than his time on the stand.

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