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Netanyahu Faces Test of Party Strength Ahead of Israeli Election

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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party is selecting its March 17 parliamentary election ticket in a race that may shape peacemaking with the Palestinians.

While Netanyahu's leadership of the party doesn't seem to be at risk in today's contest, his sole opponent, lawmaker Danny Danon, represents a more hard-line faction within Likud that opposes Palestinian statehood and is vying to seat more candidates in parliament. With polls favoring Netanyahu to form the next government, the ticket's ideological bent will have implications that go beyond party politics.

"It's a foregone conclusion that Netanyahu will win" the Likud race, **Yehuda Ben Meir**, senior fellow at Tel Aviv's **Institute for National Security Studies**, said in a phone interview yesterday. If hard-liners dominate the party ticket in the parliamentary contest, though, "Netanyahu will not be able to move on peacemaking with the Palestinians, and will basically become a prisoner in his own house," he said.

The last round of U.S.-led peace talks collapsed in April. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, who led the negotiations, has voiced interest in resuming them.

Netanyahu called early elections Dec. 2 after clashing with members of his governing coalition over issues including peacemaking. Under Israel's parliamentary system, voters cast ballots for slates and don't elect their legislators directly. Likud chooses its list through a primary election.

About 96,600 Likud members are eligible to choose among 70 candidates to represent the party in the March race.

Too Moderate

Although critics accuse Netanyahu of being unwilling to make the concessions needed to end Israel's conflict with the Palestinians, Likud hardliners say he's too moderate. They oppose the establishment of a Palestinian state, which he accepts in principle, and demand more construction in Jewish West Bank settlements to thwart that prospect.

"There has been an effort in recent years by religious-nationalist activists to exert more influence in the party," said Gideon Rahat, a political science professor at the Hebrew

University of Jerusalem. “It will be interesting to see if the trend continues of more moderate Likud figures being forced out in primaries.”

Danon, who challenged Netanyahu for Likud’s leadership in 2007, is an outspoken supporter of Jewish construction on territory Israel seized in the 1967 Middle East war. Netanyahu fired him as deputy defense minister in July after he accused the government of not striking hard enough against Palestinian militants during Israel’s summer war in the Gaza Strip.

‘Ideological Roots’

“I know that this will not be an easy election,” Danon said yesterday in an e-mailed response to questions. “I am running a campaign aimed at returning the Likud to its ideological roots.”

Polls show Likud running about even with a joint list headed by Labor party leader Isaac Herzog and Tzipi Livni, the justice minister and chief peace negotiator Netanyahu fired before his government crumbled. While each party would receive about 24 of parliament’s 120 seats, other factions that support Netanyahu’s stance on peace and security issues would gain enough seats to enable him to form a majority coalition, the surveys indicate.

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