

Yinon Magal questioned by police over abuse claims

Ex-lawmaker faces criminal probe into accusations of sexual harassment lodged by former female coworkers

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Former Jewish Home party lawmaker Yinon Magal was summoned for several hours of police questioning Thursday over sexual harassment accusations that led to his resignation from the Knesset in early December.

He was questioned in the offices of the police's national fraud and corruption investigation unit, Lahav 433, which has launched a criminal investigation in the case. He is suspected of sexual harassment and one case of indecency.

Police have collected testimony from several accusers, all of them women who worked under Magal over the years, including during his term as editor of the Walla news site.

It is yet unclear if Magal will be indicted. Sources familiar with the investigation have indicated that police are unsure if the women who have accused the lawmaker will lodge formal complaints or testify in court against him.

Attorneys for Magal said Thursday he "is happy that he can finally respond to the accusations against him. He's sure that when the police findings go public, it will be clear that he has done nothing illegal."

Education Minister Naftali Bennett, who chairs the Jewish Home party and personally appointed Magal to a slot on the list, defended his longtime friend Thursday.

"Yinon has been my friend for many years, since [serving together in the elite IDF commando unit] Sayeret Matkal," Bennett told Channel 2. "Yinon is a good friend, and I won't abandon him."

Magal "set a noble and fitting moral standard in such cases when he resigned," he insisted.

As a serving Knesset member, Magal enjoyed immunity from investigations, hearings and legal proceedings that were unrelated to his work as a member of Knesset. He lost that immunity when he resigned.

"Stepping down from the Knesset means nothing; there will be an investigation," a senior police officer said within days of Magal's resignation.

The journalist-turned-lawmaker, who is married, has been accused by four women in the past few weeks of sexual harassment.

Magal has apologized for behavior he called "hurtful," but insisted his past behavior was not criminal.

"I made a mistake in my past conduct, which is even more unbecoming for the public official I am today," Magal said in a statement in early December. "I apologize from the bottom of my heart to those who were hurt. I am determined to correct my behavior and also to repair things on the personal and family level."

On December 1, two of Magal's former employees said he had made lewd comments and unwanted sexual advances during and after he served as editor-in-chief of the Walla news site. Magal stepped down as the popular site's editor in late 2014 in order to run for Knesset.

The first public allegations surfaced that day in a Facebook post by Walla reporter Racheli Rottner, who said Magal had made a pass at her at his farewell party when he left Walla.

Hours later, a second Walla reporter, Or Shukrun, also complained that Magal "repeatedly stroked my behind, even after I asked him to stop," an act that could be considered sexual assault.

In the days following, a third and fourth woman came forward with similar allegations against Magal.

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