

# [***Robert Menendez Trial: 5 Key Moments from Opening Statements***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6C1W-NSP1-DY68-1002-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Highlight:** Attorneys gave a preview into how the high-profile corruption trial against a sitting senator will unfold.

**Body**

Opening statements began in the [*federal corruption trial of New Jersey Democratic Senator Robert Menendez*](https://www.newsweek.com/robert-menendez-trial-federal-corruption-1899821?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) on Wednesday and continued Thursday, giving the public a peak into how the high-profile proceedings will unfold.

Menendez is facing 16 charges, including obstruction of justice, bribery, extortion and public official acting as a foreign agent. He is accused of offering up his political power in exchange for gifts such as cash, gold bars a Mercedes-Benz convertible, furniture and payments on a home mortgage.

His wife, Nadine Menendez, and three businessmen were charged in the scheme as well. Nadine Menendez is being tried separately in July. Robert Menendez revealed on Thursday that his wife has [*breast cancer*](https://www.newsweek.com/bob-menendez-announces-wife-has-cancer-amid-trial-everything-we-know-1901542?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) and will need a mastectomy and possibly radiation treatment.

"We are, of course, concerned about the seriousness and advanced stage of the disease," the senator said in a statement.

Robert Menendez, who was first elected to the [*Senate*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/senate?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) in 2006, pleaded not guilty to all charges. The senator is up for re-election in November and has not ruled out the possibility yet despite calls for his resignation. Menendez said he would run as an Independent rather than trying to get the Democratic nomination in a [*video announcement*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=9HDPOlxTGnY).

Several of his fellow Senators have called for his [*resignation*](https://www.newsweek.com/democrats-turn-against-bob-menendez-1829932?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships).

**'Put His Power Up For Sale'**

In an effort to prove that Robert Menendez "put his power up for sale," US Prosecutor Lara Pomerantz went into detail about his questionable dealings with foreign nations, New Jersey businesses and government operations.

"This was not ***politics*** as usual. This was ***politics*** for profit. This was a United States senator on the take," Pomerantz said.

She also accused Menendez of attempting to "corrupt the criminal justice system" by accepting lavish gifts as payment for "sensitive, non-public US government information."

Pomerantz said the senator broke his oath of office by engaging in these actions.

"Public servants are expected to serve the public," Pomerantz said.

**How the Scheme Began**

Pomerantz presented a timeline of how the alleged corruption started with businessman Wael Hana in 2018, around the time the senator and his wife began dating.

"When Hana learned Nadine was dating a senator, he saw an opportunity," Pomerantz said.

Hana moved from Egypt to the U.S. when he was in his 20s. He met Nadine Menendez before she started dating Robert Menendez. Hana owned EG Halal, a company that became the only company allowed to certify halal products imported to Egypt, despite Hana having no prior experience in the industry.

Pomerantz claimed Hana had "connections" to the Egyptian government.

He is accused of working with Nadine Menendez to arrange dinners and meetings with Egyptian officials for the senator. He also allegedly put Nadine Menendez on his company's payroll and connected her with someone who gifted her cash for payments on a Mercedes Benz.

Hana has pleaded not guilty.

The senator showed little reaction to the allegations made against him during the prosecutions opening statement. The senator was listening closely and had his hand propped under his chin, [*The New York Times*](https://www.nytimes.com/live/2024/05/15/nyregion/bob-menendez-trial) reported.

He did not appear to react when Pomerantz pointed to him directly and accused him of corruption.

The trial is Menendez's second corruption trial in seven years. The first trial in 2017 lasted 11 weeks and ended in a hung jury on all 18 charges.

The charges included bribery, conspiracy, fraud and making false statements. Prosecutors alleged Menendez took over $600,000 in political contributions, a ritzy Paris hotel suite, and free trips on a private jet from a wealthy ophthalmologist in exchange for political favors.

**Defense Pins Blame on Wife**

Avi Weitzman, one of Robert Menendez's lawyers, delivered the opening statement for the defense, calling the politician an "American patriot" and "lifelong public servant."

The defense's opening statement lasted for over an hour and was interrupted by Federal Judge Sidney Stein several times.

"Stick to the evidence sir, not the sermonizing," Stein told Weitzman at one point.

Weitzman claimed the prosecution's case was built on "speculation and guesswork." He also said some of the services Menendez is accused of performing in exchange for gifts were simply "constituent services" for the people of New Jersey.

The defense also claimed Robert Menendez was unaware of his wife's dealings with the businessmen involved in this scheme.

"Let me say this about Nadine: Nadine had financial concerns that she kept from Bob," Weitzman said.

**'Criminalizing Friendships'**

Hana's lawyer Lawrence Lustberg delivered an opening statement for his client, alleging the prosecution is "criminalizing friendships." He highlighted the 15-year friendship between Nadine Menendez and Hana, claiming that giving each other expensive gifts was a common practice over the years.

Lustberg argued his client's actions were innocent, and he never directly or indirectly gave a bribe in exchange for political favors.

An attorney for Fred Daibes, another businessman charged in the scheme, pointed to friendship as a defense as well. Cesar De Castro said prosecutors were exploiting his client's friendship with Robert Menendez, which spans over three decades, to prove a crime occurred.

**What to Expect**

The prosecution started calling witnesses to the stand Thursday.

Aristotelis Kougemitros, an [*FBI*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/fbi?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) agent who led the raid on the Robert and Nadine Menendez's home, testified about what was found at the Englewood Cliffs property.

Pomerantz said the prosecution will present texts between Nadine Menendez and Hana to help prove their case.

"The text messages will tell you what happened," Pomerantz said. "As you read those messages you'll see the scheme unfold."

She also confirmed that Jose Uribe, a businessman who already pleaded guilty for charges related to the scheme and agreed to cooperate with prosecutors, will testify. While she said he "will give you an inside look," his cooperation does have an underlying motive.

"He will testify at this trial in the hopes of getting a lower sentence," Pomerantz said. "We're not asking you to like him."

Additional witnesses the prosecution plans to call are a U.S. Department of Agriculture official, the U.S. attorney of New Jersey and the former attorney general of New Jersey. There may also be a presentation of physical evidence, such as some of the gold bars found in Robert and Nadine Menendez's home.

[*Link to Image*](https://d.newsweek.com/en/full/2131341/bob-menendez-forum.jpg)

**Graphic**

Bob Menendez at Forum

Marco Tacca/Getty Images

Robert "Bob" Menendez, US politician and lawyer, Senator for the state of New Jersey attends the 48th edition of Economic Forum of Cernobbio on September 02, 2022 in Cernobbio, Italy. Menendez said Monday the U.S. should curtail cooperation with Saudi Arabia over oil production cuts.

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