

**Parties, Coalitions, and Peace:**  
Applying the Veto Player Theory to the  
Arab-Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process, 1992-2001

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***Abstract:***

In the 1990s, the Oslo Accords offered a series of unprecedented opportunities for peace in the Arab-Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, by the end of the decade, a comprehensive peace settlement had not been achieved, and a second Palestinian uprising had broken out. Though researchers have cited a number of reasons for the failure of the peace process, their explanations do not encompass all of the complexities involved. In this paper I argue that domestic political considerations arising from Israel's fragmented party and legislative systems explain a great deal of its apparent inability to take advantage of opportunities for peace. Under the framework of the veto player theory, my analysis focuses on Israel's government coalitions: I examine the size and ideological polarization of coalitions and the cohesion of the largest coalition party in four cases of attempted peace negotiations from 1992-2001. Large coalitions, ideological polarization within the coalitions, and low cohesion in senior coalition parties resulted in government instability and an inability to implement peace policies. While these institutional factors alone cannot entirely explain the failure of peace negotiations, their effect on the peace process suggests that Israel must learn how to harness the divisions in its governments to improve the government's ability to capitalize on opportunities for peace.

## Introduction

Since its founding as a state in 1948, Israel has been involved in ongoing conflicts with one or more of its Arab neighbors. Even after several Arab nations signed peace treaties with Israel, hostilities have continued with Palestinians in the occupied territories. Over the years, the conflict has dragged on, in spite of large support for peace on both sides.<sup>1</sup> Given the widespread support for peace among Israelis and Palestinians alike, it seems astonishing that it has not yet been achieved. Why has a lasting peace been so elusive?

A political scientist of the realist orientation might ascribe the conflict to the military and geographic security concerns of a nation fighting for its survival. However, the success or failure of peace and the formulation of national security policy are not dependent exclusively on the realist view of “external strategic-military considerations” (Kaye 2002). There are many factors that play into the continuation of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Commonly cited reasons include poor leadership on both sides, religious fundamentalism, racism, diplomatic mistakes and miscalculations, and intense nationalist sentiments. Although these factors certainly play an important role in the conflict, they do not encompass all of the complexities involved in the failure of peace negotiations. In this paper I argue that domestic political considerations arising from Israel’s fragmented party and legislative systems explain a great deal of Israel’s apparent inability to take advantage of opportunities for comprehensive peace settlements.

Israel is a highly divided society split along political, religious, ethnic, and socio-economic lines. These divisions are reflected in the Knesset, Israel’s parliament, and in the factionalized nature of its largest political parties. I will be studying the effect of Israel’s multiparty legislature and the structure of its political parties on the peace process. My analysis

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<sup>1</sup>In February 2004, 63.1% of Israelis said they greatly or considerably support carrying out peace negotiations with the Palestinian Authority (Jewish Virtual Library 2004). These numbers have remained high from the 1990s to the present, with 80.0% of Israelis saying they support the peace process in August 1996 (Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research 2004) and 76.1% saying they support it in August 2001 (Gamla 2001). Among Palestinians, support for the peace process in the 1990s hovered around 75-80%, and never dropped below 60% (Shikaki 1999).

has two parts: first, I will evaluate the ways in which the fragmentation of the Knesset has undermined four attempted peace negotiations from 1992 to 2001. Second, I will look at the role played by the cohesion of the senior party of the government coalition in each of these cases.

The fragmentation of the Knesset has two important implications that have frequently hindered the peace process. One, the fragmentation of the Knesset is translated into fragmentation in its governing coalitions; the presence of many parties in government makes it harder to agree on policy change or implementation. I will look at the number of parties in each governing coalition to determine the effect of coalition size on the success or failure of peace negotiations. Two, legislative fragmentation inhibits the formation of ideologically congruent governing coalitions. In a government made up of several ideologically disparate parties, the controversial nature of most peace legislation poses a significant threat to the stability of the coalition, and thus a threat to the peace process itself. I will examine the congruence of the policy orientations of coalition partners in order to evaluate their effect on the peace process.

The second facet of my argument deals with individual party cohesion. For the purposes of this study, I will examine only Labor and Likud, the two parties that have traditionally been at the center of all Israel's governing coalitions. The internal structure of the senior coalition party affects the cohesion of the party; nomination procedures for party lists and the size and strength of factions within the party are the two primary structural factors that affect party cohesion. A low degree of party cohesion in the key governing party creates political constraints that impair the government's ability to negotiate peace agreements, while a high degree of cohesion strengthens the party and helps to stabilize the coalition. Thus, party cohesion is conducive to the success of peace negotiations.

I now turn to a review of the relevant literature. I will then outline the variables and their operationalization and discuss the methods of analysis that I will be using in this study.

## **Parties, Coalitions and Peacemaking in Israel**

This study contributes to the literature on the effect of domestic political constraints on foreign policy (Husbands 1991, Stein 1988). I will be focusing on a narrower subset of policy-making: policies related to peace-building among groups at war. The literature on this topic is substantially smaller than on the former. Bar-Siman-Tov describes peacemaking as part of Robert Putnam's "two-level game," in which domestic and external constraints interact to affect the peace process and in which each decisionmaker must "play at both game boards" (Bar-Siman-Tov 2001). Although there are many domestic constraints that affect the peace process, this study will deal only with those related to coalitions and party cohesion. In order to better understand the impact of these factors on the peace process, I will look at the issue in the context of George Tsebelis' veto player theory of policy stability. According to Tsebelis, the greater the number of actors involved in legislation, the harder it is to implement change. Tsebelis calls these actors "veto players," defined as "individual or collective actor[s] whose agreement is required for a policy decision" (Tsebelis 1995). In his essay "Decision Making in Political Systems," he provides a theoretical framework that allows us to understand how the number of veto players, the congruence of policy positions among them, and the cohesion among the constituent units of each veto player affect policy change. Although Tsebelis uses different branches of the government as his veto players, his model is also relevant to disparate actors in a single party or government coalition.

*A) Size of the coalition:* Governing coalitions are the focus of this study because of their central role in policy making and implementation (Laver and Shepsle 1999). Tsebelis argues that as the number of players who are required to agree on a given policy change increases, the possibility for changing the status quo decreases. His study on the potential for changing the status quo is relevant here because any peace agreement between Israel and its adversaries must

rest on a change of the status quo. By applying Tsebelis' theory to coalitions, we see that the more partners there are in a government coalition, the more difficult it will be for that coalition to implement policy change (Tsebelis 1995). Thus, governments with a larger number of parties will have more difficulty in carrying out effective peace policies.

*B) Ideological congruence of the coalition:* Tsebelis argues that in addition to the number of veto players, less ideological congruence among veto players also decreases the possibility for policy change (Tsebelis 1995). In my study, congruence is defined by the ideological distance between coalition members. Ideological polarization in the policy orientations of coalition members is exacerbated by the necessity for coalition partners to compete against each other at election time. This competition creates an incentive for parties to distance themselves from one another, generating a source of tension that often makes the government unstable (Laver and Shepsle 1999). Therefore, examining the congruence of veto players in a given coalition will help us understand how legislative fragmentation affects the success of peace negotiations.

*C) Party cohesion:* Bowler, Farrell, and Katz define party cohesion as "the extent to which group members can be observed to work together for the group's goals" (Bowler, et al.) 1999). Tsebelis argues that the potential for policy change decreases with the cohesion of each veto player (Tsebelis 1995). A highly cohesive party is stronger than a fragmented party, as unified parties "create more powerful bargaining units that are able to drag eventual government outputs on a wide range of issues closer to [their] ideal points..." (Laver and Shepsle 1999: 29). Reuven Hazan has argued that party cohesion is essential to carrying out peace negotiations, especially when these negotiations are "an arduous and costly process involving the highest stakes and core values of the country." Hazan further argues that internal divisions hinder a party's ability to "sell" a process of peace negotiations to the electorate (Hazan 2000). Thus,

party fragmentation has several negative effects on peace: it impedes the effectiveness of the party in pursuing its peace agenda, while simultaneously detracting from the party's ability to promote this agenda to voters.

Two indicators of party cohesion are recurring themes throughout the literature: nomination procedures and the degree of fragmentation of the party. The rules governing parties' nomination procedures are a vital factor of party cohesion (Strøm 1990, Bowler, et al. 1999). When nomination procedures for party offices are not controlled by the central party apparatus, politicians are no longer accountable to the party itself; rather, they are accountable to the party members who elected them. This conflict of accountability weakens the central party's control over who may rise to positions of leadership. On the other hand, when "nomination politics are controlled by the party machine..., the party can ensure the cohesion of a legislative body by weeding out potential troublemakers" (Bowler, et al. 1999). Therefore, a party with decentralized nomination procedures for party offices should be characterized by less party cohesion. The second indicator of cohesion is the degree of factionalization within parties. The existence of factions within parties has been described as choosing the preference of "voice" over "exit" (Gunther and Hopkin 2002). However, if a party is too highly fragmented, factions may well choose exit over voice and leave the party. If the faction can expect to achieve electoral success outside the auspices of the party, this will increase its incentives to defect from the party as a whole. Therefore, when parties are highly fragmented, collective action becomes a problem. Factionalization, especially when combined with the threat of defection, impedes the ability of the party to act as a unit at a time when strong unitary action may be needed (Hazan 2000). Thus, the number and relative power of factions within a party will affect the cohesion and stability of the party.

Not all political scientists focus on size, congruence, and cohesion as tools for analyzing

the behavior of coalitions. For example, Laver and Shepsle outline a model of coalition formation and behavior called the “portfolio allocation model.” They argue that policy output in a given area of government is strongly affected by the party affiliation of the minister holding that portfolio. Kaarbo goes even further in her analysis of the behavior of coalitions and parties, evaluating the usefulness of eight additional hypotheses about coalition behavior (Kaarbo 1996). Although these scholars offer compelling models of coalition behavior, I will not be using them in this study. I am focusing only on the effects of Israel’s fragmented party system on the peace process, effects which are reflected primarily in the large number of ideologically disparate parties needed to form a governing coalition, and in the lack of cohesion of individual parties. Tsebelis’ model of veto players is the most relevant to these issues; therefore, it will constitute the theoretical backbone of my study.

There are also alternate visions of what factors determine the outcome of peace negotiations between Israel and its adversaries. Abraham Diskin (1996) analyzed the effects of violence on voters’ support for the peace process. Diplomatic miscalculations and strategic mistakes have been cited by others as the main factors that have stymied peace negotiations (Rabinovich 2004, Zisser 2001). Israeli sociologist Baruch Kimmerling argues that the weakness of Israel’s peace movements has strengthened the anti-peace camp, while Rashid Khalidi attributes much of the blame for failed peace attempts to the United States’ biased position on the conflict (Kimmerling 2003, Khalidi 2004). While the interaction of the factors listed above has undoubtedly contributed to the failure of peace, one aspect of the issue that is understudied in the literature is the effect of Israel’s political institutions on peace negotiations. This study does not seek to replace the cited factors by formulating one all-encompassing reason for the failure of peace. Rather, it will extend the literature on the Arab-Israeli-Palestinian conflict and will help provide a more nuanced understanding of why peace has been so difficult to achieve.

## Methods of Analysis

The dependent variable in this study is the success or failure of bilateral peace negotiations between Israel and its Arab enemies from 1992 to 2001.<sup>2</sup> I have chosen four case studies for this evaluation:

1. The Oslo Accords, 1993, 1995
2. Wye Memorandum Agreement, 1998
3. Negotiations with Syria, 1999-2000
4. Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, 2000-2001 (including the Camp David Summit)

These cases are representative because they are distributed across the time period under consideration, showing how the independent variables affected the peace process over time. Furthermore, they represent a variety of types of negotiations with both state and non-state actors, allowing us to evaluate the effects of the independent variables across the range of several kinds of peace negotiations. During the selected time period, there were three different governing coalitions and four different prime ministers.<sup>3</sup> This allows us to see the effect of several coalitions and party structures on the peace process.

There are three independent variables in this study: the number of parties in the coalition, the ideological congruence of the coalition, and the cohesion of the senior coalition party.

*A) Size of the coalition:* As Tsebelis has argued, a greater number of veto players hinders the ability of the government to pass legislation when change is needed (Tsebelis 1995). With more parties participating in a coalition, the number of veto players increases. According to Tsebelis' theory, the presence of more parties in government should result in greater difficulty in pursuing controversial peace negotiations. To measure this variable, I will count the number of parties in each coalition government from 1992 to 2001.

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<sup>2</sup> I have excluded Israeli actions that were implemented unilaterally, such as the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Lebanon in 2000. Because peace is a two-sided process that must include all the actors involved, instances of unilateral disengagement do not constitute a true peace agreement.

<sup>3</sup> When Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated on November 4, 1995, Shimon Peres became prime minister of the Knesset until new elections were held in May of 1996.



*B) Ideological congruence of the coalition:* I will measure coalitions' congruence by looking at the ideological orientation of each of their component parties. Israel's party system can be grouped into five broad categories along the political spectrum: Religious, Right, Center, Left, and Arab. Unlike the American political spectrum, placement along this spectrum in Israel is usually determined by a party's position on national security and peace concerns (Kop and Litan 2002). In this study, I will follow the party groupings outlined by Don Peretz, et al. in their articles on Israel's 1999 and 2003 elections.<sup>4</sup> A coalition with a high degree of ideological polarization is less cohesive, which, according to Tsebelis' and Hazan's theories, should hinder successful peacemaking. In the absence of congruence, the government coalition's ability to act in unity to implement peace negotiations will be impaired.

*C) Party cohesion:* According to the veto player theory, less party cohesion should lead to less potential for policy change (Tsebelis 1995). Additionally, as Hazan has argued, when the key party in a governing coalition is unable to maintain unity, the government's entire peace agenda is jeopardized (Hazan 2000). In this study, I will evaluate the cohesion of only the largest party in each coalition, as it is the coalition partner with the most responsibility in the peace process. I will measure party cohesion by looking at party nomination procedures and the degree of factionalization in a party faced with controversial peace negotiations.

Decentralization in party nomination procedures and the presence of many factions within the party lessen the party's cohesion. Cohesion varies from highly cohesive to factionalized.

The goal of this article is to add to our understanding of the ways in which domestic constraints affect the Arab-Israeli peace process. By applying the veto player theory to the internal complexities and fragmentation of Israel's government, I hope to extend the research on the ways in which institutional constraints affect the outcome of peace negotiations.

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendix A for a listing of the orientations of each of Israel's main parties.

## **The Governments of Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres, 1992-1996**

This study begins with the election of Yitzhak Rabin in 1992. Rabin's government was made up of three parties with a slim majority of 62 seats in the 120-member Knesset.<sup>5</sup> His foreign minister was Shimon Peres, and both men were ardent advocates of the peace process. The greatest legacy of the Rabin government was its negotiation of the Declaration of Principles (also known as Oslo I) in 1993 and the Interim Agreement (or Oslo II) in 1995. However, Rabin's agreement to the Oslo Accords was also his most controversial act; it led to his assassination on November 4, 1995. After Rabin's death, Peres took over the government until he was ousted by Netanyahu in the May 1996 elections.

### ***The Oslo Accords, 1993 & 1995***

The Oslo Accords were groundbreaking, not only in their security, strategic, and territorial concerns, but also for their historical, political, and ideological implications (Bar-Siman-Tov 2001). In the Declaration of Principles (DOP) and the subsequent letters of Mutual Recognition, Rabin and Arafat each recognized the other's legitimacy and right to existence. The DOP also set up deadlines for future negotiations over matters left unresolved at the time of the signing ceremony in September 1993. These negotiations were to lead to the election of a Palestinian governing authority, the withdrawal of Israeli troops from most of the West Bank in specified stages, and finally, an independent Palestinian state.

On his return from the signing ceremony in Washington, Rabin was widely criticized in Israel for legitimizing the PLO and was accused of "giving away parts of the Jews' historic homeland and undermining the security of Israel and Israelis" (Rabinovich 2004: 57). However, despite the criticism from outside, Rabin faced little controversy over the plan within his own party. Ironically, at the time of Oslo I, the deepest division in the party was entirely dissociated

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<sup>5</sup> See Appendix B, Table 2 for full details on the makeup of the coalition.

with the peace process. Rather, it was related to a health bill that was introduced by Minister of Health Haim Ramon but opposed by 13 Labor MKs at its initial reading. Ramon threatened to resign if the bill was not backed by the entire party. This seemingly minor issue created a split that eventually undermined the internal structure of the party (Hazan 2000). At the time, though, this internal division had no effect on Rabin's efforts to win the Knesset's approval of the DOP.

The crisis that almost derailed the passage of the DOP in the Knesset was Shas' defection from the coalition government. Just before the Knesset vote on the DOP, a Supreme Court judge ordered two Shas ministers to resign from the cabinet because of their indictment on charges of fraud and accepting bribes. The ruling did not affect Shas' legal capacity to stay in the coalition, but the party was under mounting pressure from its constituents to dissociate itself from what right-wingers called "national suicide" (*Boston Herald*, 9 Sept. 1993). Thus, under orders from Shas' "spiritual mentor," Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, Shas stepped down from the government (*Boston Herald* 1993).<sup>6</sup> Shas' departure left Rabin with only a 56-member coalition. Nonetheless, with the help of the Arab parties, the DOP was passed in the Knesset with a 61-50 vote.

Around this time, the Labor Party began to suffer from problems of internal disunity. In 1994, Health Minister Ramon resigned from his post and created a breakaway party to run in the elections for the Histadrut, Labor's core affiliate organization. Ramon's party won the election, and Labor lost control of the Histadrut for the first time in history. In addition, Labor's other traditional party base, the kibbutz movement, was weakened by financial difficulties. For Labor, these losses were a catastrophe, and the party "entered a crisis period" (Hazan 2000: 367). In 1995, several Labor MKs formed the Third Way faction, which was committed to fighting the withdrawal of Israeli troops from the Golan Heights. In October, this faction officially split from Labor and announced the establishment of its own party.

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<sup>6</sup>According to the *Boston Herald*, Yosef was a fundamentalist rabbi "who has, in the past, prayed publicly for the deaths of anti-religious [government] ministers and has called down the wrath of Heaven on Shas opponents" (9 Sept. 1993).

Meanwhile, the provisions of the DOP were proving more difficult to implement than its optimistic deadlines had anticipated. A surge in violence by both sides led to security crackdowns and increased popular resistance to the accords among Israelis and Palestinians alike. However, despite the setbacks and delays, negotiations continued; they resulted in the eventual Interim Agreement of September 1995. In Israel, opposition to the Interim Agreement was even more intense than the outcry against the DOP: the agreement passed in the Knesset with only a two-vote majority. Two members of Labor's Third Way faction voted against the agreement. Had the third member also voted against it, "the entire peace process and the government might have collapsed" (Hazan 2000: 370).

Just two months after the Interim Agreement was passed in the Knesset, a militant Jewish extremist assassinated Rabin. Shimon Peres took over the government, but by February 1996, he had reached the limit of what he could accomplish without destroying the party's chances for reelection in May. The redeployment of Israeli troops in the West Bank and further negotiations on the Israeli-Palestinian track were impossible. The Oslo Accords had reached a standstill.

*A) Size of the coalition:* Rabin's coalition of only three parties was relatively small compared to those of his successors; with Shas' departure it became even smaller. According to Tsebelis' theory, the small number of veto players in the government should have made it easy to pursue peace negotiations. Rabin certainly had no difficulty in reaching agreements with the Palestinians or in winning acceptance of them by his coalition. Therefore, the number of coalition partners alone cannot explain the difficulty Rabin's government experienced when trying to capitalize on the opportunities for peace provided by the Oslo Accords.

*B) Ideological congruence of the coalition:* As the veto player theory predicts, the ideological congruence of the government enhanced Rabin's ability to change the status quo by negotiating and implementing the Oslo Accords. Shas' departure from the government did not

prevent the DOP from actually being passed and put into effect, though it was without the “Jewish majority” demanded by many Israelis. The homogeneity of the coalition even added to the efficiency with which the government could implement the terms of the agreement (Bar-Siman Tov 2001). However, after Rabin’s assassination, Peres was unable to fully capitalize on the existing opportunities for peace. Despite its ideological congruence, his minority coalition was just not large enough to provide him with sufficient support for implementing the remaining terms of the Oslo Accords. In this sense, the polarization of the coalition had a large effect indeed. If Shas had remained in the coalition and had remained supportive of the peace process, Peres’ ability to implement the Accords would have been greatly strengthened.

*C) Party cohesion:* Upon his appointment as head of the Labor Party Knesset faction in January 1995, MK Ra’anan Cohen stated that “because of the problems of lack of unity, pessimism, lack of mutual consideration, and internal criticism, there have been breakdowns [in the party’s functioning]” (*Jerusalem Post*, 31 Jan. 1995). The Labor party was wracked with severe internal disunity and strife caused by the party’s rules for nomination procedures and the degree of factionalization within the party.

Labor had adopted a system of primaries for party offices that took effect in the 1992 elections. The new nominating system had an immediate effect on the cohesion of the party. As the peace process soured and Labor ministers began to think about the possibility of the party’s defeat in the next elections, they no longer stood behind Rabin in unity (Hazan 2000). Internal speculation over whether Rabin would run for reelection, coupled with the declarations of several party members that they would run against him, eroded the cohesion of the party. Under the old system, party leaders would have held firm control over the nominations for party offices.

Rabin’s tenuous majority in the wake of Shas’ departure from the coalition made the cohesion of the Labor Party vitally important for the success of the Oslo Accords (Hazan 2000).

While Labor began its term in office with a low degree of factionalization, the unity of the party was soon destroyed because of the loss of its two core support organizations. This loss, along with Third Way's departure from the coalition, marked the high degree of factionalization in the party. In fact, Labor had become so fractured that "Rabin, when speaking about the party, began to use the term 'anarchy' quite frequently" (Hazan 2000: 369).

Hazan argues that the events of the peace process and the cohesion of Labor were interrelated. Lack of cohesion in the party made it unable to pursue peace effectively, which hampered the peace process. This in turn further splintered the party in a downward spiral of disunity and lost opportunities for peace. When Rabin was assassinated in November 1995, the internal strife of the party was forgotten for a while as the party stood solidly behind Peres. However, Peres' four months as prime minister of a united party were far too short to rectify the problems that party disunity had already created. The peace process had been dealt a sharp blow by Labor's internal disunity.

### **The Government of Binyamin Netanyahu, 1996-1999**

Binyamin Netanyahu's election in 1996 marked the beginning of Israel's two-ballot electoral experiment. The effects of this experiment immediately became clear, as the Knesset splintered into even more parties and factions than had existed in previous years.<sup>7</sup> As a result, Netanyahu's coalition included eight parties, only four of which had obtained more than four seats in the Knesset.<sup>8</sup> However, the coalition was fairly ideologically congruent, consisting overwhelmingly of religious and rightist parties. Although Netanyahu was opposed to the Oslo Accords and did his best to avoid implementing them, he was forced to make two steps under the

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<sup>7</sup>In 1992, Israel adopted a hybrid parliamentary system in which the prime minister was elected separately from the party lists. This system was designed to give the prime minister greater control over the government through a direct mandate from the people. However, it further splintered the party system, as it enabled voters to choose their party of choice independently from the prime ministerial candidate they preferred (Hazan 1997, Samuels 2002).

<sup>8</sup> See Appendix B, Table 3 for full details on the makeup of the coalition.

framework of the Accords: the Hebron redeployment of 1997 and the Wye Memorandum peace negotiation of 1998. This section will focus only on the Wye Memorandum agreement.

### ***Wye Memorandum Agreement, 1998***

Despite his resistance to the Oslo agreements, the United States pressured Netanyahu into going to the Wye Plantation in Maryland for peace negotiations with the Palestinians in the autumn of 1998. The negotiations were an attempt to complete the redeployment of troops specified in the Hebron Agreement (but never implemented by Netanyahu) and to fulfill the final terms of Oslo II. The Wye Memorandum stated that the Palestinians would take more stringent measures to combat terrorism and would remove the clauses from their national charter that called for the destruction of Israel. In return, Israel would implement the troop redeployments of the Hebron Agreement and would allow the Palestinians to open an airport that had already been built in Gaza. The Wye Memorandum also declared that final-status negotiations would begin immediately and would be completed by May 4, 1999.

Opposition to Netanyahu from within his own coalition began with the signing of the Hebron Agreement in 1997. Critics of the agreement denounced Netanyahu for giving away too much, while supporters of the Oslo Accords condemned him for doing too little to promote peace (Smith 2004). Caught between these two sides, Netanyahu found himself in a precarious political position. At this time, analysts began to note Netanyahu's propensity to promise one thing to some of his constituents, the exact opposite to others, and something entirely different to the United States (*The Economist*, 10 Jan. 1998). His contradictory actions were the result of the delicate balancing act he needed to do if he was to keep his coalition intact and retain his position as prime minister while resisting pressure from the United States. Netanyahu was able to maintain this balancing act for a year following the Hebron Agreement by refusing to implement many of its provisions.

On January 6, 1998, Foreign Minister David Levy and his five-member Gesher party left the coalition. Levy resigned in a dispute with the government over its economic policies and the stalled peace process (*The Economist*, 10 Jan. 1998). With the departure of Gesher, Netanyahu's coalition was reduced to a bare majority of 61 seats, increasing the importance of the remaining parties. Now, his ability to stay in power rested on his ability to prevent another defection from the coalition. His coalition partners were aware of their new bargaining power; in the nine days after Gesher left the coalition, every single partner except Yisrael B'Aliyah threatened to quit, many over issues related to the peace process (*Times Union*, 15 Jan 1998).

Netanyahu managed to ride his coalition's internal tensions and fear of a Labor takeover until October 1998, when his signing of the Wye Memorandum created chaos in the fractured government. By December, his finance minister had quit and the defense minister was threatening to do so. Netanyahu's attempts to please hawks and doves alike by making modest concessions but finding a way not to implement them displeased all involved. Doves decried the way in which the Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations had degenerated into a crisis, while hawks lamented his failure to destroy the Oslo Accords (*Irish Times* 1998). Likud's Knesset base had been eroded to 19 party members, and defections from the remaining coalition parties reduced the coalition to only 45 MKs. The peace process had stalled, and the government fell.

*A) Size of the coalition:* Despite its ideological congruence, the size of Netanyahu's coalition played an important role in the stalemate of the peace process during his term in office. The coalition consisted almost entirely of rightist and religious parties that were opposed to the Oslo Accords. Netanyahu's supporters hoped he would suspend the peace efforts that had already been put in motion, while the peace camp urged him to continue taking new steps towards peace. However, even with his ideologically congruent coalition, he was unable either to derail the Accords entirely or to implement them fully. Tsebelis' theory states that the greater



the number of veto players, the harder it will be to change the status quo, leading to policy stability. Policy stability was certainly a defining feature of the peace process under Netanyahu; Rabinovich describes Netanyahu's term as "the years of stagnation" (Rabinovich 2004: 78). The many competing demands from Netanyahu's coalition, coupled with the parties' constant threats to resign, hindered his ability either to negotiate or to break off peace agreements. In this case, the size of the coalition played a crucial role in Netanyahu's inability to act decisively on the peace process.

*B) Ideological congruence of the coalition:* Netanyahu's coalition partners undoubtedly had ideological differences, or he would not have been forced to make them contradictory promises. However, these ideological differences are not entirely accounted for by the parties' placement on the political spectrum as defined in Appendix A. This indicates that there are important ideological divisions even within the groupings I have selected for this study. These divisions played an important role in the fall of Netanyahu's coalition, as they created a situation in which he displeased one or more coalition partners no matter what choices he made. His precarious political position, the result of the polarization of the veto players in his own government, kept him in a wobbly balance atop the status quo.

*C) Party cohesion:* Like Labor before it, Likud's internal cohesion during its time in office was severely strained by the effects of its use of primary elections for party offices. Labor's electoral success in 1992 was perceived as being partially a result of its new nominating procedures. Thus, Likud adopted party primaries immediately after the 1992 election. The 1996 elections marked the first concurrence of the systems of direct election of the prime minister and the direct election of the party lists through primaries. The result of these two factors was a sharp decrease in party cohesion on all sides (Hazan 1999).

The decreased cohesion that resulted from Likud's adoption of party primaries was

reflected in the increased factionalization of the party. In 1996, Likud-Gesher-Tzomet had formed what Jonathan Mendilow (1982) calls a “conglomerate block” party cluster. According to Mendilow, this is an alliance of parties formed for reasons of political expediency. However, he argues that there is a precarious balance between the need to maintain unity among the constituent components and the desire of each component to retain its own identity (Mendilow 1982). Indeed, the Likud-Gesher-Tzomet alignment fell apart over the years: Gesher left the coalition, while Tzomet split from Likud but remained in the coalition. Additionally, three MKs left the party to establish Herut, while four MKs left and established Israel in the Center. By the end of its term in office, as a result of decentralization in nominating procedures and factionalization, the Likud-Gesher-Tzomet block had been eroded to a single party with a mere 19 seats. Had Likud-Gesher-Tzomet maintained its cohesion, Netanyahu’s support base would have grown, enabling him to better implement his own peace plans.

### **The Government of Ehud Barak, 1999-2001**

Ehud Barak entered office in 1999 after winning a campaign based on the assertion that, as “the strongest country in a thousand miles,” Israel must get rid of its “ghetto anxiety that we are still surrounded by demons.” He promised to “start with peace [in order to] achieve security” (*The New York Times* 1999). At the same time, he appealed to the settler bloc by taking a less confrontational stance against it than Rabin had in 1995 (Smith 2004). After comfortably winning the election, Barak formed a coalition that consisted of seven parties comprising 77 seats in the Knesset, well over the number needed for a majority.<sup>9</sup> Barak had chosen to form a coalition with Shas and the other Orthodox religious parties in the hope that they would support his peace efforts in return for concessions on domestic issues. His choice was questioned by a

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<sup>9</sup> See Appendix B, Table 4 for full details on the makeup of the coalition.

significant portion of Israel's foreign policy and domestic security establishment. These people wondered "whether a government resting on a fragile coalition would be able to complete agreements entailing significant concessions on both the Syrian and Palestinian tracks" (Rabinovich 2004: 126). As these analysts predicted, the instability of Barak's large and ideologically disparate coalition would come to haunt him over the next three years as he pursued peace negotiations with Syria and the Palestinians.

### *Negotiations with Syria, 1999-2000*

Barak began his term in office by initiating Syrian-Israeli peace talks. The issues at hand in the negotiations with Syria were threefold: first, there was the question of control over the Golan Heights and the borders between Israel and Syria. The second issue was that of an early-warning system that would enable Israel to be prepared for potential military or terrorist attacks, and the third issue dealt with water rights and the tributaries of Lake Tiberias (Smith 2000).

The talks began in December 1999, with two rounds of negotiations taking place in Washington, D.C. and Shepherdstown, Virginia. Progress seemed likely, as the head of the Syrian delegation, Faruq al-Shara, made a public statement that the conflict with Israel "was no longer existential, but territorial" (Rabinovich 2004: 132). Barak, also, seemed willing and able to strike a compromise. However, in reality, reaching an agreement between the two sides was more difficult than many had imagined. The primary obstacle was the issue of borders; as a precondition for further negotiations, Syria insisted on Israel's agreement to return to the pre-1967 borders, but Israel refused to make such an agreement until Syria showed some flexibility in drawing those boundaries. Furthermore, popular protest in Israel and opposition within his coalition to the proposed concessions may have given Barak "cold feet" (Rabinovich 2004). The Syrian-Israeli peace negotiations broke down after only three months. There were many factors involved in the failure of these negotiations, but one of the primary ones was the instability of

Barak's governing coalition.<sup>10</sup> This instability must be examined in the context of the three independent variables of this study.

*A) Size of the coalition:* Because of the Knesset's fragmentation in the wake of the 1996 electoral reforms, the largest party in the legislature was One Israel, with only 26 seats. Barak was forced to court many other parties to form a majority, some of which were ideologically at odds with his campaign platform. As Tsebelis' theory predicts, the larger number of veto players did make it harder to negotiate a peace agreement. However, in this case, importance of the coalition's size is primarily due to its effect on the ideological congruence of the coalition.

*B) Ideological congruence of the coalition:* The parties in Barak's coalition were highly scattered across the ideological spectrum. At the time of his election, there was already much resistance to Barak's peace plans within his cabinet, based on rightist opposition to territorial concessions. As the Syrian-Israeli peace talks progressed, opposition in the Knesset increased, and there were large public demonstrations against Barak's policies. Most of this controversy stemmed from the issue of withdrawal from the Golan Heights, especially the northeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Two coalition parties, the National Religious Party (NRP) and Yisrael B'Aliyah, had announced from the start "that they would oppose concessions on the Golan Heights, and threatened to leave the government if it reached a peace agreement that included complete withdrawal" (Zisser 2001: 244). The NRP, Yisrael B'Aliyah, and Shas actively worked to undermine Barak's negotiating efforts by supporting a bill in the Knesset that required a 50% majority of *all registered voters* to approve the referendum on territorial concessions in the Golan Heights (Zisser 2001).<sup>11</sup> Given that the Israeli public was so evenly split over the issue of withdrawal from the region, these parties were no doubt aware that the new bill would

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<sup>10</sup>See Zisser 2001 and Rabinovich 2004 for excellent analyses of the effects that Syrian President Hafez Al-Assad's failing health, Israeli popular resistance to proposed concessions, and poor diplomatic leadership on both sides had on the dissolution of these talks.

<sup>11</sup> While in office, Yizhak Rabin voiced his support for a national referendum to be held on territorial concessions in the Golan Heights. All the subsequent prime ministers, including Barak, reiterated this commitment (Zisser 2001).

make it practically impossible for any territorial concessions to ever pass in a referendum. Even if the negotiations with Syria had succeeded and then passed a Knesset vote, the actions of these three coalition members ensured that a withdrawal from the Golan Heights would never actually occur. Their efforts to undermine Barak's peace plan, even after he had taken a more hard-line stance to try to please them, "highlighted the pitfalls inherent in Barak's efforts to appease a militant opposition *that included parties in his own coalition*" (Smith 2004, emphasis added).

*C) Party cohesion:* The negative effects of party primaries, as noted above, likely decreased Labor's cohesion within the One Israel party block. In spite of One Israel's displeasure at the inclusion of the Orthodox religious parties and the ministries they were awarded, there was little factionalization within the party cluster, which was comprised of Labor, Meimad, and Gesher (Official Knesset Elections Website). Unlike the Likud-Gesher-Tzomet alignment of the previous government, One Israel remained mostly intact and saw the net loss of only one seat in the Knesset.<sup>12</sup> The lack of factionalization in One Israel made it relatively cohesive. However, with only 25 seats, One Israel did not have enough power in the coalition to make its cohesion a decisive factor in favor of peace.

### ***Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations, 2000-2001***

With the failure of the Syrian-Israeli negotiations, Barak turned once again to the Israeli-Palestinian track. He hoped for better success in these negotiations, which dealt with a variety of final-status issues left unresolved by the Oslo Accords. However, the size and ideological polarization of Barak's coalition began to have a negative effect on these peace talks long before they actually began. As the price of its participation in his coalition, Barak had been forced to give the post of Housing Minister to the NRP. The NRP was an avid proponent of settlement in the occupied territories; during the first months of Barak's term, the pace of building new

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<sup>12</sup> There was one defection from and one addition to the party cluster.

settlements was higher than under any previous prime minister (Smith 2004). The dramatic increase in the pace of settlement created distrust among Palestinians as to Barak's integrity and his willingness to be a true peace partner (Rabinovich 2004, Smith 2004). This distrust eventually compromised the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations that began in March 2000.

The issues in these final-status negotiations were of enormous import. The most controversial matters concerned control of Jerusalem and the amount of land that was to be handed over to Palestinian authority. The peace talks began in May in Stockholm, where Barak offered to give the Palestinians sovereignty in about two-thirds of the West Bank in three non-contiguous areas.<sup>13</sup> Yasser Arafat rejected this proposal. He argued that the Palestinians could not give up that much of the West Bank, and that they must have sovereignty over all of East Jerusalem. At the July Camp David conference following the Stockholm talks, Barak again set forth his offers, which Arafat again rejected. Arafat also steadfastly stuck to his position on the "right of return" for all Palestinians who had left Israel, a proposal which Israel had consistently and resolutely opposed. Given the lack of common ground between Barak and Arafat, right from the start of the negotiations, all involved had expected them to be difficult. They were further complicated by constraints imposed on Barak by his fractured coalition government.

As the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations kicked off, the biggest split in Barak's coalition had nothing to do with the peace process. Rather, it came from "the dovish Meretz party's threat to secede from the government in a quarrel [with Shas] over funds for ultra-Orthodox schools" (*The Economist*, 13 May 2000). Since Shas had seventeen seats in the Knesset compared to Meretz's ten, Barak decided to "jettison" Meretz in return for an agreement from Shas that it would support Barak's position on Jerusalem (Smith 2004). In making this decision, Barak counted on continued Meretz support for his peace plan from outside the coalition. Despite the

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<sup>13</sup>Under Barak's plan, Israel would retain about 14% of the West Bank as a temporary security control area, to be transferred to Palestinian control after about twenty years. Israel would also keep East and West Jerusalem, but would give the Palestinians control over Abu Dis, a suburb of the city (Rabinovich 2004, Smith 2004).

loss of Meretz, Barak was left with a still-comfortable 68-seat majority in the Knesset.

However, this majority did not survive for long. On July 10, just before Barak was to attend the Camp David summit, a wave of resignations from the coalition suddenly left him without a majority in the Knesset. The resignations began with Shas, which finally withdrew from the coalition in the culmination of the dispute over funding for religious schools. Although Shas had initially agreed to support Barak's "land-for-peace" strategy, many analysts suspect that its departure from the coalition was also due to last-minute "jitters" over possible territorial concessions to the Palestinians (*The Economist*, July 2000).

Shas's decision to step down was quickly followed by the resignations of the NRP and Yisrael B'Aliyah. The NRP announced that it was resigning in protest over possible concessions to the Palestinians at the Camp David summit. It was strictly opposed to any territorial concessions regarding Jerusalem, even one as mild as Barak's plan. The NRP announced that it would leave the coalition the minute Abu Dis was transferred to Palestinian control. After a failed attempt to convince the NRP that this small concession would actually strengthen Israel's ability to hold on to all of East Jerusalem, Barak found himself fighting to prevent the NRP's position on Jerusalem from influencing Yisrael B'Aliyah (*The Economist*, May 2000).

Unfortunately, Barak was unsuccessful at preventing Yisrael B'Aliyah's departure from the coalition. The July wave of resignations stripped Barak of his parliamentary majority, eroding his coalition to a mere 42 members of the 120-seat Knesset right before he was to commence a major round of negotiations with the Palestinians at Camp David. At this point, his hopes for a successful conclusion of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations rested on his ability to scrape together another majority just long enough to complete the negotiations and put them in a referendum to the general public. Although the talks dragged on for several more months, the two sides were unable to reach a compromise. With the dual losses of his coalition and his

dream of achieving a comprehensive peace settlement, Barak was forced to call new elections.

*A) Size of the coalition:* Because of the Knesset's fragmentation, Barak needed to recruit many parties for his coalition in order to turn One Israel's 26 seats into a governing majority. As the price for their participation in the government, several of these parties demanded certain controversial ministries, setting the stage for later conflict and instability in the coalition. Had Barak not been forced to include so many parties in his coalition, the conflicts over the housing and education ministries might never have come up. Thus, he could have avoided much of the coalition's instability. As the veto player theory predicts, the large number of veto players in Barak's coalition had a strong influence on the policy stability of the government. Barak was unable to negotiate or implement new peace legislation.

*B) Ideological congruence of the coalition:* With the loss of his parliamentary majority, Barak's political survival depended on the outcome of the Camp David efforts. However, the decimation of his coalition weakened his position at the negotiating table. With new elections looming over Barak's head, progress on the Israeli-Palestinian talks was practically impossible. The political constraints imposed on him by the ideological polarization of the veto players in his cabinet made his efforts futile; without the support of a unified majority coalition, he was unable to capitalize on the opportunity to negotiate a final-status agreement with the Palestinians.

*C) Party cohesion:* As in the Syrian-Israeli negotiations, the cohesion of the senior coalition party is a minor factor in this case. One Israel was fairly cohesive and unified in its support of Barak. However, its few seats in the Knesset diminished the influence of its cohesion on the outcome of the Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations.

### **Conclusion: Parties, Coalitions, and Peacemaking in Israel, 1992-2001**

From 1992 to 2001, Israel faced a series of historic opportunities for peace. However, its



governments were unable to capitalize on the openings provided or to deepen past peace processes. Looking at Israel's governments through Tsebelis' veto player theory provides a partial explanation for their apparent inability to take advantage of these opportunities for peace. As I have argued, the large size and ideological polarization of Israel's governing coalitions, along with the factionalization of its largest parties, created constraints that prevented its governments from negotiating and implementing new peace settlements.

Tsebelis' theory postulates that the more veto players there are in government, the more difficult it will be to change the status quo. Proof of this statement can be seen in Israel's governing coalitions, where larger coalitions, such as Ehud Barak's, had a harder time pushing for peace settlements. However, the primary importance of coalition size is through its effect on congruence: in each of the cases under consideration, when more parties were included in the coalition, it became more polarized. Thus, size and congruence interact to influence peace.

A lasting peace in Israel will not come about without significant concessions on the parts of all actors involved; therefore, any effective peace legislation is sure to be controversial. As this study has shown, this becomes a problem in a government that is made up of ideologically disparate parties. Congruence in Israel's coalition has been vital to the government's ability to pursue peace settlements. In coalitions that were highly polarized, it was exceedingly difficult for the prime minister to gain support for his peace efforts from within the coalition. These findings are consistent with the veto player theory, which argues that as ideological polarization increases, policy stability also increases. However, general ideological congruence alone is not enough to tip the scales in favor of peace. For example, in Netanyahu's government, there were ideological differences even in coalitions made up of parties from the same end of the political spectrum. Given the detailed terms that were under discussion in the post-Oslo peace negotiations and the deep divisions in Israeli society over the many facets of the peace process, it

is not surprising to find polarization even within a “congruent” coalition. This finding highlights the importance of ideological congruence as a factor for peace; successful peace settlements rest on the coalition’s ability to stand in unity behind them.

In accordance with Tsebelis’ theory, party cohesion had a strong influence as a factor in peacemaking in the years before the two-ballot electoral experiment began. However, with the beginning of this experiment, both Likud and Labor lost heavily to small, special-interest parties (Hazan 1999). The new electoral system fragmented Israel’s coalitions to such a degree that the senior coalition party’s influence declined dramatically and with it, the importance of the party’s cohesion as a variable in the ability of governments to capitalize on opportunities for peace.

This study has shown how institutional factors may affect the peace process in three different governments: Rabin’s government, which was small and ideologically congruent, was able both to negotiate and implement the Oslo Accords. However, his party’s lack of cohesion eventually had a negative influence on peace. Netanyahu, with a large but congruent coalition, negotiated both the Hebron Agreement and the Wye Memorandum, though he did not fully implement either one and eventually lost his seat due to divisions over the agreements within the coalition. Barak, the man who aspired to set the Oslo process back in motion, failed to successfully complete negotiations with either Syria or the Palestinians as a result of his large, ideologically polarized coalition.

Israel’s apparent inability to take advantage of opportunities for comprehensive peace settlements cannot be explained entirely by looking at its party structure and its fragmented coalitions. In fact, these variables are only a small part of the reasons the conflict has continued for so long. However, if peace is ever to be achieved in the Arab-Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Israel must learn how to harness the divisions in its governments in such a way as to maximize the government’s ability to act decisively to capitalize on opportunities for peace.

## APPENDIX A: Placement of Israel's parties on the political spectrum

Table 1 displays the orientation of Israel's most significant parties from 1992 to 2001.

**Table 1:**

<b>Orientation</b>	<b>Party Name</b>
Religious	Shas National Religious Party (Religious/Right) United Torah Judaism (Religious/Right)
Right	Likud Molodet National Unity Tzomet Yisrael B'Aliyah (Right/Russian) Yisrael Beiteinu (Right/Russian)
Center	Center Party (formerly Israel in the Center) Gesher (Center/Right) Shinui Third Way Yi'ud (Center/Right)
Left	Am Ehud Labor Meretz One Israel (alliance of Labor, Gesher, Meimad) Yahad
Arab	Balad Hadash United Arab List

(Sources: Peretz et al. 2000 & 2003, *The Knesset in the Government System*, Jewish Agency for Israel.)

## APPENDIX B: Israel's Governing Coalitions, 1992-2001

Tables 2-4 show the makeup of each of the governing coalitions, the orientations of the participating parties, and the distribution of seats within the coalitions. Parties that joined and left coalitions are indicated, as are factions of the senior coalition partner that defected from the party. The final column of each table displays the number of seats each party retained before the next elections, showing the erosion of parties and the extent of faction-hopping. (*Sources: Jewish Agency for Israel, The Knesset in the Government System.*)

**Table 2:** Twenty-fifth and twenty-sixth governments, formed in July 1992 and November 1996  
Prime Ministers: Yitzhak Rabin (until his assassination in Nov. 1995) and Shimon Peres.

<i>Party</i>	<i>Orientation</i>	<i>Number of seats</i>	<i>Number of seats left before next elections</i>
Labor <sup>1</sup>	Left	44	41
Meretz	Left	12	12
Shas <sup>2</sup>	Religious	6	—
Yi'ud <sup>3</sup>	Center	0	1
<b>Total = 3</b>		<b>Total = 62<sup>4</sup></b>	<b>Total = 54</b>

<sup>1</sup>Three members of Labor left the coalition and formed a new party, Third Way.

<sup>2</sup>Shas left the coalition on September 14, 1993.

<sup>3</sup>Yi'ud was established by MKs who left Tzomet. It joined the coalition on January 9, 1995.

<sup>4</sup>When Shas left the coalition, the government became a minority coalition with 56 seats. When Yi'ud joined the coalition in 1995, the total number of seats increased to 57. Throughout its tenure, the government enjoyed the support of five MKs from outside the coalition.

**Table 3:** Twenty-seventh government, formed in June 1996  
Prime Minister: Binyamin Netanyahu

<i>Party</i>	<i>Orientation</i>	<i>Number of Seats</i>	<i>Number of seats left before next elections</i>
Likud-Gesher-Tzomet <sup>1</sup>	Right	32	19
Shas	Religious	10	10
National Religious Party	Religious/Right	9	7
Yisrael B'Aliyah	Right/Russian	7	5
United Torah Judaism	Religious/Right	1	1
Third Way	Center	4	3
<b>Total = 8</b>		<b>Total = 66<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>Total = 45</b>

<sup>1</sup>The five members of Gesher left the coalition on January 6, 1998. Over the course of Netanyahu's term, three MKs left the party and established Herut, four MKs left and established Israel in the Center, and three MKs left and established Tzomet. The party changed its name to Likud.

<sup>2</sup>The government also had the support of two MKs from outside the coalition.

**Table 4:** Twenty-eighth government, formed in July 1999  
Prime Minister: Ehud Barak

<i>Party</i>	<i>Orientation</i>	<i>Number of Seats</i>	<i>Number of seats left before next elections</i>
One Israel <sup>1</sup>	Left	26	25
Shas <sup>2</sup>	Religious	17	—
Meretz <sup>3</sup>	Left	10	—
Center Party <sup>4</sup>	Center	6	3
National Religious Party <sup>5</sup>	Religious/Right	5	—
United Torah Judaism <sup>6</sup>	Religious/Right	5	—
Yisrael B'Aliyah <sup>7</sup>	Right/Russian	6	—
Am Ehad	Left	2	2
<b>Total = 7</b>		<b>Total = 77<sup>8</sup></b>	<b>Total = 30</b>

<sup>1</sup>Gesher left One Israel and New Way joined. The party changed its name to Labor-Meimad.

<sup>2</sup>Shas left the coalition in July 2000.

<sup>3</sup>Meretz left the coalition in May 2000.

<sup>4</sup>In the previous elections, Center Party was named Israel in the Center.

<sup>5</sup>The NRP left the coalition in July 2000.

<sup>6</sup>UTJ left the coalition in September 1999.

<sup>7</sup>Yisrael B'Aliyah left the coalition in July 2000.

<sup>8</sup>The government also had the support of ten MKs from outside the coalition.

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