

Netanyahu's Dilemma:

Coalition Tug-of-War

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Brief Analysis

With the first high-level, direct talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority in 16 months reaching an impasse just hours after they opened, pressures facing Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu are heating up. From Gaza come statements that Palestinians will talk only with Washington, which has already declared that the "ball is in Israel's court." From Washington come hints that U.S. mediation has reached its end, suggesting that Netanyahu will now have to vote "yea" or "nay" on the U.S. package deal to restart the Oslo interim process. But perhaps most important of all are the competing tugs on Netanyahu from his own coalition partners. Members of his own Likud party as well as from other parties that comprise his narrow coalition majority -- 61 out of 120 Knesset seats (see Knesset tally at end of article) -- have threatened to withdraw support if he does -- or, in some cases, if he does not -- complete a deal for the next phase of "further redeployment." In a process that has seen deadlines come and go over the years, the Knesset's adjournment date at the end of July is widely considered the final deadline for reaching an FRD agreement.

> Predictions of the collapse of Netanyahu's coalition have been made since he first took office; the speculation that Netanyahu has now gotten himself into a bind he can't possibly survive sounds more familiar than convincing. Nevertheless, it is important to understand the various political ultimata Netanyahu faces as he approaches these final days of July. Even the rules by which a coalition could be brought down have changed in recent years and are a key element of the calculations players make in staking out their internal bargaining positions.

The (Evolving) Rules: Israel's new electoral laws, first implemented in 1996, were at least partly an effort to limit the potential of small parties to blackmail larger blocs. The most widely known change was the direct election of the prime minister, replacing a parliamentary system of prime ministerial election. Under this new system, Netanyahu became the first Israeli prime minister whose party did not have a cabinet majority, with small parties ironically having more power than ever before. A lesser known but critical change was also made in the process of removing a government. The new system requires an absolute majority of 61 Knesset members for a measure of no confidence, a steeper challenge than the old rules, which required only a simple majority of MKs present to vote no-confidence. According to the new rules, a 61-vote no-confidence resolution triggers new elections for the Knesset as well as the Prime Minister. If a much larger majority of 80 MKs votes no-confidence then the Knesset stays and only the prime minister loses his job.

The risk calculation changed for Netanyahu on July 22, when the Knesset House Committee sent an unmistakable message by approving Labor MK Haim Ramon's amendment allowing votes of no-confidence during a Knesset recess. Before this, the period of July 29 to October 19 represented a moment when an FRD could not be approved by the Knesset, but neither could a vote of no confidence. The new amendment, which still has to pass a second reading if it is challenged by an MK from the plenum within fourteen days, would pave the way for members of the coalition who are threatening to leave based on decisions taken before the Knesset recess. Netanyahu started his term with a coalition majority of 66, but when David Levy left in January and took his four Geshet colleagues with him, the

government was left with a very bare majority of 61 out of 120 seats.

The (Evolving) Threats: Netanyahu faces two contradictory sets of ultimatums from factions within his coalition. On one hand, centrist elements in the cabinet have publicly declared their intention to quit the coalition if Netanyahu fails to reach an agreement with the PA by the time the Knesset adjourns. On the other hand, opponents of further territorial compromise have threatened to bring down the government if Netanyahu agrees to the U.S. proposal of a second "further redeployment" of 13 percent of the West Bank territory still in Israel's control.

Damned If He Does. . . Minister of Infrastructure Ariel Sharon leads a group of cabinet and Knesset members who have vowed to bolt the coalition if Netanyahu concludes an "unacceptable" deal with the Palestinians. Sharon has indicated that a withdrawal from any more than 9 percent would trigger his departure from the government. Minister of Agriculture (and Tsomet party head) Rafael Eitan has set even more stringent terms; he pledged to withdraw from the government, with the the four other Tsomet MKs, if Netanyahu agrees to any withdrawal above 7 percent. The National Religious Party (NRP) opposes any further territorial concessions, but has not specified a "line in the sand" percentage at which it too will mutiny.

. . . **And Damned If He Doesn't:** The most prominent of the pro-FRD cabinet grouping is Defense Minister Mordechai, a member of Netanyahu's own Likud party. Mordechai is the only member of the "Kitchen Cabinet," also comprised of Netanyahu, Sharon, and Minister of Industry and Trade Natan Sharansky (head of the Yisrael B'Aliya immigrants' party) who is strongly in favor of concluding a deal. Third Way leader Avigdor Kahalani recently warned Netanyahu that if the next phase of redeployment is not carried out his party's four Knesset seats would leave the government. Sharansky's own position is unclear -- he seems mostly exasperated with the process and has said he wants Netanyahu to reach a decision, one way or the other.

The Clock Is Ticking: So far Netanyahu has sought to reassure all sides that his final decision will be acceptable to them, but the time for being able to placate all sides within the coalition is coming rapidly to a close. Netanyahu has employed several strategies to withstand the seemingly inevitable desertion of the coalition by one group or another. One approach is to seek an opposition "insurance policy" to provide enough votes from Labor to offset the possible loss of coalition partners. While far short of a national unity government, this arrangement would extend beyond just the vote on a redeployment and include future votes (for a specified period of time) on no-confidence. Netanyahu has reportedly received a commitment from former Prime Minister Shimon Peres -- but not current Labor leader Ehud Barak -- that at least 10 Labor MKs will join the "safety net."

Seeking out the safety net has not precluded other strategies. For example, Netanyahu has actively sought to convince members of the NRP and other Oslo opponents in the cabinet that they are better off agreeing to a 13-percent redeployment under his stewardship than facing the sort of deal a Labor government would make. He is, in a sense, presenting himself to this constituency as the lesser of two evils. He has also tried to up the ante on his cabinet competitors by threatening that if they bolt the coalition, he will form a full-fledged National Unity Government with Labor. None of the opponents of a deal have openly accepted his attempts at persuasion, but they would have to take these possibilities into account before carrying out their threats to leave the coalition. Talk by top Netanyahu aides of early elections is generally interpreted as another attempt to intimidate coalition members opposed to a deal.

> Netanyahu's efforts at avoiding the collapse of his coalition seem to indicate a goal of making a further redeployment deal -- but not at the expense of his government. With Netanyahu situated between coalition members on his right and on his left, Israel's decision on a further redeployment depends largely on who in this triangular governing set-up blinks first.

Coalition MKs: Likud, 22; Shas, 10; NRP, 9; Yisrael B'aliya, 7; Tsomet, 5; United Torah Judaism, 4; The Third Way, 4;

TOTAL: 61

Opposition MKs: Labor, 34; Meretz, 9; Hadash, 5; Gesher, 5; United Arab List, 4; Moledet, 2; TOTAL: 59

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