

# Barak's Kaleidoscope Coalition and the Knesset Challenge

by [David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations.



## Brief Analysis

As violence rocked the West Bank and Gaza, Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak was scoring a significant parliamentary victory Monday. By a 56-48 margin, the Knesset approved transfer of three Palestinian villages on the outskirts of Jerusalem, including Abu Dis, from partial to full control by the Palestinian Authority (PA). An endorsement of Barak's peace process approach, the vote also stemmed a growing perception that the prime minister is hopelessly captive to the escalating, conflicting demands of recalcitrant coalition partners.

Barak's success was particularly noteworthy given the extreme domestic sensitivity to anything connected to Jerusalem, and given that it occurred as violence swept the territories. Barak believed the Abu Dis transfer, a goodwill gesture toward the Palestinians, was vital to re-energizing the peace process, and he was particularly keen to pass the measure before visiting the United States next week. President Bill Clinton has agreed to convene a three-way summit with Barak and Yasir Arafat, probably in June, to try to finalize a framework agreement on permanent status.

## One Government, Two Coalitions

The Abu Dis vote unmasked two central domestic political realities. First, virtually nobody in the Barak coalition wants early elections, especially after going to the polls just one year ago. For all their resignation threats, coalition parties are uncertain of their prospects in a new election. This makes early elections--the almost inevitable result of a government collapse--an unsavory prospect. Barak understood this and therefore called his coalition members' bluff. By deciding at the last moment to make the Abu Dis issue a matter of "no-confidence"--meaning that the government's fate would ride on the outcome--he upped the political ante and stared down his fellow coalition politicians.

Neither the religious nor the former Soviet immigrant elements of the coalition liked the Abu Dis deal, but only the five-member National Religious Party (NRP) was willing to quit the government over it. The others, such as the seventeen-member Shas and the four-member Yisrael B'Aliya (YBA) parties made sure that whatever their qualms, Barak did not fall over Abu Dis. Shas and YBA opposition to withdrawal from Abu Dis was more tactical than strategic. These parties based their reasoning on the so-called 1995 Beilin-Abu Mazen understandings, which foresaw Abu Dis--rather than nearby East Jerusalem, coveted by both sides--as the future capital of a Palestinian state. They fear that by yielding Abu Dis before a final status agreement is reached, Israel is paving the way for later

territorial concessions in Jerusalem. Barak insists that he does not intend to make territorial concessions related to sovereignty in Jerusalem, however.

Second, the Abu Dis vote highlighted the fact that Barak keeps his government afloat by maintaining two distinct coalitions, thereby creating a veritable political kaleidoscope as a power base. His formal coalition reflects his "big tent" approach, including as many non-Likud rightists as possible, along with leftists and centrists, in order to create a de facto peace consensus. Barak wanted to avoid a return to the 1993-95 situation endured by his mentor Yitzhak Rabin, whereby fateful decisions on peace depended on a razor-thin majority clinched by Arab rather than Jewish parliamentarians. The right wing in Israel cast aspersions on such majorities in order to undermine the legitimacy of governmental territorial concessions. But Barak's approach has had its price. Unlike Rabin, who in 1992 changed national priorities by allocating fewer resources to the West Bank and the religious (thereby obtaining \$10 billion in U.S. loan guarantees). Barak has sought to win the support of these sectors by sustaining their allocations of government resources. This has hurt his economic reform program, leaving him vulnerable to the charge of failing to deliver on campaign promises.

In the Abu Dis vote, however, Barak was forced to rely on the Rabin parliamentary paradigm. Nine Arab parliamentarians, who are officially part of the opposition, gave Barak the margin needed for victory. Seven other members of the opposition also supported Barak. Taken together, 16 members of the opposition supported Barak, providing him with close to a third of his support. In contrast, an equal 16 coalition members actually voted against Barak, and no less than 13 others either abstained or did not show up for the vote. Taken together, a stunning 29 of the 68 Barak coalition members did not support Abu Dis vote. This could be a harbinger of difficulties ahead. Nor is the defection of the NRP from the coalition insignificant, since it leaves the government with a mere 63 seats in the 120-seat Knesset.

Barak's government seeks to maintain the "big tent" image if this unconventional one-government, two-coalition approach, with the prime minister alternately turning to his formal coalition for support on non-peace matters and to his "informal coalition," including numerous opposition members, on peace issues.

#### Limitations on the Kaleidoscope Approach

This certainly does not mean that Barak is politically unassailable. And indeed, his decision to shorten his trip to the United States next week demonstrates the prime minister's desire to pay close attention to the home front. Indeed, Shas threatened Wednesday to support a preliminary reading of the bill on early elections unless its funding requests for its schools are adhered to. This is not an idle threat; rather, it reflects the party's desire to justify its participation in a center-left coalition to a predominantly right-wing constituency. Moreover, Shas's aging leader Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef sees himself as engaged in nothing short of a religious renaissance of Sephardic Jewry.

Education Minister Yossi Sarid has threatened to take his left-wing Meretz faction out of the coalition if Shas receives extra funding. But Sarid has indicated his party will support Barak's peace policies even from outside the government, although Meretz's departure is not a foregone conclusion. Barak would like to avert such a departure. Shas's exit would be a bigger blow. Not only does Shas have more parliamentarians than Meretz (17-10), but Meretz could remain part of the kaleidoscope while Shas in opposition most likely would not. Barak's hope is that Shas will keep the government in business by continuing to instruct enough of its Knesset members to abstain from--if not support--key votes. Indeed, had the eight Shas abstentions been "no" votes instead, the Abu Dis withdrawal would not have passed.

There are other obstacles to the long-term durability of Barak's approach. For most purposes, Barak can be satisfied with plurality victories in the Knesset, making an abstention almost as good as a "yes" vote. Seeking to exploit the differing interests of the parties constituting the current coalition, Likud is hoping that required "super majorities"

(at least 61 votes) on major issues will force those who abstained in the Abu Dis vote off the fence. The Knesset passed preliminary readings yesterday of Likud-sponsored bills requiring a super majority both for any territorial concessions or boundary changes in Jerusalem and for any agreement allowing Palestinian refugees to return to Israel.

There are certainly elements of the Likud bill that Barak could live with, but there are also components hidden inside the proposed legislation that run counter to his final status peace strategy. His aides say he hopes to derail these elements in Knesset committees where the coalition holds a majority.

Clearly, the biggest limitation of the Barak strategy is the growing perception held by Israelis that Monday's violence was part of a Palestinian negotiating strategy to obtain concessions through controlled violence. If any of scenarios occur, the kaleidoscope may be shattered beyond repair.

David Makovsky will shortly join The Washington Institute as a senior fellow and direct the Project on America, Israel, and the Peace Process.

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