CHAPTER 5

POLICY MAKING

A permanent ministerial committee, called the Inner Cabinet, will be established. It will have 12 members, six from each party. Should disagreements arise and the Inner Cabinet does not reach a decision on a certain issue, the matter will not be brought before the Cabinet without the joint agreement of the prime minister and the vice premier.

Coalition agreement between Likud and the Labour Alignment, 1988

Israel's handling of foreign affairs is not identical to that of any other country, if only for the obvious reason that no single definition or prescription exists on how foreign policy ought to be or must be conducted. As a guide for understanding the Israeli model, neither the American political system familiar to many readers nor standard textbooks on government are sufficient. To start with only the most basic distinction, Israel is a practicing democracy, but it is a parliamentary democracy rather than a presidential or a federal one.

That Israel has a democratic form of government at all is in itself noteworthy. Constitutional theory holds that countries at war are justified in suspending democratic practices in favor of crisis government. Yet, in spite of the constant danger facing it and the official state of emergency still legally in effect since 1948, Israel has maintained its commitment to the democratic process. It is also true, however, that living under a permanent security threat has colored how foreign and defense policy is made. The result is an uneasy and not entirely satisfactory compromise between an open policy debate and the dictates of expediency and efficiency.
DEMOCRATIC POLICY MAKING, ISRAELI STYLE

Israel is not an ideal place for the careful planner or seeker after systematic policy making. Rather, the country's entire history suggests spontaneous improvisation. While this can be seen almost everywhere, nowhere is this quite so pronounced as in the realm of security and foreign affairs where much depends on the reactions, but even more so the initiatives, of others. A fluid external and security situation requires that Israeli leaders deal with concrete problems and pressing developments as they arise. To a large degree, therefore, decision making for Israel is crisis decision making under conditions of exceptional urgency and stress. We should not be led astray as many scholars have been, however, in confusing research and analysis to Israel's crisis decisions in the first forty years. The impact on overall foreign policy of noncrisis, routine, low-level, and ongoing policy decisions is no less pronounced or any less worthy of attention.

The result is a confused and inconsistent pattern of policy making. Depending on such variables as the nature of a given issue and the priority assigned it, the Israeli model has features common to an open, democratic society, but also many elements of centralism. In formal terms the process gives the impression of being highly structured, yet it can also be surprisingly unstructured and free of institutional restraints. Ample room exists for the interplay of individual preferences, for political manipulation, and for operating outside prescribed channels. In short, the foreign policy "system" of Israel is, in reality, anything but neat and systematic.

A better approach is to insist that any policy-making process, if it is to qualify as both democratic and effective, should reflect the following: broad participation, the airing of different viewpoints, open policy debate, accountability, and policy review. Although Israel does well on some counts, it does not pass this fivefold test with flying colors.

The reason is that appearances are misleading. At first glance it would seem there are a great many participants involved in shaping Israeli foreign policy. The list begins with the four million self-appointed Israeli premiers, each of whom is convinced he or she knows best. From there the list extends to the media, nearly a dozen different political parties, special interest groups, the full 120-member Knesset and its subcommittees, the government (or the full cabinet), and a score of individual cabinet ministers.

Reality, by contrast, shows the devolution of authority and its consolidation by a rather narrow ruling circle. Power, according to this pattern, tends to flow steadily upward from the people, so that actual responsibility has come to reside in fewer and fewer public institutions and individual political leaders. This process can be traced by looking briefly at each of the above potential participants within the Israeli political system. Our principal finding is that the inability of these groups to vitally or consistently affect foreign policy decisions is matched by an expansion of authority in the hands of a few, self-reliant policy elites. A glimpse into this contraction or narrowing of the field of would-be decisional actors was provided in the previous chapter's description of foreign policy under the first national unity government.

NARROWING THE FIELD

On the night of 25 September 1982 several hundred thousand Israelis descended on Tel Aviv’s Malchei Yisrael Square to take part in what has been the largest protest demonstration ever held in the country’s history. Called to demonstrate mass public displeasure over deepening military involvement in Lebanon, it helped force the government into reversing its position and agreeing to set up a full and independent inquiry panel. Here was participatory democracy in action, making it possible for citizens to have a real say on vital issues of the day, to reach and influence their chosen leaders directly without any of the intervening layers or institutions of government. But this is not how things usually work in the Israeli political scene, beginning with the public’s marginal role in the normal handling of foreign affairs.

The General Public

The Israeli electorate may be sovereign, but its impact on major government policy tends to be secondary. Public dissent or support becomes a more serious consideration usually only as part of the election cycle, either every four years or when early elections are called. Political leaders pay closer attention to shifts in public sentiment when seeking voter support and a broad mandate to govern. Otherwise, for a variety of practical reasons it is difficult for the public as such to influence foreign policy directions between elections, let alone affect a specific decision.

The streamlining of Israel’s policy-making machinery owes little to rational choice and even less to antidemocratic sentiment, but it owes a great deal to the cumulative national experience with repeated wars and crises. Structural changes and redesigns engineered over the years have geared the country for dealing at any moment with
immediate high-risk security situations, yet they do not allow for close involvement by an interested and concerned public except perhaps for when the threat has passed. What happened in 1982 was possible only because the conflict in Lebanon gave indications of dragging on indefinitely, thus giving citizens an opportunity to express themselves. Still, the rule holds: when time and discretion are essential, the public is unlikely to be consulted, nor will it be a direct participant in the policy process.

Lack of access to complete information limits the public. Often Israelis are not fully informed. And because of the system of proportional representation wherein voting is for a party list rather than for individual candidates, Israelis also usually lack direct access to their leaders. Moreover, although they may be opinionated and articulate on each and every political issue, Israelis are not known for being doers or joiners. Most people prefer to give the government a free hand in dealing with national strategy and high policy matters while they engage in individual, private pursuits. Whatever political mobilization, recruitment, and structured debate that is found generally is confined to party membership and institutions. One interesting recent development were initiatives taken by individual Israeli citizens in testing the law that forbade contacts with the PLO by participating overseas in meetings with Palestinians known for their affiliation to the PLO. Here was an instance of private citizens to some extent taking the lead in shaping new foreign policy directions. In May 1989, residents of Ashdod and Ashkelon took to the streets to express outrage at Arab acts of violence, especially the brutal murder of an Israeli soldier home on leave. Their call for a ban on Arab workers from Gaza might have provided another instance of shaping policy had it led to a groundswell of public protest and spread to other cities.

Nor does it help the cause of dispassionate, rational discourse that until fairly recently no framework comparable to the Council on Foreign Relations or the Council on World Affairs in the United States or the Royal Institute of International Affairs in Great Britain existed in Israel for holding a wide-ranging review of Israeli relations or bipartisan debate on foreign policy issues outside of the usual party forums. In December 1988, a new international affairs study group, the Israel Council on Foreign Relations, held its inaugural meeting in Tel Aviv. In scheduling a program of guest speakers, the council set forth its larger objective of acquainting Israelis with developments in the outside world and, in the words of its president, former Foreign Ministry Director-General David Kimche, in that way "perhaps to reduce our provincialism." Still, the notion of "the Israeli public" remains all but meaningless in practical political terms and in daily foreign policy decisions.

Moreover, public opinion outside of the election cycle is remarkably pliable and subject to political manipulations. Peace-related questions do arouse controversy. But otherwise Israelis are inclined to confirm decisions already taken and to lend support for announced government policy, especially when few alternatives suggest themselves, like in avoiding dependence on the United States or on reaching a genuine peace in the absence of a credible Arab peace partner. "Allya is not an issue. Neither is the wisdom of encouraging rapprochement with the Soviets and Eastern Europeans. South Africa is not a contentious domestic issue. Nor is the practice of marketing arms and military expertise. Dissent is thus restricted to the fringes.

Public pressure is really the exception rather than the rule. Notable exceptions include calls for installing Dayan in the Defense Ministry in May–June 1967, contrasted with demands for his ouster in 1973, and calls for Sharon's resignation as defense minister in 1982. Yet they were more ad hominem than substantive, and over security rather than external policy.

An additional shortcoming is that in so pluralistic and politically charged a society as Israel, public participation easily can produce a countervailing effect, with different sectors negating each other's influence, thus unintentionally encouraging policy paralysis. This was brought out well in the case of the 1984 and 1988 elections that led to NUG I and NUG II. In short, only to the extent that the Israeli public places outside limits on what policy alternatives it is prepared to accept can it be said in any way to help shape foreign policy.

Ordinarily, the pattern works in the reverse. Opinions and attitudes held by the public are formed by foreign policy actions as well as by how situations and choices are presented to it. In this sense, a policy has got to be politically acceptable to a majority of the public. Actually, such flexibility on the part of the public gives Israeli leaders enormous leverage should they in fact wish to lead. This is still a far cry, however, from direct public participation in policy making.

The Public Media

Public participation is essentially indirect, expressing itself through the three agencies of the media, voluntary associations, and political parties. Of these, the first has gained most in influence and prominence.

Since the time of the prestate Jewish yishuv [community] in
Palestine, the nation's press has provided an important link between government and public. The Israeli population, numbering 4,425,000 by 1988, consistently registers one of the world's highest literacy rates and per capita ratios of newspaper circulation. The media help frame discussion of current affairs by offering hourly radio news and broadcast coverage and providing background material as well as in-depth analysis to a national evening TV audience. And by enabling an exchange of views they are involved in setting choices before the public.

On the other hand, the media's role, like that of the public at large, has definite limitations and is often circumscribed. Censorship, for example, remains in force formally and informally. All news items and details are subject to prior authorization by the military censor. No less significant, the Press Council has accepted voluntary self-censorship in the wish not to jeopardize national security. Objectivity is also a problem. Some of the daily press is affiliated with political parties or, if independent, tends to take a predictable editorial position. Haaretz and the English-language Jerusalem Post, for example, are known for their consistent anti-Likud and antireligious stand. Radio and television are under government control as well.

The inevitable tension in the media-government relationship is aggravated further by the recurrent and increasingly prevalent phenomenon of press leaks. That the problem exists at all owes to the behavior of government officials and laxity in enforcing the law, but it is also due in part to a major development in the newspaper profession in Israel. No longer content with mere news reporting, during the eighties the press has moved into investigative journalism. Consequently, instances of government mismanagement, foreign policy improprieties, or even secret diplomatic contacts once easily covered up are today more promptly exposed and discussed, the censorship codes notwithstanding. Given the difficulty of the Knesset in performing its role as parliamentary watchdog over the executive, the media fulfills a vital function by encouraging a higher level of democratic debate on the part of an informed citizenry. Censorship currently is one of the main domestic battlegrounds in Israel. The outcome is certain to influence the level of public interest, familiarity, and influence on foreign matters of state as well as national defense policy.

**Interest Groups**

Public opinion in a democracy also can influence government through the lobbying of small segments of society. The best example, of course, is the United States, where pluralism has inspired a plethora of special interest groups and associations actively engaged in promoting a certain policy preference or course on the basis of ethnicity, religious affiliation, trade or profession, economic and social class, or even regionalism—the "Eastern Establishment" and West Coast on foreign trade policy. In Israel one finds nothing so extensive, so organized, or so effective. Group advocacy plays little if any role in foreign policy formulation; indeed, such special interests are a rarity.

There are ample reasons why. As noted previously, Israelis are not inclined toward political activism and are not easily aroused to take to the streets on other than bread-and-butter economic issues. Their political association pretty much begins and ends with party membership, if that. In fact, it may be that Israel's multiparty system is a substitute for pressure groups, special interests like those of the Orthodox community are advanced by the several religious parties. Actually, special constituencies do exist, but they focus mostly on domestic issues: higher compensation for disabled war veterans, tax privileges for development town residents, etc.

Two instances of effective lobbying, which also illustrate how easily accessible and receptive national leaders can be to well-directed pressure in a small country, are, first, insistence by heads of the northern border towns and farm settlements in 1981-82 that the government use strong military measures to prevent what was becoming an exodus of residents because of repeated Katyusha rocket shellings by the PLO from Lebanese soil, and second, government consent in May 1985 to a prisoner-of-war exchange involving 1,150 Palestinians for three Israeli soldiers following sustained pressure by relatives on key cabinet members. Yet, strictly speaking, both instances involved internal security and personal lobbying rather than nationwide mobilization of a cross section of Israelis on a purely external, diplomatic issue.

When they do arise, partisan foreign policy interest groups tend to be comparatively short lived. Ad hoc floating formations may arise at a given moment to contest a specific issue or policy only to disband once a decision has been taken either way, without becoming permanently institutionalized. This was seen after the 1973 war in the mushrooming of individual and group protest over government-military responsibility for the Arab surprise attack. Or the group may proceed to reorganize itself into becoming a full-fledged political party.

Given these qualifications, the record of foreign policy lobbying in Israel is unsurprisingly brief. For several decades the outstanding example of public protest was the bitter struggle in 1952 against
German reparations waged by concentration camp survivors and opponents of reconciliation; this did not alter the fixed course of government policy set by Ben-Gurion. After 1967 Ha-tenua limaan eretz Yisrael ha-shlema ("the movement for an integral land of Israel" and not "greater" land of Israel as usually mistranslated) arose to advocate retention of the captured territories. It was joined in 1974 by the Gush Emunim (bloc of the faithful) activist settler movement, opposed in turn since 1978 by followers of Shalom Achshav (Peace Now) committed to relinquishing control of the contested land in exchange for peace. But even these three are borderline cases as to whether their orientation is more toward external or internal affairs. In a sense they straddle both categories, arguing as much over budget priorities, security, and the future of Israeli society and democracy as over the attainability of peace with the Arabs through diplomacy. This larger, ongoing debate since 1967 over the linkage between domestic-foreign policies has been rekindled on several particular occasions: by the 1977–79 negotiations with Egypt, by the 1982 Lebanese war, and again in response to the unrest in the West Bank and Gaza after December 1987.

Arguably the most powerful foreign policy lobby in Israel is the defense establishment, acting at two levels. The professional army and General Staff enter the policy process directly as formal participants and institutional actors represented by the Ministry of Defense. They are reserved for discussion in the following chapter on the bureaucratic process.

But a large number of former career officers continue to influence public and foreign policy making even after military retirement at a relatively young age. Many have become corporate executives, and in their management positions they use to advantage such assets as personal popularity, reputation, expertise, proximity to the centers of power, and contacts with bureaucrats, politicians, and ministers in promoting their particular viewpoints on the broad topic of security and foreign affairs.

This has been particularly true of the defense industries and corporations like the Israel Aircraft Industries (IAI) actively pressing for military exports. The company effectively lobbied, for example, on behalf of the Lavi fighter project in its early stages. Due in no small part to the unraveling of this strong military-industrial coalition, the government finally decided to cancel the program on 30 August 1987, at the same time removing a source of friction on the bilateral U.S.-Israeli agenda.

Two other identifiable subgroups within the Israeli society seem positioned to exert greater influence on foreign relations than they actually do. One is composed of the various immigrant associations that reflect Israel's tremendous ethnic pluralism, with people coming originally on aliya from so many different countries (see Table 13). Organizations like the South African Federation and the Association of Americans and Canadians in Israel (AACCI) have a natural interest in promoting aliya from the West and in streamlining immigrant absorption. Their impact, however, has been marginal at best. Surprisingly, although unschooled in democracy, émigrés from the Soviet Union have been less reticent than those émigrés from the West and therefore much more effective in the rough-and-tumble of Israeli politics in promoting their cause and more vocal in mobilizing public support, both in Israel and abroad, on the question of Soviet Jewry. Similarly, too, Ethiopian immigrants banded together to form a Committee for Family Reunification to lobby for a public campaign on the part of the government and world Jewry to persuade the Ethiopian authorities to release the 15,000 to 20,000 Jews still stranded in Ethiopia.

Potentially important in this regard is the encouragement given world Jewish leaders and communities by some Israeli politicians to assert themselves on the argument over peace and the territories dividing Israelis. Bearing in mind that Israel does not permit absentee ballotting, this call to nonresident Jews goes beyond forgoing the old Zionist prerequisite of aliya and residence. If heeded, this would be tantamount to inviting an overseas constituency, Jews in the Diaspora, to function as a privileged pressure group and lobby determining domestic and national policy.

The second potential group with a disappointing record encompasses Israeli intellectuals and members of the academic community who might be expected to take a lead in molding public and official thinking as well as in articulating clear policy choices. Why don't they? Perhaps it is because Israeli academics do not agree with each other and are divided among themselves; they are far from presenting a united front. Also, many intellectuals, true to their calling, show a disdain for "dirty politics" and prefer not to get involved. In any event, like other Israelis, they, too, have a hard time coming up with practical alternatives that are policy-relevant to the country's complex security and diplomatic enigmas. Another explanation may be that ever since the Likud's surprising rise to power in 1977 many Israeli liberals and academics have been left behind by the public's swing to the right and to more nationalistic positions. Surely a deeper cause lies in traces of the "two cultures" marked by a poor regard for exhibits gibbers (Yiddish for advisers) and the Jewish intelligentsia on the part of the country's earlier generation of pioneers and nation-
Table 13. Ethnic Constituencies—Immigration by Country of Birth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of Birth</th>
<th>Period of Immigration</th>
<th>Country of Birth</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>3,536</td>
<td>129,530</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>8,277</td>
<td>72,837</td>
<td>Germany</td>
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<td>Turkey</td>
<td>14,566</td>
<td>60,494</td>
<td>Yugoslavia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yemen</td>
<td>25,405</td>
<td>46,414</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yemen, Pakistan, Sri Lanka</td>
<td>8,449</td>
<td>4,210</td>
<td>Austria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>1,272</td>
<td>4,112</td>
<td>Italy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yemen (Aden)</td>
<td>4,016</td>
<td>2,438</td>
<td>Greece</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>920</td>
<td>2,329</td>
<td>Belgium</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Scandinavian countries</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other countries</td>
<td>13,125</td>
<td></td>
<td>Switzerland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASIA TOTAL</td>
<td>40,776</td>
<td>358,825</td>
<td>Other countries</td>
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<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>265,825</td>
<td>52,276</td>
<td>EUROPE TOTAL</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>873</td>
<td>35,800</td>
<td>USA</td>
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<td>Libya</td>
<td>1,907</td>
<td>30,102</td>
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<tr>
<td>Egypt, Sudan</td>
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<td>24,290</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other countries</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Canada</td>
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Table 13. (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of Birth</th>
<th>Period of Immigration</th>
<th>Country of Birth</th>
<th>Period of Immigration</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Algeria (including</td>
<td>994</td>
<td>23,887</td>
<td>Uruguay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morocco and Tunisia]</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republic of South</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>13,669</td>
<td>Australia, New Zealand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mexico</td>
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<tr>
<td>AFRICA TOTAL</td>
<td>4,033</td>
<td>445,849</td>
<td>Colombia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Venezuela</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>41,105</td>
<td>266,622</td>
<td>Paraguay, Guyana</td>
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<td>USSR</td>
<td>170,127</td>
<td>202,917</td>
<td>Central America</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>7,057</td>
<td>169,400</td>
<td>Other countries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>10,342</td>
<td>39,926</td>
<td>AMERICA AND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td></td>
<td>28,483</td>
<td>OCEANIA TOTAL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>1,637</td>
<td>24,402</td>
<td>NOT KNOWN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czechoslovakia</td>
<td>16,794</td>
<td>23,617</td>
<td>20,815</td>
</tr>
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</table>

builders. To the extent scholars and specialists have any real policy input, it is on an individual rather than an organized, institutional basis.

Before leaving the subject of Israeli pressure groups, it is interesting to follow the fortunes of Ha Moetzta l’Shalom u’-Bitachon [the Council on Peace and Security], formed in 1988. Comprised primarily of former career army officers, its aims were to encourage a territorial compromise and to provide viable solutions for Israel’s security needs on the West Bank other than by retaining physical control over the land and its people. From the outset, the council’s credibility was questioned because many of its founding members and spokespeople were also associated with the Israel Labour party. Typically, within months it was challenged by a rival group, Ktizim v’Akademim lemaan Bitachon v’Shalom [Officers and Academics for Security and Peace], that argued the indispensable security value of the West Bank and its retention by Israel. Both groups took part in the national election campaign in 1988. Characteristically, immediately following the elections both dropped from public sight. Were either organization, or both of them, to lose credibility with the public as a result, or eventually to become incorporated by Labour and Likud respectively, this would confirm the tendency for prospective interest groups, lobbyists, and protest movements to be swallowed up by the dominant political party formations or to become themselves converted into political parties.

**Political Parties and Foreign Policy**

The overall pattern presented here of an increasingly centralized foreign policy-making process the further we go from the public is reinforced when the discussion extends to political parties. Their contribution can be argued any number of ways. For example, Israel’s numerous parties perform a useful democratic function by mirroring policy divisions around the country as well as by brokering the clash of foreign policy interests. But if judged as central participants in the actual making of policy, then the parties and their rank-and-file membership need to be viewed in a restricted capacity.

Through a process of elimination many of the parties are ineligible or exclude themselves from any direct role. Some of them are not parties in the strict sense, being narrow in scope and essentially single-interest groups. The ethnic and religious parties, for instance, do not articulate a detailed, programmatic foreign policy agenda.

Others, like the Communist party, are so ideological and doctrinaire that they command little public attention or support from uncommitted voters seeking pragmatic solutions and alternatives. More to the point politically, we should keep in mind that political parties do not make foreign policy; governments do.

All governments in Israel have been coalition governments constructed around one of the dominant parties—Labour or Likud—reinforced by several junior partners who, as the price for inclusion, stand to lose their policy distinctiveness; once co-opted, they are bound by coalition discipline. Not to be part of the ruling government coalition means being relegated to the opposition seats in the Knesset. This status may provide a rostrum from which to deliver principled criticism against the government, to expound one’s own party proposals or to table no-confidence resolutions. But being in the opposition does not bestow the right to share in decisions or even necessarily to be consulted; hence parties outside the coalition normally have no real input. In times of particular national stress [1967–70, 1984–88], the major opposition faction has even been included in governments of national unity premised on bipartisanship. On such occasions, for all intents and purposes the real focus of policy debate then shifts from the floor of the Knesset to the cabinet table where an agreed policy must be worked out jointly.

Moreover, when the system functions smoothly according to the rules of parliamentary and coalition politics, the result is automatic legislative approval for foreign policy decisions or actions presented to the Knesset by the ruling coalition. What counts in the final analysis is the ability to marshal a minimum of at least 61 votes (out of 120) in support of government policy or, in any case, not to lose on a motion of no-confidence.

Lastly, even though some twenty different movements and parties at one time or another have dotted the Israeli political landscape, the two that really matter foreign policy-wise are Labour and Likud. And yet, more recently, and other issues aside, when it comes to international relations their positions have been neither profoundly different nor unbridgeable; witness the ability of the first NUG to complete its full term. Barrning a fundamental change in Israel’s external-regional environment, as each bloc becomes larger, more diverse, and less ideological, this too will serve to blunt their remaining respective differences.

In closing out the eighties, Labour and Likud pretty much saw eye-to-eye on basic foreign policy guidelines. They agreed on the centrality of the U.S. relationship while seeking improved ties with
the Soviet bloc. Both stressed the need for Israel to be more fully integrated into the international community but were reserved toward the United Nations. Both appreciated how important fostering trade relations and promoting exports were for the country's economic future. Labour was no less committed than Likud to practicing arms sales diplomacy. Each remained sensitive to the Jewish connection and to the status of world Jewry, was concerned at the unrelieved Middle East arms race, and was pledged to maintaining a strong defense posture as well as to combating international terrorism. Similarly, both recognized the obligation to enforce the peace treaty with Egypt. Thus, at the end of the decade the foundations remained for a consensual and bipartisan Labour-Likud foreign policy.

The single major exception to consensual, bipartisan Labour-Likud foreign policy is the Arab-Israeli conflict and its resolution. And even here the cutting edge between the two party protagonists shrinks once the debate moves from rhetoric and posturing to the specifics, substantive and procedural. There were some very definite conceptual differences, to be sure, on such questions as the necessity for Jewish settlement projects on the West Bank and their security value, repartitioning of the territories, and the wisdom of Israel's participation in an international conference. Nevertheless, closer examination of their party platforms and statements by party leaders in the 1988 election campaign revealed, for instance, that Labour joined Likud in a commitment to peace negotiations between Israel and the Arab states and to a peace settlement based on the principle of compromise; in dismissing total withdrawal from all the territories or relinquishing undivided control over Jerusalem; and in acknowledging the legitimate rights of the Palestinian Arabs to self-rule short of a Palestinian state on the West Bank while showing sensitivity to Jordan's stake in any eventual territorial rearrangement. Until an agreed final settlement can be reached both parties are on record as committed, at a minimum, to preserving law and order in Gaza and the West Bank.

In short, it may have been true in the era of Ben-Gurion and a dominant Mapai party [precursor of today's Labour Alignment], that party policy was national policy. As made famous by Golda Meir's "kitchen cabinet," informal consultation among top Mapai functionaries and government ministers [sareinu v'chavereinu] often constituted the abbreviated, actual policy making process. Now, due to the factors discussed here, the political parties have been eclipsed at both the intraparty and interparty levels.

THE KNESSET

The two institutions symbolizing Israeli sovereignty and national unity are the president of the state and the Knesset. Solely from the standpoint of their relevance for foreign affairs, although it may sound somewhat harsh, their role is essentially instrumental: they each complement the policy process, perhaps meaningfully at times, but they do not figure as independent actors or policy initiators.

The president enters the picture at various moments in a primarily representative and ceremonial capacity. As the official head of state, he or she is charged with such functions as accepting credentials of foreign envoys, officiating at state receptions, and undertaking visits abroad on behalf of Israel. Israel's first president, Dr. Chaim Weizmann, fought unsuccessfully with Ben-Gurion to concentrate greater authority in the presidency. Within these narrow prerogatives, however, much depends on the office holder's personality, definition of the position, and deftness in utilizing these limited powers to the maximum politically possible. The incumbent in the late 1980s, Chaim Herzog, for instance, traveled abroad extensively, proving quite effective as Israel's goodwill ambassador.

Restricted presidential power stands in sharp contrast to references about Knesset supremacy. According to Israeli constitutional theory the single-chamber parliament is the highest authority in the land, although its real power is less impressive, especially in matters of foreign policy. In formal terms the Knesset possesses considerable authority; its duties include debating government issues, passing legislation, reviewing treaties, holding hearings, and questioning civil servants, ministers, and ambassadors. Annual debate on government budget requests often is the occasion for a more wide-ranging review of the work of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and of Israeli foreign relations in general. In addition, members of Knesset [MKs] on occasion are found engaging in public diplomacy as delegates to world congresses and interparliamentary unions, or by hosting foreign heads of state invited to address a session of the Knesset, as President Sadat did in 1977 and President Carter in 1979.

Nevertheless, the Israeli Knesset has fewer substantive powers in external affairs than some of its counterparts in other countries. By way of illustration, under the Basic Laws [which substitute for a written constitution] only the full cabinet is able to sign and ratify international agreements; regulations passed in 1963 and 1984 at most enable the Knesset to review any such accords in the context of a general political debate. Recent practice has been for the government to submit the document to the Knesset after the text has already
been initialed but before final signature. In this, as in other areas of cabinet-Knesset relations, the outcome is almost always assured in advance based on the ruling coalition bloc’s stamp of approval.

Insight into what underlies parliamentary ineffectiveness can also be had from the way the Knesset works, both in plenum and in committee. The Knesset plenary touches on foreign policy matters in one of two modes. One is through a full-dress debate; in 1978 an exhaustive debate took place well into the night when the Begin government tabled the Camp David frameworks negotiated with Egypt and the United States, and 118 out of 120 MKs rose to endorse or condemn the controversial pact. The other mode permits the members themselves to initiate discussion through parliamentary steps such as motions for the agenda, private members’ questions to a specific minister, or proposed votes of no-confidence by opponents of the government or its specific policy.

However, there has been a pronounced tendency of late to emphasize committee work over plenary debate. This has meant greater prominence for the Foreign Affairs and Security Committee (FASC), traditionally regarded as the most prestigious of the Knesset’s ten standing committees. This institutional shift within the Knesset also conforms to the larger policy making preference for the few over the many—although, rather ludicrously, not by all that much. Membership on the “select” Foreign Affairs and Security Committee had swelled in the mid-1980s to twenty-five, or more than one out of every five MKs!

One is justified in wondering why it is that membership on the committee should be so prized when it has so little statutory power and perhaps even less in practice. Being denied the tools to be a full partner in either the shaping or the implementation of foreign and defense policy is bad enough. But the committee’s experience suggests it may very well be its own worst enemy.

The very size and composition of the FASC make it an unwieldy and fractious body, a miniplenum debating forum. Membership is keyed in proportion to the numerical weight of the various Knesset coalition and opposition factions; it has always been an unwritten law that the Communist party is barred from participation on security grounds. The selection of representatives on the FASC is therefore an internal matter for each of the parties entitled to one or more seats on the committee and thus invariably governed by party politics—by itself a sign of the broader politicization of foreign policy by which the policy becomes hostage to domestic political considerations. Owing to this diffuse selection process, the committee of late has been packed with ex-military people who have entered politics.

This may be good for the parliamentary supervision of security affairs, but it also suggests an imbalance, since there are few former diplomats present to argue the sensitive diplomatic side of Israeli defense strategy. Equally apparent is the fact that other committee members have been chosen perhaps for their political clout within a given party or perhaps as a quid pro quo for joining—and hence making possible—the ruling coalition, not because they are experienced in, or necessarily conversant with, the complex issues involved in foreign affairs and security.

Party factionalism on the committee sets off a chain reaction. Discussion tends rather quickly to become partisan, with heated exchanges between government representatives and opposition critics. Another manifestation of the politicization even of something as sacrosanct as national security is the by now almost routine leaking of classified background material and sometimes verbatim minutes from closed FASC sessions to the media. This, in turn, has provided top military and government decision makers with a justification for not appearing before the committee even in in camera session or, should they consent to appear for not sharing privileged information because of the likelihood such material will be reported on the radio within hours and reprinted in the afternoon newspapers. The result is a serious decline in the value of such briefings. At most, government officials come to inform and to report before the committee—not to seek its advice or its consent.

Another result of leaks to the media and party factionalism is to further narrow the parliamentary in-group, those MKs “in the know.” Devolution of Knesset participation in foreign relations first went from the full body to its Committee on Foreign Affairs and Security, now the main work of FASC tends to be carried out in smaller subcommittees. This restructuring was encouraged by two of the committee’s recent chairmen, Moshe Arens of the Likud and Labour’s Abba Eban, who saw the smaller format as both a more efficient procedure and as an attempt at regaining the FASC’s lost influence and involvement. These subcommittees have concerned themselves in recent years with such specific foreign policy–related questions as intelligence operations, arms procurement, military exports, and future strategic doctrine. Again, however, such efforts unfortunately have been peripheral, their impact on actual policy-making inconsequential. The result is that for the present this senior committee, representing the Knesset and ultimately the entire nation, remains handcuffed. The bottom line shows that the Knesset has no real power of decision. As any detailed historical analysis would easily show, there have been few instances of major foreign
policy decisions upon which the Knesset or its committees have had a demonstrable impact.

WHO REALLY DECIDES POLICY?

Consequently, the Knesset joins the Israeli public, representatives of the media, various peripheral interest groups, and the political parties on the policy sidelines. When the moment for decision comes, all of them are more like spectators than front-line participants. This leaves the government and the high policy elite, in theory at least, able to formulate a foreign policy on Israel’s behalf virtually free of direct outside interference and without necessarily having to share either responsibility or power.

Such concentrated power makes it more difficult for Israel always to meet the four standards for a policy that is both effective and democratic: (1) an open foreign policy debate encouraging (2) consideration of all possible options, accompanied by (3) a mechanism for policy reassessment assuring (4) strict accountability. This should not be taken to mean, though, that any Israeli government has a free rein or can afford to ignore the public mood—only that the checks and balances of the Israeli political process are informal, rather than being constitutional and institutional.

After the 1982 Lebanon experience, no leader or cabinet would dare ignore deep-seated social opposition and commit Israel to another military adventure in a neighboring Arab country without first securing broad public backing. The concentration of power at the government level suggests, though, how the streamlined policymaking trend (“streamlined” in the sense of a progressive narrowing in both the number of size of participating bodies) applies even to the government (the memshala).

The workings of the Israeli cabinet system are a separate topic and beyond the scope of this book. Getting a sense of where the real locus of executive power lies requires that a key distinction be drawn. On the one hand, organizational flow charts can be obtained that show all those cabinet ministers and ministries who are positioned to be part of the decision making process neatly arranged in square blocks. On the other hand, though, there is the real “system”: those few individuals who really determine policy and make the major decisions. Thus, note the custom adopted in the 1980s under the first and second national unity governments that saw the full cabinet of as many as twenty-six ministers cede its authority to a ten-member inner cabinet (enlarged to twelve in the 1988 NUG) that proceeded to defer major foreign policy and security decisions to an even smaller forum consisting of three former prime ministers. Nor are instances lacking then, or in earlier years when strategic decisions have been deferred by the cabinet to a single minister—and not necessarily the prime minister!

In principle, the cabinet is bound by the rule of collective responsibility. In practice, though, one will have a hard time distinguishing acts ascribed to the cabinet from those authorized by an individual minister or subgroup of ministers. Such disharmony and lack of coordination are by no means new. It is just that they have become more prevalent than ever before in the last years given the nature of the NUG model of government. Any government based on a coalition of several unlike-minded political parties should not be expected to speak in complete unison; how much less so when the two main opposing parties are thrown together against their wishes.

The second NUG came into being in November 1988, pledged to improve on its predecessor. For one thing, there would be no rotation this time. It was agreed that the government should speak with one voice, that voice belonging to the prime minister. But no sooner was the second NUG formed than individual ministers began expressing their personal views and initiating actions on their own. To cite but one example, in February 1989, the agriculture minister unilaterally suspended formal ties with Greece in reprisal for its pro-PLO stance. Israel’s ambassador to Athens apologized to the Greek authorities for the rash decision but could not promise its immediate repeal.

At about the same time, Defense Minister Rabin was going public with his four-stage peace initiative to end the intifada and engage West Bank Palestinians in local elections and negotiating processes, except that there were mixed signals as to whether the plan had or had not first been tabled in the cabinet and did or did not have Prime Minister Shamir’s endorsement! It was thus apparent that the reconstituted national unity government, whatever its longevity, would not set the standard for well-ordered policy making in Israel. Nor would it break with the long-pattern of divided counsel at the top, although a real effort at doing so was made in May 1989.

After seven hours of discussion by the cabinet, Prime Minister Shamir gained formal government approval for his two-stage peace plan and call for holding Palestinian actions. What made this noteworthy in terms of how policy is made were several exceptional things:
• the unusually long amount of time given to an agenda item, even one as critical as the peace process;
• the high degree of consensus among cabinet members, with twenty endorsing the plan and six voting against;
• the opponents divided across rather than along party lines, with two ministers from the left and four from the right; and
• as a result of the debate and vote, for the first time in many years, Israeli policy stood behind a specific, sufficiently defined set of peace guidelines that might then be put out for discussion with other governments and world leaders.

For Israeli policy making this was quite an accomplishment.

But at the same time the handling of the Shamir plan exposed the less commendable side of the institutionalized-personalized-politicized system. For example, in order to craft this minimal working consensus, the architects of the plan purposely failed to cross their t’s and dot their i’s, leaving unaddressed such key questions as whether the Palestinian balloting would be held under international supervision, whether a complete halt to the intifada would be insisted upon as a precondition to the peace plan, and whether the 140,000 Arab residents of east Jerusalem could be enfranchised. If this lack of specificity made initial consensus possible, it also assured later sharp differences of ministerial view and the prospect of a government crisis if and when Israel was called upon to provide specific answers to such sensitive and fateful questions.

Another complication posed by the existing system is that it discourages serious discussion of national strategic goals at the full cabinet level. At most the cabinet deals with broadest generalities or, at the opposite extreme, with small details and tactical, procedural aspects. Some critics would even go so far as to argue that 1978 was the last time long-term national objectives and strategies for ending the Middle East conflict were seriously aired by an Israeli government.

Reliance on subcabinet decision frameworks has no statutory basis whatsoever and yet seems to be a common practice. Individual ministers have always been given a high degree of freedom to take discretionary action, as in the statutory use of emergency powers going back to the British mandatory period for assuring order and the uninterrupted supply of goods, transport, and services at home. Also in foreign policy matters this tendency to create and operate from within smaller and smaller circles of decision through individual or ad hoc arrangements has a fairly long and honored tradition. It began with Ben-Gurion’s habit of consulting his Mapai ministers (sareinut) to craft an agreed position before the weekly cabinet session, and includes, most significantly, his personal decision to go to war against Nasser in 1956 and the secret diplomatic pact he reached with the French without any prior cabinet authorization. Centralization continued after Ben-Gurion but took different forms: Golda’s “kitchen cabinet” of course comes to mind, especially the decisions not to mobilize additional IDF reserve units and not to strike preemptively that were made at the beginning of the Yom Kippur War. During the war itself, the full cabinet and the General Staff returned to the center of policy formulation. During the Likud era, Menachem Begin drew upon the days of Levi Eshkol, reviving the subcabinet Ministerial Committee on Security and Defense as the principal decision making body.

Regardless of the specific form this streamlining takes at any given time, policy will rest as much on personal intuition as on institutional, bureaucratic analysis. Clearly, the smaller the group, the greater the impact of personality. We need to look always at the two-dimensional psychological factor: (a) the character and personality of individual leaders; (b) interpersonal relationships among the two or three people making foreign policy. This has made for any number of interesting combinations.

Three Decision Makers

Important decisions—if they are going to be made other than by the full cabinet—ought to involve at a minimum those three officials primarily responsible for national security and foreign relations: the prime minister and his foreign and defense ministers. For Israel this may have to represent the best compromise possible between the dictates of swift decision and of collective wisdom. Still, even this process depends on the specific participants and their particular working relationship. Two examples will suffice: 1969–74 (Meir-Eban-Dayan) and 1974–77 (Rabin-Allon-Peres).

The period between the 1967 and 1973 wars is dominated by Israel’s military hero and defense minister, Moshe Dayan, whose opinions time and again helped determine government policy. Foreign Minister Abba Eban may have taken issue with Dayan’s tough stand but was no match when it came to political infighting, while Prime Minister Golda Meir herself tended to defer to Dayan’s sound military background, experience, and judgment. Consequently, Dayan left his mark on an entire series of crucial diplomatic security
issues, from the “open bridges” policy and Jewish settlement in the territories to Israel’s determined stand on Arab terrorism; from the war of attrition with Egypt to the Rogers and Jarring initiatives and later Sadat peace process; and from brinkmanship with the Soviet Union along the Suez Canal to crisis management in close collaboration with the U.S. at the height of the 1970 Jordanian civil war. By the same token, his failure to pick up on Arab military preparations in the fall of 1973, plus hesitancy in pushing for a last-minute preemptive air strike, played a major part in the Yom Kippur War surprise.

If Dayan’s experience sheds insight on both the advantages and disadvantages of having one member of the ruling triumvirate predominate, the following period of 1974–77 suggests what could happen should no “first among equals” or primus inter pares emerge. That the team of Premier Rabin, Foreign Minister Yigal Allon, and Defense Minister Shimon Peres had the unenviable burden of coping with the military and diplomatic fallout from the Yom Yippur War—oil revolution was hard enough. Poor chemistry among the three leaders, documented by Rabin’s bitter autobiographical reference about Peres’s disloyalty toward him, only complicated the task of pursuing a united policy course. U.S. Secretary Kissinger for one used the situation in pressing the interim agreements upon Israel. Far more successful for a while was the Begin, Foreign Minister Dayan, and Defense Minister Ezer Weizman Likud troika, which appears to have functioned closely even if not smoothly in 1978 at Camp David.

Two Decision Makers

In Israel’s loose system it is not absolutely necessary that all three top position holders be involved in a decision. Such a possibility arises whenever one person fills two of the three key posts—premier, defense, foreign affairs—at the same time. This has actually happened on at least five occasions: when Ben-Gurion was his own defense minister; when Sharet retained the Foreign Ministry; when Eshkol, modeling himself on Ben-Gurion, dealt with security affairs until the 1967 crisis; when Begin temporarily acted as defense chief in 1981; and when Yitzhak Shamir, called to succeed Begin, held on to his job at the Foreign Ministry as well. In such cases the presence of only two people at the top can go either way in terms of facilitating policy making. In Sharet’s case it worked badly—even worse when Peres and Shamir had to act jointly, finding it hard to reach agreement even on diplomatic appointments, such as choosing a nominee for the ambassadorial post in Washington. When Mrs. Meir teamed up with Ben-Gurion, the two-player arrangement worked better, and it proved it could work well in 1983–84 when Defense Minister Moshe Arens complemented Shamir in coordinating policy efforts.

One Decision Maker

There have been a greater number of instances than is publicly acknowledged in which decisions were made by a single minister who, for one reason or another, did not seek the counsel of his two principal colleagues.

An early outstanding instance of a solitary crisis decision was Ben-Gurion’s purposive strategy in 1956 to take Israel into war including secret collusion with France and then Great Britain. In the nonmilitary sphere probably the most costly error in the history of Israeli foreign relations came from a single-person decision in the early eighties. While in Washington for discussions with administration officials in 1981, then Prime Minister Begin waffled an American offer to convert its aid from loans to direct grants without first consulting his own treasury advisers. Partly as a result, Israel ended up with an onerous debt of $5.5 billion, with a life span of thirty years at a cost of 12 to 14 percent per annum in debt servicing. Only after 1984 did U.S. foreign military support to Israel become outright grants.

Solitary decision making became especially fashionable in the period 1984 to 1988 as mounting strains within the national unity government threatened to sweep aside gentlemanly good form and the sense of national responsibility with which Ministers Peres, Rabin, and Shamir at least initially had entered the power-sharing arrangement.

By the time of the 1988 national elections, Shamir and Peres were trading accusations, charging each other with “murdering the peace” and “murdering the truth.” Shamir was convinced that Peres had operated behind his back and against coalition principles by soliciting American and West European pressure, by making concessions to Egypt on Taba, by undercutting Israel’s claim to be on the West Bank for security reasons, and in general, by conducting his own private, independent foreign policy. Most galling to Shamir were the circumstances behind the Peres-Hussein 1987 London accord and America’s shift to support for a wide Mideast conference with Soviet participation. On this basis, in agreeing to renew the Labour-Likud format for another four years in 1988, Prime Minister-designate Shamir showed flexibility on most points while refusing to budge on his opposition to Peres as foreign minister. Instead, the latter entered the NUG II government as head of the Finance Ministry convinced
that Shamir, for his part, was obstructionist and not entirely committed to finding a compromise solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Israeli historians continue to argue over exactly how to classify decision making on Lebanon in 1982. Their interpretations, however, come down to two possibilities: either the strategy for marching to Beirut, engaging the Syrians, and restructuring Lebanon's politics was shared by Prime Minister Begin and Defense Minister Sharon only, or Sharon was the sole architect of what would become known as "Arik's war." But what everyone seems to agree on is that the intimate circle, possibly including Chief of Staff Rafael Eitan, was not much larger than this; the remaining cabinet ministers received only partial information and during the initial phases of the military operation were unaware of what policies they were being asked to approve. Arguably, had the war plans been more thoroughly debated and reviewed in a larger government forum, Israel could have been spared the costly extended entanglement in Lebanon.

Because of the informal, unsystematic, and perhaps even haphazard way by which Israeli foreign policy sometimes is made, the diplomatic record contains more than a few ill-conceived operations, security mishaps, and political setbacks—what historian Barbara Tuchman calls "folly" and Irving Janis "fiasco." Lebanon, the Pollard affair, and the Iran affair have at least one thing in common: they all are the product of streamlined policy making. Together they stand as an abject lesson against acting on personal impulse or in bureaucratic cabal at the expense of preparatory staff work, and they ought to confirm that at the end of such a curtailed process lies failure just as often as effectiveness and success.

In Israel, elite policy making poses the challenge of getting into the act and of getting the foreign policy act together. This takes us and the process to its next phase of policy coordination.

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**CHAPTER 6**

**POLICY COORDINATION**

... the conscious determination not to know too much, the failure to exercise effective control over the bodies officially responsible to them and the propensity of bad judgment evinced by our top leaders [in the Pollard affair] was not a one-time affair but the catastrophic continuation of a long-term pattern.

—The Jerusalem Post, 1987

On 30 August 1987 months of public suspense and government indecision over the fate of Israel's Lavi fighter aircraft finally came to an end. Speaking for the government of Israel, the then ten-mer inner cabinet decided by a single vote to abort a project that had been under way for more than a decade and was about to go into production after successful test flights and the investment of over $1 billion. Media speculation as to the reasoning behind this dramatic reversal of policy was unofficially confirmed by cabinet ministers participating in the decision. The Lavi simply had become alternatively expensive, too ambitious, too sensitive diplomatically—probably three combined.

Left unsaid in most post-mortem analyses were indicators of serious government mismanagement and bureaucratic rivalry. Placing the Lavi project from its inception, the absence of close political coordination is a recurrent feature of Israeli foreign policy. And with any of a half-dozen or more celebrated cases of bureaucratic infighting can illustrate the harmful consequences for Israel internationally. Lavi had been chosen as one of the best documented.

**THE GROUNDING OF THE LAVI**

Popular opinion inside Israel attributed the downing of the Lavi...