CAN THE ISRAELI CENTER HOLD?

By Justin Scott Finkelstein

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The centrist Yesh Atid Party's capturing of 19 seats in the January 2013 Israeli elections – making it the second largest party in the Knesset – came as a surprise to many observers. Polls conducted before the elections had indicated that Yesh Atid would win only about a dozen seats. Yesh Atid's success captured attention from around the world for weeks after the election. Pundits discussed how Israel had voted for the center, suggesting that there was some kind of seismic shift in the Israeli political landscape.

Yet, in retrospect, Yesh Atid's electoral success should not have been surprising at all. Since the 2003 Israeli elections, centrist parties have established a pattern of performing extremely well at the ballot box. During this time, Israelis have voted for centrist parties in higher numbers than in any other ten-year period in Israeli history.

Nevertheless, the Israeli center is haunted by a lackluster past. Since the first centrist party emerged on the Israeli political scene in the country's first elections in 1949, centrist parties have had very short life spans – at least with respect to securing a significant number of seats in the Knesset. This has not changed since 2003. In the four elections since then, the Israeli electorate has flocked to three different centrist parties, each time leaving all other centrist parties in tatters.

As Yesh Atid joined the governing coalition in March with Netanyahu at the helm, Yesh Atid founder and chair, Yair Lapid, was named Minister of Finance. After a few weeks, polls found Lapid's party had become almost as popular as Netanyahu's Likud-Beytenu party. However, the honeymoon came to an end later that spring when Lapid unveiled his first budget proposal, which did not significantly relieve the tax burden on the middle class and barely raised corporate tax rates. The Israeli public that voted for Yesh Atid with the hopes that Lapid would be able to implement the changes called for during the social protests of the summer of 2011 were disillusioned and disappointed. As a result, polls began showing that Lapid's popularity had plummeted.

Will Lapid's budget be his party's downfall? Have other centrist parties in Israel's history fallen apart because of similar unpopular decisions? Taking the history of these other centrist parties into consideration, what might enable Lapid and Yesh Atid to stay relevant in the long run? Furthermore, what underlying trends in Israeli society made Yesh Atid so successful in the first place?

MAJOR CENTRIST PARTIES IN ISRAEL'S HISTORY … AND THEIR DOWNFALLS

The Israeli center's rocky road began virtually with the founding of the State of Israel. The General Zionist Party, which had roots in the pre-state Yishuv,[1] won 20 seats in Israel's second elections (held in 1951). It became the second largest party in the Knesset, surpassed only by the ruling Mapai Party (which later morphed into the present-day Labor Party). In the next elections, held in 1955, the General Zionist Party maintained considerable electoral clout by keeping hold of 13 seats, but dropped to become the third largest in the Knesset. The party tried to forge a middle ground between the socialist, Mapai Party-dominated Zionist establishment of the time and the right-wing Revisionist movement (whose party had captured 15 seats in the 1955 elections). However, its lack of independent institutions and ideological cohesion ultimately led to its winning only eight seats in the 1959 elections, and soon after it merged with the Progressive Party (a smaller centrist party) to form the Liberal Party.[2]

The Liberal Party was another short-lived success story in Israel's political history. With open-market principles as its battle cry against the largely socialist Knesset, it managed to win 17 seats in the 1961 elections. Yet before the next elections in 1965, the Liberal Party merged with the rightist Herut Party to form the Gahal bloc, ostensibly because the Liberal Party shared Herut's economic philosophy.[3] This helped enlarge the opposition, but the Liberal Party was soon subsumed by Herut and never ran independently again.

It took more than 15 years for another centrist party to win more than 15 seats in an election. In 1977, the Democratic Movement for Change (Dash/DMC) burst on to the scene with exactly 15 seats. Dash was mostly a conglomerate of Israeli politicians from both the right and the left, who were compelled to ride the wave of disappointment and desired reform after the Israeli establishment's ill-preparedness for the 1973 Yom Kippur War. It hoped to join a Labor-led government after the elections; however, 1977 marked the year of the rightist Herut's rise (Likud's forbearer), which surprised much of the world by winning a plurality of seats in the Knesset and ending the dominance of Mapai/Labor and its affiliates since the founding of the state almost 30 years prior. Dash ended up reluctantly joining a coalition with Herut at the helm, yet it was not given much authority, and internal party cleavages soon tore the party apart. By the next elections, held in 1981, Dash had disintegrated.[4]

After Dash's epic rise and demise, 26 years elapsed before another centrist party won 15 seats in the Knesset. The party that broke the drought was Shinui, which won 15 seats in the 2003 elections. Coincidentally, Shinui was the only surviving faction of Dash. It had limped along since 1981, winning only two or three seats in each election until Tommy Lapid, Yair Lapid's father (also a journalist), took over as chairman before the 1999 elections. Shinui under Lapid Sr. was particularly effective at marshaling popular resentment against the subsidies given to Israel's ultra-orthodox community (Haredim). It also maintained a balance on foreign policy and economic issues between that of Labor and Likud. Consequently, Shinui won six seats in the 1999 elections before winning 15 in 2003. The decision to make Lapid chairman helped with Shinui's electoral successes, yet it also led to its eventual downfall. In the party primaries leading up to the 2006 elections, Lapid did not win as resoundingly as expected, and as a result both he and his deputy Avraham Poraz (who was defeated) decided to leave the party. Shinui found itself left without a viable leader and failed to cross the electoral threshold in the 2006 elections.[5]

The most recent centrist party to win more than 15 seats (besides Yesh Atid) was Kadima, which became the only centrist party in Israel's history to win 15 seats or more in two consecutive elections. It was founded in 2005 by former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, a year after the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip that Sharon had seen

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[1] Yishuv refers to the Jewish community in Palestine before the state of Israel was founded in 1948.

[2] Gideon Shimoni, *The Zionist Ideology* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1995), pp. 85-126, and Kevjn Lim, "Neither Left nor Right but Backwards: The Failure of Centrist Parties in Israel and their Relationship to the Multiparty System," *Israel Affairs*, January 2009. http://ehis.ebscohost.com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=6b6e01e0-1059-4d76-ab4f-613e7bca9ef1%40sessionmgr4&vid=5&hid=4.

[3] Lim, "Neither Left nor Right but Backwards," p. 34, and Knesset.gov.il, "Liberal Party of Israel," http://www.knesset.gov.il/faction/eng/FactionPage_eng.asp?PG=79.

[4] Susan Hattis Rolef, "Democratic Movement for Change," *Encyclopedia Judaica,* (2007). http://go.galegroup.com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CCX2587505092&v=2.1&u=new67449&it=r&p=GVRL&sw=w.

[5] Susan Hattis Rolef, "Shinui," *Encyclopedia Judaica,* (2007). http://go.galegroup.com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CCX2587518353&v=2.1&u=new67449&it=r&p=GVRL&sw=w.

through. Sharon decided to leave the party because members of Likud continued to harshly criticize the pullout and remained opposed to the U.S.-backed "road map" for peace—which called for a two-state solution to the conflict—that Sharon had endorsed. Kadima received 29 seats in 2006 and 28 in 2009 before apparently succumbing to the fate of other centrist parties and winning only two seats in the 2013 elections. Kadima's downfall can be attributed to a number of factors, including leader Tzipi Livni's resounding defeat in the March 2012 primaries, its singular focus on the Arab-Israeli conflict, the lack of ideological cohesion within the party, its failure to influence the coalition from within when it briefly joined Netanyahu's government in the summer of 2012, and the emergence of a new, more attractive centrist party: Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid.

HISTORY'S LESSONS AND THE ISRAELI CONVERGENCE IN THE CENTER

As Yesh Atid takes the center's reins, it is worth noting that although centrist parties have had a long history of failures in Israel, other countries, such as Finland and the Netherlands, have been able to sustain large centrist parties for decades. Therefore, we know that centrist parties are not inherently and universally prone to short-term lifespans, insignificance, and ultimate failure. So why has this consistently been the case in Israel?

Drawing on the history of the five major centrist parties in Israel explored above, and nine more minor Israeli centrist parties documented in Figure 1 below, five main patterns can be identified: 1) the party joined with the major party to its right or left (usually Labor or Likud), 2) the party's platform was often not very different from the major parties on either the right or left, or the party had difficulty articulating a clear ideology or vision (which often led to its merger with Labor or Likud), 3) internal fighting, 4) the party revolved around only one person and could not survive after his or her departure, and 5) the party's platform was dominated by a singular issue. Remarkably, the passing of a single law has never been the main reason for an Israeli centrist party's failure; so perhaps Lapid's unpopular budget does not spell doom for Yesh Atid.

Figure 1: Centrist Parties in Israel's History

Party	# of Seats and Years	Main Points of Platform	Reason(s) for Breaking Up
The General Zionist Party (GZ)	7 ('49-'51) 20 ('51-'55) 13 ('55-'59) 8 ('59-'61)	Umbrella for non-Revisionist and non-Socialist Zionists; pragmatic approach on all the main issues	Lack of institutionalization; lack of ideological cohesion; merged with Progressive Party to form Liberal Party
Progressive Party	5 ('49-'51) 4 ('51-'55) 5 ('55-'59) 6 ('59-'61)	Open-market principles (countering the hegemony of the ruling socialist-oriented Mapai party)	Merged with the General Zionist Party to form Liberal Party
Liberal Party	17 ('61-65)	Open-market principles (like Progressive Party, this was in response to the socialist orientation of the ruling Mapai)	Formed a bloc with rightist Herut called Gahal, the holdouts formed Independent Liberal Party
Independent Liberal Party	5 ('65-'69) 4 ('69-'73) 4 ('73-'77) 1 ('77-'81)	Bring different social and economic stratums together; separation of synagogue and state	Joined Alignment (Labor Party alliance) for 1984 elections; leader Yitzhak Arzi left to join Shinui towards 1988 elections
Rafi	10 ('65-'69)	Electoral reform; injecting some capitalist principles into economy	Joined with other parties to form Labor Party in 1968; no significant ideological or programmatic differences from ruling Mapai Party
National/State List (Rafi-State List after 1971)	4 ('69-'73)	Basically the same as Rafi (was formed by Ben-Gurion and other members of his Rafi party who did not want to join rivals to form Labor Party in 1968)	Ben-Gurion (its leader) resigned from Knesset in 1971; party ran for Knesset as part of Likud in 1973 elections

Party	Seats	Platform	Notes
Democratic Movement for Change (Dash/DMC)	15 ('77-'78)	Trimming of government bureaucracy; decentralization; reform of the education and housing systems; willing to accept territorial compromise but not over Jerusalem	Broke up into separate parliamentary factions because they expected to join a Labor-led government in 1977, but Herut won; internal cleavages then tore party apart
Shinui	2 ('81-'84) 3 ('84-'88) 2 ('88-'92) 2 ('92-'96)* 2 ('96-'99)* 6 ('99-'03) 15 ('03-'06)	Negotiate with Palestinians; government accountability; halt in government intervention in economy to promote sector-specific interests; more equitable education system 1999-2006: Anti-religious; secularist; against funding of ultra-orthodox	In primaries, party head (since 1999) Tommy Lapid was challenged and his deputy Avraham Poraz was voted out; as a result both left the party, creating two factions and ultimately the party's electoral demise
Telem	2 ('81)	Israeli disengagement from parts of West Bank; more of a free market economy; religious-secular status quo with mutual respect	Party held together by leader Moshe Dayan, who died in 1981; lacked coherent ideology; merged with Herut in 1981
Yahad	3 ('84-'88)	Economic reform to avert crisis; government accountability; unity between the various sectors of society; promotion of a peace process	Merged into bloc with Labor in 1984
Ometz	1 ('84-88)	Primary concern: Economic austerity	Merged with Labor in 1984 and with Likud in 1988
Third Way	4 ('96-'99)	Opposed to withdrawal from Golan Heights; between Labor and Likud on peace issues	Labor took tougher position on Golan Heights; basically a one-issue party
Center Party	6 ('99-'03)	Unity on peace issues; more movement on peace process; written constitution	Leader Yitzhak Mordecai resigned amidst sex scandal
Kadima	29 ('06-'09) 28 ('09-'13) 2 ('13-)	Security-oriented territorial compromise based on "two states for two peoples"; open-market economy with some socialistic principles	Focus on Israeli-Palestinian conflict; leader Tzipi Livni lost in primaries and left party; impotence in Likud coalition; internal party cleavages
HaTenuah	6 ('13-)	Two-state solution; green policies	---
Yesh Atid	19 ('13-)	Unity between religious and secular populations; legislation requiring Haredim to serve in army; economic and housing reform; two-state solution	---

Note: the years parliamentary elections have been held in Israel are 1949, 1951, 1955, 1959, 1961, 1965, 1969, 1973, 1977, 1981, 1984, 1988, 1992, 1996, 1999, 2003, 2006, 2009 and 2013.

*With leftist Meretz party.

That Israeli centrist parties have had more success in the past 10 years than in any other period in Israel's history has been the subject of much debate. Some have contended that the trend is a reflection of the emergence of a "new consensus" or "neo-centrism" among the Israeli electorate. Proponents of this theory argue that the Second Intifada has caused Israelis to fear that a negotiated peace agreement with a reliable Palestinian partner is unattainable in the short term even as they accept the two-state solution as ultimately in Israel's interest.[6] Another argument is that

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[6] See Shmuel Sandler and Jonathan Rynhold, "Introduction: From Centrism to Neo-Centrism," *Israel Affairs,* April 2007, and Yossi

the relative success of centrist parties has little or nothing to do with the convergence of public opinion in the center. To support this view, public opinion polls are cited that show a higher percentage of Israelis self-identifying as centrists at times in Israel's history when there were far fewer Knesset seats occupied by centrist parties.[7] It is therefore postulated that the simple existence of a high percentage of voters who identify as centrist does not necessarily translate into success for centrist parties and, conversely, that centrist parties need not rely on a solid centrist base in order to do well at the ballot box.

Yet it may be that these two arguments together actually help explain the real reasons for the recent electoral successes of centrist parties in Israel. With polls showing that Israelis do not self-identify as centrist much more than they did at any other time in Israel's history, the fact that they vote for the center may be indicative of something going on in Israel's larger political left-right spectrum. Through circumstances not wholly of their own making, the major parties on the right and left have created a considerable hole in the center. Yesh Atid (and other centrist parties over the past ten years) came at just the right time to catch the resultant floating electorate. In the past, Labor (the major party on the left) and Likud (the major party on the right) have been able to present themselves as centrist and/or representative of Israeli public opinion. Labor, in particular, was able to do this over the first three decades of Israel's existence, during which it dominated at the ballot box.

However, during the Second Intifada, the Israeli public increasingly began to see the Labor party as the embodiment of the ideas of yesterday. Since its victory in the 1992 Israeli elections, Labor had generally held that if Israel made enough concessions, then the Palestinians would be ready to enter into a peace agreement with Israel. Those hopes were shattered with the Second Intifada, and the electorate began moving rightward.[8] This led to Likud winning the general elections in 2003. But Likud's traditional emphasis on preserving Israeli control over all (or almost all) of the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea proved to be not very palatable to the Israeli electorate either. Therefore, when Ariel Sharon broke away from Likud in 2006 to form the centrist Kadima, an electorate was more than ready to propel the party to victory in that year's elections. Labor had become irrelevant, Likud was seen as too hardline, and a void in the middle was waiting to be filled.

Creeping social fissures and economic issues have likely also played a role in the recent successes of centrist Israeli parties. Among social issues, the question of the Haredi community has been especially discussed among the Israeli public. Throughout the past couple of decades, the Israeli public has grown to resent the fact that the Israeli Haredi community largely enjoys exemption from military service and receives generous living stipends – at the Israeli taxpayers' expense – to study sacred Jewish texts. Labor and Likud had come to be seen as too complacent on this issue, and the situation was ripe for a centrist party to emerge that claimed to be able to fix the problem and unite Israelis.

On the economy, the Labor party's socialist ethos was seen as outdated in the modern, neo-liberal global economy. Likud's strident capitalism, however, was and still is seen by much of the electorate as too much of a threat to the social welfare state that many Israelis feel unites the country. Again, the environment was ripe for a centrist party to emerge. All of these factors taken together help explain the recent success of centrist parties in Israel, including Yesh Atid. Israelis did not necessarily have to identify as centrist for center parties to succeed; the conditions that led to their success were often beyond the control of individual voters.

THE ROCKY ROAD AHEAD

Taking into account both the history of Israeli centrist parties and the de facto centrist doctrine that much of the Israeli electorate has gravitated towards, there are certain considerations that should be paramount when evaluating Yesh Atid's prospects in the long-term. These factors can roughly be divided into structural, ideological and circumstantial categories.

Structurally, the historical record of Israeli centrist parties has shown that a party cannot rely on one person only. Therefore, if his party is to have staying power, Lapid must groom others to lead and give others significant power.

Klein Halevi, "Can the Center Hold? Understanding Israel's Pragmatic Majority," *Foreign Affairs,* January/February 2012, http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/136728/yossi-klein-halevi/can-the-center-hold.
[7] Lim, "Neither Left Nor Right but Backwards," pp. 38-39.
[8] Efraim Inbar, "The decline of the Labour party," *Israel Affairs,* January 2010.

Lapid is uniquely positioned to have absorbed this lesson: his own father's party, Shinui, failed for this very reason. Telem and the Center Party are also examples of parties that have fallen victim to this pattern. In a similar vein, Yesh Atid must also build institutions in order to nourish a viable constituency. Regional Yesh Atid offices must establish themselves and forge lasting relationships with locals. (The General Zionist Party is a textbook example of a political party that suffered as a result of not having independent institutions).

Ideologically, Yesh Atid needs a coherent vision or set of beliefs beyond Lapid's vision of unity between the religious and secular publics—entailing the enlistment of Haredim into the army. On the conflict with the Palestinians, it needs to define more explicitly the centrist position and set forth a strategy to achieving the objectives it sets. The same applies to the economy. The vision Yesh Atid projects and propagates will have to be adequately separate from, and relatively equidistant to, the major parties on both its right and left. Maintaining a coherent centrist ideology or niche may help stave off attempts by other parties to co-opt Yesh Atid, as seven of the 13 now-extinct centrist parties listed in Figure 1 above eventually merged with the major party to either its right or left and thereafter ceased to be an independent political actor. The lack of a distinct centrist vision and/or ideology almost certainly contributed to this phenomenon.

Whatever set of political beliefs Yesh Atid champions and claims as its exclusive domain, party members can do themselves a favor by making sure they all stay on more or less the same page regarding the major issues. Both Kadima and Dash had problems with internal fighting that contributed significantly to their demises. Yesh Atid may be particularly susceptible to this since its top 20 members consist of a wide variety of people—from Yael German, who used to be with the leftist and secularist Meretz party, to Dov Lipman, a Haredi rabbi. These disparate backgrounds may result in some disagreements when it comes to the role of Judaism in the state and a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. (Kadima is an example of a party that sputtered in part due to its lack of unity on the latter issue).

Finally, circumstantially, Yesh Atid and its supporters must keep the center to themselves and ensure that another attractive centrist party does not emerge. The Third Way Party was most likely supplanted by the tempting pull of military heavyweight Yitzhak Mordecai and his Center Party in 1999, and Kadima would have likely done better in the recent elections if Yesh Atid had never been formed. For Yesh Atid, the rise of another attractive centrist party may be beyond its control.

CAN YESH ATID SUCCEED WHERE OTHER CENTRIST PARTIES FAILED?

Unless there is some kind of major shift in the Israeli public's basic political paradigms – on the economy, social issues and foreign policy – or the Likud or Labor parties manage to re-brand themselves and (re)position themselves in the center, there is a viable Israeli electorate on which a centrist party can rely. Despite this, no Israeli centrist party has been able to maintain its hold on this portion of the electorate for more than two consecutive elections. Achieving this will be one of Yesh Atid's fundamental challenges.

Yair Lapid is in a unique position to break the Israeli center's cycle of failure. Never before in Israeli history has a leader of a centrist party been the son or daughter of a former centrist party head. By mere virtue of having this close familial connection, Lapid has had the opportunity to learn the lessons of the Israeli center in a very intimate way. Indeed, Lapid has already authored a book about his father's life, including his political career.[9] Therefore, Lapid should know a couple of things about the unsustainability of a party dependent on one person. However, there will be many other hurdles that Lapid and Yesh Atid will have to clear in order to be successful in the long run.

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[9] See Yair Lapid, *Memories After My Death* (London: Elliot and Thompson, Ltd., 2012).