

## Separating Israelis and Palestinians: Demarcating *De Facto* Boundaries

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The Israel-Palestinian peace process has taken a sharp turn for the worse in recent months. The incidents of suicide bombings carried out by fundamentalist terrorists both within Israel and the Occupied Territories has raised serious questions concerning the future direction of this process. Within Israel, public support has shifted away from cautious support of the agreement over limited autonomy to intense opposition. Without any clear improvement in their personal and collective security, many Israelis feel that nothing has been gained from the concessions made thus far, and that there is little reason to move ahead unless terrorist activities can be terminated by the Palestinian administration.

In the wake of the first two bomb incidents, in Tel Aviv in October 1994 and at the Bet Lid junction near Netanya some three months later, the Israeli government proposed the limiting of free movement of Palestinian workers from the West Bank and Gaza Strip into Israel. This is perceived as being part of wider policy, now commonly known as 'separation', in which the degree of contact between Israelis and Palestinians would be reduced to a minimum. In effect, the government is proposing the putting in place of a *de facto* boundary which would separate the two peoples and their respective territories.

Israel finds itself in a dilemma with respect to this situation. As of 1995, the official Israeli negotiating stance did not, as yet, recognise the inevitability of the establishment of a separate Palestinian state over and beyond the granting of autonomy. Physically separating the Gaza Strip and West Bank from Israel in order to meet short term security objectives, threatened to weaken the long-term Israeli negotiating objectives. In practical terms, physical separation, increased 'border' checks and patrols only served to strengthen the concept of a separate Palestinian state.

While the Palestinians will claim the whole of the West Bank and Gaza Strip (including East Jerusalem) for a future Palestinian state, Israel will seek to make significant border changes which will

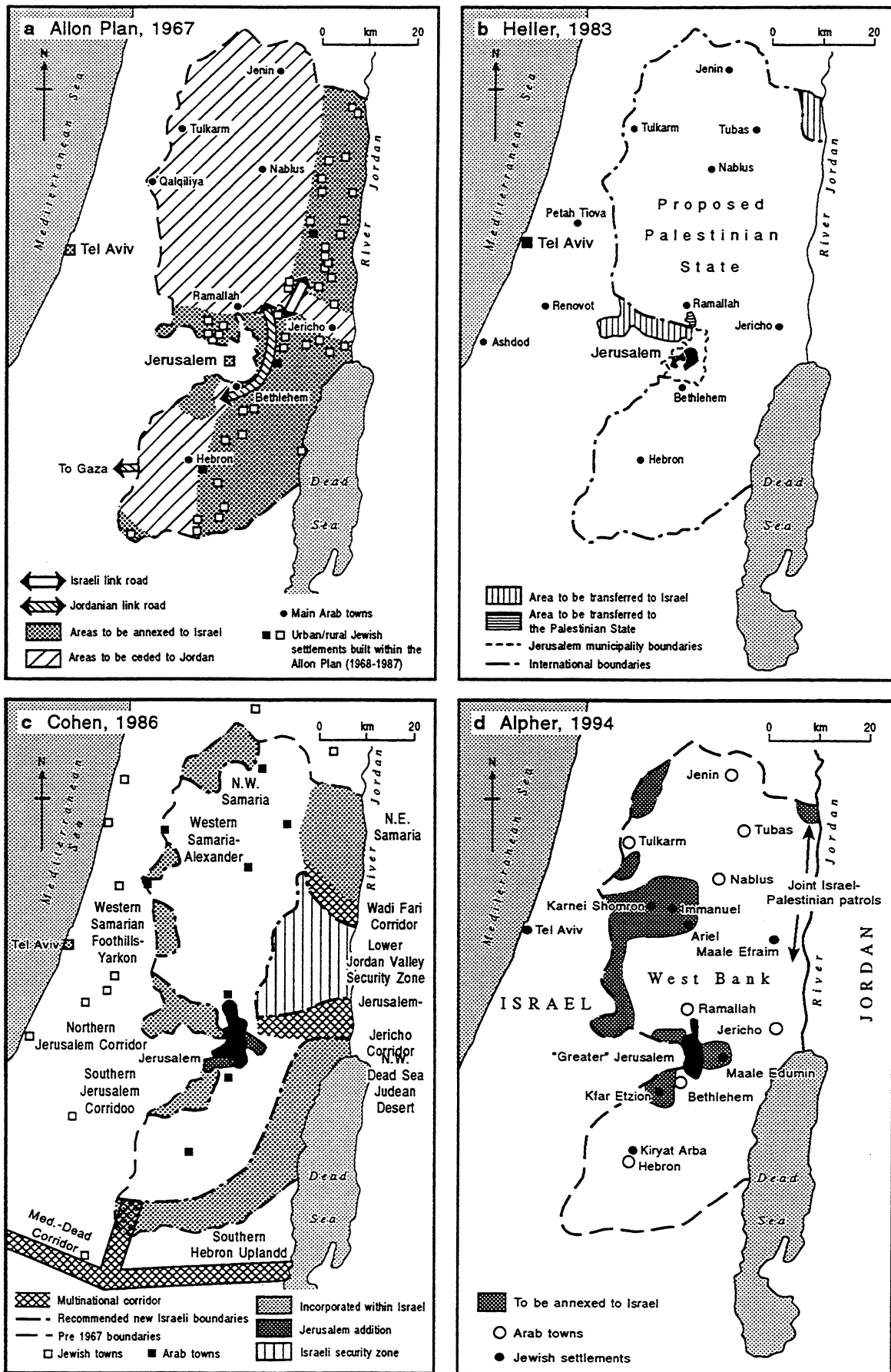
enable them to retain control of key strategic locations, critical areas of the water aquifer and approximately 65% of the Israeli settlements. A recent study carried out by the Jaffee Centre for Strategic Studies at Tel Aviv University has shown that these interests can be maintained by relatively small border adjustments to the east of the current administrative boundary (Figure 1d). Setting up a line or fence of separation along the course of the old 'green line' will only serve to weaken Israel's own negotiating position in the final boundary demarcation process.

Two governmental committees were set up to work out the details and implications of the implementation of 'separation'. While the 'security' committee recommended a high level of physical separation along the course of the green line, their proposals were rejected by the 'economic' committee on the grounds that the cost, both infrastructural and operational, were too high. The security proposals included the establishment of a 212 mile long security strip, ranging in width from one mile to several hundred feet. The strip would follow the course of the 'green line', with the exception of two areas - Jerusalem and the Gush Etzion region. In these areas, the strip would be located to the east of the old boundary.

Only nineteen miles of the strip would actually have border fences, the rest of the strip being patrolled by the Israeli army on the eastern (West Bank) side and the border police on the western (Israeli) side. A limited number of crossing points would be determined, through which all traffic desiring to cross from the West Bank into Israel would have to pass. In early April 1995, the Erez crossing into the Gaza Strip was reinforced by the redeployment of 500 soldiers equipped with sophisticated equipment to detect weapons and explosive materials in vehicles crossing into Israel. In addition, all commodities arriving in trucks had to be unloaded and transferred to Israeli vehicles for onward shipment into Israel.

The estimated cost for the implementation of the project was expected to run to over US\$125

Figure 1: Proposals for 'Green Line' Redemarcation



Source: Newman, D. (1995) 'Boundaries in Flux: The 'Green Line' Boundary between Israel and the West Bank - Past Present and Future', *Boundary and Territory Briefing*, 1, 7, Durham: International Boundaries Research Unit.

million, with an annual operational cost of approximately US\$50 million per annum. These figures were subsequently disputed by the 'economic' committee, who argued that the actual cost for total separation would be as high as two billion dollars, with operational costs of US\$150 million per annum. As an alternative, they proposed two plans which would simply increase the existing levels of surveillance and would undertake spot checks of documents and increase the frequency of road blocks along, or around, the 'green line'. Implementation costs for these alternatives were expected to range from a high of US\$300 million to a low of only US\$10 million.

In order to cut costs, more limited measures were proposed. These included transit points for workers along the 'green line', from which they would be transferred into Israel in Israeli vehicles, or the establishment of a large retail market for goods and produce at one of the major crossing points to which both Israelis and Palestinians could come without having to cross into the territory of the 'other' group. The construction of new industrial zones at selected sites within the West Bank and Gaza Strip was also perceived as a means of creating employment opportunities within the Occupied Territories and thus preventing movement of Palestinian labour into Israel itself. Thus, the economic and security objectives were intricately interwoven with each other, both influencing the eventual adoption of a clear policy on the part of the Israeli government.

For the right wing opponents of the peace process in Israel, the concept of physical separation is unacceptable. They argue that this is the first step on the road to the demarcation of a separate Palestinian state which will involve the removal of some of the Israeli settlements which are located within a Palestinian territory. They compare the separation concept to a system of physical apartheid in which ethnic populations are firmly located within their own separate homelands, between which there is little, if any, interaction and contact. At the same time, they continue to blame the present government for being directly responsible for the suicide bombings which, they argue, have occurred in direct response to the peace accords. They do not accept the distinction between the new Palestinian authorities based around the PLO leadership and the fundamentalist Islamic movements such as Hamas and the Jihad. In their view, the granting of limited autonomy to the Palestinians has weakened Israel's control over

the territories and has brought, in its wake, the increased level of terrorism and suicide bombings.

But it is not only the right wing in Israel who oppose the *de facto* precedent of separation. In a recent newspaper editorial by Israeli diplomat and statesman, Abba Eban, which appeared in the Jerusalem Post on 20 April 1995 under the title "Take a Look at the Map", Eban argues that in Israel's quest for regional harmony,

*"...the idea of living as an embattled and isolated ghetto was never a part of its aspiration ... the ultimate guarantee of a peace agreement lies in the creation of common regional interests in such degree of intensity, in such entanglement of reciprocal advantage, in such mutual accessibility as to put the possibility of future wars beyond rational contingency....The answer lies in the sheer impossibility of the separation idea. One look at the map destroys the myth. There is no Sinia buffer here. There is a pattern of proximity and interconnection so intense and pervasive... For good or ill ... Israelis, Palestinians and Jordanians are committed by geography and history to accept their proximity as a common fate ... It would be a mistake to take long-term decisions based on short-term emergencies".*

The separation idea raises the paradox of the current peace process. Within Israel the idea was promoted as a means of keeping out suicide bombers, despite the fact that physical separation only serves to enhance the concept of separate Israeli and Palestinian territorial entities, the pre-condition for a two state solution to the conflict. While such a final arrangement may be on the hidden agenda of some of the more enlightened amongst Israel's negotiating team, the notion of a fully independent and separate Palestinian state is not yet part of the official policy of the Rabin government. Physical separation does not serve the current interests of the Israeli negotiating position.

Contrastingly, the Palestinian authorities immediately opposed any notion of immediate separation or further closing of the 'green line' boundary. The short term economic dislocation suffered by the Palestinian inhabitants of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip was too much for the already overburdened Palestinian autonomy administration to cope with. Thus, despite the fact that physical separation serves the long term

political aspirations of the Palestinians for a separate territorial entity, they worked to prevent any immediate sealing of the boundary.

These contrasting positions on the nature of separation serve to highlight the critical importance of economic development of the West Bank and Gaza Strip for the successful implementation of a political solution. For many Palestinians, their economic position has worsened since the onset of limited autonomy in April 1994. Less than 40,000 workers now find employment in Israel, as compared to over 100,000 just two years ago. Unemployment has increased, especially in the Gaza Strip, leading to a sense of frustration with the Palestinian leadership who, in the eyes of many, have not been able to 'deliver the goods'. Many of the frustrated turn to the opposition forces of the Hamas and the Jihad who portray Arafat and the PLO as having sold out the cause of the Palestinians to the Israelis. This provides fertile ground for the planning of new bombings within Israel which, in turn, result in punitive Israeli actions including the move towards separation.

For his part, Arafat is caught between two sets of pressures. Israel expects Arafat to show his commitment to the cause of peace by forcefully controlling and limiting the activities of Hamas and the Jihad. Such action on his part only serves to offer 'proof' to the more radical Palestinian forces that Arafat has now become the operational arm of Israeli policy. If, on the other hand, Arafat does not take action, Israeli public opinion perceives him as not living up to the conditions of the Declaration of Principles (DOP). Dissatisfaction with the peace process within Israel takes support away from the present government and weakens their chances to continue with the negotiations and, more importantly, to win the 1996 elections.

But time is its own healing process. Between March-July 1995, there have not been any further bombing attempts. This period has been accompanied by renewed negotiations over the redeployment of Israeli military forces from the major West Bank towns. The Palestinian authorities have argued that much of the political frustration amongst the Palestinian street is due to the slow progress which is being made in pushing the implementation of autonomy through to the next phase, to include the remainder of the West Bank territory. Israeli demands for the holding of elections within the West Bank and the Gaza Strip are met by the counter argument that such elections

were conditional on the Israeli military redeployment. At the time of writing, there were indications that agreement concerning some major population centres had been reached, including Nablus, Jenin, Tulkarem and Qalqilyah. Troop redeployment is opposed by the Israeli settler community throughout the West Bank who, in turn, accuse the Rabin government of deserting them. They have threatened to take unilateral action in 'defending' their interests and, according to press reports, have set up local militias to oversee the security of Israeli settlements and safe passage in the event of a military redeployment.

The peace process is threatened by the radicals on both sides. The Hamas and Jihad continue to reject the validity of any deal with Israel which continues to be seen as a foreign intrusion into the Islamic Middle East. They do not accept the notion of a Palestinian state including the whole of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, constituting only 23% of Mandate Palestine. For their part, Israeli settlers also reject any peace process which involves the 'giving up' of land which, in their fundamentalist view, constitutes part of the divinely promised Land of Israel for exclusive control of the Jewish people. Each of the radical groups, spurred on by a blind belief in the divine justice of their respective cause, desire to maintain/achieve sovereignty over the whole territory. There is no possible meeting of minds between these groups.

The alternative is to carry on, step by step, with the current peace process, negotiated between pragmatic politicians such as Prime Minister Rabin and Chairman Arafat. The other option is a religious war of dimensions to equal all that has gone before it during the past forty years. Separation is but one way in which the ultimate pragmatic territorial arrangement will be implemented. While separation signifies a territorial divorce, rather than the hoped for economic marriage of the early days of the peace process in late 1993 and early 1994, it is still a better solution than a return to full scale warfare and mass violence. If anything, it signifies the need for both Israel and the Palestinians to find ways of speeding up the negotiations over final territorial arrangements rather than maintain this uncertain period of transition, during which both sides become increasingly frustrated at the lack of tangible benefits.

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