DEFENSIBLE BORDERS TO SECURE ISRAEL'S FUTURE

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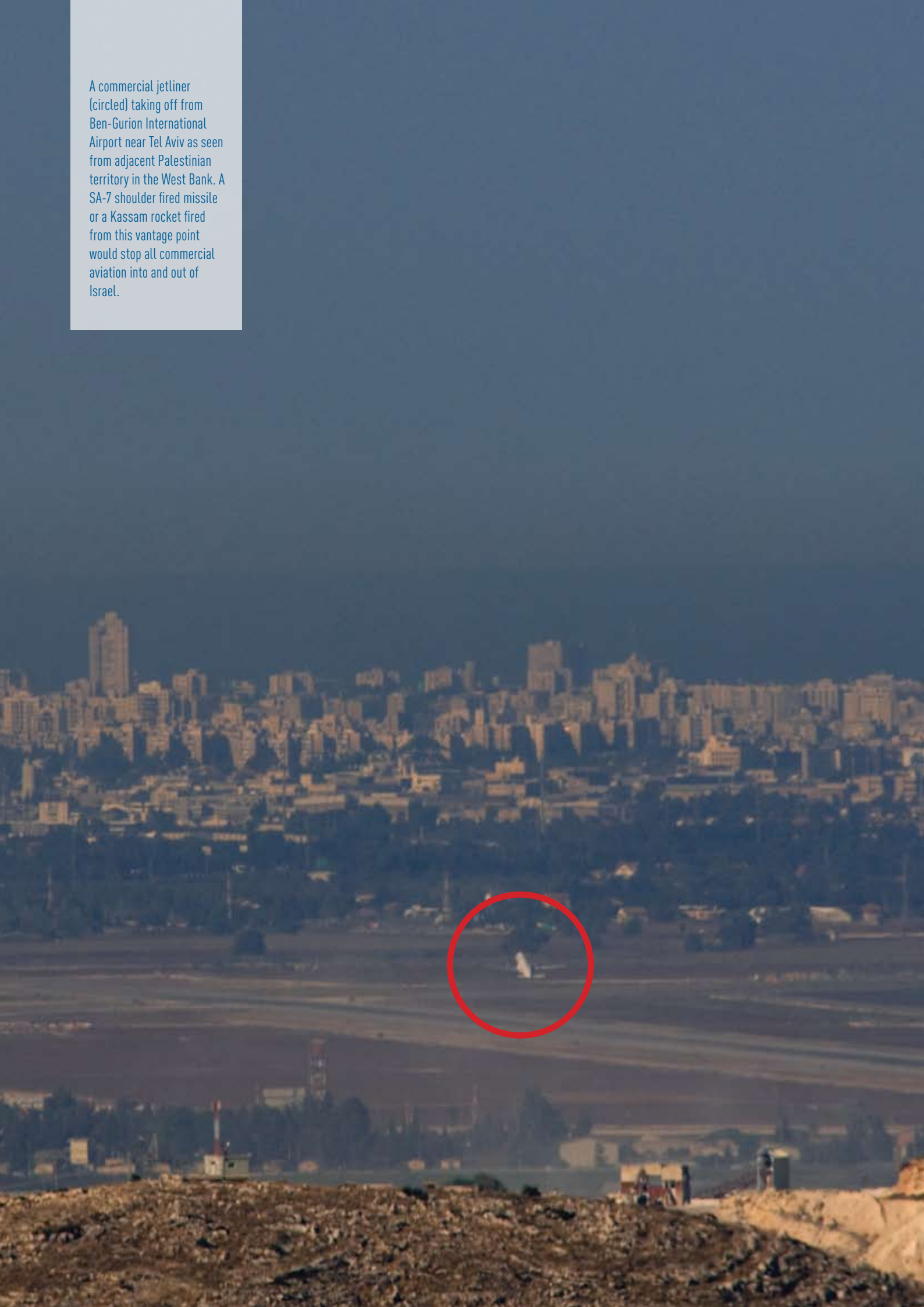
Israel's 1949 Armistice Lines Were Indefensible

Israel's fundamental right to "defensible borders" is grounded in the special legal and strategic circumstances it faced in the aftermath of the 1967 Six-Day War, when the West Bank and other territories were captured. The armistice line of 1949, from which Israel was attacked, had only been a military boundary between the Israeli and Jordanian armies, and not a permanent political border, according to the 1949 Armistice Agreement itself. This provided the background for UN Security Council Resolution 242 of November 1967, which did not call on the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) to withdraw fully to that line. Instead, it concluded that Israel would need "secure and recognized boundaries" which could be different from the indefensible pre-war lines. Prior to 1967, Israel's waistline between its major coastal cities and the Jordanian-occupied West Bank was approximately eight miles wide at its narrowest point, and provided no strategic depth in case of invasion.

Today, it is commonly misunderstood just how vulnerable Israel actually was then and would become once again if it were compelled to withdraw to the pre-1967 lines. As noted elsewhere in this policy study, Israel is a tiny country of about 10,000 square miles, approximately the size of New Jersey in the United States or slightly smaller than Belgium. Compounding Israel's small size is the fact that 70 percent of its population and 80 percent of its industrial capacity are concentrated in the narrow coastal strip sandwiched between the Mediterranean Sea and the West Bank.

To make matters worse, the adjacent hills of the West Bank topographically dominate the coastal plain, which is a relatively flat and exposed area. This provides distinct advantages to an attacker for observation, fire, and defense from an Israeli ground response. And there are many targets located along Israel's coastal plain: Ben-Gurion International Airport, the Trans-Israel Highway (Route 6) which runs north-south only tens of meters west of the West Bank, Israel's National Water Carrier, and its high-voltage electric power lines. If the West Bank were to fall into hostile hands, the resulting situation would pose a constant threat to Israel's national infrastructure.

For this reason, the architects of Israel's national security doctrine from Yigal Allon to Moshe Dayan to Yitzhak Rabin found compelling reasons to insist that it must not return to the vulnerable 1967 lines, which



A commercial jetliner (circled) taking off from Ben-Gurion International Airport near Tel Aviv as seen from adjacent Palestinian territory in the West Bank. A SA-7 shoulder fired missile or a Kassam rocket fired from this vantage point would stop all commercial aviation into and out of Israel.

only appeared to invite aggression and imperil Israel's future rather than set the stage for peace. These Israeli leaders sought new boundaries that would allow Israel to defend itself, by itself. Thus there emerged within the national security establishment a broad consensus that called these new lines "defensible borders" and urged that they be sought in any future negotiations.[1] In 2004, the U.S. provided Israel with a letter of assurances recognizing its right to defensible borders; it was signed by President George W. Bush and was backed by a bi-partisan majority in both houses of the U.S. Congress.

The Threat of Conventional Attack

The logic behind Israel's need for defensible borders is based on four principal threats: conventional attack; terrorism; mortar and rocket fire (as well as ballistic missiles); and unconventional attacks. When it comes to conventional attack, in contrast to the armed forces of the surrounding Arab states, the IDF is made up largely of reserve units that need approximately 48 hours to completely mobilize. The military formations of the Arab states are mostly active-duty units, with a small role for reserves. Defensible borders will provide the optimal topographical conditions for Israel's active-duty forces to withstand a ground assault by numerically superior forces while the mobilization of the reserves is completed.

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Even after the mobilization of the reserves is completed, defensible borders additionally provide the IDF with the necessary strategic depth it requires for managing a defensive battle, in the event Israel comes under attack. Should Israel lack this minimal battle space, then its deterrence posture will be weakened and the propensity of regional armies to initiate a surprise attack will grow, in order to achieve a decisive outcome against the IDF as rapidly as possible.

These have been the main considerations for defensible borders, given that conventional Arab war coalitions formed in 1948, 1967, and 1973 that featured the deployment of Iraqi expeditionary forces to Israel's east. Since the end of the 1991 Gulf War and the advent of peace between Israel and Jordan, this danger has diminished in the near term. Yet no one can be certain how Iraq will evolve in the long term: perhaps it will become a new Arab democracy seeking peace with Israel – or it might become a satellite state of Iran, seeking to spread Iranian influence in the Arab world. No one can be certain how the alliances and alignments of states in the Middle East will evolve in the years ahead. Israel cannot plan its security around a snapshot of the current Middle Eastern political situation, but rather must take into account several possible scenarios for the evolution of the region.

It should be stressed that guaranteeing its security in the event of a massive conventional attack will remain critical for Israel, since even today, in the age of missile proliferation, wars are ultimately decided by the movement of armies and not by the employment of air strikes alone. Factually, the massive airpower employed by the United States against Iraq in both 1991 and in 2003 did not bring Saddam Hussein's regime to agree to the terms demanded by the UN Security Council. Only the movement of coalition ground forces deep into Iraqi territory ended the conflict. As long as ground forces remain the decisive element in determining the outcome of wars, then the conditions affecting land warfare, like terrain, topography, and strategic depth, will continue to be vital elements of Israeli national security. Indeed, most of Israel's neighbors still stress the role of heavy armor in their order of battle, making land warfare a major component of the Middle East military balance of power.[2]

Israel's Strategic Vulnerability from the West Bank

The Threat of Terrorism

Since its foundation, Israel has faced state-supported terrorism emanating from the entire Middle East region, and this consideration is especially relevant today. By its presence along the eastern perimeter of the West Bank in the Jordan Valley and the Judean Desert, Israel has been able to prevent weapons smuggling and the infiltration of hostile forces. As a result, the West Bank has not become a battlefield for global *jihadists*, like Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia. Indeed, one of the most important preconditions of a successful counter-insurgency or counter-terrorism strategy is isolating the area of conflict in order to cut off any reinforcement of hostile forces with manpower and material.

As we have seen in Gaza, the inability to prevent precisely this flow of weapons and manpower has been the source of years of attacks, instability, and diplomatic problems.

The Threat of Rocket and Mortar Fire

Should terrorist forces in the West Bank employ mortars or rockets, as they have in Gaza, Israel's interior would be fully exposed. Given the fact that the West Bank virtually overlooks Israel's main cities, sitting several thousand feet above major population centers such as Tel Aviv, it is critical to avert the introduction of mortars, rockets, and surface-to-air missiles into the West Bank. This is not just a theoretical concern or based only on a worst-case analysis: Al-Qaeda launched an SA-7 shoulder-fired, anti-aircraft missile at an Israeli commercial airliner in Mombasa, Kenya, in 2002. Since then, Hamas has made a determined effort to smuggle anti-aircraft missiles into Gaza.

Short-range rockets pose a particular challenge for Israel, rendering the little land that Israel possesses as a particularly important defensive barrier. Ironically, the powerful long-range rockets possessed by neighboring states are less of a problem than short-range rockets would be in the West Bank. Long-range rockets are expensive and require large launching pads or vehicles that are easily identifiable. Short-range rockets, and even shorter-range mortars, are much more difficult to locate, especially when they are embedded within a civilian population. They can also be very numerous because of their low cost. If Israel wants to prevent their deployment near strategically vulnerable sites, it must have control of the ground in those areas and thereby deny hostile forces the ability to threaten its most vital facilities.

The more Israel's geographic vulnerability increases, the more it will face a greater threat from non-conventional attack by Middle Eastern military forces, as well as from non-conventional terrorism.

The Non-Conventional Threat

Defensible borders have continuing relevance in an era in which concern with non-conventional weapons in the Middle East is on the rise, especially nuclear weapons. Israel is such a small country that in the event of war, it must disperse its population and defensive assets as widely as possible in order to reduce the enemy's belief that it can achieve a decisive military advantage by launching a first strike, without facing any retaliatory response from Israel. The more Israel's geographic vulnerability increases, the more it will face a greater threat from non-conventional attack by Middle Eastern military forces, as well as from non-conventional terrorism. This will become more pronounced should the accessibility of terrorist groups to Israel be improved, as they acquire the ability to use nuclear terrorism in the future.

The Jordan Valley: A Critical Component of Defensible Borders

Since 1967, the Jordan Valley has been the most critical component in Israeli thinking about defensible borders, largely because of its unique topographical features. The entire width of Israel and the West Bank together averages about 40 miles from the Mediterranean to the Jordan River. The Jordan

Israel's Geographic and Topographic Vulnerabilities Opposite a Prospective Palestinian State

Rift Valley itself is only 6 to 9 miles wide. The Jordan River is roughly 1,300 feet below sea level, but it is adjacent to the extremely steep eastern slopes of the West Bank mountain ridge, which at its highest point reaches 3,318 feet above sea level. Along its peaks Israel has placed early-warning stations facing east. Thus the entire Jordan Rift Valley constitutes a natural physical barrier against attack that averages between 3,000 to 4,600 feet.[3] It is also an arid zone with relatively little Palestinian population. Finally, there are only five east-west passes through which an attacking army can move, each of which can be defended with relative ease, even by Israel's small standing army. For this reason, the Jordan Valley has been viewed as the front line for Israel's defense in an extremely uncertain Middle East.

Given the Jordan Valley's strategic importance for Israel's defense, in recent decades the IDF has deployed brigade-level forces there that could be reinforced by reserve units in the event that a significant ground threat emerges from the east. In the past, Israel pre-positioned equipment in the Jordan Valley for these units. During its negotiations with the Palestinians, Israel has also sought to preserve the right to move its forces to the Jordan Valley across strategic east-west roads. In many respects, the Israeli force in the Jordan Valley would serve as a trip-wire to trigger a full reserve mobilization if it was attacked. It is no wonder that former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin asserted in his last Knesset address, delivered in October 1995, that in any peace settlement Israel must retain the Jordan Valley "in the broadest meaning of that term."

Why can't Israel just rely on the capabilities of its military intelligence to warn of an imminent attack, so that Israel's reserve forces can be mobilized in a timely fashion in order to neutralize any potential land attack in the future? And having made this decision, wouldn't Israel no longer need to deploy a forward force in the Jordan Valley? In the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the IDF maintained inadequate forces along the Egyptian and Syrian fronts, believing that it would receive timely intelligence to reinforce them. This turned out to be an enormous miscalculation, because the Egyptians and Syrians managed to launch surprise attacks that ran counter to the expectations of Israeli military intelligence at that time.

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One of the areas where intelligence warnings can be faulty is the matter of anticipating the political alignments of Middle Eastern states. For example, Jordan has unquestionably emerged as a vital partner for peace with Israel. Yet twice in its recent history, sudden developments led to military escalation in the region, which caused enormous pressure on the Jordanian leadership to assume a more hostile posture toward Israel. In 1967, King Hussein was the last leader to join the Arab war coalition against Israel and permit foreign armies to enter his kingdom to join the war. In the lead-up to the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, there was enormous pressure in Jordan to align the kingdom with Saddam Hussein; in 1989, Iraqi reconnaissance aircraft were given permission to enter Jordanian airspace and photograph potential targets in Israel. Israel cannot abandon the Jordan Valley on the assumption that attacks from the east are no longer possible, or that IDF forces can be mobilized quickly enough to counter them.

Indeed, relying on timely reinforcement of Israel's eastern front by reserve units is becoming increasingly hazardous. As already noted, Israel's neighbors benefit from having large, active-duty formations, with only a minor role for reserves. It is in their interest to delay Israel's reserve mobilization as long as possible and thus preserve their own advantageous force balance for a longer period of time. Missiles can even disrupt the reserve mobilization altogether by targeting meeting points and reserve equipment centers. Under such conditions, it can be expected that neighboring states will use their large ballistic missile and long-

Israel's Defense Line:
The Jordan Rift Valley with the Steep Eastern Slopes of the West Bank Mountain Ridge

range rocket inventories for exactly this purpose, to prevent the arrival of adequate reinforcements to any of Israel's fronts, including the Jordan Valley.

Some observers suggest that Israel could rely on airpower to neutralize any attacking army, which would obviate any need for an optimal defensive line. But in any likely battlefield Israel will face, the air force will have other high-priority missions before it can engage in close air support. First, it will have to achieve air superiority by destroying the air defense systems of enemy states. Then it will need to suppress ballistic missile launches aimed at Israeli cities. Thus, the advent of ballistic missiles and rockets has increased the importance of terrain and strategic depth for Israel, since its small standing army may have to fight for longer periods of time without reinforcements from the reserve forces, whose timely arrival may be delayed or prevented by rocket fire. Israel's standing army may also have to operate for a considerable period of time without major assistance from the air force, which may be busy elsewhere.

The critical importance of the Jordan Valley for Israel's security is evident from the Israeli experience with Gaza. When Israel implemented the Oslo Agreements in Gaza in 1994, it established a security zone between southern Gaza and Egyptian Sinai that was little more than 300 feet wide in several critical areas and came to be known as the "Philadelphi Corridor." Palestinian groups exploited this narrow corridor and built smuggling tunnels from the Egyptian half of the town of Rafah in Sinai into the Palestinian half of Rafah, under the Philadephi Corridor, in order to import rockets and other munitions into Gaza. Israel fought the tunnels with limited success until 2005, when it withdrew completely from Gaza – including from the Philadelphi Corridor.

After Israel relinquished the Philadelphi Corridor, the scale of weapons smuggling vastly increased and Gaza became a launching pad for rockets of increasing range and lethality aimed at Israeli population centers. Hamas and other terrorist groups expanded their smuggling efforts, importing weapons from Iran, Yemen, and Sudan. Hamas operatives could leave Gaza and fly to Tehran, where they received training from the Revolutionary Guards before returning to build up Palestinian forces. At the same time, the whole tunnel industry provides a livelihood for thousands of Egyptians who have no interest in seeing the tunnels shut down.

The Jordan Valley is in many respects the Philadephi Corridor of the West Bank. While underground tunneling is not likely, the Jordan Valley is vastly longer than the Philadelphi Corridor and provides a diversity of opportunities for smuggling. If Israel is proposing that any future Palestinian state remain demilitarized, to prevent it from becoming another Iranian-backed stronghold like Gaza, then the only way to guarantee that prohibited weaponry does not enter its territory is by Israel retaining control of the Jordan Valley and physically blocking the entry of illegal arms.

Israeli control of the Jordan Valley also has important implications for Jordanian security. Should the IDF ever evacuate the Jordan Valley, the main effort for the prevention of smuggling will fall on the Jordanian Army. Once it is widely known that Israel is no longer present to seal off the West Bank from the east, it is likely that many regional terrorist groups will seek to exploit Israel's new vulnerability and they will seek forward positions within Jordan. This will markedly increase the security burden on the Jordanians, and could lead to dangerous new challenges for them.

If Israel were to withdraw from the Jordan Valley, the area could easily become a magnet for regional terrorist groups seeking to infiltrate the West Bank and join Hamas' war on Israel.

In fact, prior to the 2007 U.S.-led surge in Iraq and the setbacks for Al-Qaeda in Anbar Province in western Iraq, Al-Qaeda had begun setting up offshoots in Jordanian towns like Irbid which sought to recruit West Bank Palestinians. If Israel were to withdraw from the Jordan Valley, the area could easily become a magnet for regional terrorist groups seeking to infiltrate the West Bank and join Hamas' war on Israel, whether the terrorist operatives come from Al-Qaeda in Iraq or Hizbullah in Lebanon.

Strategic Terrain Dominating Jerusalem: The Vulnerability of Jerusalem and the Jerusalem–Tel Aviv Highway

The attraction of the Jordan Valley as an open smuggling route may also lead to the buildup of many terrorist groups inside the Jordanian kingdom itself, which would undoubtedly undermine Jordanian security. The last time Jordan became an active base against Israel was in the late 1960s. In 1970, King Hussein put an end to the vast terrorist infrastructure created by the PLO in what became the Jordanian Civil War, because it threatened to topple his kingdom.

Defensible Borders and Jerusalem

Jerusalem is one area where Israel's need for defensible borders is acute. Prior to 1967, Jerusalem was situated at the end of a narrow corridor that began on the Israeli coastal plain. Israel's capital was surrounded on three sides, and near the western entrance to the city, the corridor was only several miles wide. Topographically, Jerusalem is surrounded by dominating hills that control the access routes to the city. For example, the West Bank village of Beit Iksa is only a few hundred yards from the main Jerusalem-Tel Aviv highway, which could expose Israel's main transportation artery connecting its two largest cities to potentially hostile rifle fire. In 1967, the Jordanian Army exploited the commanding terrain around Jerusalem to launch some 9,000 artillery shells into the city's Jewish neighborhoods.

After 1967, due to defensive considerations, Israel moved to establish permanent control of the hills dominating its capital, developing the Givat Zeev settlement bloc to the north, the Gush Etzion bloc to the south, and the city of Maale Adumim to the east of Jerusalem. Maale Adumim is also located along one of the most important strategic east-west roads for moving Israeli reinforcements into the Jordan Valley in case of war. It is essential that Israel retain control of these areas that dominate Jerusalem.

Alternative Security Arrangements?

One idea raised in the past – and rejected by the Palestinians – has been to allow Israeli deployment in the Jordan Valley and early-warning stations to be placed in territory under Palestinian sovereignty. Yet even if the Palestinians accepted such Israeli force dispositions, it is questionable how enduring they would be, since any Palestinian government would have a strong interest in eroding any Israeli presence within Palestinian territory. In addition, any Israeli military presence would likely serve as a lighting-rod in Palestinian domestic politics.

Furthermore, Israel's security interests in the Jordan Valley cannot be met by granting the area to the Palestinians and deploying foreign peacekeeping units in the area. (This issue is discussed more fully elsewhere in this study in "The Risks of Foreign Peacekeeping Forces in the West Bank" by Maj.-Gen. [res.] Yaakov Amidror.) Israel's national security doctrine is rooted in the principle of self-reliance, and for good reasons. Israel has accepted international monitors to oversee implementation of past agreements, but it has always resisted proposals that involved soldiers from other armies – including U.S. servicemen – risking their lives instead of Israeli soldiers. Moreover, the Israeli experience with an international presence has been poor. UNIFIL in Lebanon has not lived up to Israeli expectations in preventing the re-armament of Hizbullah after the 2006 Second Lebanon War. Equally, EU monitors abandoned their positions at the Rafah crossing in 2006 when challenged by local insurgents from Gaza.

Israel should seek to acquire Israeli sovereignty in areas of vital military importance in the West Bank, as part of a territorial compromise, rather than settle for extra-territorial security arrangements that simply will not last. This was the original intent of UN Security Council Resolution 242, which did not envision a complete Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank, but rather the creation of new borders that would take into account Israel's security needs and at the same time assure that any future peace agreement will endure. To provide Israel with the minimal strategic depth it needs for its long-term survival, the Jordan Valley must become Israel's eastern border, thereby helping to create truly defensible borders.

Notes

1. Yigal Allon, "Israel: The Case for Defensible Borders," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 55, no. 1 (October 1976).
2. Anthony Cordesman, *Arab-Israeli Military Forces in an Era of Asymmetric Wars* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 26.
3. The highest point of 4,600 feet is measured by the height differential between the Dead Sea, at 1,300 feet below sea level – the lowest point on Earth, and the apex of the West Bank mountain ridge which reaches a height of 3,300 feet above sea level at Baal Hatzor.

Kenyan President Daniel Arap Moi views missile launchers, at the Paradise Hotel north of Mombasa used in a failed SA-7 shoulder fired missile attack by Al-Qaeda on an Israeli passenger jet on Nov. 29, 2002. The plane with 261 passengers and 10 crew members landed safely in Tel Aviv with no casualties, but 16 people were killed in a simultaneous suicide bombing on the Israeli-owned hotel