

Defensible Borders in a Historical Context

MK Dr. Yuval Steinitz

Israel's Quantitative Inferiority to Its Arab Neighbors

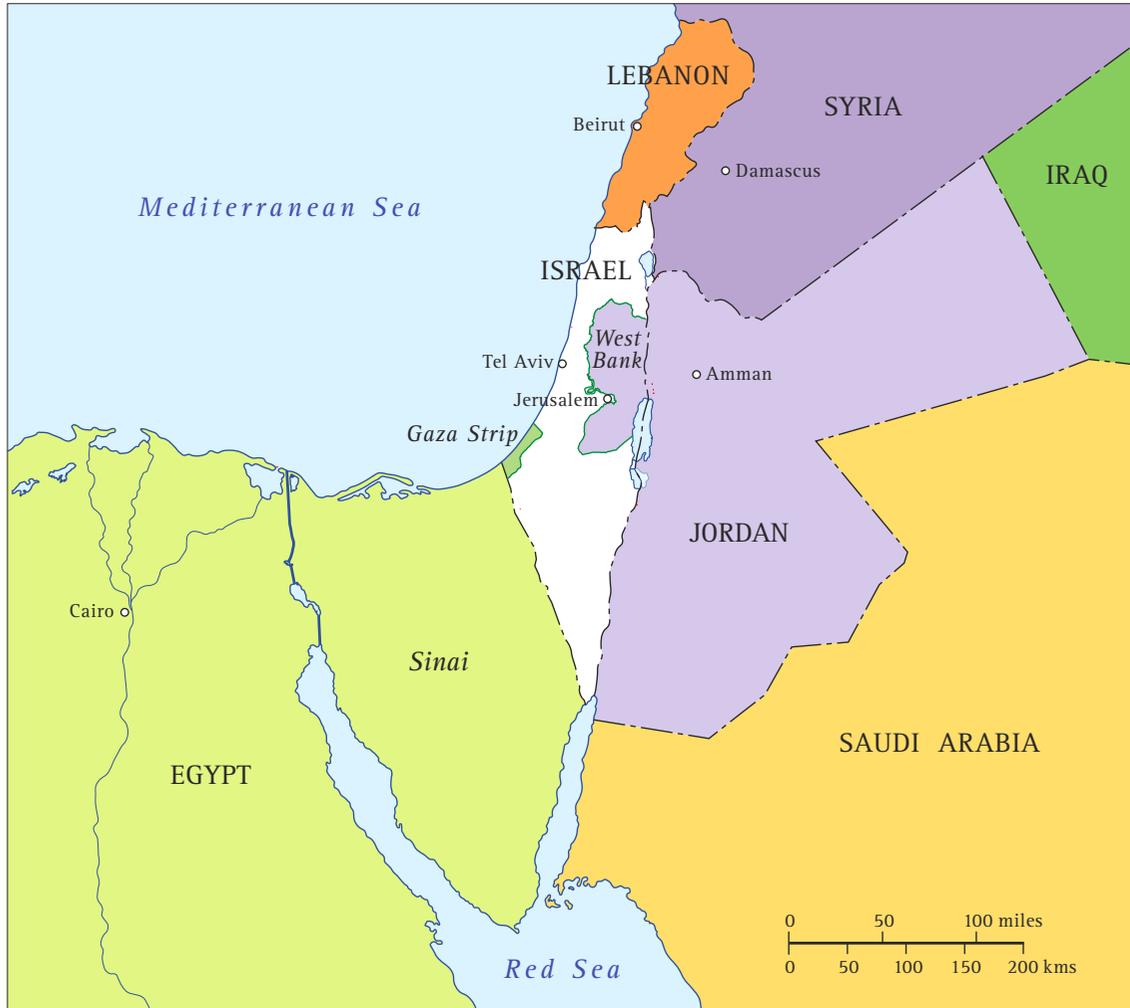
“Defensible borders” for Israel is a concept that has garnered international legitimacy and support since 1967. As such, it is not an Israeli idea alone. In fact, as recently as April 14, 2004, President George W. Bush reaffirmed America’s “strong commitment to Israel’s security including secure and defensible borders” (emphasis added), in an exchange of letters with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. Yet while Israel has benefited from no less than a presidential commitment in this regard, there is little understanding today as to what this term means:

- What are the criteria for determining what defensible borders are and what makes a border indefensible?
- Even if Israel has a legal right to defensible borders, why should it insist on applying that right in any future territorial settlement with its neighbors?

The overall balance of forces in the Middle East is a necessary backdrop to any discussion about defensible borders. In the case of Israel and the Arab states, this balance of forces is unique in comparison with any other global conflict in the modern era. Israel suffers from an acute quantitative inferiority in comparison with its Arab neighbors, given the fact that the entire Israeli population numbers about six million, while the population of the Arab states reaches close to 300 million. Moreover, in geographic terms, Israel covers only 10,000 square miles including the disputed territories of the West Bank and Gaza, while the Arab League states have about eight and a half million square miles of territory.

Israel has not had a full-scale war with a coalition of Arab states in more than twenty years. Nonetheless, tremendous latent hostility towards Israel’s very existence continues to be rampant in much of the Arab world, sustained by school textbooks that teach hatred rather than

**Map 2: Israel Within the
1949 Armistice Lines (pre-
1967 Borders)**



coexistence, by militant mosque sermons that spread incitement rather than tolerance, and by regional satellite stations, like al-Jazeera and even Egyptian government channels, that demonize Israel across the Arab world rather than promote peace and understanding.

Military Threats in the Middle East Shift Rapidly

It would not take long for a determined Middle Eastern leader to exploit these anti-Israel sentiments in order to create a far more threatening military situation on the ground for Israel. And Western intelligence agencies can frequently miss these rapid shifts. Indeed, in January 1967, the Arab world was polarized and mostly struggling against itself; a good portion of the Egyptian Army was fighting in distant Yemen. Yet within six months, the core Arab states around Israel were unified under Egyptian

Given the rapidity with which military coalitions can unexpectedly form in the Middle East, the asymmetries between Israel and the Arab world have enormous strategic implications. With their large populations, the Arab states maintain the bulk of their armed forces in active-service military formations that can be made ready for battle in a relatively short period of time. In contrast, the ground units of the Israel Defense Forces are based on mostly reserve formations that require up to 48 hours for full mobilization. For this reason, on the first day of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, 177 Israeli tanks had to hold off a Syrian assault of some 1,400 tanks.

Western intelligence agencies can frequently miss rapid shifts in intentions. Given the rapidity with which military coalitions can unexpectedly form in the Middle East, the asymmetries between Israel and the Arab world have enormous strategic implications.

leadership and preparing for war with Israel. More recently, in 2004, King Abdullah of Jordan warned of a future military axis in the Middle East based on militant Shi'ism, stretching from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon, which reaches Israel's northern borders.

Israel's Primary Strategic Aim: Survival Despite Regional Hostility

There is another fundamental asymmetry that has to do with the very different intentions of each side. Israel's primary national strategic aim is survival and, as a result, its strategy is ultimately **defensive**. In comparison, Israel's adversaries in the Arab world (with the addition of Iran) have called for its destruction at different times. Even today, Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state is still delegitimized by most Arab societies, even among those allied with the West. Sometimes this offensive goal is disguised by political means such as calling for the "right of return" of Palestinian refugees to Israel in order to alter its demographic composition and achieve its elimination.

Given the offensive intentions that

geographic size and the vulnerability of its national independence. It is not surprising that small, vulnerable states in the Middle East such as Cyprus, Lebanon, or Kuwait have found themselves to be the repeated prey of their larger neighbors, whose well-equipped armies could create a *fait accompli* through a quick strike or political manipulation.

It is important to stress the difficulty of assessing the hostile intentions behind a potential adversary's overall military posture. Indeed, Israel's most costly intelligence errors are associated with the misreading of the intentions of Egypt prior to the 1973 Yom Kippur War and, later, those of the PLO with the signing of the 1993 Oslo Accord. (The first was an error of the IDF intelligence corps, while the second was a mistake of the political echelon.) For this reason, a peace treaty, while certainly a desirable goal, cannot alone safeguard Israeli security. The

Israel's most costly intelligence errors are associated with the misreading of the intentions of Egypt prior to the 1973 Yom Kippur War and, later, those of the PLO with the signing of the 1993 Oslo Accord. For this reason, a peace treaty cannot alone ultimately safeguard Israeli security.

have been expressed on the Arab side, the geographic proximity of Israel's population centers to any hostile force sitting along the 1967 lines would serve as a constant temptation to attack. A quick survey of the Middle East would reveal clear linkage between a state's

real intentions of Israel's peace partners may, after all, be unclear or subject to changes as a result of shifts in the regional balance of power. As a consequence, the embattled Jewish state needs to incorporate a safety net into its peace agreements in order to protect

itself from latent forms of hostility that might return and dominate its neighbors' policies.

Israeli Leaders Address Defensible Borders

How are these asymmetries in land, population, and strategic intent to be addressed by Israel? David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, first established the Jewish state's defensive doctrine in 1953, which stressed the need for Israel to base its strength on a qualitative military edge in order to offset its numerical inferiority. It also included the use of pre-emptive military operations in the event that Arab states had massed their armies and were preparing to attack.

However, other architects of Israel's defense doctrine recognized that pre-emption was not always an option. For example, Yigal

Defensible Borders." Allon argued that Israel needed defensible borders "which could enable the small standing army units of Israel's defensive force to hold back the invading Arab armies until most of the country's reserve citizen army could be mobilized." According to Allon, Israel would need a minimum of 700 square miles out of the 2,100 square miles that make up the West Bank (see Map 3).

In my view, these conventional military requirements for defensible borders from Allon's day are still a part of Israel's defense doctrine. In 1997, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu expressed his view that Israel's future borders should be based on "Allon-Plus." Additionally, most of Israel's defense ministers, from Moshe Dayan through Yitzhak Rabin, also believed that an Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 lines, or close to them, would endanger Israel's very existence. Speaking at the Herzliya Conference in 2000, Ariel Sharon added: "As long as future wars,

***I*srael needs to incorporate a safety net into its peace agreements in order to protect itself from latent hostility that might return and dominate its neighbors' policies.**

Allon, who served as Israel's minister of foreign affairs in the first Rabin government (besides having commanded the Palmach strike forces during Israel's 1948 War of Independence), wrote an article in *Foreign Affairs* in 1976 entitled "Israel: The Case for

which we all hope can be avoided, are decided on land, like the 1991 Gulf War, topography and strategic depth will remain vital for Israel's defense." For that reason, he stated that "Israel should strive to obtain defensible borders." And as he explained to the Knesset on April

The Allon Plan

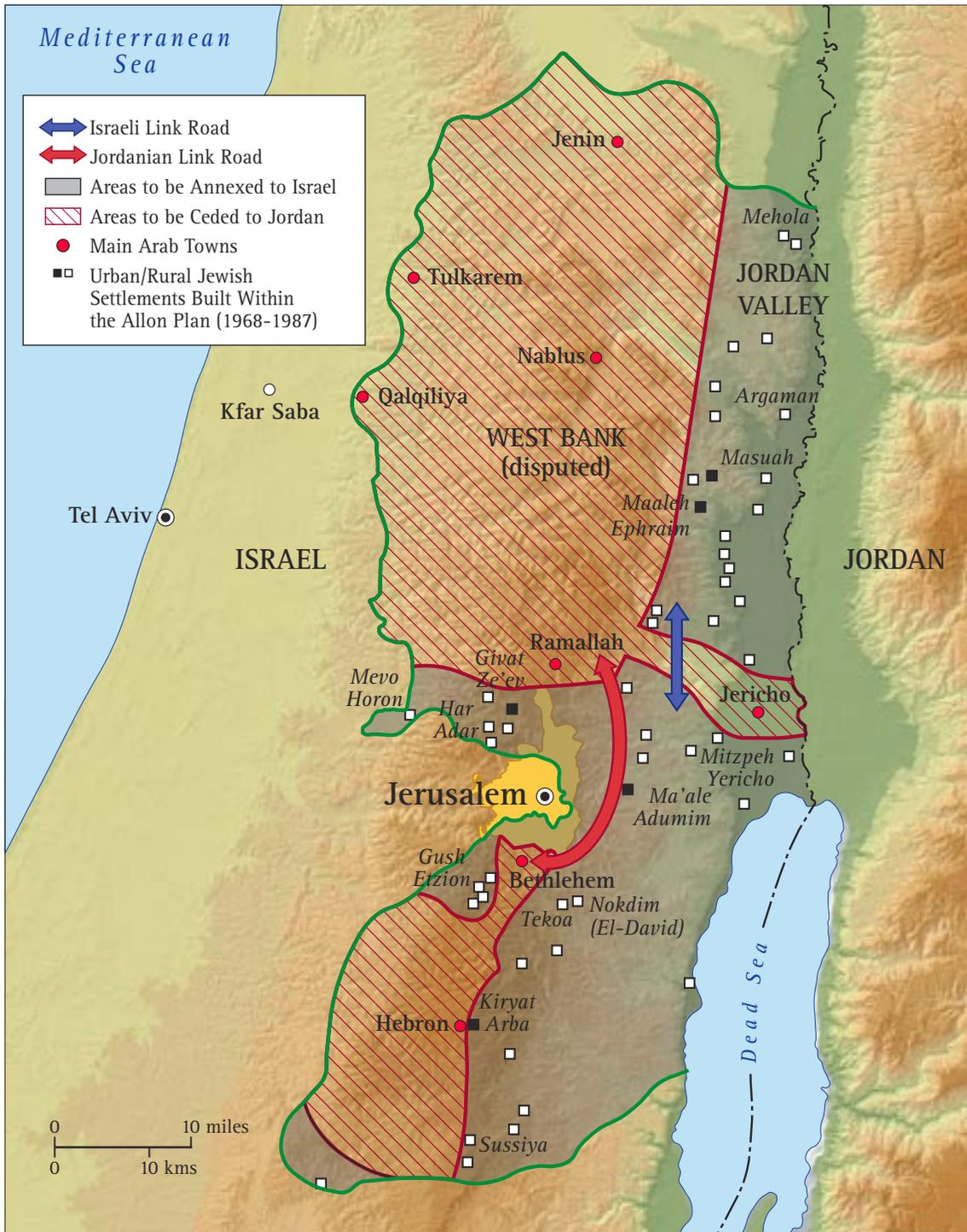
July 13, 1967

“I propose that the Jordan River and the line cutting through the middle of the Dead Sea be set as Israel’s borderline with the Kingdom of Jordan, even unilaterally. In order for there to be a real border, I believe that a 10-15 kilometer-wide strip should be connected to Israel along the Jordan Rift Valley until the Dead Sea....From north of the Dead Sea the border should be drawn westward (perhaps while intentionally bypassing Jericho) towards Jerusalem’s northern border, while including the Dead Sea-Jerusalem road in Israeli territory. The border should be drawn westward from the outskirts of Ramallah in such a way that the Latrun-Beit Horon-Jerusalem road will be in Israel’s hands.”

– *Yigal Allon*

Source: Yigal Allon, *In Search of Peace* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1989).

Map 3: Allon Plan, 1970



22, 2004, Prime Minister Sharon incorporated “defensible borders” in the West Bank into the heart of U.S.-Israeli understandings over his disengagement plan.

Defensible Borders and the Threat of Terrorism

Yet other strategic factors are necessary to consider, as well, in any discussion about defensible borders, especially the threat of terrorism. Israel learned during the Oslo years that terrorism is not a tactical problem of low-scale violence alone. Above a certain threshold, terrorism can constitute a strategic threat that must be neutralized. Moreover, it would be dangerous to rule out the threat of non-conventional terrorism, which is already being planned by al-Qaeda-related groups.

Israel has sought to partly address its

infiltration attempts into Israel, this was made possible due to the fact that the Israel Defense Forces were able to intercept most terrorist operations well inside the fence, where the majority of terrorists were caught. An Israeli security zone inside the fence, where tunnels could not be constructed, contributed to its efficacy as well.

Moreover, since the Israeli government moved the route of the fence closer to the “green line” – the pre-1967 armistice line – the fence is primarily an instrument to counter infiltration, but does not address an entire array of terrorist threats from sniper fire to short-range mortar attacks. To neutralize these threats, Israeli security zones beyond the fence will be absolutely vital. For that reason, the security fence in the West Bank should be seen as the “last line of defense” rather than as a potential new political border that could be easily defended in the future, in

Speaking at the Herzliya Conference in 2000, Ariel Sharon declared: “As long as future wars...are decided on land, like the 1991 Gulf War, topography and strategic depth will remain vital for Israel’s defense.” Therefore, “Israel should seek defensible borders.”

unique problem of Palestinian terrorism with the security fence it has erected along parts of the West Bank and the entire Gaza Strip. But it would be an error to view the security fence as a truly defensible border. While the security fence around Gaza has succeeded in blocking

isolation from any additional security zones.

By pulling out from the Gaza Strip, Israel is taking calculated risks for peace that few nations have similarly undertaken themselves, so that the Palestinians there will have every opportunity possible to build

a new life for themselves. But complete withdrawal from the Gaza Strip should not serve as a precedent for the territory of the West Bank, which is adjacent to Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and the heart of Israel, where more vital security considerations are at stake.

In conclusion, Israel's need for defensible borders, particularly in the West Bank, is indisputable. Such borders must insure that a future peace settlement will be stable and not undermined by the combination of Israeli vulnerabilities and the remaining hostility that might be prevalent even after formal peace treaties have been signed. As a consequence, an Israel with defensible borders will promote regional stability. In contrast, an excessively vulnerable Israel can become a flashpoint for continuing conflicts and crises that could envelop several surrounding states. In that sense, defensible borders must be seen as a vital guarantor for

The West Bank security fence is primarily an instrument to counter infiltration, but does not address an entire array of terrorist threats from sniper fire to short-range mortar attacks. To neutralize these threats, Israeli security zones beyond the fence will be absolutely vital.

assuring a lasting and durable peace for Israel and the entire region.