

## The Netanyahu Administration and the Middle East Peace Process

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### Introduction

The past year has been a difficult one for the Middle East peace process. Beginning with the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin, followed by the surprise election defeat of the Peres Administration and its replacement with the right-wing government of Benjamin Netanyahu, and culminating in the delayed implementation of the remaining clauses of the Oslo II Accords, most notably the Israeli military redeployment in the town of Hebron, the peace process appears to have undergone a significant retreat.

Despite his constant reiteration of the new administration's desire to continue to advance the peace process, the actions of the Netanyahu government have not given rise to any significant expectations. It took the new Prime Minister three months before he was ready to meet with the head of the Palestinian Authority, Yasser Arafat, during which time any mutual trust which had been built up by the previous administration with its former foes rapidly dissipated. The opening of the archaeological tunnel in Jerusalem resulted in renewed violence and bloodshed, while Netanyahu allowed the demands of the West Bank settlers to delay the Hebron redeployment for as long as possible. Increased tension on the Syrian and Lebanese fronts replaced the expectations for a post-election dialogue with these countries, while even Egypt and Jordan – the two countries with whom full peace treaties had been signed and implemented – became highly critical of the direction taken by the new government.

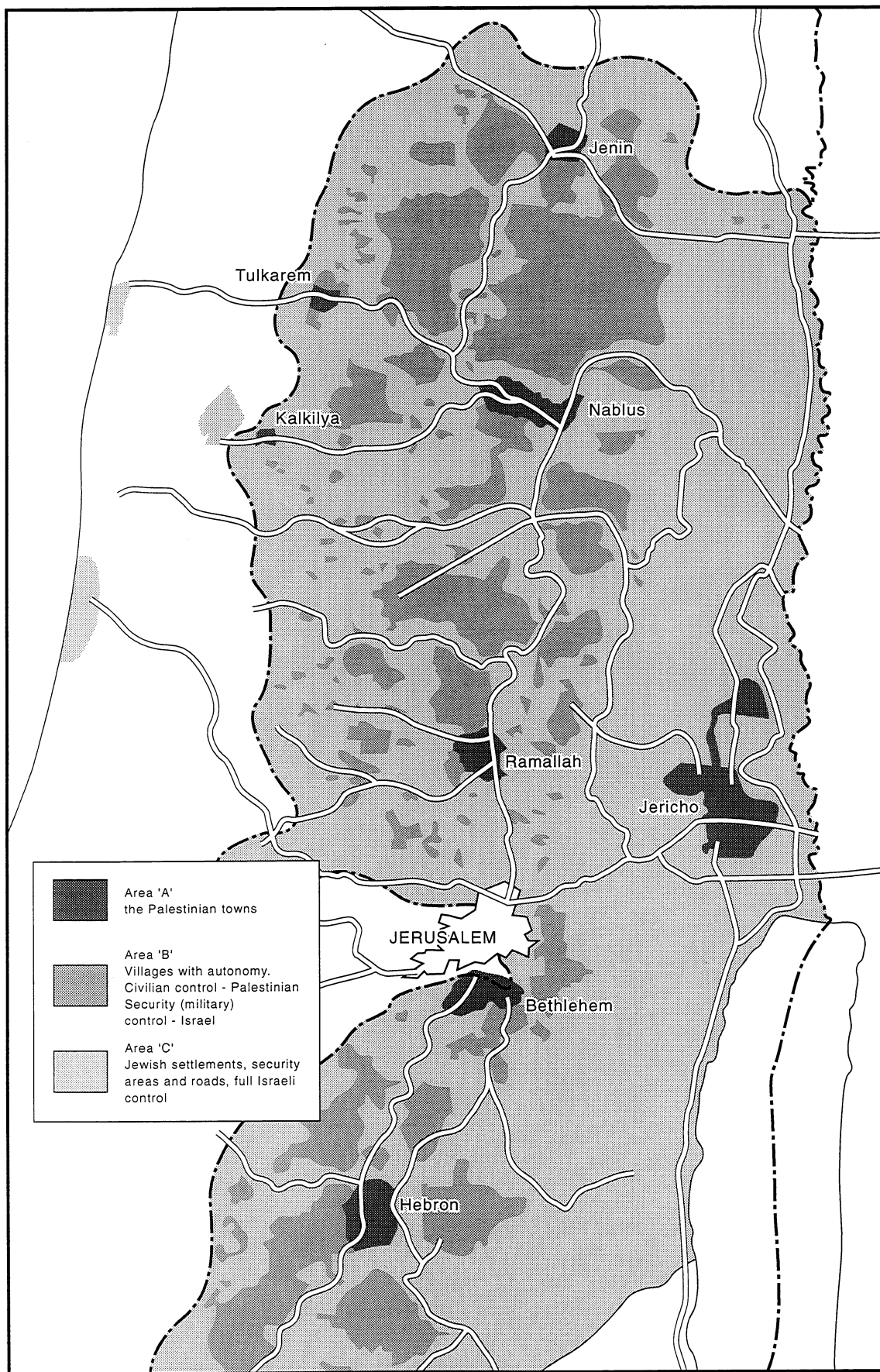
### Israel-Palestine: The Future of the West Bank and Gaza Strip

The negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority took an immediate and sharp turn for the worst following the election of the new government. Not only were the final stage negotiations put on hold, but the final implementation of the Oslo II accords was also delayed. The Netanyahu administration argued that

while it was fully committed to honouring all contractual obligations entered into by the previous government, it was necessary to insert changes into the agreement which would, in their view, ensure the security of the Israeli settlers in the West Bank. Despite the fact that the previous Israeli government and its leaders had long since moved beyond the psychological barrier involved in recognising their former enemies as negotiating partners, the new administration were not immediately prepared to undertake the same direct form of leadership dialogue. During the election campaign, the Likud party had continued to depict the Palestinian leadership as consisting of former terrorists who could not be trusted to live up to their side of a peace agreement. While in the immediate aftermath of the elections, Netanyahu held phone conversations with both President Mubarak of Egypt and King Hussein of Jordan, he was not, as yet, prepared to speak, or meet, directly with Yasser Arafat. It took nearly three months until a first, cold, handshake between the two leaders took place, and a further two months and an emergency summit in Washington before a second meeting between the two leaders occurred. It was assumed that the Washington Summit would bring about a speedy conclusion of the Hebron talks, but they were further delayed by mutual procrastination on both sides.

The main stalling point in the continuation of the Palestinian track concerned the Israeli redeployment from the town of Hebron. This was the only Palestinian town (excluding East Jerusalem which had not been part of the Oslo II Accords) which had not yet been evacuated by the Israeli military. Hebron contains a small group of approximately 400 Jewish settlers and a separate Jewish suburb (Kiryat Arba) containing 7,000 inhabitants, amongst a Palestinian population of some 120,000 residents. Hebron was the only Palestinian town in which Jewish settlement had been promoted in the heart of the Palestinian built-up areas, owing to its historic and religious significance. Religious Jews attach great importance to the reputed burial site of the Biblical figures of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. For many of

Figure 1



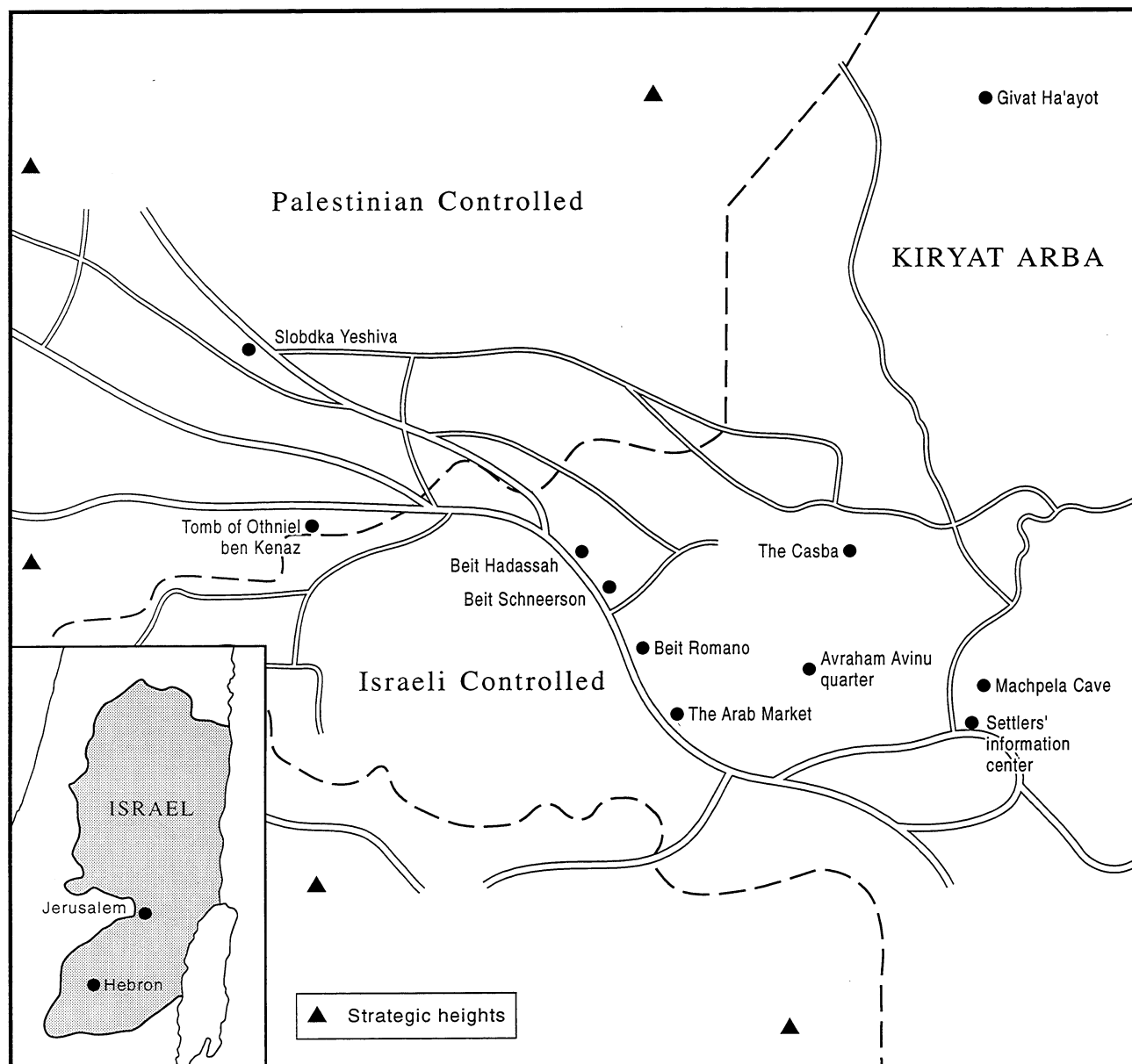
the religious nationalists, Hebron is only second in importance to Jerusalem itself. The settlers, and their supporters throughout the country, opposed any Israeli redeployment from the city, arguing that the withdrawal of the army to all but the Jewish sections would create an impossible security situation. The settlers also rejected any notion of evacuation in the cause of peace.

The Netanyahu government attempted to renegotiate the Hebron part of the Oslo Accords in such a way as to increase the Israeli security presence and to create a *cordon sanitaire* between the few Jewish houses and the Palestinian town. Despite repeated reports of the imminent signing of the agreement, the two sides were unable to finalise the details. Israel argued that it would not redeploy in Hebron as long as the security of the Jewish

settlers was not ensured, while for their part the Palestinians refused to accept the insertion of new clauses in the agreement which had already been signed and ratified by the previous Israeli government. The Israeli negotiators held out for the right of 'hot pursuit' throughout Hebron in the case of terrorism or other acts of violence, while the Palestinians saw this as an infringement of the *de facto* territorial sovereignty which was applicable to all of the 'A' areas in which the full transfer of authority had taken place (Figure 1).

During the drawn out negotiations, the settlers and their supporters continued to pressure the government against withdrawal from the town, arguing that they had supported Netanyahu in the election campaign as a means of preventing any further implementation of the Oslo Accords (or, as

Figure 2:



they referred to it, 'the Peres-Arafat agreement'). By the time the renegotiated clauses had been signed, Israel had all but withdrawn from most of the city, leaving the final redeployment to be implemented within the space of a few hours. Ironically, the final agreement was similar in most respects to the original document (Figure 2). For many, it was hard to understand why the government had allowed the whole peace process to virtually collapse over the Hebron issue by dragging its heels in the negotiation process when, in reality, the two agreements were so similar.

The last stages of the Hebron negotiations gave rise to additional issues, such as the Palestinian Authority's demand for full control of the Dehaniya air strip in the Gaza Strip and Arafat's demand that Netanyahu commit himself in writing to a new timetable of further talks. Israeli counter-arguments included demands that the Palestinian Authority live up to its own side of the bargain, such as the explicit deletion of the clauses in the Palestinian covenant calling for the destruction of Israel and their failure to turn over terrorists who had sought safe refuge in the Palestinian areas. The nature of these arguments centred around technical, rather than substantive, issues. These were the sort of issues which could have been solved relatively quickly under the former administration, under which a good working relationship between negotiators on both sides had slowly been created. The fact that the negotiations got bogged down on what appeared to be minor issues was evidence of the severe worsening of the dialogue process. As the Hebron negotiations dragged on, Netanyahu faced increasing opposition within his own government by right-wing ministers who threatened to vote against the proposal.

Even the Arafat-Netanyahu handshake in Washington, following which Netanyahu was quoted as saying he had got to know his adversary in a way that would enable future dialogue, was seen as no more than a camera opportunity for the Israeli leader. It was no surprise that in the wake of the bloodshed which took place in September, Netanyahu rejected the call for an immediate summit in neighbouring Egypt, holding out on the long trip to Washington. Netanyahu preferred to face the world in a place where he feels equally at home, rather than in the isolated and increasingly aggressive atmosphere of an Arab capital.

Following the Hebron redeployment, it remained for the Israeli and Palestinian teams to commence

negotiations over the final stages of a full peace agreement between the two sides. Clearly, the Netanyahu administration preferred to see the Oslo II Accords as the final stage in a process which they opposed. The new government stated categorically that they rejected the notion of a separate and independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, although they did not rule out further territorial withdrawal from parts of Areas 'C', those areas, encompassing some 60% of the whole West Bank, which had remained under full Israeli control even after the implementation of the Oslo Accords.

For the Palestinians, such a stance is clearly unacceptable. While they had never received any open commitment to the establishment of a Palestinian State from either Rabin or Peres it was clear that they viewed the two Oslo Accords as no more than a transitional stage on the way to a final settlement. There could be no other explanation for having accepted an agreement in which they took over full control of the daily administration of nearly two million Palestinians while leaving most of the territory in Israel's hands. There had been much internal criticism within the Palestinian camp over the nature of this agreement with some groups accusing Arafat of having 'sold out' to Israel. It was only by emphasising the transitional nature of this agreement that it could be partially accepted amongst the general Palestinian populace.

Left to their own choice, the new Israeli government were likely to have stopped the process there. But faced with intense international pressure to honour their contractual obligations including the commencement of final stage negotiations, coupled with the threats emanating from the Palestinian camp that the cessation of the process would result in renewed violence, the government had little choice. The bloodshed which had occurred in September 1996 following the Israeli decision to open the archaeological tunnel in Jerusalem had been a clear indication that any future violence and bloodletting would be of an intensity hitherto unknown. While the *Intifada* years had been characterised by the use of stones and home made petrol bombs there now existed a well armed Palestinian police force who were prepared to use these weapons if and when necessary, against Israeli soldiers and settlers. Within Israel, the right-wing accused the former Rabin and Peres governments of having been responsible for handing over weapons to the Palestinian Authority and, by implication, of being responsible for the deaths of Israeli soldiers. The fact that six times as

many Palestinians were killed in the two days of bloodletting was of little consequence for the more militant groups within Israel.

The message was clear – while a full peace agreement held out the hope for long-term stability and security, the breaking down of the process held out the danger of localised guerrilla warfare. Post-Oslo Palestinians had already grasped the first stages of autonomy and self-government. To lose the prospects of a final settlement now would have been a much greater letdown than having never gone into the process from the outset. While Arafat was pressured by the Israeli government to curb the activities of the militant Hamas and Islamic Jihad organisations, at the same time he made it clear to Israel that there was no peaceful turning back or cessation of an ongoing process which had not yet been finalised.

## Unresolved Issues

### *Jerusalem*

Jerusalem remains the most contentious and problematic of all issues facing the negotiating partners. The Likud administration refuse to recognise that Jerusalem is even open to any form of negotiation. During the period since their election, the new administration has acted to close down a number of Palestinian offices in East Jerusalem and has attempted to prevent any use of Orient House as a meeting place between Palestinian leaders, most notably Faisal Husseini, and foreign diplomats. The Israeli government argue that the Palestinian Authority do not have the right to undertake political or diplomatic activity within East Jerusalem and that this constitutes a blatant contravention of the Oslo Accords. This too has resulted in renewed diplomatic tension. A visit of the troika of European foreign leaders to the region refused to meet with Netanyahu or Foreign Minister David Levy following the refusal of the latter to let them meet Palestinian leaders in Orient House. A parallel visit by the French President, Jacques Chirac, was accompanied by much tension and bitterness as Chirac berated the Israeli security officials for not allowing him total freedom of movement in the streets of the Old City of Jerusalem.

In response, the Palestinian leadership have stepped up their calls for the establishment of a Palestinian State with East Jerusalem as their capital city. This

in turn, has played into the hands of the Israeli hardliners who use this as proof to show that the Palestinians will not accept any partial solution to the problem and that there is no point in continuing the negotiations. The Jerusalem issue was used most effectively by the Likud in the election campaign. Their campaign managers successfully sold the message to the Israeli public that Peres was prepared to come to an agreement which would include the redivision of Jerusalem into Israeli and Palestinian self administrative neighbourhoods. Although, as it turned out, no such agreement had ever been made, the Labour leadership did not respond to this challenge, even in the live debate between Netanyahu and Peres just a few days prior to the election itself. Public opinion polls showed that the issue of Jerusalem was a major priority for many Israelis and that many had been influenced by the lack of adequate response by the Labour party to the Likud allegations.

For Israeli politicians, Jerusalem has become a particularly thorny issue. The city is divided into three, highly segregated, population groups. In addition to the Palestinian areas of East Jerusalem, the city has become increasingly populated by ultra-orthodox Jews who reject the notion of a secular state and who are trying to impose their own religious way of life over the Jewish parts of the city. This has resulted, in turn, in a gradual outflow of secular residents of the city to the dormitory communities in the urban periphery and to Tel Aviv. Taken together, the Palestinian and ultra-orthodox residents constitute a majority of the city's population.

Given the continuation of current demographic growth trends, this anti-state majority will grow even further during the next decade, although there is little chance that they would join forces in a single political movement. For their part, the ultra-religious have no greater love for the Palestinian residents of the city than they do for their secular Jewish counterparts, while the Palestinians have not, on the whole, exercised their right to take part in Israeli held elections – national or municipal – as this would be equivalent to legitimising the Israeli annexation of the eastern part of the city.

Politicians and urban planners have suggested, amongst other solutions, the division of the city into self-governing units for each of the three population groups, while maintaining an overall umbrella authority for such matters as physical planning, infrastructure and so on. While for many Israelis

this may be an acceptable solution for separating orthodox and secular Jews within the city, it is implicitly recognised that such an arrangement will also apply to the Palestinians of East Jerusalem and, as such, help create the capital city entity which so many Israelis oppose at this stage.

### *The Settlements*

Under the Rabin government, the West Bank settlers complained that they had been starved of resources for further expansion. Recent statistical data however show that the West Bank settler population (excluding East Jerusalem) grew by over 30,000 residents during the four years of the Labour administration. This surprising figure is made up of natural growth within the existing communities, mostly populated by religious inhabitants with large and growing families, coupled with the internal expansion of existing settlements.

Any attempt to understand the peculiarities of the Oslo II map and the division of the region into Areas 'A', 'B' and 'C' have to take account of the location of Israeli settlements and the unwillingness of the Israeli negotiators to consider the possibility of settlement evacuation – partial or total – in what was still a transitional stage on the path to Palestinian statehood (see *Boundary and Security Bulletin*, 3, 4).

The Israeli negotiators had been unwilling to deal with the issue of settlements for two paradoxical reasons. In the first place, any attempt to evacuate even a single outpost at that stage of the process would have resulted in vehement, probably violent, opposition from within Israel – equal to, and probably greater than, any opposition which had already been displayed by the right-wing and the settler movement to the Rabin government.

Secondly, the settlements continued to be an important card held by Israel for the final stages of territorial negotiations. The more settlements, the stronger a case Israel could have made for keeping control of certain parts of the West Bank, especially those areas within which the major settlement concentrations are to be found and which are also in close proximity to the green line, thus allowing for possible boundary redemarcation in the final stages.

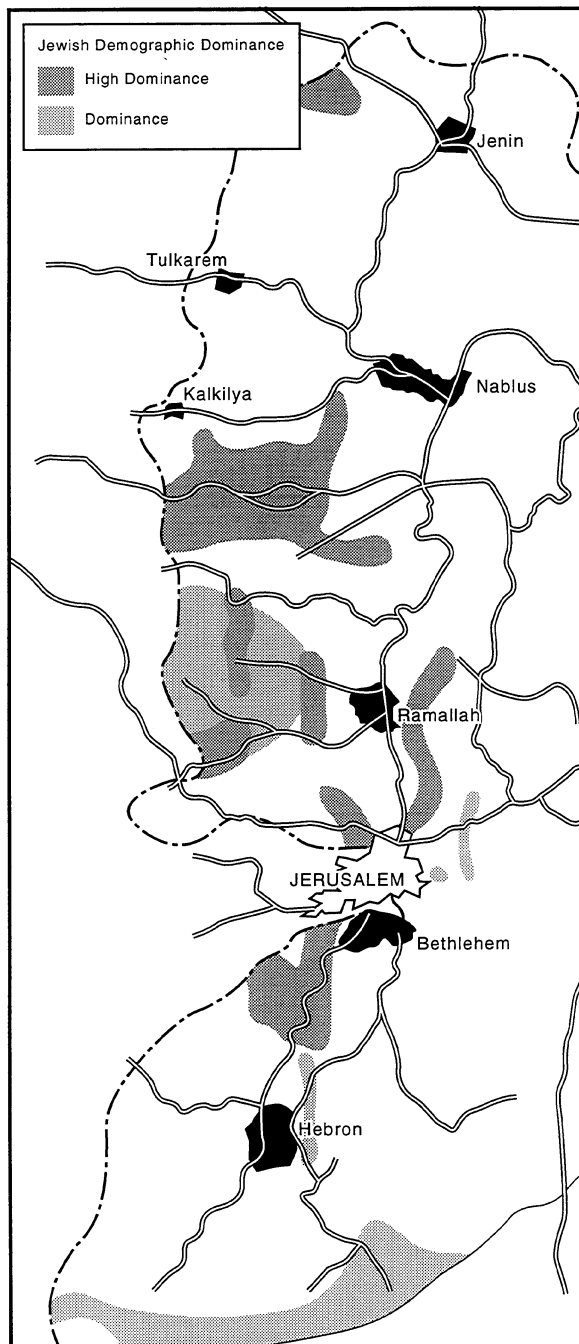
All the proposals put forward by various Israeli groups and political movements aimed at translating the Oslo Accords into a final territorial agreement prioritised the issue of settlement. The

proposals all had one theme in common: how to retain the maximum amount of Israeli settlements by annexing as small an area of territory as possible. The logic behind this thinking is that the founding of settlements-colonies do indeed create facts which, in turn, determine the future boundaries of the state in the negotiation process. Thus, it was no surprise that immediately following the election of the Netanyahu administration, the settler leaders demanded additional resources from the government to bolster and expand the existing settlement network. Resigned to the fact that some form of territorial compromise would eventually be reached even by the right-wing administration, they desire to consolidate the settlement network in such a way as to make it even more difficult for densely settled parts of the West Bank, such as the western margins of the area close to the old 'green line' boundary or the Modi'in region straddling the Jerusalem-Tel Aviv highway, to be returned to Palestinian control as part of the final agreement.

A recent proposal, drawn up by geographers at Tel Aviv and Bar Ilan Universities, has proposed that Israel annex an area equivalent to 23.4% of Areas 'C' (or 18.2% of the whole West Bank) within which, according to their calculations, there is "territorial dominance" by the Israeli-Jewish population (Figure 3) This would include the retention of Israeli control over 89 settlements consisting of some 105,000 inhabitants (87% of the Jewish residents of the region). Palestinian negotiator Faisal Husseini was also reported as having agreed, in principle, to the idea of boundary amendments to take into account some of the Israeli settlements. However, such amendments would be much smaller than those proposed in any Israeli plan, and would also be dependent on territorial exchange elsewhere, rather than on any depletion in the overall size of the Palestinian state.

Much debate centred around the Beilin-Abu Mazzen agreement, which had been drawn up by previous government Minister (and, some would say, the architect of the Oslo peace process) Yossi Beilin and Palestinian chief negotiator Abu Mazzen. This plan was reported to have reached an agreement whereby Israel would retain control of a small part of the West Bank including many of the settlements, in exchange for which she would cede an equivalent amount of land to the Palestinian authority in the Gaza Strip area. This even served as the basis for some informal discussions between a group of Labour and Likud Knesset members, although it was flatly rejected by the more right-

Figure 3



wing members of Parliament as well as by most Palestinians.

Some eight months after the election, the settlers have become exasperated at the fact that despite public assertions to the contrary, the government has not yet released the necessary resources for settlement expansion. The Netanyahu administration clearly wanted to complete the Hebron agreement before bringing international wrath down upon Israel for returning to its old policies of West Bank colonisation. Paradoxically, they have greater leeway for delaying settlement

expansion, or for that matter implementing the withdrawal from Hebron, precisely because the right-wing settlers are not comfortable about demonstrating against the government which they worked so hard to bring about. Some settler leaders have asserted their disappointment with the actions of the Netanyahu administration but they are equally aware that this is preferable, from their point of view, to a Labour administration. In the long-term however, the imminent danger of the government pouring additional resources into the West Bank settlement network is the serious most single danger facing the next stages of the peace negotiations, if they are to take place at all.

The issue came to a head again in early December following the murder of members of a settler family (a woman and young child). In the immediate aftermath of this event, the government authorised the redesignation of all West Bank settlements as 'Priority Development Areas' in which the residents would receive a variety of tax, education and social security benefits, similar to those given to the poorer neighbourhoods and development towns of the periphery. These benefits had been in effect under the previous Likud administrations but had been cancelled by the Rabin government. The murder of the settler family provided the excuse for putting into effect a policy which, on the one hand, would partially appease the settlers while, on the other hand, would not necessarily create new settlements – an act which would have been a direct infringement of the Oslo agreements.

### Syria and Lebanon: The Remaining Territorial Issues

Prior to the 1996 elections Syria and Lebanon remained outside the circle of direct dialogue. Although the idea of 'Lebanon first' was occasionally raised within the public discourse in Israel, it was generally accepted that any solution to the problems of south Lebanon would be dependent on reaching an agreement with Syria. Rumours to the effect that the Rabin and Peres administrations had agreed, in principle, to total territorial withdrawal from the Golan Heights in exchange for a full peace agreement with Syria was used by the right-wing Likud party to great effect in their election propaganda. Then, as now, there remained a more widespread opposition amongst the Israeli public to any form of territorial withdrawal from the Golan Heights, perceived as constituting a region of supreme strategic importance, than to any

other aspect of the peace process (excepting the issue of Jerusalem), including the eventual establishment of an independent Palestinian State.

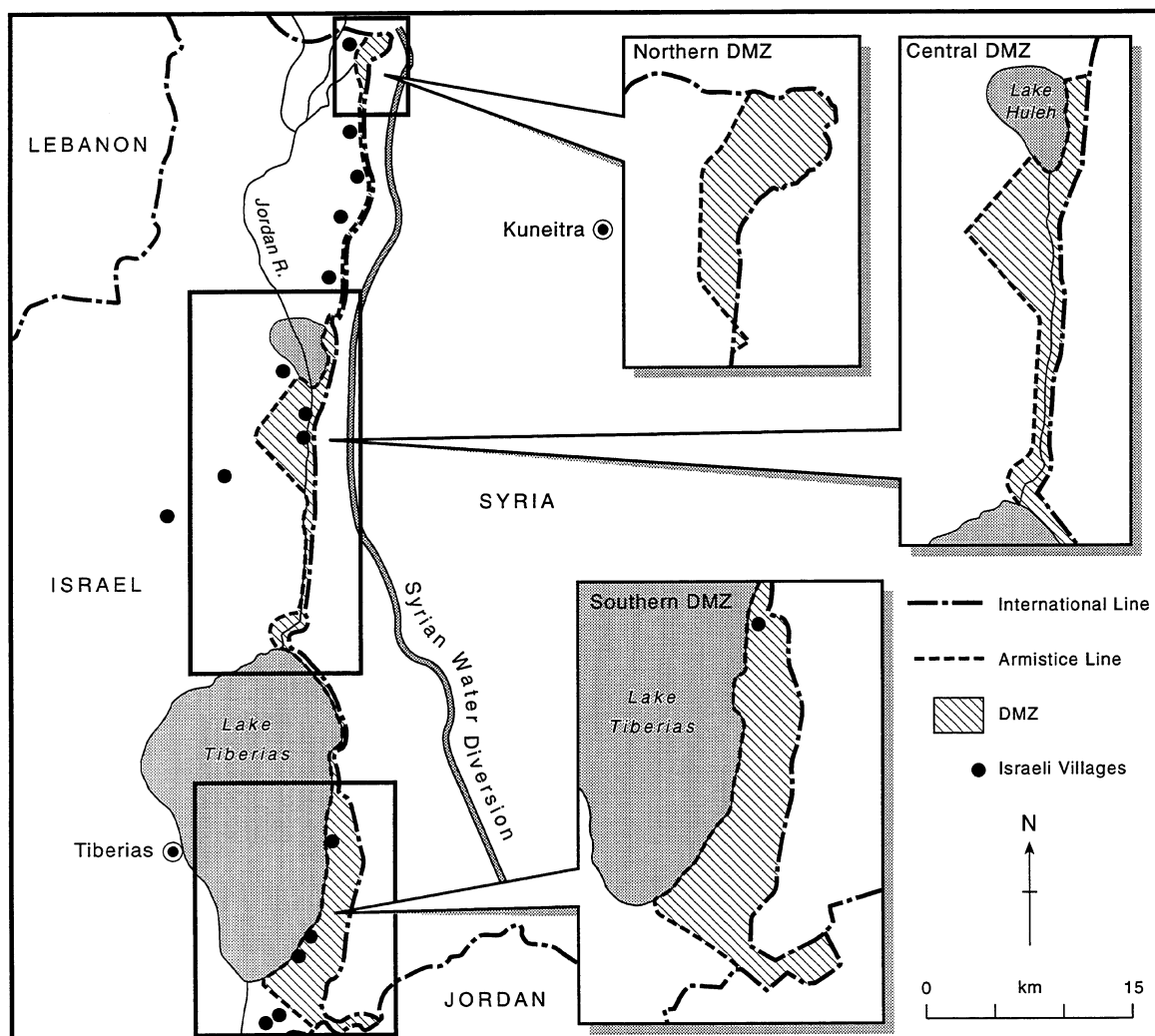
According to the popular press and the political commentators within Israel, the government was prepared to undertake a significant withdrawal from the Golan Heights in exchange for a full peace agreement. The argument appeared to centre around whether the withdrawal would be full or partial, and whether Israel would be able to retain control of strategic sites overlooking the Israeli settlements and villages in the Huleh and Jordan Valleys, as well as continuing to control some of the valuable water sources in the northern part of the Golan Heights. From the Syrian perspective, nothing short of a full withdrawal to the pre-1967 lines and a full evacuation of all Israeli settlements is acceptable.

At one point the public debate had centred around whether the Israeli withdrawal would be to the pre-1967 lines or to the international line of 1949. The

latter included an Israeli withdrawal from three small demilitarised zones which had constituted a small buffer during the 1949-1967 period (Figure 4). A return to either of these lines would have meant a total Israeli withdrawal from the region. The fate of the settlements under such an agreement remained unclear. Syria demanded the total evacuation of all settlements, while Israel suggested the leasing of some of the region from Syria in such a way that some of the settlements could remain. Had an Israeli withdrawal taken place, it is extremely unlikely that Syria would have agreed to such an arrangement. For their part, many Israelis continued to reject the very notion of a total withdrawal from the strategic heights overlooking the settlements of northern Israel.

Following the election of the Netanyahu government, the informal Israeli-Syrian contacts came to an abrupt end. The Israeli ambassador in Washington, who also headed the negotiating team with Syrian officials was replaced by a Likud

Figure 4





government appointee. As the Israel-Palestinian negotiations ground to a temporary halt, Syrian military manoeuvres took place close to the Israeli boundary. For a short time, the danger of renewed warfare between the two countries appeared imminent, with each accusing the other of stirring up an already heated atmosphere. These increased tensions came to a head at the end of 1996. The defence portion of the new state budget for Israel was reported as having been revised at the last minute so as to include the possibility of the outbreak of war with Syria. Early in the new year, a series of bomb blasts in the heart of Damascus were used by the Syrian government as a means of focusing responsibility on the Israeli secret services.

The delicate strategic balance in southern Lebanon had also suffered a major setback prior to the 1996 elections. In response to Hizbollah *Katyusha* rocket attacks on northern Israel, the government launched a major artillery offensive on guerrilla and civilian targets throughout southern Lebanon. The offensive resulted in short-term mass migration of Lebanese civilians towards Beirut, causing severe economic and social dislocation. The *Grapes of Wrath* operation was intended as a dual message, to both Lebanese and Israeli civilians. For the Lebanese Israel attempted to dissuade them from giving cover to Hizbollah bases and missiles. For Israelis, in the run up to the elections, the government attempted to show the electorate that – despite its support and promotion of the peace process – this would not be at the expense of the security of the Israeli population. Highly sensitive to the internal criticism that his government, in its rapid pursuit of a peace agreement, was not paying enough attention to the security of its citizens, Peres authorised a full-scale bombardment of south Lebanon. The short-term cost in terms of human lives and physical damage to both northern Israel and southern Lebanon went far beyond any accumulated damage of the previous few years.

The unclear agreement entered into by Israel and Lebanon (with Syrian approval) which brought about an end to the immediate bloodshed and the return of the residents to the villages, was portrayed by the Likud party as yet another indication of the lack of long-term security considerations put into play by the Labour party. This too was used to good effect by the Likud in the final run up to the election campaign. It remained clear, in the long term, that an Israeli withdrawal from the self-styled security zone in southern Lebanon would only be

reached if, and when, an agreement was reached with Syria.

### **Egypt and Jordan: A Tenuous Peace**

Perhaps nothing indicated the turnaround in the peace process more than the signals which came from the two countries with which Israel had already signed and implemented full peace agreements – Egypt and Jordan. Shortly after his election, Netanyahu had committed himself to continuing the peace process to both President Mubarak and King Hussein. Following the first direct meeting between the two leaders, Mubarak had even gone as far as to suggest that there was no imminent danger of the collapse of the peace process and that the new Israeli administration could be expected to follow in the path of the Rabin and Peres governments. For its part, Israel saw the peace with both countries as having removed the direct existential threat to the country and, as such, believed that it could afford to delay the process if, and where, necessary.

The reaction of the two governments was not short in coming. Following the repeated delays at redeployment in Hebron, culminating in the renewed violence and bloodshed in September 1996, both Mubarak and Hussein became openly critical of the Israeli government in general and Netanyahu in particular. This was reflected in public statements and numerous articles and editorials in the respective press of the two countries. Both Egypt and Jordan were subject to pressure exerted by much of the Arab world who rightly perceived the two countries as constituting a bridge between them and Israel. Many of these countries, most notably in North Africa and the Persian Gulf, who had commenced opening trade offices in Israel with the possibility of future full diplomatic recognition, slowed down their activities.

Israeli delegates to regional conferences, most notably the economic conference held in Cairo in November 1996, were not as warmly received as had been the case only a few months previously. At one stage, the Cairo conference was in danger of being cancelled altogether. Eventually it took place without the presence of state leaders. Countries which had slowly been drawn into the peacemaking atmosphere now reverted to their previous positions, preferring to wait and see what actions would be taken to ensure the continuation of the

peace process. Any major setback would result in Israel remaining isolated, as in the past. This would constitute a major blow to the Israeli economy, particularly as this was seen by many to be the major single benefit of the normalisation of relations with the Arab world. It remained for Israeli President, Ezer Weizmann, a known sympathiser of the Oslo Accords and one of the chief architects of the Camp David Peace Accords between Israel and Egypt, to visit Jordan and Egypt in an attempt to patch relations up and to persuade them to give the new Israeli government some more time in getting their act together.

Ever since the signing of the Camp David Peace Accords, Israel has seen the removal of Egypt from the direct field of confrontation as having removed the most immediate threat to the state. It has allowed a certain amount of breathing space for all Israeli leaders and was adequately put to the test during the invasion of Lebanon during the early 1980s. The recent statements of Egyptian leaders that a collapse of the Israel-Palestinian dialogue would severely test the character of the agreements with Egypt has caused a great deal of consternation within Israel. Similar statements were never made during ten years of a right-wing government in the 1980s. But the changed situation, in which a process had commenced and was now in danger of collapsing, was perceived by all Arab leaders, including the moderate King Hussein of Jordan, as holding the potential for major conflagration in the future.

### Conclusion

The peace process has taken a significant step backwards since the election of the Netanyahu government. Early optimism which suggested that Netanyahu would be faithful to his election sloganeering of advancing the peace process, albeit in his own way, and of responding to the demands from the centre rather than the extreme right and the settler movement, do not appear to be taking place. During his first eight months of office, he has appeared to harden, rather than soften, his policy making – to the consternation of his political opponents within Israel, the Arab world and the international community.

Paradoxically, his government, as the Begin government some fifteen years ago, has a better chance of pushing a limited agreement through the Israeli Knesset (parliament) than the previous Rabin and Peres administrations had of pushing through a full peace agreement. While the latter were limited

to their extremely narrow parliamentary majority, Netanyahu can call upon the support of the whole opposition in addition to at least half of his own party.

This type of limited agreement is the most that can be hoped for at this stage, and it remains to be seen whether the Netanyahu administration will respond to the calls from the centre for the continuation of some form of peace process, or will eventually be drawn into the intransigent and irredentist stances proposed by the right-wing settlers whose objective is to destroy any immediate hopes for peace in this volatile region. It is possible that Netanyahu sees 1998, the year in which Israel will celebrate fifty years of existence, as a year in which a peace agreement will be signed. But this requires a significant change in the policies adopted by his administration thus far. Recent events would, unfortunately, suggest little reason for such cautious optimism.

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