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Where Israel Must Stand

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Field Dossier: Where Israel Must Stand

By Uriel Zehavi · תורגם מאת אוריאל זחבי Published: December 4, 2025

Subtitle: How National Priority Areas quietly decide which parts of Israel live, grow, and get defended first.

Introduction

The piece opens by contrasting public diplomatic rhetoric about Israeli-Palestinian negotiations with concrete state decisions about resource allocation and settlement patterns. While international discussions focus on abstract political formulas, Israel's government makes tangible choices about infrastructure investment, housing subsidies, and military positioning that fundamentally shape which communities survive and flourish.

The author addresses questions from American Jewish families about why people would choose to live in high-risk frontier regions, arguing that practical necessity—rather than ideology alone—drives settlement patterns and that understanding National Priority Areas (NPAs) is essential to comprehending Israel's strategic future.

Geography as Destiny and the State's Countermove

Israel's extreme geographic vulnerability defines all strategic planning. The country's narrow width means hostile forces controlling the Judea-Samaria ridge can observe and threaten the entire coastal population center. Rather than accepting geographic constraints, Israel has constructed "artificial depth through people, towns, roads, and stubborn presence."

NPAs function as strategic instruments rather than mere budget mechanisms. By formally classifying regions as priorities, the government signals essential importance and channels tax relief, subsidized mortgages, infrastructure investment, and educational funding accordingly. This system represents "national triage" allocating limited resources to areas deemed existentially necessary.

The author argues that security, demographic sustainability, and social cohesion form three pillars that must work together. Judea and Samaria occupy this system's center regardless of international political opinion because successive Israeli governments—across the political spectrum—recognized the ridge's strategic necessity for national survival.

Early Israeli leadership, particularly Ben-Gurion, understood survival required strategic population placement. The text describes how Holocaust survivors and Jews expelled from Arab lands were deliberately settled in frontier regions to create defensive depth. Towns like Dimona and Kiryat Shmona functioned as "civilian outposts designed to hold the borders while Israel built an army, a government, and an economy."

The 1967 war fundamentally altered Israel's defensive position by providing control of high ground previously controlled by enemies. The Allon Plan and later security doctrines treated this terrain as mandatory for national survival—Jerusalem's flanks must be secured, the Jordan Valley must provide eastern protection, and key highlands must remain under Israeli control.

Rather than formally designating Judea and Samaria as NPAs—which would create propaganda vulnerabilities—the state employed “priority without declaration,” using parallel budgets and special exemptions while achieving the same strategic effects.

The State's Resource Engine and Command Signal

NPAs operate as the state's allocation mechanism, directing every ministry toward prioritized regions. These classifications drive funding for security, socioeconomic development, and “national missions” including Jerusalem, the northern frontier, the southern desert, and strategic blocs across Judea and Samaria.

The system works through asymmetric incentives designed to overcome normal economic gravity. Families won't relocate to frontier regions based on ideology alone, but subsidized mortgages, reduced housing costs, funded schools, and infrastructure investment become compelling. Teachers accept frontier postings when housing costs are covered; businesses relocate when tax incentives offset risks.

Judea and Samaria communities receive “NPA-equivalent treatment” despite formal omissions from published lists designed to avoid diplomatic friction. The Settlement Division, Housing Ministry, Education Ministry, and Transportation Ministry all direct resources as though these areas were unambiguously prioritized, creating institutional momentum toward permanence through practical means rather than policy declarations.

The author notes that NPA designations fundamentally reshape population distribution, labor markets, property values, and civic participation. “Civilians become the architecture of sovereignty” as homeowners and parents in priority regions form the political backbone supporting continuation of strategic policies.

Population as Forward Defense and Territorial Control

Israel's security doctrine treats civilian population as essential infrastructure. “If Israelis live on the frontier, the frontier holds. If they don't, it collapses.” This principle explains why the state continues investing in Gaza envelope communities despite relentless Hamas attacks, northern communities facing Hezbollah fire, and frontier settlements on contested terrain.

The Gaza envelope communities represent a deliberate rejection of enemy strategy. When Hamas attempted to empty frontier towns through sustained rocket fire and massacres, Israel responded by reinforcing rather than abandoning these areas. The message to hostile forces: “the cost of trying to drive away Israeli civilians is more civilians.”

The northern frontier follows similar logic—Hezbollah’s presence in southern Lebanon directly threatens Galilee communities, yet Israel maintains civilian presence as deterrent and stability mechanism. If Israel abandoned populated frontier regions, hostile forces would gain uncontested territory and access corridors toward the coastal plain.

Judea and Samaria represent the system’s highest stakes. The ridge provides observation and strike capability against the entire coastal region where most Israelis live. Strategic blocs—Ma’ale Adumim, Gush Etzion, Ariel, the Binyamin arc, the Jordan Valley—create “a lattice of civilian strongpoints that shape the IDF’s freedom of movement.”

Infrastructure serves dual civilian and military functions: bypass roads reduce exposure to ambush while accelerating troop mobility; surveillance systems on hilltops enable monitoring of surrounding valleys; legalized outposts connected to infrastructure “shift control toward Israel and away from hostile actors.”

The E1 corridor between Jerusalem and Ma’ale Adumim functions as a strategic hinge that Rabin identified as “mandatory for Israeli security.” Without E1, Ma’ale Adumim remains semi-isolated; with it, Jerusalem becomes a “defensible metropolitan arc stretching eastward” with interior routes to the Jordan Valley that cannot be severed.

The Jordan Valley serves as Israel’s “only real buffer to the east,” preventing foreign armies or militias from rapidly crossing into the mountains. Villages there serve as “anchors for the IDF, stabilizing a zone that would otherwise be empty and vulnerable.”

The Negev presents different challenges—vast space and thin population create vacuums that hostile actors might exploit through proxy networks. Israel’s response involves expanding bases, building towns, and intensifying infrastructure and governance to transform strategic liabilities into assets.

Identity Forged Where the Country Places Its People

Frontier settlement creates distinctive national culture. Communities absorbing sustained pressure develop civic structures enabling survival—rapid response teams, neighbor watches, community coordination—that become cultural norms rather than emergency measures.

Development towns historically populated by immigrants from Middle Eastern and North African backgrounds created generations of Israelis who “built roads, factories, and schools out of sand and rock and stubbornness.” This experience produced characteristic traits: directness, loyalty, and resistance to pretension.

Judea and Samaria communities blend ancient historical memory with modern strategic responsibility, creating civic ethos treating presence as mission. Children absorb both “without contradiction” as schools teach that living in these areas represents “an act of continuity, not ideology.” Youth movements train leadership and service; adults participate in guard duty and emergency preparations as routine.

When the state signals regional importance through funding and infrastructure, it attracts families understanding the implicit message. Teachers staying in frontier schools become community anchors; doctors rotating through remote clinics stabilize medical access.

Cultural life in NPAs demonstrates coexistence of risk and normalcy—film festivals in fortified centers, wineries in rocket range, outdoor concerts on formerly contested hilltops. Immigration patterns show olim (new immigrants) often settling in NPAs where housing affordability and community support offset inconvenience and danger.

Building the Country Where Strategy Demands It

Israeli economic policy inseparably links economics and security strategy. Infrastructure investment functions as “territorial control,” with budgets deployed as defensive tools and asphalt becoming “sovereignty.”

Housing represents the most direct lever. Young couples confronting prohibitive Tel Aviv prices find homes in frontier regions at half the cost, supplemented by government grants, subsidized land, and tax discounts. This financial restructuring redirects migration patterns while advancing strategic objectives.

Employment development follows infrastructure—historically development towns suffered from isolation and limited opportunity, but state highway construction, tunnel excavation, interchange building, and bypass network development progressively reduced friction and pulled opportunity outward.

Healthcare infrastructure in frontier regions demonstrates inability to ask people to live where the state needs them without providing survival resources. Clinics appear despite private sector unwillingness to invest; doctors receive bonuses for frontier service; hospitals prepare for emergency treatment under fire.

The generational housing crunch in the center accelerates population redistribution as families priced from central regions become frontier candidates, strengthening peripheral areas while relieving central pressure.

Remote work technology amplifies this effect as fiber infrastructure extends to frontier regions, allowing professionals to work for central employers while living peripherally, providing the state incentive to deploy connectivity strategically.

E1 exemplifies the infrastructure-before-declaration approach: the corridor remains officially undeveloped despite complete planning, approved zoning, and prepared utilities waiting for political clearance. The police headquarters sits “like a stake in the sand” representing state intention to eventually activate the space fully.

Communities Carrying the Line

The text examines specific communities embodying strategic doctrine. Sderot sits close enough to Gaza that residents observe the enclave from upper windows, with daily life structured around 15-second sprints to shelters. When

Hamas attempted to empty Sderot through sustained attack, Israel responded with accelerated reconstruction and massive immigration influx—"the state rebuilt at a speed unheard of in bureaucracies."

Be'er Sheva transformed from desert outpost to "strategic metropolis" through sustained state investment in military bases, university development, and cyber infrastructure. This demonstrates how decades of treating regions as "mission-critical" eventually converts frontier liabilities into strategic assets.

The Jordan Valley contains "thin line of small communities" functioning as "early warning posts and territorial anchors." Residents rotate through security squads and monitor terrain alongside agriculture, ensuring "if they're not there, someone else will be."

Jerusalem's periphery—Ma'ale Adumim, Gush Etzion, Givat Ze'ev, Binyamin communities—extends the capital's "defensive depth outward." While daily life appears suburban, their role remains explicitly strategic, forming rings that prevent Jerusalem from becoming "a vulnerable enclave."

The author includes personal anecdote of a Binyamin resident willing to relocate her family within hours if the state required Jewish communities in Gaza, illustrating patriotic commitment that transcends comfort or security.

Where the System Breaks and Why It Matters

Every strategic system contains weak points. Israel's priority map experiences failures when discipline lapses, politics interfere, or bureaucracy lags behind reality. Some NPAs never achieved critical mass despite initial state investment, leaving residents without sufficient economic foundation. Dimona, Ofakim, and parts of Safed experienced underfunding despite carrying national burdens.

Arab communities inside the Green Line faced historical under-prioritization, creating inequality clusters and resentment that ultimately weaken national cohesion. "A country that depends on cohesion cannot afford internal zones of neglect."

The greatest contradictions appear in Judea and Samaria, where strategic necessity proves "unequivocal" but legal-diplomatic complexity creates "bureaucratic friction." The state treats regions as essential while refusing formal NPA designation, producing funding through workarounds and infrastructure delays. This "limbo" state allows hostile actors to "exploit hesitation."

The text describes concrete examples of strategic communities with minimal population—three-family towns near hostile outposts that depend on resident rotation for supplies and security. These exist "because it's on a strategic point" despite harsh living conditions.

Political manipulation distorts allocation when governments add towns for coalition arithmetic rather than strategic rationale, misallocating resources and weakening frontiers. "Ghost incentives" occur when formal announcements fail to produce promised funds, eroding trust in the entire system.

Inertia prevents removal of outdated designations from priority lists, causing “priority” to become “background noise” when everything holds that status. The deepest contradiction involves formal designations failing to reflect actual strategic necessities, producing “dishonest maps” incapable of generating sound policy.

The Next Map: Where Israel Must Strengthen the Line

Iran’s encirclement campaign represents the primary strategic driver for the next two decades. With Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, and militias in Syria and Iraq, the Galilee, Golan, Jordan Valley, and Judea-Samaria ridge become non-negotiable terrain. “Rockets can be intercepted. Lost territory cannot.”

Demographic momentum shows Jewish population growth in Judea and Samaria outpacing the center as young families seek space. The state must decide whether to codify this spontaneous pattern or resist it, but “the question is whether the state will formalize what is already happening.”

Urbanization pulling inward must be countered by state infrastructure pushing outward. Be’er Sheva, Kiryat Shmona, Ariel, and Ma’ale Adumim must become “full-scale regional centers” offering futures, not merely survival.

Judea and Samaria must transition “from informal priority to formal centrality”; the Jordan Valley requires “recognition as the eastern spine”; the northern Galilee needs “population surge”; the Negev requires “law and governance to match investment.”

Technology redrawing the map includes remote work enabling distant living, drone warfare eliminating illusions of center safety, and dispersal becoming national policy rather than frontier phenomenon. “A country facing long-range fire cannot stack its citizens in one narrow strip.”

Infrastructure megaprojects will shape generation patterns more than ideology—rail links determining Galilee viability, base relocations locking southern gravity, bypass networks cementing ridge presence, and E1 activation making “Jerusalem a fortified metropolis.”

The Map as a Statement of Survival

The Priority Map represents “national doctrine written across the land” rather than administrative spreadsheet. It reflects decisions about what Israel must hold and refuses to lose. Given Israeli geography, “survival demands clarity—geographic, demographic, and moral.”

The frontier towns, Judea-Samaria communities, Negev pioneers, and Galilee residents function as “the country’s human fortifications” to whom the state owes infrastructure and investment in exchange for anchoring exposed terrain.

Judea and Samaria occupy the “heart” of this ethos, knotting geography together and providing “height, depth, and continuity” while “tying modern statecraft to ancient belonging.” These communities stabilize Jerusalem, secure the coastline, and anchor the Jordan Valley.

The conclusion argues Israel survives “because Israelis live with purpose in the places that matter most—and because the state still has the discipline to keep sending them there.”

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