

# Is the Jordan Valley Truly a Security Zone for Israel?

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## The Alon Plan — The Background

On July 26, 1967, Defense Minister Yigal Alon presented a plan to then-Prime Minister Levi Eshkol for a settlement with the Palestinians, which came to be known as the Alon Plan. Since its inception, the importance of the Jordan Valley to Israeli security has been deeply imprinted on the collective consciousness of the Israeli polity. Today, as Israel discusses a permanent settlement with the Palestinians, the effects of this logic remains discernible within the popular discourse: it is generally believed that the Jordan Valley remains crucial to Israeli security, and that a permanent settlement must include both Israeli control over the Jordan Valley and the positioning of substantial security forces there. Indeed, there are those who go even further, maintaining Israel must annex the area outright.

A demonstration of how central this belief is to popular Israeli conceptions of security can be found in the credo of the Third Way Party, a hitherto-unknown party which won four seats in the Fourteenth Knesset (1996-1999). The party's "Double Boulevard" program (which called for Israeli annexation of broad eastern and western 'security strips' in the West Bank) adopted the ideas of the Alon Plan with regard to the Jordan Valley and added the concept of annexing parts of western Judea and Samaria along the length of the June 4, 1967

borders (also known as the Green Line).

Popular conceptions of security notwithstanding, it is clear that the Alon Plan was formulated under conditions wholly different from those that prevail today. Both the international and regional realities were different in almost every possible parameter — politically, strategically, economically, and militarily. This observation demands a reexamination of the security concept which the Alon Plan sought to promulgate, taking into account the period during which its basic assumptions were formulated.

At its foundation, the Alon Plan was based on four primary assumptions:

1. Peace with the Arab states is possible and necessary.
2. Israel's geo-strategic integrity must be protected, this integrity being based on defensible borders which would prevent future wars.
3. The demographic consideration must be central: An absolute Jewish majority must be maintained in Israel.
4. Any settlement must enable the Palestinian people to realize their national aspirations without harming the security of the State of Israel, leaving it to the Palestinians to decide whether to establish political ties with the Kingdom of Jordan or the State of Israel.

On the basis of these assumptions, Alon proposed the following modalities for a permanent Israeli-Palestinian settlement:

1. Israel's eastern border would be the Jordan River, with the line of the river also dividing the length of the Dead Sea.
2. A 15 km-wide strip of land west of the Jordan River would be added to the State of Israel, becoming an integral part of the country. In the region of the Judean Desert, the width of the strip would be 25 kilometers, reaching the Hebron area.
3. In the Jericho area, there would be a passage from the eastern bank of the Jordan River to the western one, giving the Palestinians a corridor to Jordan.
4. A passage would be established from Judea and Samaria to the Gaza Strip.
5. The entire Jerusalem area would be annexed to Israel.
6. Only necessary "corrections" would be made to the remaining borders.
7. With regard to areas densely populated by Arabs in Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip, negotiations would be conducted among Israel, the Arab residents, and Arab states, with the goal of establishing a government by consensus.

## The Fundamentals of the Plan — Reassessment

In the year 2001, two of the underlying assumptions of the Alon Plan appear extremely problematic. The concept of maintaining what was called "the geo-strategic integrity" (the intention

evidently having been geo-political) of Israel by virtue of defensible borders and avoiding future wars has been overturned by developments since the Six-Day War. 'Defensible borders' did not prevent the Yom Kippur War in 1973. Indeed, it would appear that the opposite is the case: that the attempt to hold on to territorially maximalist borders actually *contributed* to the outbreak of the war. The peace treaty with Egypt, which was dependent on conceding what were ostensibly more favorable lines of defense, ensured peace along the Israel-Egypt border. Similarly, the withdrawal from Southern Lebanon has brought relative calm to the northern border. In both cases, there may, of course, be disagreements as to the chances of this quiet enduring for a protracted length of time. In the case of Egypt, however, the agreement has withstood the test of time for 20 years.

Moreover, Alon's belief that the Palestinians could achieve their national aspirations without harming the security of the State of Israel, and via political ties to either Jordan or Israel has, over time, become both dated and irrelevant. The only viable solution which enables maintaining the integrity of a Jewish majority in the State of Israel while also enabling the Palestinians to fulfil their right to self-determination without harming Israel's security is by means of the peaceful establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel.

The question examined in this

article is thus twofold. The first question is whether Israeli control is needed over the Jordan Valley in order to ensure that the reality created following a Palestinian-Israeli permanent settlement would not impair Israel's security. The second question is related to the first, asking whether the opposite assertion might not also be true: that Israeli insistence on control over the Jordan Valley risks *harming* its own security in the long run.

Israel's security interests *vis-à-vis* the Jordan Valley have both an internal and an external aspect. The external-security considerations address the question of what the most correct response would be to an attack by a large land force coming from Jordan. Israel's military has traditionally supposed that such a force would be based on a war coalition composed of the Arab states lying to Israel's east, the main element of which would be the Iraqi army. Internal security considerations address the question of how to assure that the Palestinian state does not become a base for terrorism and guerilla warfare against Israel.

Discussion of the external-security issue will now proceed along two lines. First, the contribution of Israel's control over the Jordan Valley to an overall eastern-front military threat will be discussed. Following this, a discussion regarding the *likelihood* of such a threat actually materializing will be also be attempted. Later on, the article will then discuss the internal-security threat.

## Coping with Military Threats from the East

In the event of a land attack by an Arab coalition from the East, the traditional IDF (Israel Defense Forces) concept called for two possible courses of action.

1. An effort to cope with the threat while it was still at some distance. This course of action exploits the air superiority of Israeli Air Force to attack and destroy Iraqi forces entering Jordan, as it did in the 1967 (June) War. Alternatively, IDF ground forces would meet the Iraqi expedition force while still deep within Jordanian territory. The underlying assumption at work is that that Iraq's distance from Israel increases the likelihood of sufficient advance warning to enable this course of action.

2. The second course of action called for a defensive deployment based along Alon Highway (also known as Route 90, this is the road that runs the length of the Jordan Valley). The Jordan River itself is not a serious obstacle, and deployment in the Jordan Valley itself makes no sense because it is dominated by the high ground in both sides of the valley, and would serve as a death trap for forces deployed within it. The defensive deployment must, therefore, base itself in areas west of the Jordan Valley from which it is possible to achieve topographic control over the valley.

Changes in the strategic environment, along with changes in the manner in which modern warfare

is conducted, have increased the value of distant combat over close defense. In the framework of the peace treaty with Israel, Jordan committed itself not to permit the use of its territory by forces hostile to Israel, and not to join any anti-Israel coalition. If forces hostile to Israel were to enter Jordan, either because Jordan had abrogated the treaty with Israel or because it was powerless to prevent such action, Israel would have the legitimization to operate within Jordanian territory against those forces. In this regard, not the Jordan Valley — but all of Jordan — is Israel's security zone.

The Persian Gulf War, and the limited confrontations of the decade following it, have demonstrated the change (some would say *revolution*) in the manner in which conventional warfare is conducted. The ability to unleash accurate fire from great distances is continually growing in importance. The combination of the ability to locate targets in real time and from great distances, combined with long-range guided weapons and with command and control systems that enable the rapid direction of weapons at a selected targets, imparts the ability to massively erode mechanized and armored forces long before they reach the line of contact. It is fair to assume that Israel, which is among the few nations that possess leading-edge military technologies, would not only have the legitimization to strike enemy forces within Jordanian territory, but would have a superior capability to do so.

A future Palestinian state erected in the area of Judea and Samaria would be surrounded on three sides by Israel. On its fourth side would be Jordan, a state with which Israel

maintains peaceful relations and strategic connections that are based on mutual interests. If the need arises to insert Israeli forces into the area of the Alon Highway in order to establish the basis of a defensive deployment against an attack by the eastern front, these forces will be able to deploy from the south and north, avoiding densely populated Palestinian areas. The Palestinian state (which, as per the expected agreement, will not be armed

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with heavy weapons) would not be able to prevent this. In addition, the inclusion of clauses in the permanent agreement which would legitimate such Israeli action would make this option easier, as would completion of the Alon Highway in such a way that it connects with the Israeli highway network.

Moreover, the practical possibility of defensive deployment using forces which would enter the Jordan Valley on an emergency basis obviates the need for a large ongoing presence of Israeli forces there. It is reasonable to expect that Israel would maintain a limited presence of its forces in the Palestinian-held Jordan valley for a predefined period of time following

the signing of an agreement. However, this would be a short-term deployment, to allow Israel to confirm the stability its new strategic environment. In the longer term, however, Israel must orient itself to the reality wherein there are no Israeli forces in the area of Palestinian sovereignty.

Beyond the IDF's clear capability in coping with threats from the eastern front even without having uninterrupted control of the Jordan Valley, there is some doubt as to the likelihood of such a threat actually materializing, at least for the foreseeable future.

The global and regional changes which have taken place over the past decade have significantly reduced the both the likelihood and the destructive potential of a broad land-based attack against Israel by an eastern Arab coalition. The potential magnitude of this threat has diminished because of the relative weakening of Syria, Iraq and Jordan. Syria and Jordan have both failed to locate funding for the revitalization of their armed forces, while Iraq's military force was severely damaged during the Persian Gulf War in 1991, and the sanctions in place since then have prevented it from rehabilitating and re-equipping its armed forces. It is fair to assume that Jordan and Syria will continue to suffer from weak economies, preventing them from growing in military strength on the basis of their own resources. As for external financing, the disappearance of the Soviet Union left the Arab states bereft of an external power willing to underwrite their military growth. While Jordan does enjoy limited American military assistance, the scope of this aid is insufficient to

mount a serious threat and there is considerable US domestic pressure against increasing foreign aid.

In addition, it is unlikely the Arab oil-producing states will give significant assistance to these countries even if they continue to enjoy increased oil prices. The willingness of these states to contribute to pan-Arab goals has diminished over the years, due primarily to two reasons:

1. The Arab oil states suffered a major economic crisis with the decline in oil prices, which focused on the wastefulness which prevailed when oil prices were high;

2. This crisis was accompanied by an increased awareness of these states regarding their growing domestic needs. Iraq remains the only country whose income from oil — particularly if the high prices are maintained — could enable it to grow militarily on the basis of its own financial resources, if sanctions are lifted.

Meanwhile, there is no indication that the US will be willing to allow these sanctions to be lifted from Iraq. Even if were they to be suspended, Iraq would still be mired in huge debts, which would impede its ability to allocate the necessary resources for a sustained re-armament program. For these reasons, Iran and those Arab states which are still interested in taking part in the strategic race in the Middle East are focusing on developing ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction — areas in which the question of control over the Jordan Valley is irrelevant.

The new global and regional realities also reduce the likelihood that an anti-Israeli eastern war coalition would even coalesce in the first place.

Unlike the past, there is no superpower to support such a coalition. The United States, which enjoys unprecedented status and influence in the Middle East, would surely seek to prevent its formation.

At the same time, the ideal of pan-Arab unity has lost its relevancy in recent years, and the prevailing tendency in the Arab world is division rather than unity. The majority of Arab states are focused on internal affairs and on realizing their particular national interests. The gathering of the Arab countries for the purpose of condemning Israel in the wake of the latest confrontation between the Palestinian Authority and Israel strengthens this assertion: the results of that summit do not attest to a willingness to invest significant resources for the sake of contributing to a pan-Arab cause. At present, Jordan is a signatory to a peace treaty with Israel and is tightening its strategic ties with Israel. Syria has conducted peace negotiations with Israel, revealing that the gaps between the stances of the two sides are not wide. Islamic radicalism has weakened, and the threat against the positions its adherents have been able to stake out in Iran and Sudan is growing. A permanent settlement with the Palestinians will serve to strengthen these trends still further, since the Islamic movements no longer will be able to use the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a rallying cry. Although the Middle Eastern system is fragile and its future difficult to forecast, the aggregate of these developments reduce the probability that there will be a need to cope with the potential threat of a land-based attack from the east.

## The Control of the Jordan Valley and the Palestinian State

Those who believe in Israeli presence in — or control of — the Jordan Valley claim there is also a need to control the Jordan River as a dividing line between the Palestinian state and Jordan. In their view, there are two aims to this control:

1. Achieving separation between Jordan and the Palestinian state for the sake of preventing the Palestinians from destabilizing Jordan, and to prevent undesirable connections between the two banks of the Jordan River;

2. Preventing the entry of undesirable weapons and people into the territory of the Palestinian state. That is, it is feared that lack of Israeli control over border crossings would enable the Palestinian state to violate whatever restrictions its treaty with Israel might place on its armed forces, and would make it easier for terrorist operatives to carry out attacks against Israel.

However, Israeli control over the Jordanian and Egyptian borders with the Palestinian state would result in a severe erosion of Palestinian sovereignty. Such harm to Palestinian interests could be justified only if there were no viable alternative which answered Israel's vital defense requirements. In this case, it is possible to point out several other potential solutions: Israel is already a partner to agreements which limit the deployment of forces and weaponry in specific areas, as established in the peace treaty with Egypt and the disengagement agreement with Syria. In both cases, Israel agreed to monitoring mechanisms based on

international forces. In the agreement with the Palestinians, it would be possible to include a similar international monitoring and verification system to ascertain compliance by both sides.

With regard to concern over contacts between Jordanians and Palestinians that might have a negative effect on Israeli security, it must be remembered that such ties stem primarily from the large Palestinian component within Jordanian society. The question of who controls the border has only marginal impact in regard to this issue. In any event there will likely be a considerable volume of both people and products moving between Jordan and the Palestinian state, because of family connections, commerce, and tourism.

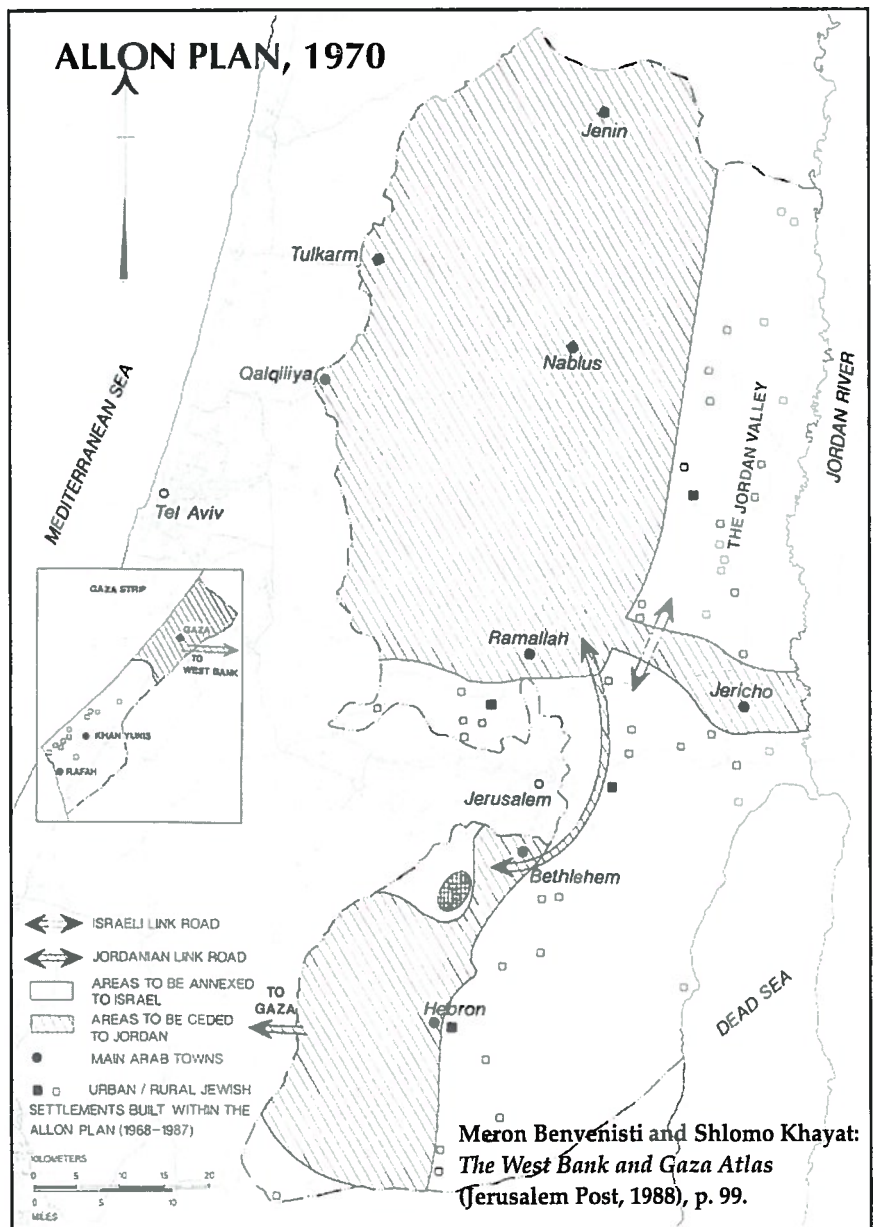
Coping with terror originating in the territory of the Palestinian state will depend primarily on the relations between Israel and the Palestinian leadership. Terrorism serves as a tool in the hands of movements rooted within Palestinian society, primarily Hamas, and does not depend on influences outside Palestinian territories. The armaments they need may already be found within this territory, whether light weapons or explosives. The outside elements have influence only in the realm of guidance, which — in the age of fax machines, mobile phones and the Internet — cannot be prevented by control over borders. Efficiently coping with terrorism depends primarily on the existence of the interest on the part of the Palestinian state to prevent terrorism.

The key question, therefore, is under what circumstances would the

Palestinian state have an interest in preventing terrorism? It appears that only a viable Palestinian state, which enjoys stability and the potential for economic development, and which maintains a diverse system of political, economic, and security contacts with Israel and Jordan, will have the commitment to fight terror. Israeli control of the Jordan Valley, let alone

annexation, would impede the creation of such a Palestinian state for the following reasons:

- \* The Jordan Valley and the Judean Desert are the only large reserves of land that can serve the Palestinian state. Israeli control of them would impede the development of the Palestinian state and would create unrelenting pressure to change the



agreement, thus impinging on its stability in any event.

\* Any reasonable solution to the refugee problem would require returning part of the refugees (even if not the majority) to the territory of the Palestinian state. Without the above territories, there will be nowhere to settle them. The absence of a solution to the refugee problem would then, in turn, harm the stability of the agreement, as well as the relations between the two countries.

\* IDF presence and movement of its forces in this area would give rise to friction with the Palestinian populace, and the relations between the two

sides would be damaged.

\* Encirclement of the Palestinian state by an Israeli ring in all directions would create a sense of siege, which would not promote the promulgation of normal relations between the two countries.

### Summary

The aggregate of considerations presented here leads to the conclusion that the concept contained in the Alon Plan is anachronistic. Considering the benefits that ceding the Jordan Valley could confer upon Israel, it is preferable that Israel positively consider this option, and certainly that

it not entertain any notions of annexing it. The marginal security dividend deriving from control over the Jordan Valley does not measure up against the strategic value which would accrue as a result of signing a fair permanent agreement with the Palestinians that would include monitoring arrangements and bilateral cooperation. In this framework, there would also be a need for arrangements which would enable Israel's use of areas west of the Jordan Valley in the event that a threat were to materialize along the eastern front.