



A Border as a Dynamic Space

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Israel aspires to permanent borders. Yet a nation, a homeland, a state, and permanent borders are not necessarily congruent, and this complexity is not unique to Israel. Israel should rethink the popular assumption that a homeland and political borders must be a perfect fit.

“Every house has a wall, every villa has a fence, every state has a border. Where is Israel’s border?” That was how Sefi Rachlevsky, in his book *Ein Goul (There Is No Border)*, expressed his desire for Israeli stability based on permanent borders. Architects, however, know how inaccurate that statement is: not every house has a wall; nor does every villa have a fence. Sometimes the opposite is desired. When a window is opened on a view, one wants continuity from the inner space to the outer, and out beyond the boundaries of the yard.

The yearning for permanent borders exists on the Israeli right, too; it is not only a phenomenon of the liberal left. The congruence between nation, homeland, state, and permanent borders is treated as something obvious. Yet in other countries, such congruence is unusual. The modern nation-state aspires to a civic, cultural, and sovereign homogeneity that would dovetail with political borders, but the dynamic in which reality emerges does not always accord with such a monolithic order. The phenomenon is also found elsewhere in Europe and in the US. Israel, however, is anomalous in that no Israelis live in the neighboring states.

When the 1948-49 War of Independence came to an end, all the neighborhoods that remained beyond the armistice lines were abandoned. Full congruence emerged between a border and Jewish existence within a territory. Yet things were not always so clear-cut.

During the years of the British Mandate, pioneering movements did not cease their settlement efforts in Baron Rothschild’s lands in the Hauran and the Golan, even

though those territories had been made part of the French Mandate in Syria. That approach was common to all the pioneering movements: their notion of territory rejected political borders as delimiting the scope of national aspirations that define a homeland. Similarly, when the 1947 partition plan was adopted by the UN, David Ben-Gurion was disinclined to evacuate significant neighborhoods that remained outside Israeli territory, such as Nahariya, the Western Galilee villages, and Gush Etzion in the Hebron Hills.

The complexity of these tensions between political borders and the territory of the homeland is not unique to Israel. Other examples include the complex status of Alsace-Lorraine for Germany and France, and of Transylvania for Hungary and Romania. After the Soviet Union fell apart, the Russians, too, had to confront the challenge of the incongruity between their recognized borders and lands outside those borders that included substantial Russian populations. From this crisis, Moscow fashioned a new military approach that came to be known as “hybrid warfare” in the West and “new-generation warfare” in Russian.

The most recent campaigns – in Georgia in 2008, in the Crimea, and in Ukraine – made use of traditional Russian concepts in updated forms. These campaigns made deliberate use of a combination of military force and civilian measures. When the Russian troops made their way back to the Russian-Georgian border, President Putin was left with a significant achievement: while his forces had indeed withdrawn fully and evidently from Georgia, the Russian civilians in Abkhazia had, thanks to the campaign, acquired autonomy. In accordance with international law, Abkhazia remained under Georgian sovereignty, without Russia having violated the status quo regarding international borders. Yet the territory, with its national, cultural, and economic affinities, had become a de facto Russian province.

In a reality where the preservation of international borders has become a cornerstone of the law of nations, Israel should reconsider the old notion that a homeland and political borders are not always a perfect fit. When vacillating, for example, between formally annexing Maale Adumim and building 100,000 housing units from Maale Adumim toward the Dead Sea, it is worth asking: if the new border would not be recognized in any case, what purpose would annexation serve? Large-scale building would do far more to promote Israel’s interests.

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