



## PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

### **Letter to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu**

**by Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacoheh**

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 951, September 17, 2018

**Mr. Prime Minister,**

**I would like to contact you personally and directly.**

The state of Israel and its citizens have been fortunate to have you at the helm for the past nine years. One can readily envisage the nightmare scenarios had your ideological and political opponents been leading the country. Your steadfast opposition to the "peace plan" that President Barack Obama tried to dictate has been particularly significant.

And yet, there is a lingering concern about your demographic vision of the spatial arrangement of the territory between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. Not least because your government's long-term construction plans envisage the concentration of most of Israel's population in the crowded coastal strip and the Dan metropolitan area (Gush Dan).

In accordance with this long-term planning, some 2.6 million new homes will be built by 2040 – all within the pre-1967 "Green Line." In the Jerusalem district alone, some 300,000 homes will be built, thus pushing the city westwards to the green lung of the Judean Hills instead of realizing the potential offered by the open spaces east of Jerusalem, to Maale Adumim and the Dead Sea. Existing building plans already envisage the town of Beit Shemesh to grow to 350,000 residents, thus accelerating the tipping of the demographic balance towards Gush Dan. Likewise, the construction of hundreds of thousands of new homes on lands evacuated by the IDF and the security establishment in central Israel (Tzrifin, Sirkin, Glihot, and Taas Ramat Hasharon) will add one million people to the densely populated Gush Dan area.

These trends are dangerous to Israel's national interest in two critical respects: security and the enforcement of state sovereignty, especially in peripheral

areas. This is why Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion insisted from the outset on the dispersal of the Israeli population.

The simple truth is that the hundreds of thousands who will make their homes in the crowded areas of the coastal strip and Gush Dan will remain there for generations to come. And while it is true that Israel's rapid population growth necessitates affordable housing solutions, the existing solutions tend to exploit available opportunities rather than reflect long-term strategic planning. At the same time, powerful market forces that will not be easily reversed are establishing facts on the ground. There is a real danger that when the opportunity for large-scale construction in the West Bank avails itself, the demand may well be negligible.

In light of the lessons of the failed Oslo process, and given Israel's long-term spatial requirements, one would hope that you will lay down a no less ambitious development master plan than the principles outlined by Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in his last Knesset speech (October 5, 1995): Israel's continued control of both "united Jerusalem, including Ma'ale Adumim and Givat Ze'ev" and the Jordan Valley "in the most expansive interpretation of this term."

Within this framework, Rabin stressed the necessity of the land corridors leading to the Jordan Valley, including Highway 5 (Rosh Ha'ayin-Ariel-Ma'ale Ephraim). In keeping with this stipulation, instead of the 40,000 homes being built in Rosh Ha'ayin and the 30,000 planned to be built in the Ramat Hasharon area, there should be extensive construction connecting Rosh Ha'ayin to Ariel and from there to the Tapuah junction. Instead of the hundreds of thousands of homes slated to be built west of Jerusalem, the construction efforts need to be directed eastwards towards the Dead Sea.

Mr. Prime Minister, your caution is fully understandable given the massive constraints under which you are operating. But in the absence of a long-term planning vision – a master plan placed on the desks of the professional echelons – developments on the ground are setting lasting patterns that will make the preservation of Israel's security and spatial requirements in the West Bank ever more untenable.

In strengthening the existing contours of Jewish neighborhoods in Judea and Samaria and the Jordan Valley, alongside the PA-controlled Areas A and B, the following planning trends are required:

- Consolidating Jerusalem's metropolitan status by developing transportation and municipal infrastructure from Gush Etzion to Mishor Adumim, Michmash, Ofra, and Givat Ze'ev.

- Exploiting the open corridor from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea for the construction of tens of thousands of housing units.
- Developing an eastern avenue for the State of Israel from the town of Arad to Mount Gilboa, while transforming the Jordan Valley into a continuously settled area.
- Consolidating the southern Hebron Jewish villages as a northern envelope of the Beersheva metropolis.
- Constructing a highway along Route 6 across the Judean Desert gradient from Arad to Mishor Adumim, and continuing northwards on the Alon route to Beit Shean and Afula.
- Developing the settlement potential on Route 5, in continuous succession from Elkana to Ariel, Tapuah, Migdalim, and Ma'ale Ephraim.
- Establishing the West Binyamin and West Samaria neighborhoods as a security belt for the coastal plain.

Confined to Area C, these measures will also help shape this area's spatial contours at such time as the PA is prepared to negotiate an end to the conflict.

The road to attainment of these goals is admittedly fraught with obstacles and certainly requires caution and political sensitivity. However, this was the basic vision that guided David Ben-Gurion and Menachem Begin, and the one to which Moshe Dayan, Yigal Allon, and Yitzhak Rabin aspired. This is also the course of action favored by your voters, who yearn to see you faithfully strive for its realization.

*Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacohen is a senior research fellow at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. He served in the IDF for forty-two years. He commanded troops in battles with Egypt and Syria. He was formerly a corps commander and commander of the IDF Military Colleges.*

BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family