Frontier State

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In Europe today, a common understanding of borders tends to confuse two distinct orders of reality: On the one hand, the juridical demarcations of a state; on the other, the historical contours of a nation's territory. If French citizens are only dimly aware of this distinction, it is because since Louis XIV the borders of the kingdom—subsequently the Republic—have been congruent with what generations of Frenchmen have come to consider the natural borders of France. The genius of the "Sun King" was to bring the nation to consider those boundaries to be natural—what the royalist historian Jacques Bainville would later deem the "necessary borders" of France.[1] This equivalence of state and country, firmly rooted as it now is in the European way of thinking, likewise determines what we understand by "sovereignty": A state, a nation, a territory.

These brief observations will suffice to highlight the radically different situation in Israel with regard to the question of borders. To begin with, the borders of today's Jewish state in no way correspond to the historical boundaries of the biblical Land of Israel. Furthermore, to this day these borders have been neither definitively fixed nor formally recognized. They have been regularly adjusted by military confrontation and political negotiation. The borders that were drawn in the 1947 UN partition plan, for instance,

do not correspond to the considerably expanded borders of the armistice signed two years later, at the end of the War of Independence. And those of the armistice were, in turn, frequently redrawn: In 1967 after the Six Day War; in 1979 following the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt; again in several stages following the 1993 Oslo accords; and finally last summer, with the evacuation of the Israeli settlements from the Gaza Strip and northern Samaria. And they are bound to be redrawn yet again at a final settlement of the Israeli-Arab conflict.

For the time being, however, we cannot foresee what the precise boundaries of the Jewish state will turn out to be. We know that they will not follow the contours of *Eretz Yisrael*. In fact, we are not even certain what these contours really were; neither Jewish tradition nor scriptural commentators have been able to agree on the exact demarcation of the biblical Promised Land. This double uncertainty—concerning the borders of the state and the contours of the Promised Land—weighs heavily on the manner in which Israelis relate to the territorial dimension of their national sovereignty. Indeed, there has never been a single, authorized, consensual vision in Israel of the nation's own "home turf."

There is yet another peculiarity of the Israeli condition: The equivalence between the principle of sovereignty and the idea of borders—taken quite for granted elsewhere—was slow in coming to political Zionism. For several decades, from the birth of the movement at the end of the nineteenth century until the middle of the 1930s, the Jewish aspiration to reclaim a national existence in the biblical land of Israel overlooked, so to speak, the question of the actual borders of the future state.

In the following pages, I will attempt to determine how and when the question of sovereignty and that of borders finally converged. I will also try to shed light on the evolution and inflections of the notion of borders in the history of political Zionism. In tracing this evolution, one may point to three pivotal moments.

Early political Zionism is characterized by two dominant traits: The struggle to achieve national self-determination, defined brilliantly by Theodor Herzl in his famous pamphlet of 1896,[2] and the territorial project that arose spontaneously in the wake of the pogroms in Russia in 1881, which brought a number of pioneer groups to Palestine in the 1880s. Disenchanted with the promise of emancipation, these individuals yearned to regenerate the political and spiritual aspirations of the Jewish people in the land of Israel.[3]

Only after Herzl, and following the creation of the Zionist Organization, did the national and territorial projects converge, become institutionalized, and achieve a dynamic that continues to this day. Successive waves of immigration, land purchases, the proliferation of agricultural communities, the redemption of—in their own words—a desolated land, the development of several urban centers, the creation of representative institutions, trade unions, social services, even a paramilitary force—all these elements were part of a political strategy that had been spelled out by Herzl and the early Zionist Congresses. It endeavored to provide a territorial groundwork for a political blueprint, with the aim, in the short term, of providing a refuge to persecuted Jews, and in the long term of establishing a sovereign state.

During this first and highly turbulent epoch of Zionism, however, the question of borders was rarely ever raised. The establishment of the state seemed too hypothetical, too remote from the more urgent anxieties of the day. The Zionist movement was engaged in a "strategy of insertion,"[4] which involved the establishment of a more or less contiguous territorial foundation. It consisted of communal settlements, later *kibbutzim* and *moshavim*, all in areas only sparsely populated by Arabs: The Galilee and the Kinneret region, the swampy Jezreel Valley, the coastal and Sharon plains, and the Hefer Valley. This program did not lend itself to a discussion about national

borders, especially since *Eretz Yisrael* at that time was only a portion of an infinitely larger territory—the Turkish Empire, and then the British Mandatory regime.

In its first decades, then, Zionism made its priority not the affirmation of political sovereignty on a defined territory, but the striking-down of human roots into the soil. It represented the noble dream of a "return to the land"—in both senses of the term—but a return that was silent on the subject of borders.

It was in 1937 that the matter of borders forced itself onto the agenda of the Zionist movement, where it has remained ever since. April 1936 saw bloody confrontations between Jews and Arabs in Mandatory Palestine, a general strike, and a popular insurrection by Palestine's Arab inhabitants.[5] In the wake of "the troubles," the British government created a Royal Commission of Inquiry (known as the Peel Commission) that eventually recommended the abandonment of the British Mandate and the partition of Palestine into two states. It even went so far as to draw these states' respective contours—much to the dissatisfaction of all interested parties (including not a few British parliamentarians).[6]

The Peel Commission report dealt a harsh blow to the Zionist movement. Although this was the first time that the idea of partition, and the establishment of a sovereign Jewish state, had been officially and explicitly formulated, the report's proposals were deemed callous and illogical: The Jewish state's dimensions were Lilliputian at best, and practically half the inhabitants living in the appointed territory were Arab. In addition, there was the nagging concern that such a state would not be able to accommodate all of Europe's Jews, whose mounting peril in the grip of Nazism was just then coming to light. And finally, the prospect of partition had shattered the long-held hopes of the Zionist Left—notably the members of Brit Shalom—for the creation of a binational state.[7]

Despite the intense passions on both sides, and the fierce arguments for and against, there was henceforth no choice but to address the long-neglected issue of borders directly. The question could no longer be deferred now that the chasm between Zionist aspirations and the derisory parcel of land assigned by the Commission had been revealed.

The events of 1936-1937 constitute, therefore, a major turning point in the history of political Zionism: They inaugurated the debate on the borders of Israel in which we are still engaged today. It is beyond my purview to discuss the vicissitudes of that debate up to and after the creation of the State of Israel. I will, however, note that during the two decades that separated the War of Independence and the Six Day War, this debate observed a kind of truce, suspended but not resolved, as the young state lived inside its uncomfortably vulnerable borders—borders that were at least tangible, if not acceptable.

Indeed, with the Six Day War, the idea of borders tilted dramatically. The spectacular expansion of territory under Israeli control after 1967, particularly its eastward extension to the banks of the Jordan, made real what had previously been but a utopian dream: A geographical equivalence between the State of Israel and the Land of Israel.

Paradoxically, this equivalence, greeted in certain quarters as a messianic omen, had the effect of blurring rather than clarifying the idea of borders. From the outset, it was clear that these new borders could only be temporary: Israel could not give them legal imprimatur without stirring universal opprobrium, which, for the core of Israel's political class, was simply not worth the risk. Even as resolute a partisan of Greater Israel as Menachem Begin was always wary of formally annexing Judea and Samaria, although he considered them an integral part of the Land of Israel. Indeed, a certain ambivalence characterized all governments that identified with the idea of Greater Israel: They claimed sovereignty for the Jewish state over the West Bank, yet never went so far as a legal enactment. They established dozens

upon dozens of settlements as if to erase the former Green Line, yet never attempted to draw up a new boundary. Thus Israel became, literally, a state without borders.

What has most contributed to the blurring of borders since 1967, however, is the absence of a national consensus as to the legitimacy and extent of Israel's territorial sovereignty. For the unyielding believers in the idea of *Eretz Yisrael*, sovereignty—the product of a divine covenant—transcends every human convention. Hence no government has the authority to abandon a gift bequeathed by God to the Jewish people. For the majority of Israelis, however, sovereignty is first and foremost a political principle, by definition irreducible to transcendent authority. It belongs to the realm of man. It involves contractual engagements sanctioned by law and determined in the framework of international negotiations. But in the absence of such negotiations, the very idea of a border, with its concomitant human dimension, became increasingly evanescent in the collective consciousness of Israelis. One needs to make a real effort to conceive of a national entity without a shared vision as to the physical contours of its communal existence. This predicament has continually undermined Israeli society, threatening the social fabric of the country to this day.

In the years that followed the victory of 1967, one could identify three distinct arguments on the question of borders. The first was the biblical, or messianic, argument to which I referred above. The second was the geopolitical argument—the most famous expression of which was the Allon Plan[8]—which sought to afford Israel strategic depth by postulating borders protected by buffer zones and a reservoir of settlements, while at the same time keeping out of areas heavily populated by Palestinians.[9] The third argument was the demographic one, which the Allon Plan had attempted to address as well in its own way. According to this argument, every solution other than a general retreat from the West Bank arrived ineluctably at a binational state in the best-case scenario, and the subordination of one

people by another in the worst one. The Labor party, which, one sometimes forgets, took an active part in the settlement of these territories, tended to give priority to strategic considerations. As for the leaders of the Right, they tended to compound the security argument with the biblical argument, and sometimes—depending on whom they were addressing—alternated between the two.

The first two arguments have not stood the test of time. The geopolitical contention, plausible in its day, is now nullified by the prodigious advances in military technology; no amount of strategic depth can shield Israel from modern missiles. The biblical argument is not in much better shape today, either, not only because Israeli society has become less hospitable to invocations of Providence as a political imperative, but also because of a growing alienation on the part of the majority of Israelis towards the partisans of Greater Israel, particularly since the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin. This murder, which was preached before it was committed, and was then justified and even celebrated by the lunatic fringes of the extreme Right, delivered a fatal blow to the idea of Greater Israel. Thus while there have always been those who invoked the Tora as the fundamental justification for annexation, or even for maintaining a hold on the territories, this position has little traction today in the public debate in Israel.

If the strategic argument has been losing its purpose and the biblical argument its aura, demographic considerations have been steadily gaining ground. It has been an uphill struggle, however. Until recently, successive Israeli governments and the general public have indeed remained deaf to warnings, infrequent as they were, which predicted an ineluctable slide towards a binational situation if Israel continued to occupy the territory conquered in 1967 and to establish new settlements therein. For a long time, these warnings were dismissed by both the Right and the Left: The former viewed them as undermining the realization of *Eretz Yisrael*, and the Left considered it simply a matter of time before a physical separation

between the two peoples would be enacted in any case. Motivated by utterly divergent objectives, yet nonetheless convergent in their conclusions, both partisans and opponents of Greater Israel were united in brushing off a few troublesome demographers whose warnings remained largely inaudible. One such demographer even found himself chided by then-Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir: "Ah, so you are the professor who alarms the public with your statistics."[10]

It was these statistics, however, highlighted by the tragic Israeli-Palestinian violence of recent years, that ended up forcing a large part of the Israeli Right to abandon its dream of a Greater Israel, and a good portion of the Left mournfully to revise its naive vision of peace. Thus have both groups been compelled to revise dramatically the way they now think about sovereignty, territory, and peace.

It would therefore appear that, regarding the perception of borders, we are now living in another era, the first portents of which could be seen long before the death of Yitzhak Rabin, and even before the Oslo accords. If I had to assign a precise date to this new perception, I would go back to 1987 and the outbreak of the first Intifada. Between 1967 and 1987, the Green Line had all but vanished; Israelis had practically forgotten about it. They circulated freely in Judea and Samaria without much concern for their safety. The inhabitants of the settlements rubbed shoulders peaceably with a Palestinian population that may not have accepted them, but didn't set out to harm them, either. The "revolt of the stones" put an end to this trouble-free coexistence, however. And if the Intifada did not bring the Palestinians any immediate political benefits, it did produce one considerable effect: The Green Line, which seemed to have disappeared, now fatefully returned to Israeli consciousness.

One could argue that, Green Line or no, the process of building settlements in the West Bank continued and even accelerated. But by 1987, and particularly by the eruption of the second Intifada in September 2000, aside from the agglomerations that surround Jerusalem, settlements both new and old came to resemble less and less the peaceful localities they had once

been. Today they increasingly look like besieged fortresses, protected by IDF soldiers and connected to Israeli territory by special roads, themselves patrolled by the army. It could be said that in the eyes of the majority of Israelis, all ideological considerations notwithstanding, the inhabitants of these settlements appear to live beyond the borders of their country. It could even be said that they are considered to be living in a foreign country, one to which most Israelis have not ventured for years. It is surely not by chance that among the thousands of families who have just been evacuated from the Gaza Strip and northern Samaria, almost none have considered relocating themselves to the West Bank, or even to the Golan Heights.

The construction of the security fence has placed in striking relief the resurrection of the old Green Line. In fact, it has done much more. Aside from the contentious question of the precise route it should take, it has revived the long-dormant notion of a national border—and not in an altogether bad way. The wall has restored to Israelis an image quite unlike the sentiment it communicates to many Europeans. I am not only referring to the benefits it has brought in matters of security, for in this the results are incontrovertible. I am talking rather about the different reactions, political and cultural, that the wall has produced both within Israel and abroad. It is this difference that I wish to explore by way of conclusion.

For a European today, a wall that separates one people from another instantly evokes the darker moments in the history of a continent long divided by fierce national conflicts, and in particular by the East-West standoff emblemized by the Iron Curtain. It is no coincidence that the mass of barbed wire and stones that divided Berlin was called "the wall of shame." The dissolution of the Soviet empire delivered Europe from the curse of its past divisions, but the pacification of the continent came at a price: Nationalistic passion was extinguished, and along with it came the diminishing stature of the nation state. We now live in a time when borders have all but disappeared, and the very idea of a border seems obsolete, even suspect. The

recent rejection by a majority of Frenchmen of the European constitution hasn't changed this; the nation has been brought into disrepute, and the blessings of multiple identities, plural solidarities, and global humanism are everywhere acclaimed.

In the world in which we now live, then, Israel appears as an anomaly, and the security fence a veritable scandal that offends not only European memories of the recent past, but also individual sensibilities and globalized compassion cherished especially among the European Left. Israel is probably the only Western country that is evolving counter to the new faith in a unified, borderless humanity. Indeed, this vibrant nation has, since its birth, lived in search of borders, in the forlorn pursuit of defined sovereignty, tangible territory, and a physical horizon that circumscribes a national consciousness at peace with itself.

The ambiguous attitude of the Palestinians on the question of borders only serves to heighten this sense of yearning. The reticence or inability of the Palestinian leadership to pronounce upon, or even discuss in public, the borders of its future state has persuaded a large cross-section of Israelis—on the Right as well as on the Left—that, in avoiding the question, the Palestinians may reveal a deep-seated wish that there be no borders at all. To put it bluntly, they still hope that Israel will somehow go away; and any discussion about borders will only compromise this long-standing design. One could even say that Israelis' aspiration for a border is nourished, even exacerbated, by the Palestinian silence on the subject.

Responding recently to an American scholar who was praising what he called "clouded identities,"[11] the Israeli writer A.B. Yehoshua reacted somewhat testily: "If asked to define the concept of Zionism in one word, I would choose 'borders;' allowed one more word, I would add 'sovereignty.'"[12] By way of an ingenuous and telling illustration, he went on, "Just as every house has a door which opens and closes… so the territorial boundaries of the state determine its sovereignty and responsibility."[13] It was Israel's misfortune, Yehoshua added, to have been forced in 1967 through an act of

self-defense to obliterate the borders that laid out the compass of its sovereignty, and thus its identity.

I take these words to express something very profound, something that frequently eludes the outside observer, and a good number of Israelis, for that matter: The establishment of discernible borders after the War of Independence, narrow and porous as they were, contributed to the normalization of Jewish existence and restored to it that which had been a mere prayer throughout the exile—sovereignty, territory, borders.

In Israel today, the aspiration for peace is an integral part of the quest for tangible borders, even if it means constructing, at the risk of provoking international discontent, a wall and a barrier. This wall and barrier not only delineate two territories, but represent the political, and above all cultural, abyss between two peoples who ultimately remain more different than their geographical proximity might suggest. Whoever recognizes the validity of Montesquieu's teaching about the "general spirit" that governs nations—"climate, religion, laws, the maxims of the government, examples of past things, mores, and manners"[14]—must confront a stark truth. Israelis and Palestinians, who live in the same climate, work side by side, engage in trade, discuss their differences, and occasionally even agree on certain matters, nevertheless belong to two nations that are separated by almost everything else: Religion, laws, principles of government, memories, mores, habits of thought, and, above all, the idea of the Other. Reason instructs them to draw together, but the "general spirit" of each people—specifically the way each relates to the idea of democracy, both in terms of government and individual disposition—continues to set them far apart.

One may deplore this situation, and hope that with the passage of time these profound differences will diminish, or at least downsize sufficiently to make a political understanding possible. One may also hold firm to the idea that the absence of democracy in practically all Muslim societies is not

an inherent misfortune of their nature; witness the recent elections in the Palestinian territories, and the commitment of certain Palestinian leaders to a negotiated settlement. But democracy is evaluated neither by a strict application of electoral procedures nor by good intentions. Rather, it is evaluated above all by its capacity to become rooted in people's minds, by the regular functioning of political institutions, and by natural consent to universal suffrage. In other words, it cannot take root in a place where recourse to violence escapes the legal prerogative of the established authority. To deny that today we are a long way off from these elementary requisites would be to hide from the truth.

Such an acknowledgment, of which the security wall is both a consequence and a symbol, should not exclude the dialogue, academic cooperation, or interpersonal relationships for which many men of goodwill sincerely hope. But the best will in the world, to return to Montesquieu, will have little or no bearing on the spirit of a nation. For the real test of Israeli-Palestinian peace pertains to much deeper layers, quite remote from the realm of goodwill: Namely, the relationship that the two peoples have with their political institutions, their manner of thinking, their mores, their passions, their loyalties.

The idea of borders that I have here attempted to illuminate embodies for Israelis both a desire for peace and a wish for separation. It is precisely this association, between peace and borders, that has become for many Europeans and others today a strange, almost unintelligible notion.

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Notes

1. This term, taken from the *Journal of Bainville*, is cited by Patrice Gueniffey in his preface to Jacques Bainville's *Napoleon* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), p. xliii, n. 2. [French] For this territorial construction, see Daniel Nordman, *Frontiers of France*: *From Space to Territory in the 16th-19th Centuries* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998). [French]

2. Theodor Herzl, *The Jewish State*, trans. Sylvie d'Avigdor (London: Nutt, 1896).

3. On the first pioneers, called "Lovers of Zion," see David Vital, *The Origins of Zionism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975).

4. I borrow the expression from Alain Dieckhoff, author of a useful summary that describes the successive stages in the territorial strategy of Zionism, "The Territorial Strategies of Zionism," *Twentieth Century* (January-March, 1989), p. 32. [French]

5. For the Arab revolt of the 1930s, see in particular Yehoshua Porath, *The Palestinian Arab National Movement: 1929-1939, From Riots to Rebellion* (London: Frank Cass, 1977).

6. For comments on the Peel plan and its numerous contradictions, see Walter Laqueur, *A History of Zionism* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972), ch. 10.

7. The debates stirred up in the Zionist movement by the Peel Commission are analyzed in the detailed study by Shmuel Dotan, *Partition of Eretz Yisrael in the Mandatory Period* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 1983). [Hebrew]

8. From Yigal Allon (1918-1980), former commander of the Palmah, holder of several ministerial posts, and one of the eminent figures in the Labor party. The Allon Plan was presented for the first time in July 1967.

9. The Allon Plan and its implications are analyzed in the detailed account of Yerouham Cohen, *The Allon Plan* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1973). [Hebrew]

10. Shamir to Arnon Soffer, professor of geography at the University of Haifa, as quoted in *Yediot Aharonot*, October 19, 2001. [Hebrew]

11. Marshall Berman, "Israel: No Souvenirs," *Dissent* (Summer 2004).

12. A.B. Yehoshua, "A Brief Reply to Marshall Berman," *Dissent* (Winter 2005), p. 101.

13. A.B. Yehoshua, "A Brief Reply," pp. 101-102.

14. Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. and ed. Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller, and Harold Samuel Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1989), bk. 19, ch. 4.