

Addressing the Balance From Within

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The historic mission Prime Minister Ehud Barak has taken upon himself - obtaining lasting peace treaties with the Palestinians, Syria and Lebanon - entails reaching agreement over Israel's permanent borders. Israel does not now have, nor has it ever had, internationally recognized borders. The simple question of "where is Israel" has since 1967 been a common topic of discussion. It took place in the public consciousness and at times has even been an identity-defining issue in specific sectors, a litmus test of tribal affiliation. Menachem Begin's revolution at Camp David, and the direction taken by Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres and Benjamin Netanyahu over the Oslo accords, helped transform the question of borders and territories from a fateful religious-historical one into a pragmatic tool for political negotiations. The change encouraged many in Israel to believe that once a territorial formula was attained, all other disputes would be resolved and the land would enjoy quiet and prosperity. There is, of course, a connection between attaining acceptable borders and peace, and quiet and prosperity. But the formula which views the question of borders as the sole key to the future is simplistic and dangerous. It tends to overlook the important question of whether a Palestinian state to be established within the borders designated for it by the Oslo process, will be a viable one. And it does not address a question of utmost importance: How will citizenship in Israel finally be defined.

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The formal definition of Israeli citizenship derives from the citizenship law, a law which every normal state has. One prominent weakness of the Israeli version of this law is that it, like many of our other laws, does not specify in which territories it applies. A second weakness is that important sections of the law create the impression of a patchwork drawn up and amended to meet specific needs at various times. At the heart of the law lies a clear distinction between Jews, who are invited to come to Israel as citizens, and all others. This type of selection was appropriate in the 1950s and helped resolve the difficulties of many Jewish families. But in no way does it correspond with the definition of a liberal democratic state.

Another part of the law distorts the natural right of citizenship granted a person by virtue of his being an ancient resident of a given territory. The Israeli citizenship law recognizes this principle, but restricts it to carefully selected specific dates of residency. The dates that enable residents to qualify for citizenship do not include the period when most Palestinian refugees were forced to reside outside their ancestral lands. In contrast to its preference for Jews, wherever they may be, who have the right of return, the law discriminates against Palestinian residents of the land. However, the issue of Israeli citizenship does not end merely with the citizenship law. There are also procedures, norms and working methods of government agencies and public institutions which de facto define a problematic hierarchy of citizenship.

Within the Green Line, in a state which built itself ideally as a home for a diverse population of Jewish citizens, there are today almost one and a half million non-Jewish citizens and residents - nearly a quarter of the population. There are in Israel more than 800,000 Arabs, over 300,000 Provoslavic Christians originally from the Soviet Union (most of them the spouses or offspring of Jews) and over 200,000 Eastern Europeans, Africans, Asians and South Americans who came here to work and stayed on living here. Work procedures and standard criteria in the Interior, Religious Affairs, Health, Education, Defense and Agriculture Ministries, as well as in the

National Insurance Institute, Israel Lands Administration, Jewish Agency, health funds, government corporations, cooperative organizations and many other institutions deprive these non-Jewish residents of natural rights which in other countries are an integral part of the basic citizenship package.

Embarrassingly, various segments within this huge group are prevented from obtaining vital resources such as religious and burial services, health care, population registry, education, land and water use for agriculture and communal settlement, security classification, National Insurance Institute assistance, employment in government companies and more.

Examples of the frontal collision between these restrictions and the state's claim that it is a Western, liberal, democratic state have been occurring frequently in recent months. A partial list includes the young Arabic man who was not accepted into El Al's flight attendant training program, the immigrants from the CIS who did not receive identity cards from the Interior Ministry, the Umm el-Fahm family whose right to live in Katzir was rejected by the community, the foreign workers who did not receive medical assistance and basic human rights and were humiliatingly expelled, and the Arab MKs who were pushed out of coalition discussions.

If Barak thinks it is possible to solve the problems and of this and future generations by attaining an international agreement on Israel's external borders without seriously addressing the challenge of citizenship, he is in for some unpleasant surprises. The process of determining the geographical outline of the country must be accompanied by a deep, genuine and painful effort to build a healthy, civil and egalitarian domestic society