



Estimates of the number of Palestinian refugees wishing to return differ, but the main question is what would be needed to reconcile Israel's established national rights with a restoration of the Palestinian rights that were alienated after 1947?

There is little dispute amongst geographers that the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, even when constituted as an independent Palestinian state, are in no condition to accommodate an additional two million refugees, not least because its high current and projected population growth rates. Accordingly, the feasibility of refugee-return is intimately linked to the equally urgent issue of the Palestinian state's overall viability.

Quite substantial areas in Israel are scarcely inhabited by Jewish citizens, due to their remoteness and a shortage of jobs and services. These include areas that Israel conquered in the final stages of the 1948-49 War, where most indigenous Palestinians managed to stay put, and where today they still make up the overwhelming majority of the local population. While marginal on these accounts for Israel, de Jong argues that such areas are crucial to make the return of Palestinian refugees feasible, while at the same time decisively improving the prospects for Palestine's development, at little to no cost for Israel, which would even benefit from a greatly expanded consumer market.

The map shows two areas (light orange) with a negligible Jewish population, that if opened up to a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza would improve economic viability by creating conditions and areas capable of accommodating up to two million returning refugees. It is crucial to emphasize that the issue of living conditions is no less, and is in fact more, important than the issue of space in this regard.

The area in the north comprises the core of the Galilee and the Wadi Ara region, which in the south links the West Bank with Gaza. In each area one large and several smaller cities could be constructed. De Jong argues that spreading the demographic burden of such refugee-absorbing cities over areas which – on account of their land and market bridging functionality – are economically focal, would create vital space, linkages and jobs for the incoming population and benefit the entire area by increasing the demand for goods and services.

The new configuration – only affecting 8% of today's Israel proper - could turn the currently fragmented Palestinian territories into one cohesive contiguous space, along a major trunk road, providing fast and unhindered passage to all districts, neighboring countries, and seaports in both Gaza and Akka. Such a configuration would not need to prejudice the established sovereign rights of Israeli citizens – Arabs or Jews – as all existing communities could remain with their current jurisdictional arrangements, while only the unused open land in the re-absorption areas (light orange) would need to be brought under a regional Palestinian developmental authority. De Jong suggests that this leaves less than 2% of either population residing in non-contiguous sovereign areas in what is today Israel proper, and requires a minimum of controlled road crossings. The map indicates sovereign road-passages for guaranteeing unrestricted Israeli territorial contiguity, while ensuring the same for the Palestinian territory and its thoroughfare.

Again drawing his guidance from the 1947 Partition Plan, de Jong's map further outlines an eventual division of the entire land area along similarly equitable lines, seeing a resulting 50-50 partition as a potentially comprehensive territorial settlement when incorporating the western section of the Negev, as shown on the map, with the contiguous block outlined above.

It is useful to briefly review the feasibility of refugee-return figures in the so-called Geneva Accord (signed in Dec. 2003) as a final status plan supported by a reasonable number of Israelis and Palestinians and which is most accommodating to Palestinian aspirations for statehood.

The Geneva Plan recognizes the right of return to the areas targeted to fall under Palestinian sovereignty (the dotted lines on the map). The socioeconomic feasibility of accommodating hundreds of thousands, perhaps up to a million, returning refugees within the restriction of those lines is not addressed in the plan. Again, this is less an issue of space than of geographic conditions.

For instance, even countries like Denmark or Switzerland which are small, but economically powerful could never absorb such numbers without risking a severe and destabilizing recession, in particular when most immigrants are ill-qualified to become productive members of the labor force. This would be particularly true in the case of Palestine with its economic foundations shattered after decades of Israeli colonial rule.

The Geneva Plan may accommodate the same amount of land as that contained within the pre-June 1967 Palestinian Territories, but it reduces, prejudices or excludes certain crucial areas of the West Bank. The Plan proposes to annex core West Bank areas which are crucial for the needed rehabilitation of the Palestinian economy, in particular in and around Arab East Jerusalem (blue arrows).

In return, it proposes to exchange these for areas which are not only peripheral and marginal to Israel, but most of all and decisively also for Palestine (brown arrows).

