



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 of 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 while creating an area capable of accommodating up to two million returning refugees. The area in the north comprises the core of the Galilee and the Wadi Ara region, that 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 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 would remain with their current municipal 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 under 2% of either population residing in non-contiguous sovereign areas in what is today Israel proper, and demands a minimum of controlled road crossings. The map indicates sovereign road-passages for guaranteeing unlimited 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.

