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LATRUN – A NO MAN’S LAND IN ISRAEL

Abstract:

The article deals with the geopolitical interpretations of the cases of no man’s lands. On the example of Latrun area, which is located on Israel-Palestine demilitarized zone it is analyzed how conflict history affected political situation of this land, how it is governed and how both sides want take it. Situation in Latrun remains unclear. Israel considers it as part of Israel, but the Palestinians see this area as part of the former West Bank.

Key words: Israel, Palestine, no man’s land, crisis areas, geopolitics.

Introduction

A no man's land is a unique area usually situated between two countries, which creates a common land boundary between countries with no real agreement on the exact location of the line. Sometimes a situation like this creates an area which is not a part of any country but remains as a zone with no legal sovereignty.

The term *no man's land* first appeared during World War I in Europe describing the area between two front lines, especially in the Western Front, which was not held by any side of the conflict. Later it became a phenomenon in the boundary making process in Asia, especially after World War II. The *no man's area* existed between North and South Vietnam as a division between the two rivals. The same situation still exists between North and South Korea - an area about 4 km wide is located between the two countries, stretched along the whole Korean peninsula separating armies of the two rival political entities. *No man's land* is also known by its American name: DMZ (Demilitarize Zone), which is a incorrect name, as demilitarize zones are zones under one country's sovereignty but without any military existence in that area.

More *no man's lands* can be found in Cyprus along the so-called "Atilla Line", between the area held by Cyprus and the area held by the Turks, which is also called The Turkish Republic of Cyprus. In this paper we will deal with a special - a *no man's land* between Israel and Jordan. It was created in 1949 and even that it disappeared in 1967 it still exists and might have an influence on the future relations between Israel and the future Palestinian state

Latrun Area

Latrun is a name given to a village located near the road between the port city of Jaffa and Jerusalem. According to Christian

tradition, the good thief crucified with Jesus, came from that area. In late 19th century, a French Christian order built a monastery there and during World War II the British authorities built a huge fortress nearby in order to protect the junction between the west – east and the north-south main routes of Palestine.

British Palestine, an area allocated to Britain after World War I, was divided between a Jewish State and an Arab state in November 1947 (fig. 1). The Arabs refused to accept the partition and started a war, first between the Arabs and the Jews in Palestine, and later, after the establishment of the State of Israel 14th May 1948, between the Arab states of Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Transjordan versus the newly born State of Israel. This war lasted to the early months of 1949 and it was ended by a series of armistice agreements between Israel and each of the countries involved in that war (except Iraq, which never signed an armistice agreement with Israel). The armistice agreements introduced armistice lines which separated the fighting forces and consequently established non-recognized but real border line between Israel and the Arab countries later known as "The Green line" (accordingly to the color of the pencil used in the delimitation process). Those lines were basically marking the areas each army occupied up to a moment in which the cease-fire agreement was achieved. During the war, the Arab Legion of Jordan occupied the monastery and the fortress of Latrun and the Israeli army although

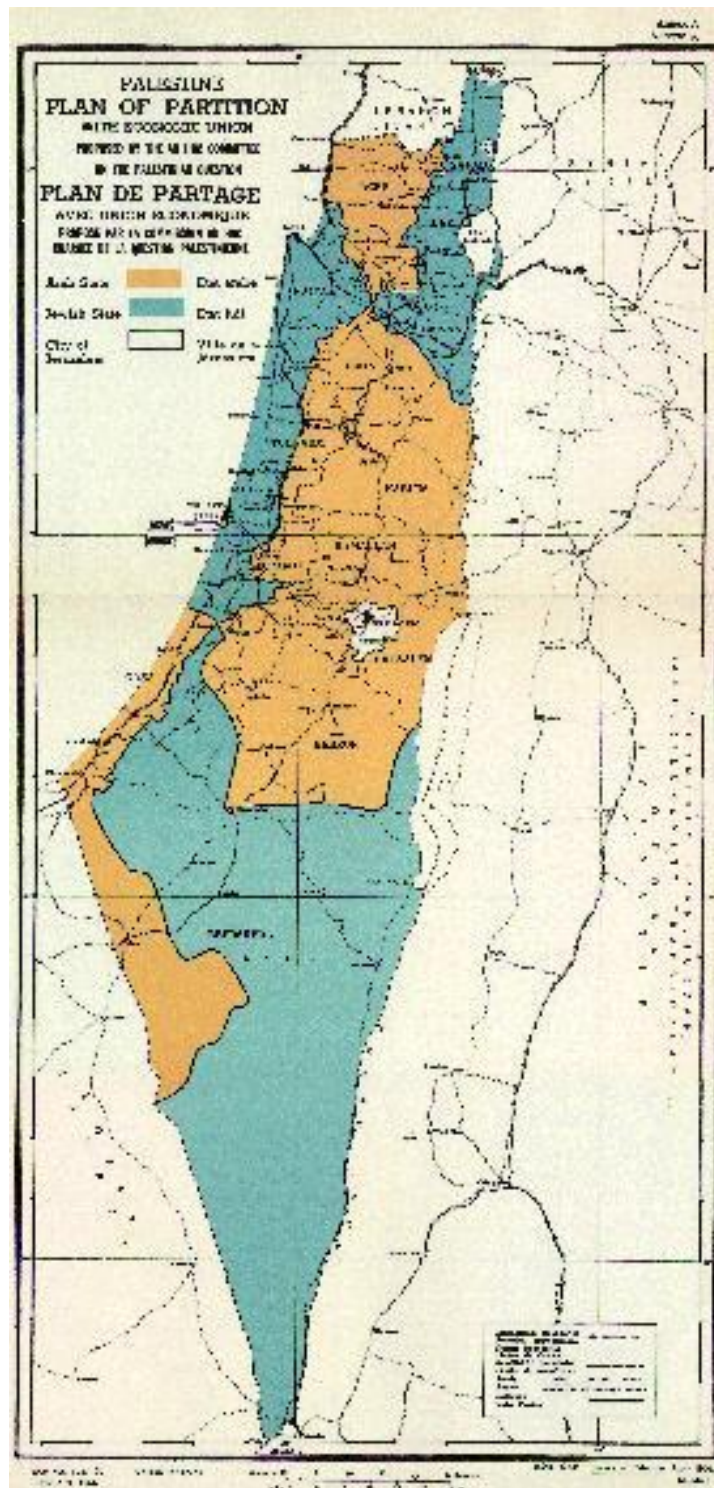


Fig. 1: The UN Partition plan of November 29th 1947.

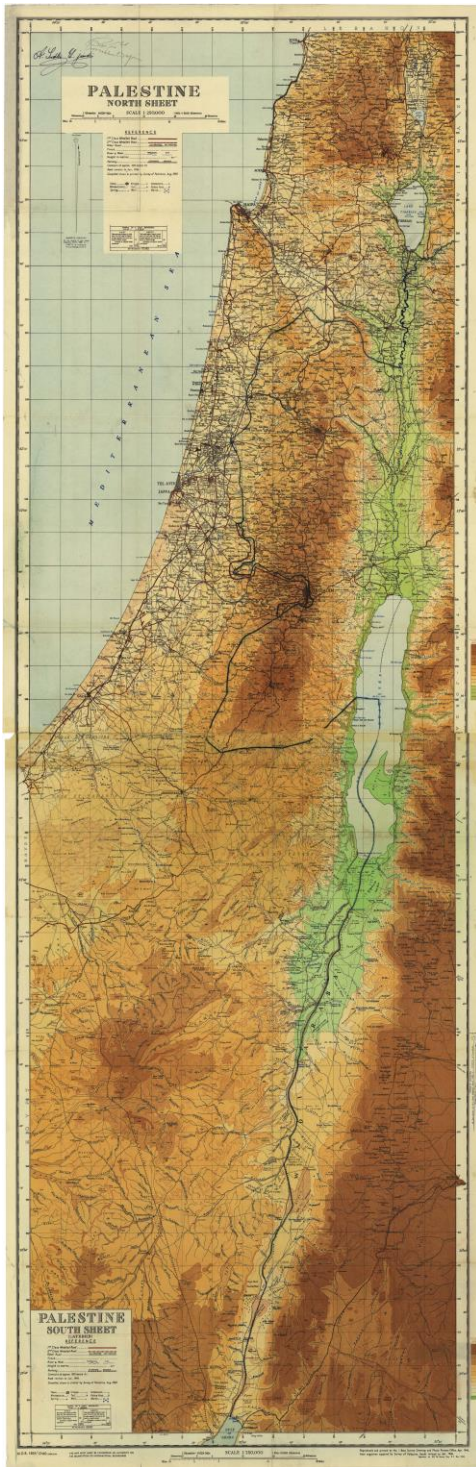


Fig. 2: Case-fire line.

and tried to occupy this important spot, could not occupy it. So the agreed armistice line left those buildings in the Jordanian territory.

As that area is partly a hilly area, the armistice lines there was marked as two lines, showing the positions of the two armies at the time of the cease-fire (fig. 2). Those lines came to be the armistice lines. The two parties, Israel and Jordan, accepted the need to divide the area by establishing one line but during the process of changing the two lines into one the process was stopped. This is how the "area between the lines" came to life and it existed as a *no man's land* for about 19 years, till 1967 (fig. 3).

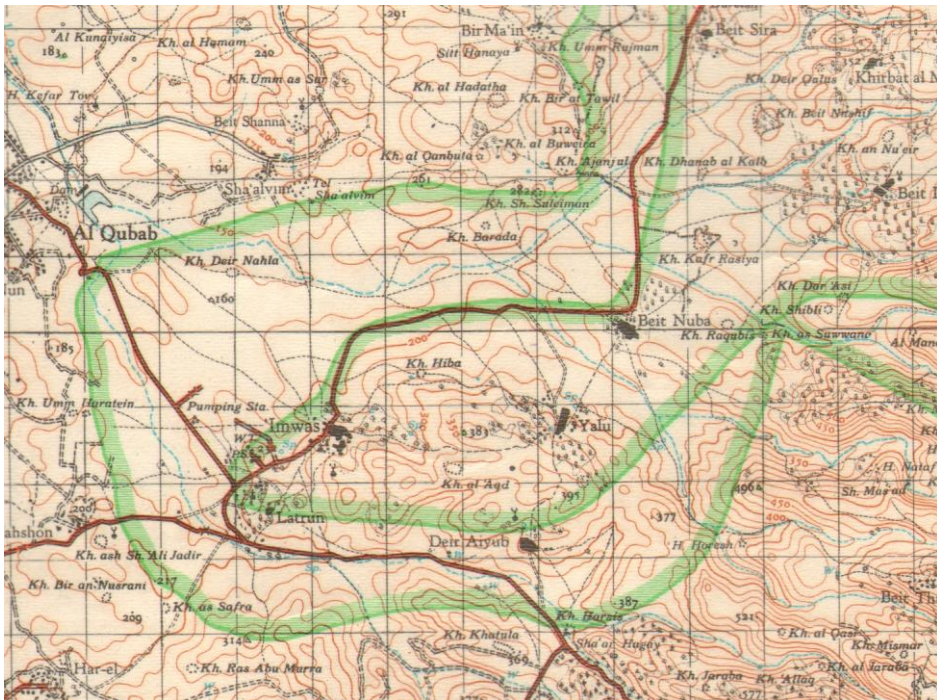


Fig. 3: The Latrun *no man's* area.

The *no man's area* of Latrun, which is about 44 sq. km, was partly a fertile plain area and partly a hilly area. The plain area is suitable for cultivation and was cultivated by the Arabs of the near by villages for centuries before the war. The two lines left that area in an un-known sovereign hand. Part of this area belongs to the monastery; other parts belong to the Arabs. The non recognized area then became an area of dispute concerning the right to cultivate the fertile land. Both sides agreed to leave the monastery area in the hand of the monastery people, as they were under the patronage of France. When it comes to the remaining area, for 19 years each side tried to occupy the land for cultivation by agriculture activities.

Israeli cultivators from newly established Kibbutzim on the Israeli side of the line, entered the area, cultivated about 600 hectares of it, while Arab farmers cultivated about 50 hectares adjust to the Jordanian line. During the year no one established control or built any permanent buildings in that area, not even planted any fruit trees. It was only used for a one year crops, mainly wheat, barely and vegetables. Here and there some small clashes between the two sides occurred as in October 1965. That year it even led to a two days of "tractors War" in which some cultivators and soldiers were wounded. A non-official agreement established the situation as Israel tried to achieve a formal agreement for dividing the area but Jordan refused to sign any formal agreements with Israel.

1967 War and after.

During the War of 1967 Israel occupied the whole West Bank including the "no man's area" of Latrun. Apart from incorporating the area of Jerusalem into the former Jordanian area Israel never annexed the West Bank (Judea and Samaria) and that area is still concerned as "an occupied area" governed by a military commander. The situation of the *no man's area* remains unclear. Israel considers it as part of Israel, but the Palestinians see this area as part of the former West Bank and as such, a part of their territory (especially after a 1988 declaration of Jordan that abolished all its claims for the West Bank, giving it to the Palestinians). Israel established some new settlements in that area (one of them is the unique Jewish-Arab village of Neve-Shalom), gave the cultivated areas to near-by villages, and built a part of the new highway between Tel Aviv to Jerusalem on it. The former Arab villages existing near the lines were evacuated days after the 1967 war and therefore abolished. The Palestinians never abolished their claim to that area (fig. 4).

During the peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian authorities, it was suggested that the area should be considered as an area which half of it belongs to Israel and the other half, although belong to the Palestinians, will remain in Israel, which will give the Palestinians the same amount of land as compensation for it. As the peace talks were halted, the future of this area is still waiting for final settlement.

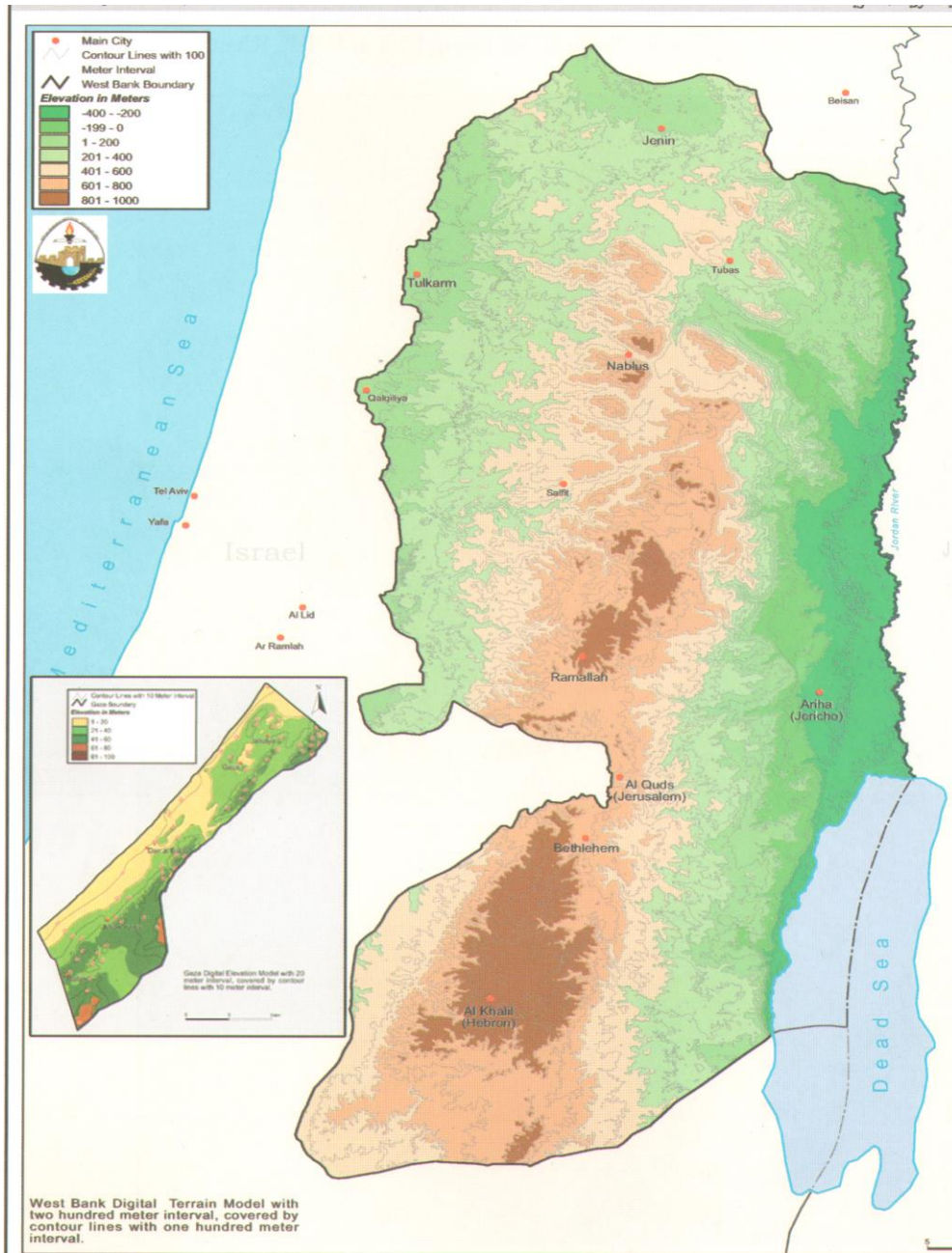


Fig. 4: Palestinian map showing the entire *no man's land* in West Bank Area.

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