

Why have Israeli-Palestinian peace talks ignored the importance of good mapmaking?

LESSONS FROM THE SWISS CHEESE MAP

BY SHARI MOTRO

In September 1995, after months of tense negotiations over what would be Israel's first significant withdrawal from the West Bank, the Israeli delegation to the Oslo II peace talks unveiled before their Palestinian counterparts the now infamous "Swiss cheese" map. The map was introduced just 24 hours before the agreement was to be signed. When Yasir Arafat saw it, he stormed out of the negotiating room. Uri Savir, Israel's chief negotiator at the talks, recalls the Palestinian leader's reaction:

Arafat glared at [the map] in silence, then sprang out of his chair and declared it to be an insufferable humiliation.

"These are cantons! You want me to accept *cantons*! You want to *destroy* me!"

OFFICIAL OSLO II MAP The infamous "Swiss cheese" map.

Up until that point, the Israeli team had insisted on focusing discussions with the Palestinians on the text of the agreement, which had gone through countless drafts—maps were off limits. As one of the soldiers accompanying the Israeli delegation, I came to appreciate the meticulous care with which the verbal components of the agreement were negotiated. My duties included translating parts of the agreement from English (the official language of the agreement) into Hebrew so that, as soon as it was signed, it could be sent to the Knesset (Israel's Parliament) for ratification.

During the final weeks of the marathon negotiations, I would receive the latest marked-up draft, update my translation, and review my work with Gilad Sher, one of the delegation's most respected attorneys. Every word mattered. Israeli troops were slated to "redeploy," not "withdraw," from parts of the "West Bank," not from the biblical lands of "Judea and Samaria." The agreement made no mention of a future Palestinian state; it stressed, rather, that the ultimate goal of the Oslo process was to reach "a permanent settlement based on Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338." These resolutions demand that Israel withdraw from territories occupied in the 1967 war, including the West Bank.

The Interim Agreement, the fruit of the Oslo II talks, divided the West Bank into three areas: A, B, and C. Area A, which included the West Bank's major population centers but ultimately comprised only 3 percent of its area, would immediately come under full Palestinian control. Area B, which included more sparsely populated Palestinian communities and comprised 24 percent of the West Bank, would be subject to joint Palestinian and Israeli control. Area C, the rest of the West Bank, would remain under full Israeli control during the initial withdrawal stage, though further Israeli withdrawals from Area C were planned for later stages. Many of the provisions in the agreement underplayed the fact that 73 percent of the West Bank would remain in Israeli hands. (Area C, for example, was defined as areas "which, except for the issues that will be negotiated in the permanent status negotiations, will be gradually transferred to Palestinian jurisdiction in accordance with this Agreement.") Unfortunately, the main map accompanying the agreement communicated the opposite message.

The dominant visual elements of the map attached to the final Interim Agreement are dozens of disconnected bright yellow blotches. Each is surrounded by a thick red line, further emphasizing its isolation. Upon closer examination, you notice eight brown blotches. The brown blotches mark Area A (full Palestinian control); the yellow archipelago is Area B (joint control). Area C is absent from the key and there is no sign of the pre-1967 border, ominously implying that the fate of the 73 percent of the West Bank designated for further Israeli withdrawals had already been decided—in Israel's favor.

Following Arafat's dramatic walkout, the Israelis increased their initial proposal for the yellow areas, Area B, by 5 percent, and the Palestinian leader signed the agreement. But his opponents derided him for accepting the Swiss cheese map—a vision of Palestinian sovereignty punctured by holes. The official map reinforced the arguments of Oslo's harshest critics, like Edward

Said, who saw the agreement as a humiliating capitulation to Israeli expansionism.

Some people claim that the Oslo process was deliberately designed to segregate Palestinians into isolated enclaves so that Israel could continue to occupy the West Bank without the burden of policing its people. If so, perhaps the map inadvertently revealed what the Israeli wordsmiths worked so diligently to hide. Or perhaps Israel's negotiators purposefully emphasized the discontinuity of Palestinian areas to appease opposition from the Israeli right, knowing full well that Arafat would fly into a rage.

Neither is true. I know, because I had a hand in producing the official Oslo II map, and I had no idea what I was doing. Late one night during the negotiations, my commander took me from the hotel where the talks were taking place to an army base, where he led me to a room with large fluorescent light tables and piles of maps everywhere. He handed me some dried-out markers, unfurled a map I had never seen before, and directed me to trace certain lines and shapes. Just make them clearer, he said. No cartographer was present, no graphic designer weighed in on my choices, and, when I was through, no Gilad Sher reviewed my work. No one knew it mattered.

MAPS RECORD FACTS BUT, WHETHER BY DESIGN or by accident, they also project worldviews and function as arguments. Every map reflects a set of judgments that influence the viewer's impression of the underlying data. The choice of colors and labels, the cropping, and the process of selecting what gets included and what gets left out all combine to form a visual gestalt. A skilled designer can make peace seem inevitable or impossible, reassuring or terrifying, logical or jumbled.

For the visually aware reader, this point will seem obvious. Artists know that visual representations are as malleable as verbal ones. Peace negotiators tend to be passively aware that maps, like charts and photographs, can be crafted to emphasize a certain point of view. Since they can't conduct a meaningful conversation about borders without maps, however, they are forced to use a tool they don't know how to control, hoping that their good intentions will lead them in the right direction.

Many of the basic principles of information design parallel well-known principles of good writing. "Vigorous writing is concise," teach Strunk and White in their classic American prose manual, *The Elements of Style*. "A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts." The information graphics guru Edward Tufte makes similar points about graphic design, railing against what he calls "chartjunk"—the meaningless visual noise that clutters so many computer-generated displays. Effective writing, say Strunk and White, reflects deliberate choices about micro and macro organization; good writers strategically craft each sentence and paragraph so that the most important ideas are placed in the most prominent positions. Tufte similarly shows how muting secondary and structural elements like arrows, grids, underlines, frames, legends, and

shadows reduces visual clutter and helps to clarify the primary information. Tufte advocates “a visual hierarchy.” When everything is emphasized, “*nothing* is emphasized; the design will often be noisy, cluttered, and informationally flat.”

THE MAIN CONCEPTUAL CHALLENGE IN MAPPING THE Interim Agreement was how to depict Area C—the part of the West Bank that remained in Israeli control when the agreement was signed in 1995 but which was explicitly slated for further Israeli withdrawals, though the scope and timing of these withdrawals would be determined at later stages. As we have seen, rather than tackle this challenge, the official map ignored it, neglecting to mark Area C altogether. Since its signing, other mapmakers have struggled with how to depict the agreement, and in particular Area C. The results demonstrate how differently the underlying data of Oslo II can be interpreted—and how difficult it can be to modulate a map’s political symbolism.

Take, for example at one extreme, the map produced by Applied Research Institute—Jerusalem, a Palestinian research institute that publishes, among other resources, *A Geopolitical Atlas of Palestine*, a cartographic history of Israeli “colonization” and Palestinian dispossession.

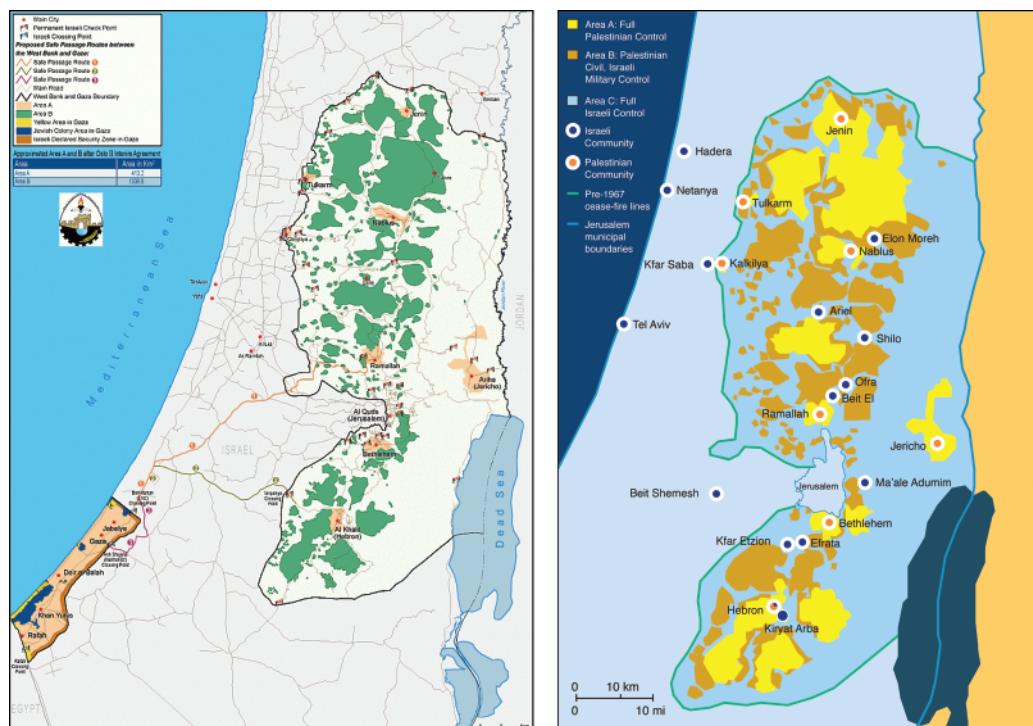
In the ARIJ map, Palestinian-controlled areas seem like little spots floating helplessly in a petri dish. Area C—the white space surrounding the green and salmon islands—is absent from the key and is virtually indistinguishable from

Israel. The pre-1967 border, which forms the silhouette of the area that some critics of Oslo argued should have comprised the new Palestinian state, hovers accusingly in the background. ARIJ’s mapmakers took care to label Palestinian cities with their Arabic names, in some instances adding Hebrew or Western names in parentheses: Al Khalil (Hebron), Ariha (Jericho), Al Quds (Jerusalem). The Jewish settlements in Gaza are labeled “Jewish Colony Area.” The map includes the safe passage routes linking the West Bank and Gaza, which were absent from the official map (they were depicted instead in a separate map attached to the agreement). But the ARIJ map also includes checkpoints, one of the enduring military faces of the occupation.

When I first saw this map, I assumed that its authors intentionally designed it to argue that the agreement imprisoned Palestinians in what Oslo critics have called “apartheid-style Bantustans,” referring to the “cantons” that had enraged Arafat. But when I spoke with Khaldoun Rishmawi, a unit director at ARIJ,

he told me that he did not believe this was the intention. The map, he said, was produced during optimistic times, implying that its designers viewed the agreement as potentially *good* for Palestinians. Logically, then, the map should have seemed like a step along the way to a two-state solution; Area C should have been associated with Areas A and B, not with Israel. Instead, as with the official Oslo II map, the map’s message belied its authors’ intentions.

Another map that associates Area C with Israel—though with very different implications—is a map commissioned by Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and produced by Koret Communications. The company’s CEO, Reuven Koret, is also the publisher of *Israel Insider*, a pro-settler website that has vilified Ariel Sharon for his plan to withdraw from Gaza. The site’s list of hot topics



ARIJ OSLO II MAP Areas A & B are like spots in a petri dish.

KORET OSLO II MAP Evoking the “Jordan option.”

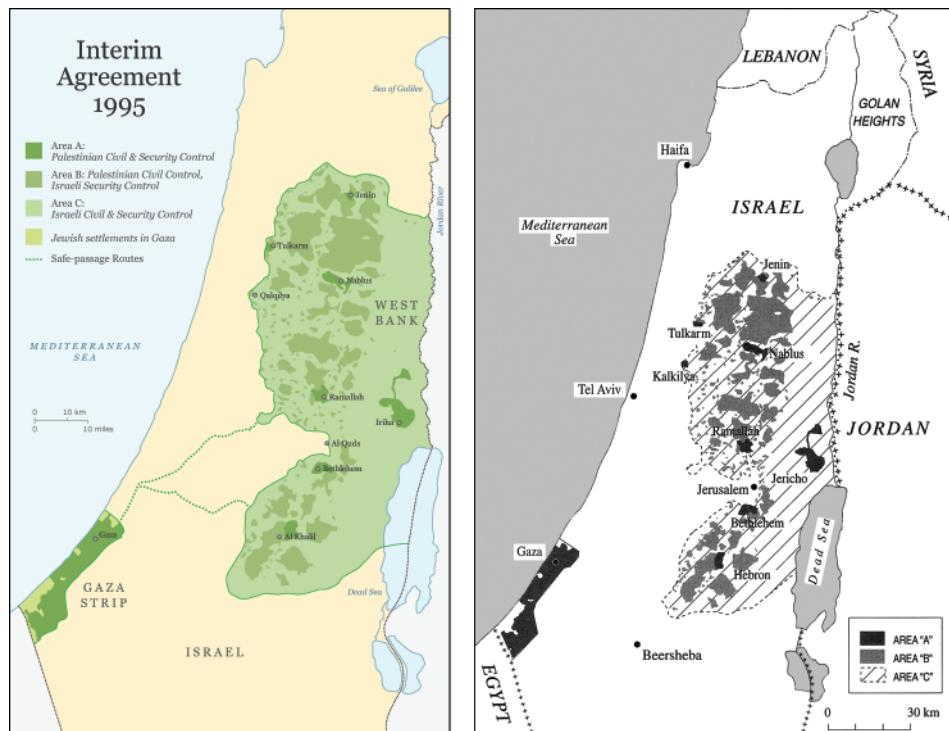
includes “peace process” in quotation marks, reflecting the rightist view that the process was a sham because no peace is possible.

Koret’s map clearly designates Area C, acknowledging that the agreement assigned a new legal category to it. But the territory’s color unmistakably associates it with Israel, a different shade of blue. The yellow and brown of Areas A and B (slightly larger on this map because it illustrates a further Israeli withdrawal after the first Oslo II stage) implicitly associate them with Jordan to the east. Such an association subtly alludes to what is known as “the Jordan option”—the idea that Palestinians do not need a new state because they already have one on the other side of the river. (Most Israeli Jews dismiss this perspective, which is often coupled with a call for transferring Palestinians out of the Jewish state, as a dead end that will only perpetuate the conflict.) The frame, which includes the entire West Bank and just a small portion of Israel, makes it seem as if the areas under Palestinian

control are relatively large. The map's title as it appears on the Ministry's website is derived from the biblical names for the region (Judea and Samaria), which also carries political significance, asserting Jews' "historical right" to these territories.

The official map, ARIJ's, and Koret's all associate Area C with Israel, making Oslo II seem, in one way or another, like a defeat for Palestinians. At the opposite extreme, what would an Oslo-is-good-for-Palestinians version of the Interim Agreement look like? How might a map argue, as some Oslo optimists did, that, though the agreement left Area C in Israeli control for the time being, the parties understood that most of it was designated for the future Palestinian state?

Working with professional graphic designer Jonathan Corum of 13pt and using as our base a map published in American medi-



ator Dennis Ross's memoir, *The Missing Peace*, I recently produced an alternative vision of Oslo II.

Jonathan and I chose colors that clearly associate Area C with Palestinian-controlled Areas A and B. We labeled all West Bank cities with their Arabic names, and we included the so-called "safe passage routes" linking Gaza and the West Bank.

Naturally, while those committed to a two-state solution to the conflict might have been reassured (perhaps falsely) by this picture, it would have terrified the Jewish residents of Area C and their supporters.

Between these two extremes would be a moderate interpretation of Oslo that takes the open-ended fate of Area C at face value. Such a map exists, and shows up in an unexpected, but telling place: *The Process*, the memoir of chief Israeli negotiator Uri Savir.

Here Area C—the hatched area—is unambiguously marked as distinct from Israel (white) as well as from areas coming under

full or partial Palestinian control (shades of gray). How could the same man, thoughtful and aware enough to include this nuanced map in his own book, sign off on the infamous "Swiss cheese" map in his official capacity as negotiator? I asked Ambassador Savir to explain the difference between the two maps. I wanted to know why the map in his book specifically delineates Area C, whereas the original, official map did not. But he did not acknowledge a meaningful difference.

WILL THE AUTHORS OF THE NEXT ISRAELI-Palestinian peace agreement learn from the mistakes of Oslo? The signs are not promising. Of the various proposed peace plans that have surfaced since the Oslo process fell apart in 2001, only one, the Geneva Accord, includes maps of what a final settlement might look like. By the time the accord was signed, I had become a lawyer and had published a graphic guide to United States income tax law. I had also taught a seminar at Yale College on the fledgling field of visual communication and the law. When I saw the Geneva maps, my heart sank.

The Geneva Accord, though controversial, continues to play a pivotal role in both societies' efforts to end the bloodshed between them. It catalyzed Ariel Sharon's push for a unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, and the new Palestinian leadership's principles for a final settlement of the conflict mirror the Geneva plan.

The crux of Geneva's territorial compromise is a plan for two states, based on the pre-1967 border, with one-to-one adjustments (Israel would receive parts of the occupied territories, in exchange for Palestinian sov-

ereignty over equal areas on the Israeli side of the border), plus a corridor connecting the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. A positive vision of this two-state idea should leap from Geneva's maps. Instead, the hodgepodge of versions in Geneva web materials, printed pamphlets, and public-relations packets are filled with chartjunk, arbitrary colors and labels, inconsistencies, and omissions. Flouting basic principles of visual rhetoric, Geneva's maps obscure the simple reassuring elegance of the agreement's proposed solution.

Several Geneva Initiative maps, for example, give visual priority to meaningless yellow boxes containing the map's title and city labels. The maps also emphasize the pre-1967 border and the outlines of the areas slated to be swapped. They are certainly important elements, but the thick colored lines depicting them leave the viewer struggling to figure out what is being swapped for what. Geneva's maps use red for the areas annexed to Palestine, which brings connotations of danger,

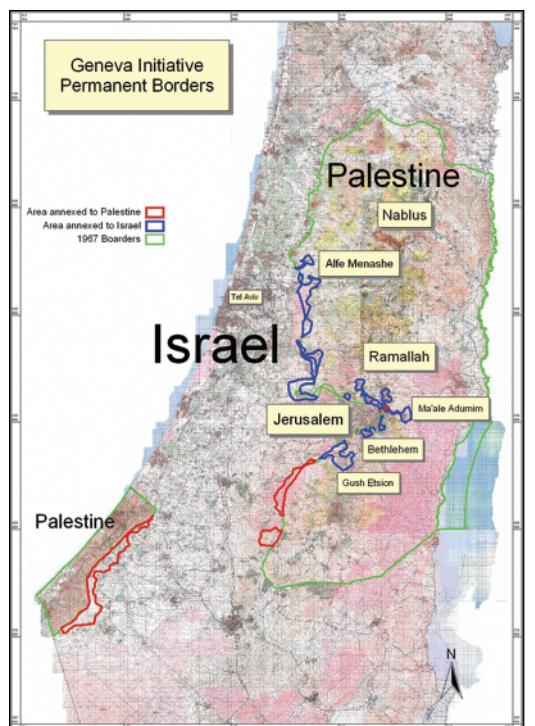
aggression, and blood (the Hebrew words for “red” and “blood” share the same root). The country labels are also relatively prominent, which is good; Palestine is no longer a dirty word, and Geneva’s drafters were right to celebrate it. But repeating it twice is a mistake. It threatens Israelis because the two “Palestines” appear to surround little, vulnerable Israel; it threatens Palestinians because it emphasizes the disconnection of the West Bank from the Gaza Strip.

The most egregious blunder in the official Geneva maps is their omission of the corridor connecting the two parts of Palestine. The specific route and form of the corridor have not been determined, so including it on a map presents a graphic design challenge. Still, omitting it altogether sends the wrong message. What is required is a visual placeholder corresponding

incorporated into Palestine are equal to areas in occupied territory slated to become part of Israel. We marked the corridor with what amounts to a visual placeholder, indicating that its route and form remain undetermined.

Israelis and Palestinians who support a two-state solution desperately need a positive picture that captures and bolsters their fragile conviction that peace is possible. If Israelis and Palestinians talk peace again, getting the maps right will require a collaborative process of drafting and redrafting by the agreement’s authors together with cartographers and graphic designers. This process would produce better graphics, and it would reveal new ways of seeing and therefore thinking about the agreement. It is well known that writing forces us to confront the limits of our own understanding, exposing logical gaps and unresolved details, richness, and complexity of which we are often unaware before putting pen to paper. Writing also spurs creativity, helping us see possibilities to which we would otherwise be blind. Drawing does the same.

For this reason, negotiators who spontaneously scribble notes and diagrams—as both Uri Savir and his Palestinian counterpart Ahmed Qurei did during the Oslo process—should be encouraged. But to be effective, official peace maps, whether they are part of a legal record, a blueprint for implementation, or a public education effort, must incorporate political, technical, and artistic sensibilities. Software (Geographic Information Systems, for instance) and technicians with no design training are not enough. A visually illiterate negotiator with a sophisticated mapping program and a technical



GENEVA INITIATIVE MAP A study in “chartjunk.”



MOTRO/CORUM GENEVA MAP Peace as possible.

to the verbal “to be determined” language in the text of the Geneva agreement.

I returned to my designer and together we tried to create a map that does justice to the spirit of Geneva.

This time I asked him to try a new color palette. The beige and green of our Oslo maps reminded me of desert, military fatigues, and tanks. I wanted to create a different vision of Israel and Palestine, especially since this map is not only for internal Israeli and Palestinian consumption. I wanted something that would communicate to the world the lush, fertile face of the Holy Land (the area’s topography varies dramatically, ranging from rich forests in the north to rocky desert in the south). We chose cool, calm hues from the Israeli and Palestinian flags, and we coded the land-swap areas so that they are clearly associated with the state to which they are slated to belong. The key adds another critical piece of information: The size of areas on the Israeli side of the pre-1967 border

assistant is no better equipped than a lousy writer with a state-of-the-art word processing program.

Good maps alone will not be enough to bring peace, but poor design should not join the long list of pitfalls already burdening the peace process. Since the election this year of Mahmoud Abbas as Palestinian president, a fragile informal truce has raised hopes that, sooner or later, negotiators will again be arguing over percentages of territory and safe passage routes. If the next agreement’s maps make the same mistakes displayed by those attached to Oslo II and to Geneva, they will undermine the chances for success. If the new maps capture a vision that Israelis and Palestinians can live with, they may well tip the balance in favor of peace.

Shari Motro is an assistant professor of law at the University of Richmond and a senior fellow at Empax, a New York-based think tank that studies the role of graphics in diplomacy.