# Imagining a New Regionalism of Israel: Methodology, Work Process, and Future Vision

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*This paper proposes a new regional division map for the State of Israel, as a response to the country's ongoing social, political, and territorial crises. Against the backdrop of the October 7th massacre, the war in Gaza, and Israel's deepening internal divisions, the proposed regional framework is an act of spatial and political imagination, aimed at fostering equity, safety, and sustainable development for all citizens. Building on a critical reassessment of the 1951 Sharon Plan—Israel's first national master plan—the study deconstructs its colonial and ethnocratic foundations while retaining its structural vision of interdependent regional planning. The new map outlines 33 regions anchored by strong urban cores, promoting collaboration between local authorities and bridging urban-rural divides. Drawing on contemporary theories of new regionalism and city-based democracy, the paper positions cities not only as engines of economic growth but as hubs for democratic engagement, social justice, and environmental resilience. It argues for the need to move beyond Israel's fragmented municipal landscape of 259 local authorities toward a more integrated regional framework that enables equitable distribution of resources, strengthens local governance, and enhances civic participation. Mapping is thus employed as a transformative tool—both diagnostic and generative—capable of shaping more just spatial futures. The proposed regional vision invites a rethinking of national planning as a platform for pluralistic, inclusive, and resilient society-building.*

***Keywords**: Regionalism, Israel, Planning History, Regional Division, New Towns, Inequality, Ethnocracy*

## INTRODUCTION

In this paper we propose a regional division map for the State of Israel. The study and map were created in the framework of a collaboration with the Institute of Israeli Thought (2025). The map was created on the background of the deepest, most

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severe crisis in Israeli history, the judicial overtake and the severe social and political rift, the October 7th massacre and the deadly war in Gaza, the humanitarian and hostage crisis that is far from ending. The regional division map is presented as a way of actively imagining a future of equity, safety and growth for all citizens of the State of Israel. The map is based on a critical analysis of national physical plans since the establishment of the State, continued by the assessment of data at a regional level, and followed by the identification of 33 regions and four urban core morphologies.

The first National plan, the Sharon Plan of 1951, divided Israel into 24 regions and proposed the establishment of around 20 'New Towns' that would be the urban centers of each region. However, it was based on forced population dispersion and an ethnocratic strategy of 'land grab' leading to the social and ethnic fragmentation and the near impossibility of creating well functioning regions (Yiftachel, 2001). We argue that although the Sharon Plan had failed, its regional framework, and its promotion of interconnectivity and interdependence of urban and rural settlements may still be of relevance to the present moment, albeit with significant transformations. We propose an exercise in spatial political imagination, in which the Sharon Plan is de-colonized, that is, cleared away from its ethnic and settler colonial aspirations. We propose to re-read its proposal to integrate cities into regions, rural into urban, and urban into rural, however, with the focal point of the region being the city, an economically, socially, and culturally urban core that will promote more equal sustainable growth throughout the country.

Around the world, in the global North as well as the global South, though with significant variations between countries, new regionalism is increasingly seen as a means to achieve sustainable social, economic, and environmental growth by strengthening regions beyond state centrism, promoting more balanced power relations, and fostering cultural and social pluralism (Breslin, 2002; Rogerson; 2009; Pike et al., 2014; Coe et al., 2023; McWilson et al., 2025).

The regional plan we propose in this paper also aspires to decrease spatial inequalities, through a regional division based on strong urban cores, that will enhance collaborations between different local authorities. Our proposed regional map is based on present reality, allowing itself to indicate a proposed future, based on the understanding that mapping is an act of agency (Corner, 2011), that not only identifies the existing but may hopefully push toward more justice and equality in space and society, also arguing that cities may enhance the accessibility to a better existence, including employment, education, health, housing and culture to all the inhabitants of the region, strengthen democracy, and lead to a future of more trust, safety and equity.

## THE CITY AS A HUB

According to the United Nations, in 2020, 50% of the world's population lived in urban areas, and forecasts predict that by 2070, over 58% of the global population will reside in cities (UN, 2022). This increase is attributed to urbanization processes,

which have intensified in recent decades and are characterized by the migration of people from rural areas to urban spaces. Throughout history, cities have served as central hubs of governmental and administrative power, as well as focal points for commerce, industry, and culture. Modern cities—metropolises, global cities, and even mid-sized cities—often face significant challenges due to diverse populations, overcrowding, and housing and employment issues. However, they also hold the potential to function as centers of democratic activity precisely because of their complexity, which is visually expressed in the urban landscape (Sassen 2016).[1] The future of humanity lies in cities, but not only in metropolises or global cities. The UN report on cities, written in response to the COVID-19 crisis, noted that the challenges the world has faced over the past fifty years are fundamentally linked to the immense phenomenon of urbanization (UN, 2022). However, it is now clear that cities are also part of the solution.

The cities proposed as the foundation for our regional map are not merely spaces for economic prosperity and capitalist, free-market-driven, and unequal growth. The cities we envision as regional hubs in Israel are places where local democracy will be realized, practicing "the right to the city" – the right of all residents—both present and future, permanent and temporary—to inhabit, use, create, govern, and enjoy cities, villages, and settlements that are just, inclusive, safe, and sustainable, where public spaces are essential for a full and dignified life (Lefebvre, 1967; Harvey, 2015).[2] Cities must be prepared to handle crises and should be based on a new social contract that ensures universal basic income, healthcare coverage, and housing for all. The UN report proposes three levels of urbanization: cities, small towns, and medium-density rural areas. This perspective suggests continuity and a seamless transition between urban and rural spaces, offering a unified definition of what constitutes a city (UN, 2022). Cities may play a crucial role in fostering socioeconomic resilience by serving as hubs of economic, social, cultural, and environmental development. They drive job creation, reduce poverty, and enhance regional competitiveness while fostering strong social networks that promote belonging, security, and crisis support. As cultural centers, cities enrich local identity, encourage creativity, and facilitate the exchange of ideas among diverse populations.

As research shows, cities often function as lively and active local democracies, often more than the states they are part of, sustaining city based citizenship (Barber, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2019; Barak and de Shalit, 2021). Cities may enable greater civic and political participation, strengthening the connection between residents and local governance. They may also be catalysts for social mobility by providing access to education, vocational training, and employment opportunities, empowering individuals to advance economically and socially (ibid).

Cities may contribute to environmental resilience (Barber, 2017), by promoting sustainable solutions such as green infrastructure, public transportation, and resource management. Their high population density supports climate innovation while reducing sprawl and emissions. Additionally, resilient cities positively

impact surrounding regions by improving infrastructure, services, and sustainable development, fostering cooperation between urban and rural areas. Well-planned cities may thus enhance democracy, social equity, and environmental sustainability, making them essential for long-term resilience and progress.

### The Need for a New Regional Plan

Israel's spatial landscape is fragmented into 259 local authorities—a result of decades of planning as will be later examined in detail, that prioritized the establishment of numerous small, scattered settlements, favored agricultural communities over urban ones, and used planning as a political tool for territorial control. Israel's geography is one of fractured regions. Only regional interests could create meaningful pathways into the highly centralized power structure of the Israeli state (Yiftachel, 2001). Indeed, a political and spatial reorganization—replacing the fragmentation into hundreds of competing local authorities with regional cooperation, emphasizing shared interests over differences, and fostering collaboration among diverse social groups to improve their own lives—may lead to a significant change for the better.

The social, economic, and political failures of the existing municipal structures in Israel deepen the fractured national space. As will be shown, national planning in Israel has served as an institutional mechanism for population dispersion or concentration, and has failed to address the deep structural polarization and political and social disparities in the country. In the existing fragmented system, settlements in the same geographical area often compete for economic resources. For example, conflicts arise between urban and rural authorities over the designation of agricultural land, the location of profitable industrial and commercial zones, and access to environmental resources. These struggles are significantly based on the contemporary municipal structure that emphasizes social, cultural, and ethnic differences between settlements and various groups in Israeli society. Ideological considerations have fragmented and fractured the space, and existing planning mechanisms and laws often perpetuate these differences and disparities, leading to planning discrimination (New Discourse, 2003; Yulis, 2023).[3]

The paper presents the idea of establishing a regional layer in Israel, visualizing it through lines and shapes that reflect how the Israeli national space would function better, according to a new regional framework. Drawing on James Corner's Agency of Mapping (2011), the map does not sanctify the existing situation or merely seeks to regulate space more efficiently, but aspires to shape an imagined reality of spatial, cultural, and economic balances in the country, based on future trends in Israeli society. The map proposes a regional vision aimed not only at improving the distribution of resources and opportunities between different areas but also at creating new connections that will contribute to sustainable development and strengthen the social and economic resilience of all regions in Israel.

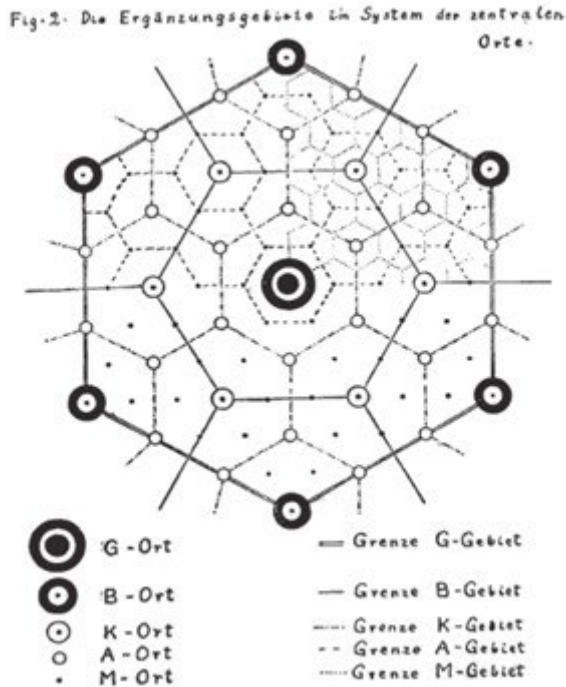### *Blind Spots in Israel's National Planning*

Over the 75 years since the establishment of the State of Israel, national master plans have reflected a shift from a centralized and hierarchical planning approach—focused on dispersing the population outside major cities—to approaches that value urban densification in regional cities across the country while protecting open spaces, natural resources, and heritage sites.

The first and most significant footstep in national planning is the Sharon Plan (1951), that promoted the dispersion of cities and settlements across the country under the supervision and control of the government's planning department and the Ministry of Housing and Construction at the time.

The Sharon Plan was Israel's first comprehensive national master plan. Already during the war, in July 1948, the Government Planning Department was established (Sharon, 1951). It inherited most of the functions of the Mandatory planning system and served as the chief planner for the country's physical infrastructure (Kark, 1995). The Government Planning Department prepared the Sharon Plan in 1951 through a team of architects led by the German-born architect Arieh Sharon (1900-1984). In practice, it was a regional plan that divided the country into 24 districts, with each district designated urban settlements—some newly established—and agricultural settlements that would receive services from the regional city. The planning was based on the creation of a hierarchical structure of cities and rural settlements and advocated for the dispersion of the population across the country while reducing density in existing cities and establishing new ones, according to a model developed by the architect and urban planner Eliezer Brutzkus (Brutzkus, 1964; Wilkof, 2023).

The Sharon Plan was based on the regional approach of that period: hierarchical and technocratic centralization, and its logic of urban planning incorporated early 20th century concepts of the Garden City and the Neighborhood unit (Zaidman and Kark, 2016; Shadar and Maslovski, 2021). The regional theory on which the Sharon Plan was based and which provided it with a "scientific" foundation was the Central Place Theory, developed by the geographer Walter Christaller in 1932 (Christaller, 1933). Christaller's hypothesis assumes that the area of influence of a central place must theoretically be hexagonal. This is the geometric shape closest to a circle and the only shape that, when combined, can cover an entire spatial area. Therefore, according to Christaller, the complete network of central places consists of a series of networks made up of hexagons of different sizes, layered upon one another. According to Christaller's theory, there is a clear mathematical regularity in the mutual distances between centers of the same level and those of different levels (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**: Central Place Theory diagram



Source: Christaller, 1933

This structure formed the foundation of the first national master plan, whose goals were to "eliminate the existing 'polarity' between rural and urban settlements, introduce intermediate links between the rural unit and the large city [...], and organize services, economic activities, and social life based on regional cooperation between town and countryside within small geographical regions (planning districts) "(Brutzkus 1964).

The hierarchical structure consisted of the following levels:

1.  A rural cluster center (Type B), containing a few hundred residents, designed to serve four to six workers' villages.
2.  A small regional center (Type C), i.e., a town overseeing a broader rural area, with a population of 8,000-12,000 people who were still economically connected to the rural region.
3.  A medium-sized city (Type D), with a population of 20,000-60,000, serving as a service center for an entire planning district and as a hub for industries that were not necessarily tied to the region.
4.  The four largest cities, which served as the capitals of large geographic regions and represented the highest level in the hierarchical center system.

Sharon Plan's primary "success" as a regional plan was based on the forced settlement of new immigrants in the 1950s and reliance on government budgets in the periphery—factors that ultimately exacerbated polarization (Sharon, 2006).

Although this approach was regional in nature, it primarily served ideological and political motives, such as prioritizing rural settlement over urban development and fostering a "melting pot" concept in which individuals were molded into a single society with shared collective values. One of its main goals was to secure state control over land and prevent the return of Palestinian residents to their lands and villages. Furthermore, the Sharon Plan led to the establishment of new towns, where Jewish immigrants from Arab countries were primarily sent to, that struggled to thrive due to their remoteness from employment opportunities and other essential resources (Sharon, 2006).

Forty years later National Master Plan 31 (NMP 31) prepared in 1991, responding to the great demand for housing due to the immigration from the former Soviet Union, was the first plan to promote a regional approach based on concentrated urban distribution rather than dispersal. While it still officially endorsed population dispersion, in practice, it aimed at densification in urban areas with functional employment centers. It designated three regional development zones—north, center, and south—as hubs for social, economic, and transportation development. This plan, and those that followed, responded to global changes that began in the 1970s, such as reduced government intervention, a transition to a free-market economy, and a flexible, dynamic, and global economic model (Rachevsky, 2014). These changes highlighted cities as key centers for economic, social, and cultural development.

It became clear that densely populated cities with high levels of economic, technological, cultural, and social activity provided a higher quality of life. "Israel 2020" (Mazor, n.d., submitted to the government in 1997) clearly reflected these shifts in thinking. It was a comprehensive, data-driven research project that emphasized the urgent need for urban densification and the restriction of population dispersion into cities while preserving open spaces—a finite resource that must be protected for the common good. The plan proposed concentrating the population in three urbanized regions (north, center, and south), separated by open spaces, ensuring the preservation and protection of nature and landscapes (Mazor, n.d.). By doing so, it promoted dense cities that function effectively in social, economic, technological, and cultural terms.

This plan was also accompanied by a vision of a future peace scenario in which Israel's regional urban network would be part of a broader regional structure in the Middle East. National Master Plan 35 (published in 2005) built upon the insights of "Israel 2020" regarding urban densification and introduced the concept of "textures"—a more flexible and nuanced planning tool that refined the distinctions between urban areas and open spaces (NMP 35).

In the diagram below, we compare the national plans developed so far with the regional plan created at the Institute for Israeli Thought (Ben Zaken et al., 2025). This comparison examines the plans based on their planning philosophy, urban perspective, regional approach, socio-economic policy, and the geographic-planning tools that were or will be used to apply it (Table 1).

**Table 1**: Comparison of Israeli national and regional planning approaches

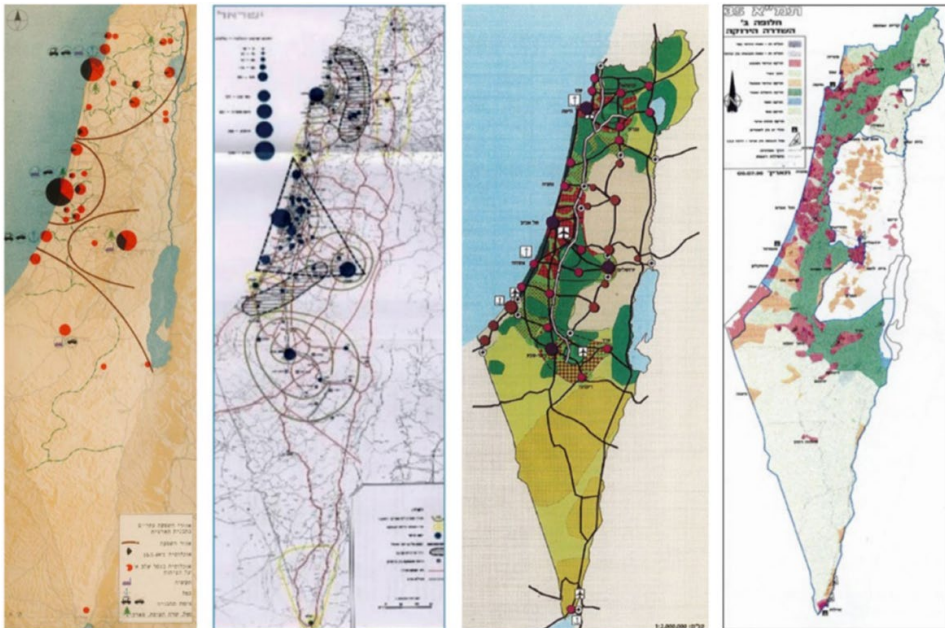| PLAN | CONCEPTION | INSTRUMET | Socio-political approach | Centralism/ participation | Urban concept | Regional Concept |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sharon Plan 1953 | Dispersed distribution | New Towns | Centralized social democracy | Planning professionals | Low density low rise, dispersed development Garden City (Howard) Functional Zoning | Central Place Theory (Christaller) |
| NMP 31 1993 | Dispersed centralization | Development Area | Centralized, in the process of privatization | Planning professionals | Densification zoning + | Marking existing development areas |
| Israel 2020 1997 | Densification and the guarding of open spaces | The urbanized region | transfer to neo-liberalism | A large team of experts Roundtable | High density zoning + | High Rise Metropolises |
| NMP 35, 2005 | Densification and the guarding of nature and heritage | The Texture (Mirkam) | Privatized, neo-liberal globalized | Planning Professionals | | Dense versus open |
| Institute for Israeli Thought, 2025 | Urban centers based Regionalism | The regional City | Localism, social democracy | Consultation regarding borders. Inter-Regional collaborations | FUA MUA Conurbation | FUA Collaboration and interrelations between urban and rural. |

All national plans had the explicit goal of creating equality and balance, through a variety of planning mechanisms, however, they also had implicit aspects that subverted their outward ones. In the early years, equality was presumed to be achieved through a hierarchical and scientifically driven mechanism of population dispersion, that was believed to lead to a balance and socio-economical co-existence between central and peripheral, new and older settlements, however, this was undermined by its means of forced population and ethnocratic logic. By the 1980s and 1990s, the underdevelopment of the new towns due to lack of employment sources, along with the growing awareness of climate change, and that Israel's open spaces are a finite resource that led to planning professional's recognition that urban densification should be encouraged to protect natural and scenic values and reasonable urban development. In the 1990s, alongside globalization, values of diversity and pluralism replaced the "melting pot" ideology. The master plans in Israel reflected these changes as well. However, these changes were also part of a turn to neo-liberal and globalized economies that gradually replaced centralized socialist economies and welfare state mechanisms like publicly funded housing, and a turn to a globalized economy at the expense of socialist welfare values. This may be seen clearly in the field of urban planning (Alster and Avni 2022) and in housing policies (Hananel and Nachmany, 2024).[4] These transformations and other social, economic and political processes have led to the increase of polarization between center and periphery in a variety of indexes (Gerby et al., 2000; Shefer and Antonio, 2013; Dahan 2021).

Despite national planning's aim to be a constructive, organizing, and balancing force that reduces polarization in Israeli society, it still suffers from significant blind

spots that prevent it from effectively creating a fairer, more equal, and more balanced space. These blind spots—ethnocratic land distribution, development, spatial organization and regulation, and the inequality in socio-economic resources—are directly linked to the challenges of establishing a governmental and functional regional tier based on urban centers.

   Though later plans abandoned the Sharon Plan rhetoric of a "Jewish people" and a homogeneous social and ideological collective, they had their own flaws. Both NMP 31 and NMP 35, while no longer promoting widespread settlement expansion to prevent land from being claimed by non-Jewish citizens, still contained elements of discrimination against the Arab population—primarily by concentrating growth in large metropolitan areas and limiting the expansion of Arab localities through conservation zoning (Jabareen, 2022). Although these plans aimed at equitable distribution and sought spatial balance, they avoided addressing land ownership and development mechanisms—fundamental components of spatial social inequality in Israel. This mechanism enabled the rapid privatization of agricultural lands in the 1990s—a process of ethnocentric privatization (Yiftachel, 2022, Yiftachel and Kedar, 2000; Yiftachel, 2021). This privatization was marketed as an efficient development strategy, transferring valuable land resources to housing, infrastructure, industrial, and tourism developers. It was partially halted by the Supreme Court ruling in the Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow case, which required the state to consider distributive justice (New Discourse 2003). However, the master plans influenced by this process barely reflect these considerations (Figure 2).

**Figure 2**: National Physical Plans since the 1950s
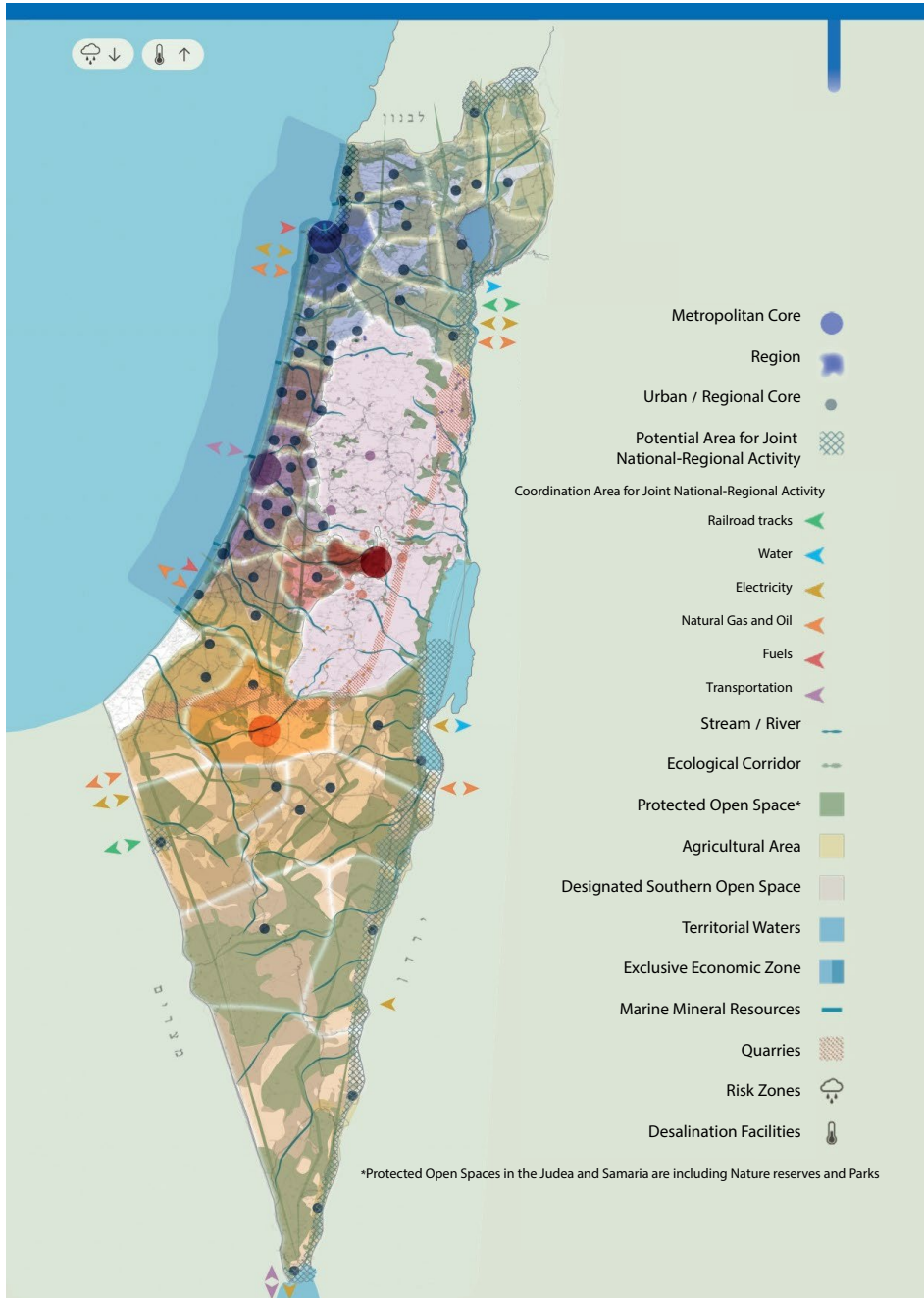


Source: Ben Zaken et al., 2025

Additionally, in "Israel 2020" and subsequent plans, there is an inherent blindness to developments in the occupied territories—the "gray spaces." In these areas, complex and ambiguous interactions exist between planning and building laws, enforcement authorities, and non-Jewish populations, who experience varying degrees of discriminatory treatment under the law (Yiftachel, 2022; Jabareen, 2020).

## A NEW REGIONAL ORDER: THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

The ongoing discourse on a new regional framework in Israel that was carried out by governmental organizations like the Ministry of Interior and Joint ALKA (Noy-Hindi, 2018) and non-governmental ones (Ilan and Dekel, 2024) has so far produced few national division maps that represent the vision for reorganizing the space. The Ministry of the Interior's map, based on regional clusters (Eshkolot in Hebrew), is shaped according to the existing municipal boundaries of local authorities. The boundaries of the clusters are defined by the boundaries of the local authorities included in them (currently, about 60% of local authorities are included in formally defined clusters, excluding metropolitan areas). Although national master plans since the 1990s have not led to the creation of a regional planning layer, in recent years, the Planning Administration has begun to recognize its importance. In 2024, the Planning Administration published a cellular-based commuting patterns regional map, according to which it defined new regions. While this new regional map is based on commuting patterns, it is not quite clear what other mechanisms were used to determine the regional borders, and what will be the benefit of the new regions as they are heavily based on the existing and lacking in political imagination (Figure 3).

In the project with the Institute of Israeli Thought we propose a regional map based on thriving cities of various sizes, serving as the beating heart of different regions across the country. This map aspires to provide a spatial infrastructure for decentralizing governmental power in Israel. We believe that a necessary condition for addressing these issues is a new spatial division based on strong and independent urban centers throughout the country, some of them already existing and functioning, and others are yet to be promoted, and integrated into their geographical surroundings through sustainable mechanisms of mutual economic growth.[5] This also requires a redrawing of municipal boundaries to encourage inclusive economic development nationwide and the establishment of formal ties between diverse populations based on clear civic interests. In the following section, the methodology by which we divided the country into regions and regional cities will be presented. First, we present geographic and social data that shows how national space functions in the present.

**Figure 3**: Strategic National Plan for 2050, Israel Planning Administration, 2024



Source: The Planning Administration

## Mapping Existing Conditions and Projecting the Future Collecting Raw Data from Open Government Information

To present the vision for contemporary regionalism in Israel, first the current situation was mapped, evaluating future trends.
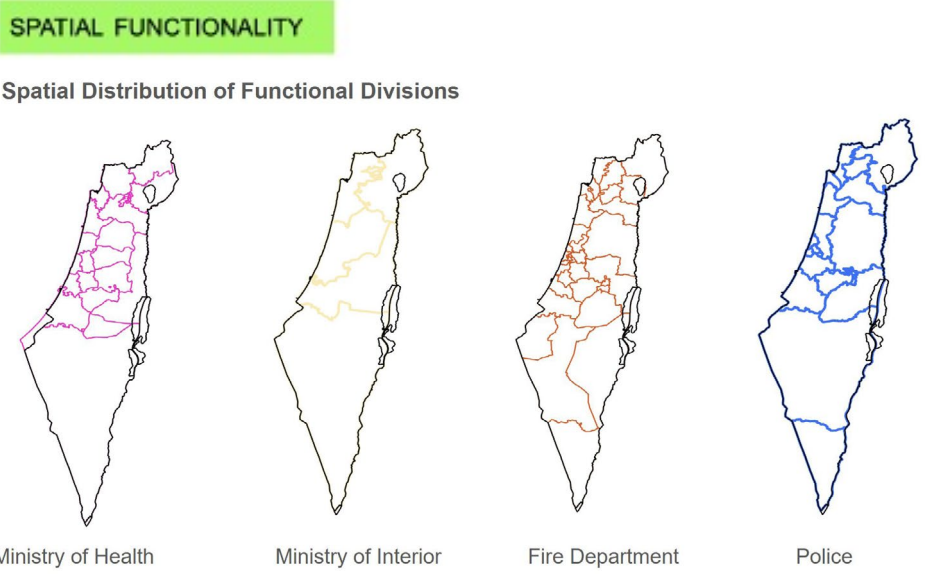
The various maps presented are based on publicly available datasets from government sources. Maps have the power to reshape realities, but not all do. When mapping avoids universal schemes that disregard local culture, society, and unique conditions, it holds tremendous potential for transformation (Corner, 2011). Our work does not seek to reinforce existing governmental power structures but rather to analyze and understand them first, highlight their fault lines, and then develop new frameworks from them. Through restructuring, we aim to build a governance model based on regionalism, one that is more responsive to citizens' needs and that may lead to significant social and political change.

The data for our map was gathered from open government databases published by various ministries. As part of Government Decision No. 1933 (August 30, 2016), Israeli ministries were mandated to make their databases publicly accessible to enhance government efficiency and service quality. This policy significantly facilitated our mapping process by allowing us to easily obtain data from public sources and begin spatial analysis.

The global trend of open data is now taking root in Israel. Our first step involved analyzing the space using Geographic Information Systems (GIS), which integrate various datasets into a visual spatial representation. Over time, GIS has become a government tool for representation and power distribution. However, instead of replicating existing power structures, we used GIS to create our own map, representing a new regional governance model. GIS enables us to switch between macro and micro perspectives, from identifying broad national trends (e.g., lower socioeconomic rankings in peripheral areas) to case studies (e.g., Sderot's lack of emergency medical services and low educational performance). These insights demonstrate how government policies impact urban conditions and highlight the importance of spatial mapping for understanding social and economic complexities.
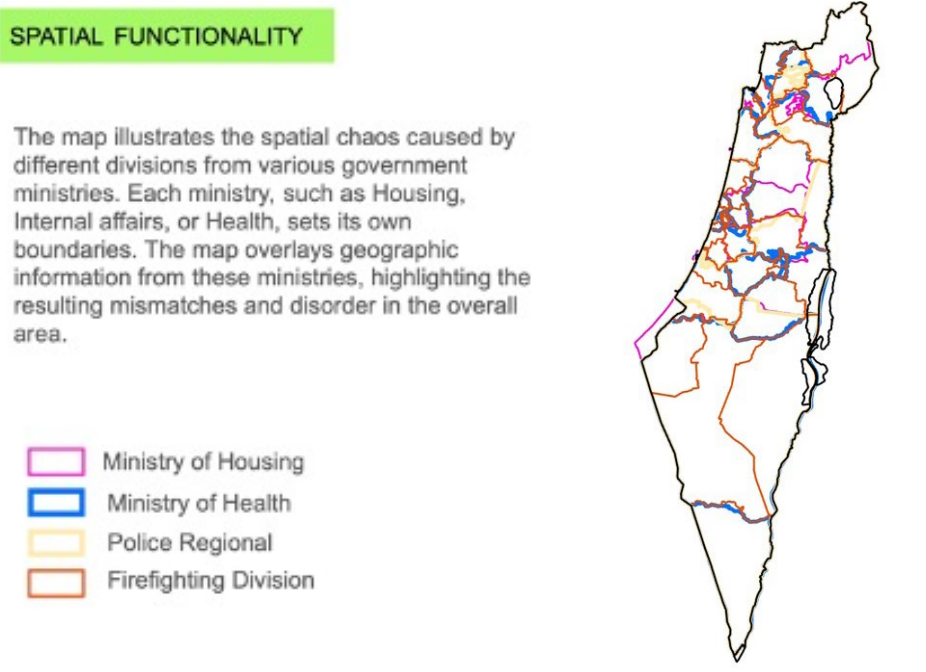
The attached map illustrates the spatial chaos resulting from the overlapping spatial divisions implemented by different government ministries. Each ministry divides the space differently and establishes distinct boundaries (Figure 4). For example, the way the Ministry of Housing divides the space differs from the way the Ministry of Interior or the Fire Department does. The map presents geographic information layers sourced from various government ministries and demonstrates the overlapping layers that highlight the existing spatial chaos. It is possible to see how each government ministry creates its own unique division, leading to inconsistencies and disorder in the overall spatial structure (Figure 5). This chaos reflects the need for standardization and coordination between the various ministries to develop a more uniform and efficient spatial policy. The overlap between different information layers emphasizes the importance of integrated and coordinated spatial planning, which can contribute to improved spatial management and development in the country.

**Figure 4**: The Divisions of the Various Authorities and Ministries



Source: Ben Zaken et al., 2025

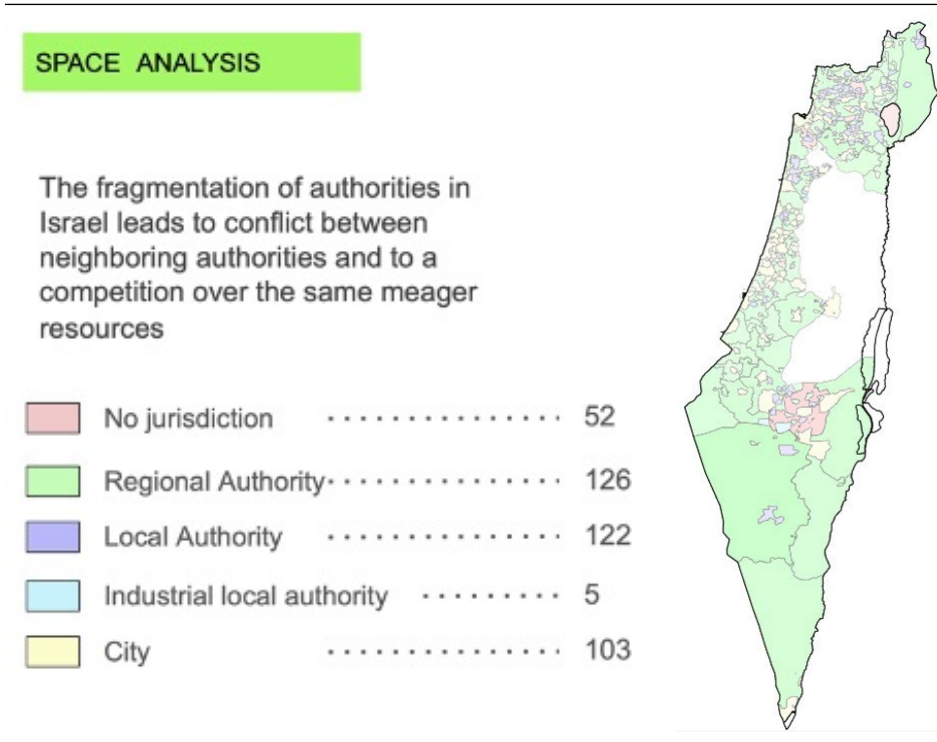**Figure 5**: The spatial chaos



Source: Ben Zaken et al., 2025

*Fragmentation of Settlements*

As mentioned earlier, the Israeli national space is highly fragmented. Within the 1967 borders, Israel is divided into 258 local authorities: 82 municipalities, 120 local councils, 54 regional councils, and two industrial local councils (Figure 6).
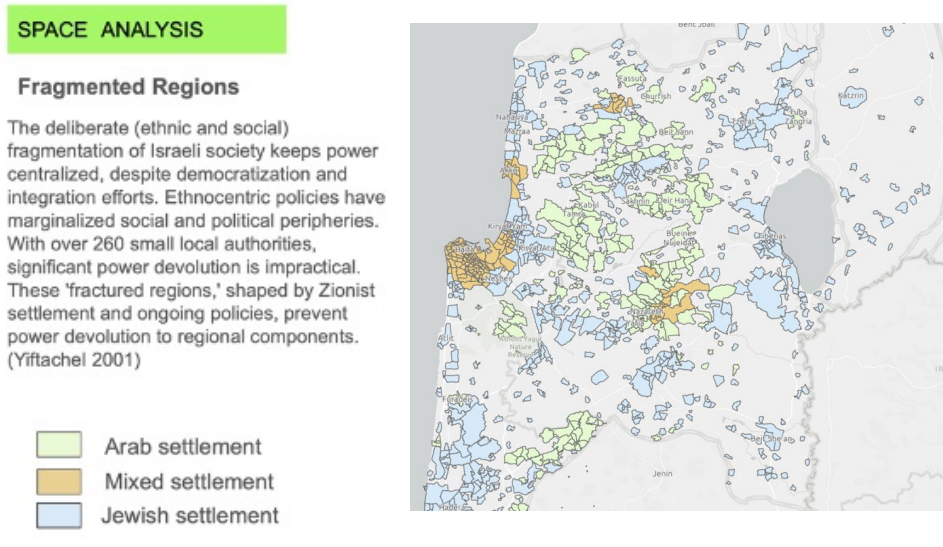
**Figure 6**: Types of local authorities



Source: Ben Zaken et al., 2025

This fragmentation is the result of various interconnected factors: historical separation, particularly in peripheral areas, between new towns (previously called development towns) and regional councils that include kibbutzim and moshavim (collective and semi-collective villages respectively) through territorial delineation (Kalman, 2024)[6]; ethnic separation between Jewish settlements and Druze and Arab settlements; and decades of policies encouraging the planning of more and more new Jewish settlements—mainly small, dispersed community settlements—while planning very few settlements for Arabs, as a political tool for spatial control (Figure 7).

The deliberate (ethnic and social) fragmentation of Israeli society has maintained centralization despite efforts towards democratization and integration. Ethnic policies have marginalized social and political peripheries. The large number of small local authorities prevents significant power transfer to local areas. These fractured

regions, shaped by Zionist settlement and ongoing deliberate policies, hinder the transfer of power to regional components. However, only regional interests can create meaningful pathways into the highly centralized power structure of the State of Israel (Gradus, 1983; Yiftachel, 2001). Indeed, in the following section of the paper, a regional division map will be presented, designed to reorganize regions in a way that fosters cooperation rather than fragmentation and disintegration, strengthens equality between different social groups, and enhances Israeli democracy through civic participation and local collaborations.

**Figure 7**: Fragmented space



Source: Ben Zaken et al., 2025

## Creating the Map
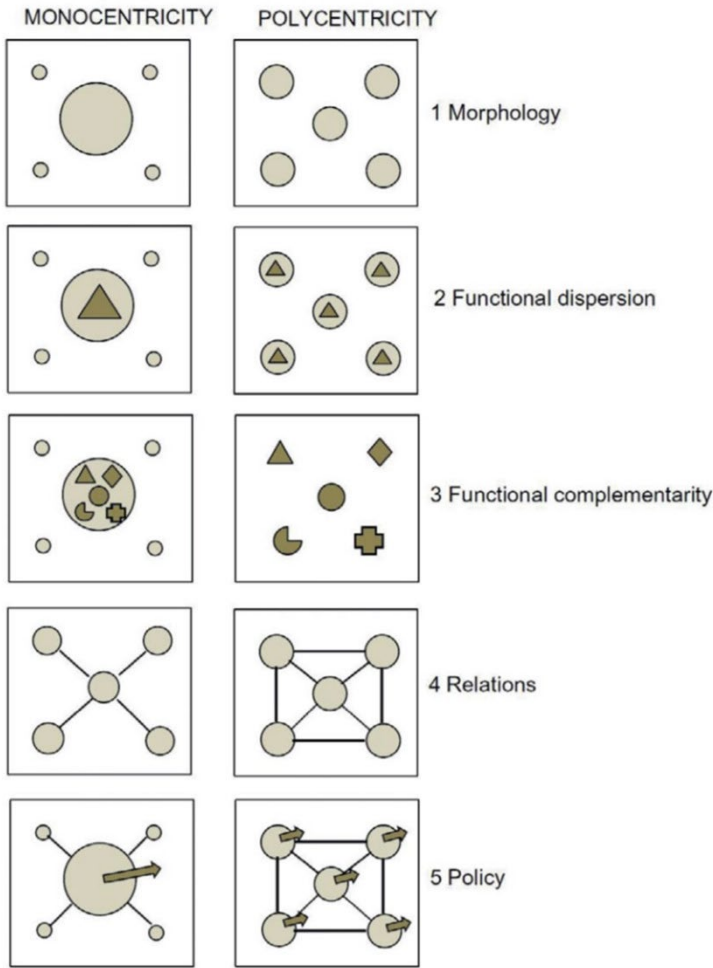
### Review of Urban and Regional Morphologies

Our map challenges previous regional maps by emphasizing spatial inequality and pointing to critical social and economic challenges. It positions regional cities as essential for managing urban complexity and driving social and political change through a restructured regional system. In order to create our map we have relied on studies in the field of urban and regional morphology. The field deals with the study of the structure and patterns of urban and suburban areas, seeking to understand how they develop and change over time (Arefi and Aelbrecht, 2024). It is an interdisciplinary field of knowledge and research that combines geography, urban planning, urban economics, and urban history.

Regional morphology extends beyond cities to analyze the spatial organization of broader geographic areas, including rural settlements and natural landscapes. It

examines how environmental, cultural, and economic factors shape the development of regions over time.[7] The goal of regional morphology is to understand how the physical and functional structure of a region changes according to economic, social, and environmental factors, to visually reflect this structure, and to propose a desirable future morphology. Urban and regional morphology investigates the dynamics between physical structures, urban functions, and the spatial contexts that generate the fabric of urban and regional life.

The field of regional morphology deals, among other things, with the tensions between different forms of spatial structures, particularly in relation to the notions of monocentricity versus polycentricity. *Monocentricity* describes an urban structure in which there is a single dominant center that serves as the primary hub for economic, employment, and social activity, with the surrounding area organized around it. In contrast, *polycentricity* refers to an urban structure where there are several significant centers distributed across the regional space, each with important economic and social functions. In such a structure, not only the main center serves as an attraction point—additional centers can also function as activity hubs. Figure 8 visually illustrates the differences between monocentric and polycentric regional structures (Halbert, 2008). When it comes to *functional* distribution, such as the distribution of commercial, industrial, and residential functions—in a monocentric city, these functions tend to concentrate in the central area. In polycentric cities, however, they are distributed among several centers. In terms of institutional functions, such as cultural, healthcare, and educational institutions, in a polycentric structure, each center may specialize in different functions, thereby complementing one another. From the perspective of connections and interactions, in a monocentric area, interactions are mainly concentrated in the urban core. In a polycentric region, interactions occur not only with the main center but also between the different centers themselves. In terms of governance and policy, in a monocentric area, the central city holds significant influence over the entire region. In a polycentric structure, each city develops its own policy, which both influences and is influenced by the surrounding towns and cities, creating a more complex regional dynamic (Groth et al., 2015).

**Figure 8**: Monocentric and polycentric regional structures
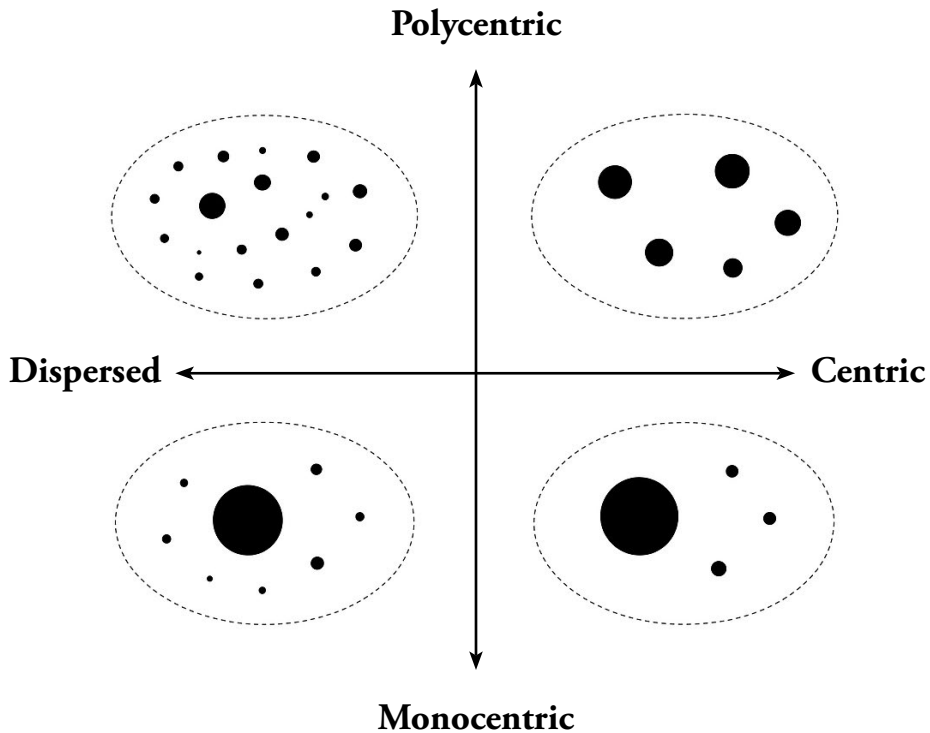


Source: Halbers, 2008

Note: The monocentric structure is characterized by a single dominant center surrounded by smaller peripheral centers. In contrast, a polycentric structure features multiple similar sized centers spread throughout the urban space.

Regional morphology includes an understanding of the form and structure of various areas and helps us analyze the dynamics between urban centers and the periphery. This includes the functional connections between them and the influence of economic, social, and demographic factors.

**Figure 9**: Main types of regional structures according to two main axes: centralization versus dispersion, and monocentricity versus polycentricity



Source: Burger and Meijers 2010

One can distinguish between four main types of regional structures, based on the degree of centralization and polycentricity (Figure 9):

Polycentric and Dispersed
This structure, shown in the upper left part of the figure, is characterized by multiple significant centers dispersed throughout the regional space. Each center operates independently but is connected to the others via economic and functional ties. In this configuration, there is no dependency on a single center, and both economic activity and population are relatively evenly distributed across space (Burger and Meijers, 2010).

Polycentric and Centralized
This structure, found in the upper right part of the figure, includes multiple centers located close to one another. These centers form a concentration of economic activity within a specific area, while still maintaining a distribution of activity among several hubs. This represents a network of main centers that attract significant economic and employment activity.

Monocentric and Centralized

Shown in the bottom right of the figure, this structure features a single dominant center that serves as the main hub of regional activity. Economic, employment, and social activities are concentrated primarily in this center, and most movement and interactions are directed toward it.

Monocentric and Dispersed

In the bottom left of the figure (Figure 8), this structure includes a single dominant center, but regional activity is also dispersed beyond the core. This dispersion may involve secondary centers of lesser importance or suburban areas that gradually develop over time. In contemporary research on regional morphology, focus is placed on examining and analyzing different regions using indicators such as transportation data, demographics, density, and connectivity. The goal is to understand and map how a region functions in reality.

Regional structures are based on centralization and dispersion indices, in order to assess their influence on land use patterns, transportation systems, and residents' quality of life. These assist urban planners in setting strategic directions for planning and future development, aiming to improve connectivity, density, and services across space. Understanding regional morphology also requires consideration of the population size of cities in the region, as it directly impacts all aspects of planning and the daily life of residents. Population levels determine the availability of workers and employers, the demand for commerce and services, and overall regional development. Accordingly, it is essential to define clear population targets at all planning levels. In the absence of such targets, the natural growth of peripheral areas may leave them small, weak, and consequently, underdeveloped (Burger and Meijers, 2010; Burger and Martijn, 2011; Halbers, 2008).

Our analysis incorporates these theories and morphologies while considering spatial insights specific to Israel and its peripheral urban areas. In the process we have relied on some of the work done by Ilan, Dekel et.al (Ilan and Dekel, 2024). Ilan and Dekel use the concept of functional urban area (FUA) mentioned earlier, in order to distinguish them from administrative divisions such as municipalities, districts, and provinces, which often lack functional logic, using the term in Hebrew "Hevel Eretz" (geographical territory). According to their theory, such a territory revolves around a regional city, attracting the majority of work commuters, service consumption, commerce, education, healthcare, culture, and leisure activities. The study categorizes territories into three levels:

1. Core and Inner Ring: Surrounding a metropolitan city.
2. Primary Territory: Surrounding a secondary metropolitan city.
3. Secondary Territory: Surrounding a growing city.

Some remote territories lack a central city (classified as frontier territories), but these are exceptions. The territories function in a hierarchy, extending from one another based on their functional strength relative to residents' needs. While their functional boundaries are flexible, they can be identified and structured to optimize

their effectiveness. Population size is a fundamental factor in functional spatial planning, influencing all aspects of urban life. A larger population generates a broader labor market, greater commercial demand, and improved service quality. The study emphasizes that without defined population targets in planning, peripheral cities and regions will remain small and weak, leading to economic and social stagnation. A multi-regional planning approach is proposed, based on a system of cities with varying population sizes and geographical locations, each assigned a regional role according to its place in the spatial hierarchy. This framework enabled us to classify cities based on their functional regional roles. We begin by mapping and analysis of existing spatial divisions.

*Urban Hierarchy*

The map construction is based on central cities, the urban hierarchy, and the spatial relationships between them within the region. The concept of urban hierarchy describes the connections and relationships between different cities in a given area, focusing on their size, importance, functions, and interactions. This hierarchy is based on several key criteria:

- Size: Larger cities, or metropolitan areas, are typically more central and influential. They attract population, businesses, institutions, and infrastructure, serving as major economic, cultural, and social hubs with diverse employment opportunities.
- Importance: Cities gain significance through their roles in economy, culture, politics, or science. Their influence may stem from strategic location, institutions, or industry, allowing them to shape policy and drive regional and national development.

*Functions*

Cities often specialize in areas like industry, commerce, tourism, or education. This focus strengthens their regional role and ability to provide relevant services, boosting their economic and social influence.
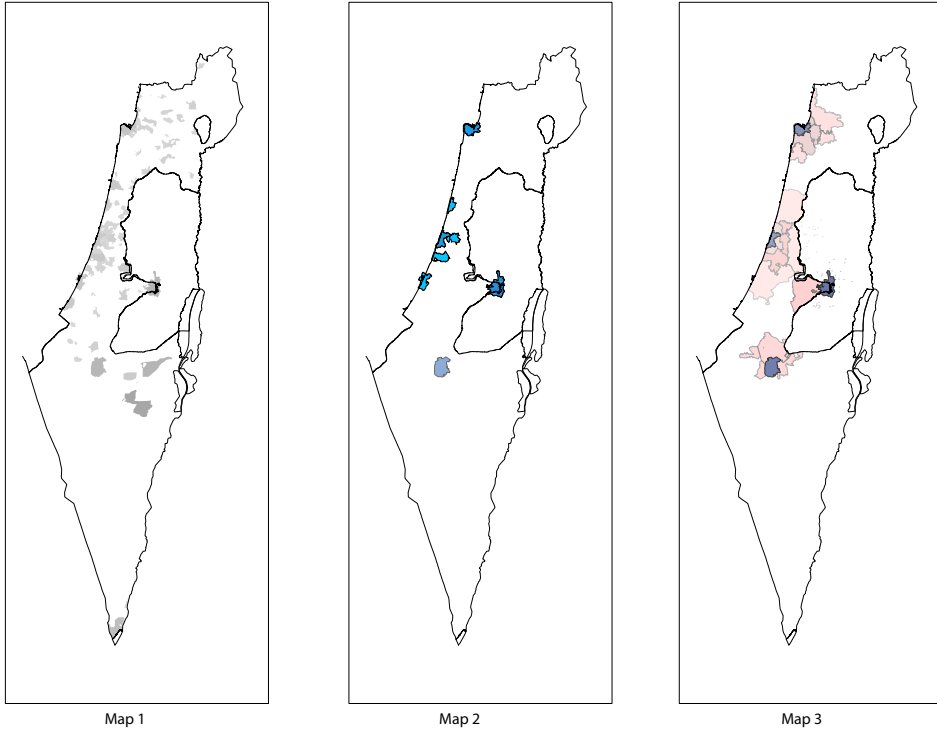
The following maps will illustrate the ways in which we have mapped and defined the different statuses of cities based on these criteria. These mappings will help visualize how the various factors influence the structure of cities and their relationships, as well as identify the hierarchy that exists within regional space (Figure 10).

**Figure 10**: Breakdown of Maps (from Right to Left):
Map 1: All settlements classified as cities.
Map 2: Metropolitan cities and cores surrounding the metropolitan areas.
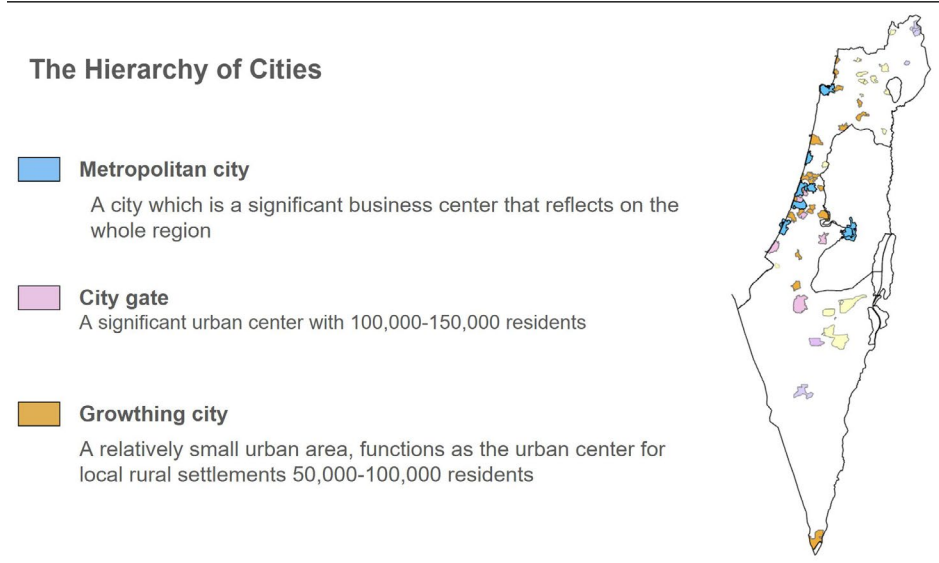Map 3: Secondary metropolitan cities (as defined on the following page)



Source: Ben Zaken et al., 2025

The map in Figure 11 details the types of cities based on size and location:

- Metropolitan Cities: Jerusalem, Haifa, Be'er Sheva, and Tel Aviv. These cities serve as the primary economic, cultural, and social centers of the country.
- Secondary Metropolitan Cities: Cities with *200,000-500,000 residents*, located on the outer ring of a metropolitan area, approximately *25-35 km* from its core.
- Gateway Cities: Cities with *100,000-250,000 residents*, serving as significant urban centers in the inner ring, about *15 km* from the metropolitan core. In less densely populated regions, a gateway city may evolve into a secondary metropolitan city.
- Growth Cities: Cities with a relatively small urban fabric, housing *50,000-150,000 residents*, functioning as service centers for rural areas in the outer rings of the metropolitan area or even beyond.

- Special Cities: Cities with a small population but significant spatial or economic influence in their region.
- Special Local Council: A settlement that is not officially classified as a city but holds economic and cultural significance within its geographical area.

**Figure 11**: Map of City types by size and location



Source: Ben Zaken et al., 2025

*The Socioeconomic Index*

The socioeconomic index is a tool that assesses the social and economic level of populations or areas based on a combination of various factors. It includes indicators such as income level, education level, employment level, health status, housing conditions, crime rates, and access to public services. The index reflects the social and economic situation of residents and is used by government offices and planning bodies for policy determination, resource allocation, and the development of economic and social programs. In Israel, the index is divided into deciles or socioeconomic clusters, with higher clusters representing more affluent populations, while lower clusters indicate weaker populations. In our map, we have created a new index for regions, called the regional socioeconomic index. The index is calculated by multiplying the socioeconomic index of each locality by the number of residents in that locality. We then added up all the results and divided the sum by the total number of residents in that region. This process created a new socioeconomic value for the area, allowing us to examine the performance of one area in relation to another.

*Connectivity and Delimitation*

Beyond the classification of cities by size and location described above, the map was based on theoretical concepts from contemporary regional discourse, which relate to connectivity and delimitation. These concepts help in understanding the spatial relationships and connections between different cities.

One such concept is the *Functional Urban Area (FUA),* a term defined by the OECD and mentioned in the previous chapter. Functional Urban Areas are determined based on daily commuting patterns. They can be measured by the movement of passengers, and if such data is unavailable, they can be estimated based on road density or public transport accessibility, which allows for one-hour travel to one or more central cores (Dijkstra et al., 2012).

Another concept is *Morphological Urban Areas (MUA),* which refers to a spatially continuous urbanized zone characterized by high population density, a compact built environment, and significant economic and social interactions. These areas typically exhibit dense residential, commercial, and infrastructural development, forming a cohesive urban fabric. The MUA concept is used to analyze urban form and structure, often serving as a basis for regional planning and metropolitan governance. However, in highly dense regions, a unique Morphological Urban Area may include several preferred Functional Urban Areas. Unlike Functional Urban Areas (FUAs), which are defined based on commuting flows, MUAs are delineated by physical urban continuity and land use patterns (Dijkstra et al., Veneri 2016).

A further concept is Large Urban Regions (LURs). Large urban regions can take different forms depending on the presence of unique and isolated MUAs or FUAs, or whether multiple such areas exist in proximity to one another. According to this approach, the focus is on analyzing local economic connections between different MUAs and FUAs. For example, proximity to national or international airports and the presence of multinational companies contribute to these areas, integrating them into a network of cities and global regions.

MUAs focus on *spatial continuity* (built-up areas, urban density, and land use). FUAs incorporate *functional relationships* (commuter patterns, economic interactions). Combining both approaches gives a *comprehensive view* of urban systems.

### Creating the New Model: City-Region Types

Based on these concepts and on our analysis, we established a classification of different types of areas. Each category includes its own system of regional city hierarchies and connectivity between them.
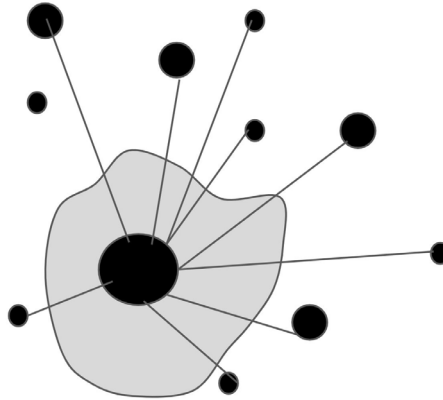
*Single-City Region*

This regional division is based on the idea that at the heart of the region lies a single central city, which serves as the economic and cultural powerhouse of the area. This concept aligns with the idea of *Functional Urban Areas (FUAs),* where a central

city acts as the anchor of the region. Such a regional classification is more common in peripheral areas, where there is less spatial continuity between settlements.

A case study of such a region is the city of Be'er Sheva, which serves as the metropolitan center of the southern region and hosts numerous key institutions, including educational, cultural, and healthcare facilities. Be'er Sheva functions as the regional city for this area (Figure 12).
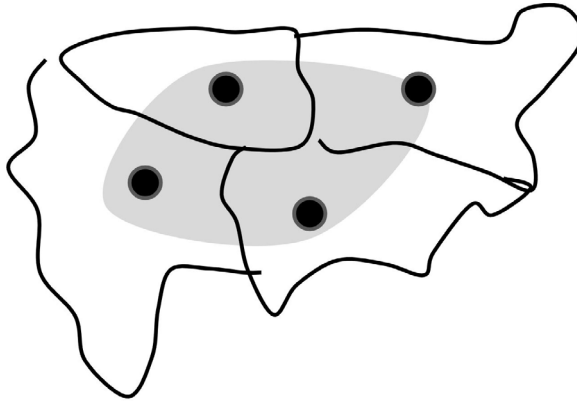
**Figure 12**: Single-City Region



Source: Ben Zaken et al., 2025

*Continuous Morphological Area*

When multiple cities exist in a high-density region without clear spatial separation between their centers, an urban space with a continuous morphology emerges. This concept aligns with the *Morphological Urban Areas (MUAs)* approach.

Together, these cities form a spatially continuous regional cluster of residential areas, industry, and public institutions. According to this perspective, all the cities within this space collectively constitute a single urban region, fostering economic and social interactions. However, this does not imply merging the cities into a single entity; rather, it emphasizes preserving the individual identity of each city while recognizing their geographic proximity as a factor that integrates them into a shared urban system. A case study of such a continuous urban area is the Eastern Sharon urban cluster, which includes the cities of Kfar Saba, Ra'anana, and Hod HaSharon (Figure 13).

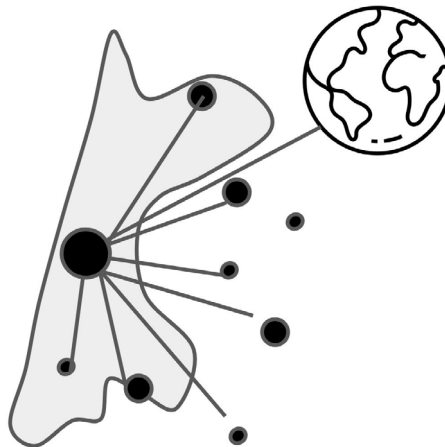**Figure 13**: Continuous Morphological Area



Source: Ben Zaken et al., 2025

*Global Metropolitan Area*

   Urban areas with distinct urban forms and strong economic and cultural influence have become part of the global network of international metropolitan regions. These areas are integrated into the global urban system, linking them to international economic and cultural flows. A key case study of such a region is the Tel Aviv metropolitan area, where the city functions as part of a network of global cities with significant international influence. Tel Aviv is embedded within the global urban framework, strengthening its role as a hub in the international economy (Figure 14).

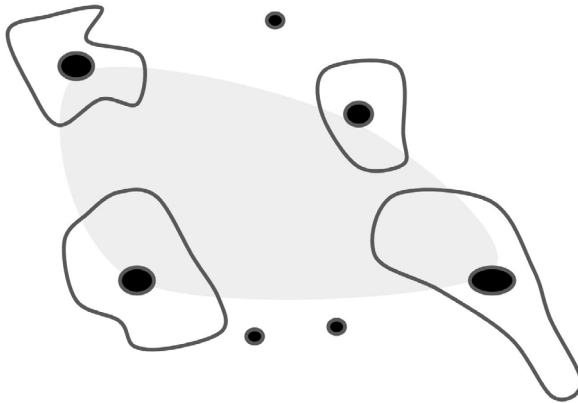**Figure 14**: Global Metropolitan Area



Source: Ben Zaken et al., 2025

*Multi-Nodal Separated Urban Area*

These areas consist of multiple cities, such as growth cities, gateway cities, or special local councils. Unlike regions with a single dominant economic core, these areas lack a rigid economic anchor that serves as a spatial and economic center. However, the collective connection between several cities can create a significant socio-economic anchor for the entire region. A case study of such a region is the Eastern Negev area, which includes the cities of Arad, Dimona, and Yeruham. By linking these three cities into a single regional framework, the area can strengthen its economic and social significance within the broader regional context (Figure 15).

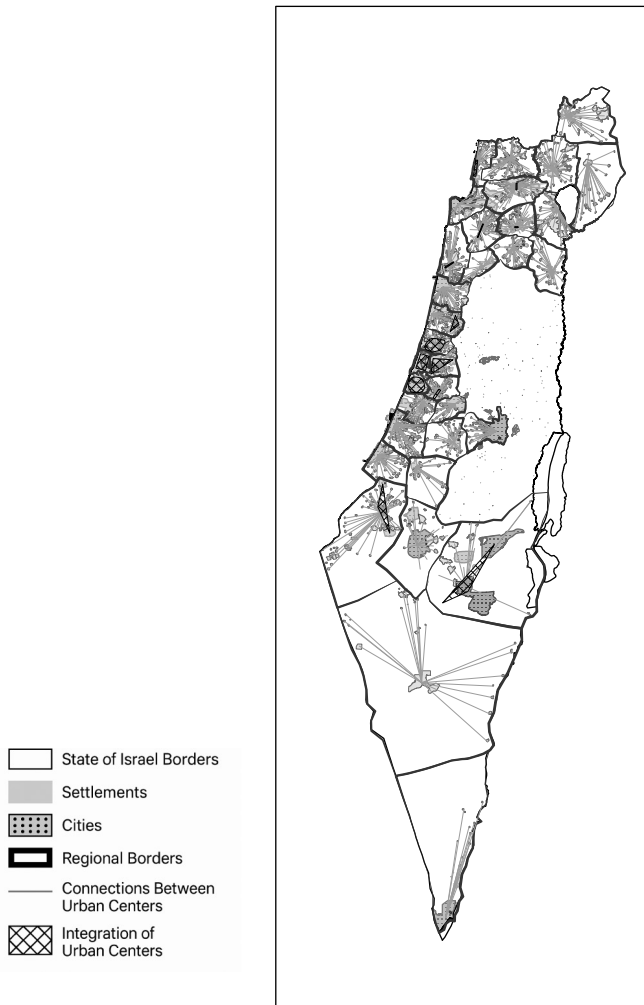**Figure 15**: Multi-Nodal Separated Urban Area



Source: Ben Zaken et al., 2025

*Map of Israel's Regional Division*

The map below presents the division of all of Israel into regions, with each region divided according to one of the four patterns described earlier: a region of one regional city, a continuous morphological region, a global urban region, and a multi-centered separated urban region (Figure 16). In total, 33 regions have been created according to the following breakdown: 22 city-region areas, 1 global metropolitan area, 7 multi-centered separated areas, and 3 continuous morphological areas. The number 33 is not an absolute and final figure for the regional division, and the size of the regions and the settlements within them may require further consideration. These are lines drawn on the map, which can be discussed and debated further. We hope that this map will serve as a first step in the discussion of the nature of the regional governance layer in Israel and the boundaries of the different regions.

**Figure 16**: The Regional Map of Israel



State of Israel Borders

Settlements

Cities

Regional Borders

Connections Between
Urban Centers
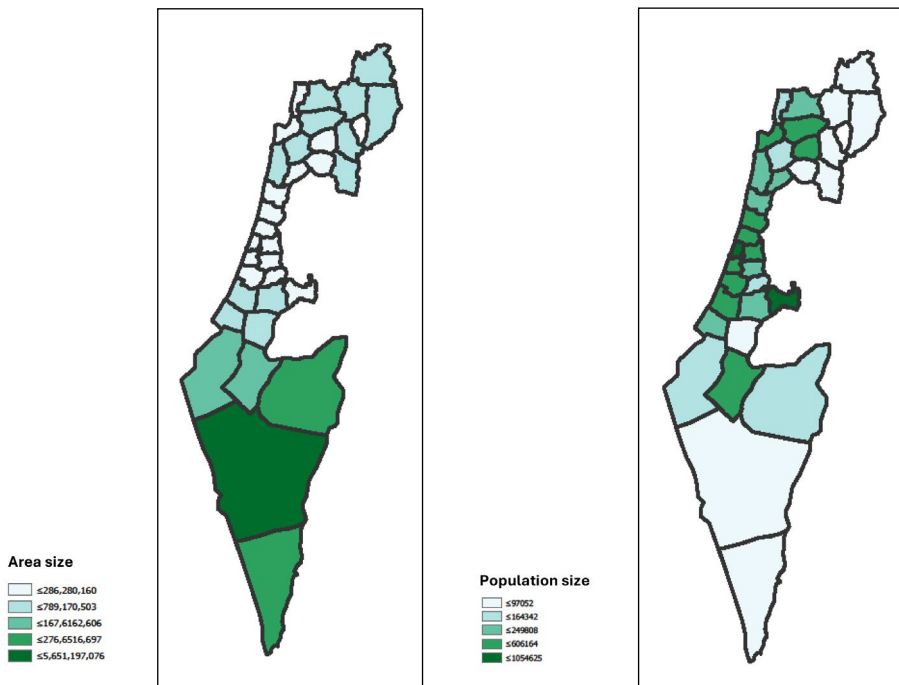
Integration of
Urban Centers

Source: Ben Zaken et al., 2025

The map provides a visual description of the connections and linkages between different cities, demonstrating how each region operates based on its morphological and functional structure. It allows us to see the dynamics between the cities and the surrounding rural settlements, thus offering insights into the spatial and economic interactions within the region. The map reflects the geographical boundaries of each region, but the relationships between the center of the region and its borders are not necessarily between a center and its periphery. In some regions, the cities are located at the edges of the area (for example, in a gateway city), and there are regions with several cities. Ultimately, the map is a visual representation that allows us to see a

broad picture of all the regions together, helping to assess the spatial interactions and how they connect and impact each other in the geographical and economic space.

Next, a visual analysis is presented showing an inverse relationship between the size of the region and its population (Figure 17). On the right, a map of the regional division is shown with a representation of the population, where the darker the color, the larger the population. On the left, a map of the regional division with a representation of the area is shown, where the larger the area, the darker the color. The placement of these two maps side by side demonstrates that as the area becomes larger, the population decreases. For example, the region of Mitzpe Ramon in the south has a very large area, but its population is very small. In contrast, the Tel Aviv region is very small in area but has a very large population. Below are maps of three regions (Figures 18-20), including the type of region, the rationale behind the division, and data such as the number of residents, socio-economic ranking, and the settlements included in the region.

**Figure 17**: The area of the region versus the number of residents
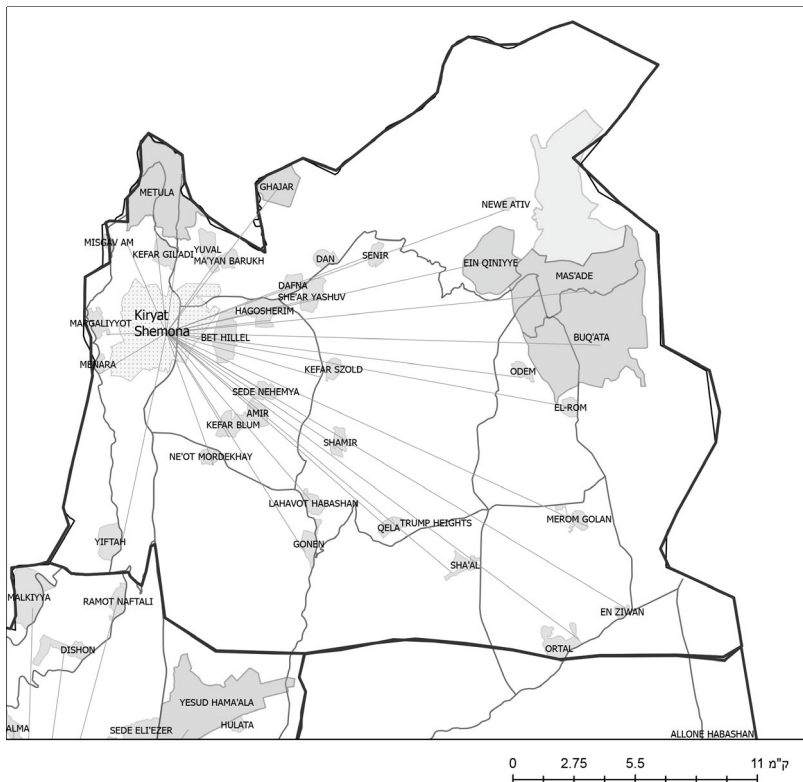


Source: Ben Zaken et al., 2025

The following is an example of one of the regions:

### *Kiryat Shmona—Golan Heights*

*Type of Region: One City-Region*
    The Upper Galilee region is rich in open landscapes, mountain ranges, valleys, streams, and heritage sites from various cultures in the area. In the Golan Heights, Druze settlements have been established since the late 16th century. Kiryat Shmona is the central city of the region, and in recent years an industrial and innovation zone has developed there, along with Tel Hai College, which has now become the University of the Galilee. This is a city with significant development potential, serving as a hub for services and urban experiences for the entire region. The northern, eastern, and western borders of the region run along the borders of Syria and Lebanon, starting with the Druze settlements in the northeastern Golan Heights, extending to Metula in the northwest. The southern border of the region encloses the Upper Galilee at the point where it meets the Katzrin district and southern Golan Heights, and the Safed, Rosh Pina, Hatzor, and central Galilee districts.

**Figure 18**: Region 1: Kiryat Shmona – Golan Heights (Area: 615.3sq.km.; Pop.: 125,262; Average socio-economic ranking for the region: 4)



Source: Ben Zaken et al., 2025

## IMAGINING A FUTURE OF REGIONAL COLLABORATIONS – FINAL NOTES

The regional division plan proposed in this paper is based on a re-examination of historical national plans, and particularly the 1951 Sharon plan which was based on regional thinking, although one based on ethnocratic principles. We attempt to rethink regionalism based on ethnic, social and economic equity, democracy and 'the right to the city'. The map is also an attempt to practice 'the agency of mapping', that not only identifies the existing but may hopefully push toward more justice and equality in space and society. Creating a map is a complex process that requires boldness—drawing lines, setting boundaries, determining what is inside and what is outside, and thinking deeply about what connections will lead to better, thriving regions.

The regional plan proposes a division based on formal parameters—land area and population size, economic strength, natural boundaries or those based on major roads, and administrative and governmental decentralization—aimed at restoring geographical balance and social equilibrium to Israel. Though the regional framework we propose is far from being a magical solution to the political, social, and economic crises inflicting the country, the restructuring of the space may moderate and balance the intensity of Israel's crisis and establish a more stable democratic foundation. The regional division may also reshape the relationships between citizens and the government—serving as a means to increase citizens' involvement in managing and making decisions about their living space and environment. It may establish a governmental institution that sees, listens to, and understands the needs of the citizens within its jurisdiction and will allow them to be heard, seen and take a greater part in their local government. And perhaps most significantly, it will enhance and strengthen new and existing collaborations between citizens from different population groups in the same region, working toward shared goals related to daily life, the environment, and their most basic lived experiences. The creation of this new regional layer in the country is not merely a conceptual change but also an institutional shift that requires new economic as well as functional models of mutual, sustainable growth.

Decentralizing power, from the central government to the regional level, will allow the central government to be more responsive to citizens' needs and to create a more grassroots spatial mechanism capable of obtaining an up-to-date picture of the local population's needs and desires. This, in turn, will allow the central government to focus on its exclusive responsibilities—national strategy, resource management, foreign relations, budgeting, and oversight. This may create an adaptive and flexible system that can provide precise responses and address the spatial and economic interests of the population groups living in the region.

It is important to note that we see this map as an initial version. It has several significant shortcomings. First, we have not related to the much needed mutual growth mechanism for urban and rural settlements within the regional framework,

as it is outside the framework of this project. Spatial and economical mechanisms for dealing with these relations still await research and development. Another aspect which we have left out of this project is the areas outside the borders of the Green Line which are part of an unresolved political conflict in which there is development and settlement carried out by Israeli governments against international law. We do not wish to ignore the dire situation in the West Bank that is drastically deteriorating in the past two years since the monstruous Hamas attack on Israeli civilians on the 7th of October 2023, nor the growing massive destruction of physical infrastructures, the mass civilian deaths and the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza. However, these issues are beyond the scope of this project. In fact, the project seeks to first address the already immense complexity within the 1967 borders. We believe that tending to the inequalities and injustices within Israel's internationally legitimate borders will serve as the foundation for dealing with the wider region. It is also worth mentioning that this map is only a first stage since we believe in public participation processes and in deriving knowledge from the ground. In the next stage, interviews, polls and consultations with inhabitants representing the various communities must be held, in which final boundaries for the regions will be determined, and decisions will be made about collaborative institutions of the regions in a variety of issues of collaborative space.

## NOTES

1   Sasskia Sassen argues that despite the intensification of global capitalist forces, squares, streets, and parks remain fluid and accessible spaces. The growing physical and visual presence of migrants, diverse identity groups, and social disparities actually enhances and stimulates political action and social struggles for equality, inclusion, and justice (Sassen, 2016).

2   The concept of the "Right to the City" was first introduced by French sociologist Henri Lefebvre in his 1968 book *Le Droit à la Ville*. In the decades that followed, the idea was further developed as it was adopted by social movements, local governments, and international organizations.

3   One example is the "Land Petition" case, in which the Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow Movement filed a petition in the 1990s against the Israel Land Authority, arguing that it allowed kibbutzim to rezone agricultural land for commercial, industrial, and residential purposes. See: New Discourse, 2003. Another example is the struggle that took place in Beit She'an Valley over public access to the Asi River. Kibbutz Nir David claimed that the river was part of the kibbutz's private property, while residents of nearby cities, particularly Beit She'an, demanded access to this natural resource. See Yulis, 2023.

4   As shown by Hananel and Nachmani (2024), the housing policy divided into four periods, each characterized by a different housing policy, reflected in different decisions, policy tools, goals, budgets, and target populations. In the

first period (1950s-1970s), Israel's housing policy was harnessed to achieve broad national goals befitting a centralized social-democratic regime. In the second period (1980s-1990s), in line with the global political-ideological shift toward neoliberalism, the role of the private sector in the housing market increased at the expense of direct government involvement. An atypical episode was the public construction following immigration from the former Soviet Union. The third period (2000-2011) was characterized by the intensification of neoliberal trends in the housing market, with almost no national housing policy. The fourth period (2011-present) is witnessing a recentralization process with the return of state involvement in the housing market, but now, as a regulator aiming to create the market conditions that will attract private developers to engage in housing production. The research findings indicate that centralization has always been Israel's default response to national crises. Contrary to popular opinion, centralization processes are largely value-free; they can appear in conjunction with diverse ideologies and regimes and do not necessarily ensure more egalitarian and just policy outcomes. We demonstrate this conclusion by discussing the prevailing centralized neoliberal housing policy's broad social and spatial consequences.

5    For instance, the one developed by Idan Porat and Yogev Sharvit (Porat, 2023).
6    Oren David Kalman seeks to shed light on hitherto unexamined aspects of jurisdictional delineation, with a focus on the balance of power between the city of Ofakim and the Merhavim Regional Council, and the circumstances, considerations and ramifications of the decisions taken by Israel's Ministry of Interior. Although the circumstances which led the Ministry to adopt its decisions entailed geographical segregation that led to potential economic inequality, the decisions themselves were not purposely discriminatory, as revealed by archival material, at least not on ethnic grounds, and the economic inequality was not an inevitable result of those decisions (Kalman, 2020, 2024).
7    In recent years, researchers have employed advanced methodologies to analyze regional morphology. For example, Halás explored the temporality in the delimitation of functional regions using mobile phone location data, offering new insights into how regions function and change dynamically over time (Halás, 2024).

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