

## WHAT AND WHERE IS ISRAEL?

### Time for a Gestalt Shift

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Israel is one of the few states in the world that has never issued a postage stamp featuring a map of the country. Although most countries are proud of their shape and often use their map image on postage stamps and elsewhere as a unifying and iconic representation of national existence, that is not the case in Israel. The question of the country's exact territorial composition is, and always has been, too politically and ideologically fraught to enable its map image to be used in that way. But if the State of Israel dares not officially speak the name of its borders, that does not mean it does not have them. What it does mean, however, is that tracing where the borders of the state have been, and where they are now, requires an act of explicit and assertive analysis.

Because thinking productively about the future of a state means knowing what is inside it and what is outside it, we must ask what is it that lies between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. Is it a state named Israel, located in part of the area, with other parts of this territory existing outside it? Or does the State of Israel contain all the territories west of the Jordan River, even if those territories and the populations living in them are ruled differently? For a half-century the answer to that question in the minds of most (not all) of those living in this space, studying it, or seeking to change it was clear: the land west of the Jordan was defined as divided between Israel and not-Israel. For decades this was the solid ground of analysis and action: it contributed an unquestioned apprehension of reality to campaigns to bring about or prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state. The result was on-point journalism, energetic political mobilization, and much excellent scholarship.

