

A National Plan to Strengthen Israel's Northern Border Region (NBR)

About Us

We are residents, civil society organizations, business owners, and representatives of local governments who live and work near Israel's northern border in the Galilee and Golan Heights, as part of a mosaic of strong and diverse Jewish and non-Jewish populations in the area.¹

We live adjacent to an enemy who is spread out along our border, heavily armed, and who has one main ambition: to destroy the State of Israel.

Since that terrible Shabbat on October 7, 2023, whether we left our home by state order or remained in the area, we are finding it difficult to close our eyes and fall asleep, because we understand too well the dangers of living in the shadow of such an imminent threat, and also understand what the price in fire and blood would be of the struggle to remove that enemy.

Inspired by our morality and Zionism, we are determined to see our region prosper, now and in future generations- as a nation that "seeks out and pursues peace".

We are the Northern Border Region.

October 7, 2023 – The Watershed Moment

The Sabbath of October 7, 2023 represents a milepost in the history of the State of Israel and the entire Zionist movement, but for the NBR, it's a real watershed moment. If until that terrible Sabbath, our mission was the socio-economic challenge facing any region in an outlying area, since that day our challenge has become an existential one. Our position in the region and the communities on the border line once again have critical security significance for the State of Israel, as they did at the beginning of the Zionist period, when border regions were central to the Zionist effort. Until October 7, our region's main challenges were a lack of competitive employment opportunities and critical life infrastructures, in comparison with the center of the country. Since that fateful day, we have been exposed to fear and our collective memory about the fragility of the border and the terrible dangers lurking on the other side, a tangible threat and **dangers that no one can deny anymore.**

The War in the North

Since the outbreak of the war, Israel's borders with Lebanon and Syria have become an active wartime front, with dozens of rockets, anti-tank missiles, mortars, and UAVs fired daily from Lebanon into Israel. Residents of the communities within 5 km of the border (about 60,000 people) have been evacuated from their homes by government order, and many residents of

¹ This document was prepared by the Northern Foundations Forum (see details at the end of the document) and edited by Michal Raikin, Ze'ev Hayut, Amit Granek and Atar Razi-Oren. Thanks to Micha Friand for the assistance.

the north beyond that region have evacuated themselves based on a real and tangible fear for their lives.

Since the beginning of the war, the shooting from the Lebanese side of the border has extended from Rosh Hanikra on the Mediterranean Sea to Metula. As the fighting in Gaza progresses, the attacks by Hezbollah and other terrorist organizations have increased as well, to ranges beyond the border region, including direct targeting of communities in the north.

It's true that the IDF has been working to the best of its ability to thwart the threat from southern Lebanon since the beginning of the war. In addition, many Israeli army units have been deployed inside communities, including those kibbutzim, moshavim, and towns that have not been evacuated. **Despite this, the enemy has maintained most of its military and strategic capabilities. The reality created on Israel's northern border has prohibited residents from returning safely to their homes, both now and in the foreseeable future.**

"In the Border Regions, the Nation of Israel Shall Be Assessed"

Starting on that Shabbat, we have come to understand, as they did in the early days of the State and the beginning of the Zionist movement, that we cannot rely on weapons alone. Rather, "at that place where the Jewish plow will dig the last furrow", i.e., **in that last place where we will be able to sustain prosperous and safe communities, that's where our border will be, and that's where the fate of the State of Israel will be determined.**

If we do nothing – whether we continue to live in the shadow of an enemy spread out along our border or whether we bear the harsh consequences of a struggle to remove that enemy – **our region will endure a dangerous period unprecedented since the establishment of the State.** Residents will be displaced farther south in significant numbers; communities will be abandoned; investments will cease; essential service providers will refuse to live and work in the area; and cultivated regions will lay fallow.

The residents of the north now live without a timeline. It's unclear when the evacuees will be able to return to their homes and when life will return to normal, even in areas not evacuated by the government. **There is fear of war and fear of the absence of war and the deterioration of life to short rounds of missile barrages, as the Gaza Otef region has experienced since 2005.** This reality challenges not only the security of the Galilee region's citizens, but also their ability to earn a living. Because of this, an absolute majority of the residents of the NBR have declared that they will not return to their homes as long as the security situation does not improve fundamentally. This scenario will not just be our own personal disaster, but also a catastrophe for the State of Israel.

Faced with this gloomy scenario, we offer the NBR a Zionist vision of turning the tables on the situation. Contrary to the previous reality in the area farthest from the economic center of Israel – **our region's economic, social, community, and human reality will intensify and become the best in the nation.** We seek to build a reality (similar to the early Zionist period) in which the residents of Israel's periphery do not look with envy to the center of the country, but just the opposite. The entire country will look to the southern and northern border regions to draw inspiration and learn how to build strong economies, flourishing communities, quality of life and resilience. **This is the Zionist mandate of our generation.**

We trust and believe in the resilience and spirit of the people and communities in our region, and feel the support of the entire country. **However, we cannot achieve this based on our spirit alone.** Given the magnitude of the hour, the threat to the future of our region, and the national importance of its success and prosperity, we are convinced that the time is ripe for the State of Israel **to jumpstart a national program unprecedented in its scope to strengthen the NBR .**

Working Assumptions:

1. Restoring personal security is a key element

The main premise to this plan is that removing the threat from Israel's northern border is a necessary condition to for residents to return to their homes and restore normal life in the region. Restoring the sense of security, beyond any military and political moves, requires significant investment in the security aspects of the area's communities. Without actual security and a sense of security, there can be no economy.

An alternative scenario for reference might be not high-intensity military action in the region, but rather limited military responses alongside diplomatic efforts to implement [UN Security Council Resolution 1701](#). In this scenario, the threat will not be completely removed, and great uncertainty will still exist regarding the decisions of area residents to continue their lives in the NBR.

The concern would be, in that scenario, that the majority of the weaker population sectors will have no choice but to return to the region, while area residents from higher socio-economic backgrounds will consider staying in the safer regions they were displaced to, and perhaps even move there permanently.

Given a plan to significantly increase security and the sense of security even beyond the level that existed prior to October 7, 2023, the following are the guiding principles for that program:

2. There are proven internal forces and resources in the region that can lead the restoration

This program cannot be written or carried out in Jerusalem. A decision/plan should be written by whoever will be responsible for its implementation.

3. The challenge before us requires regional action

The program is focused on the development and strengthening of the NBR, from the Mediterranean Sea to the Yarmuk River, in a strip of the northern border extending from the Western Galilee to the Eastern Galilee and the Golan Heights. This principle stems from the need to address issues and elements larger than the operational scope of any single local government in the region. This principle requires cooperation between two areas and two regional clusters, the Eastern Galilee and Western Galilee, an approach which in itself has significant value and meaning for the development of Israel's north.

4. Regionalism requires significant reinforcement of the urban centers in the NBR, based on the leveraging of assets

The plan will promote area urban centers so that they become centers for development, population growth, and the provision of high-quality regional services by leveraging sustainable regional assets.

5. The role of the government is to lead and enact policies backed by long-term resources

The implementation of the plan presented here requires decisions at the national level, decisions focused on reconceptualizing and redefining the role of the country's peripheral regions in general, and the NBR in particular. It requires decisions about a substantial change in priorities that will be reflected in the allocation of national resources at levels not seen in the past. **The national government's long-term commitment is a prerequisite condition for the implementation of this plan.**

6. A multi-sector approach as a basis for the plan's success

Over the years, multiple plans have been formulated and government decisions have been made about the northern Israel envelope region and the entire northern area of the country. This plan is not intended to replace them. This plan asks the government to transfer some of its authority to the regional level, to remove certain barriers and thereby create program sustainability, in collaboration with all sectors and local governments, regional clusters, civil society organizations, and leaders and representatives of the business sector. Unlike in past years and in past crises such as the Second Lebanon War, today in the Galilee there are proven management mechanisms that can play decisive roles in the development planning process. There is no need to establish new management mechanisms that will just add bureaucratic burden. The Western Galilee and Eastern Galilee clusters broke the paradigm 15 years ago towards a path of regionalism. They have organizational memory and implementation capabilities, and they must lead an innovative structural process that will serve as the basis for the success of the civilian aspects of this plan.

7. The regional economic development approach: Stimulating the business sector alongside strengthening the civil infrastructure

The approach proposed in this document seeks to combine unprecedented incentives for businesses and companies to spark the growth of the commercial sector in the region, with an emphasis on the ecosystems already built in the Galilee (such as agrifood-tech) to achieve results in the short/medium term, while preserving economically strong population groups in the NBR. This would take place alongside investments in civil society, such as strengthening education, bolstering regional transportation, and a profound change in the quality of local municipal services, which will only produce results in the long term.

The Goals of the National Plan to Strengthen the NBR ²

In the short term:

1. Security and resilience

The actual security and sense of security of the residents of the NBR will be no less than those in the center of the country; the resilience of residents and communities will be among the highest in the country.

2. Decrease in regional tensions and increase in regional cooperation

The level of mutual trust and social cohesion in the envelope region will increase considerably based on accepted measures, allowing it to overcome the primary social divisions characterizing the area- rural areas vs. urban centers and Jews vs. Arabs. In addition, mechanisms and capacities for coordinated and synchronized regional management will be established in the border region.

3. A significant increase in the activity of the private sector related to the regional growth engines- with an emphasis on the number of startups, investments in industry, percentage of high-paying jobs, and more.

In the long term:

4. Standard of living and quality of life

The standard of living and quality of life in the NBR will be among the highest in the country- as measured by various indices, including life expectancy; achievements of the local education system; accessibility to transportation – both inside and outside the area; level of disposable income per capita; culture; environmental quality and protection; and accessibility to advanced public services and sports and leisure infrastructures.

5. Economic might

Within five years, the gross regional product of the northern envelope region will increase significantly compared to the country average; the average salary will rise and the disposable income per capita in the region will increase significantly compared to the average disposable income per capita in the country.

6. Demographic growth on an unprecedented scale

The current retention-migration balance in the region will shift significantly in the positive direction. The migration of residents from the NBR will be completely stopped, and the area will absorb new residents looking for high standards of living and quality of life, in significant numbers relative to the past.

² The plan proposed here is described in summary fashion. The details of the costs and economic implications will be formulated after the agreement in principle concerning its components, together with regional leaders and government ministries.

The Main Change-Generating Aspects of the National Plan to Strengthen the NBR

1. Resilience and a sense of security

The first and most fundamental element in strengthening the border region is related to security and emergency preparedness. We call for:

- The full implementation of the “Magen Yisrael” (Shield of Israel) program while promoting investments in shelter and defense infrastructures in communities.
- Significant investment in the hospitals in the region – Ziv Medical Center in Tzfat and the Galilee Medical Center in Nahariya (including bolstering the mental health system at the Nahariya Hospital and moving the Mazor Mental Health Center adjacent to it) so that they can serve, both routinely and in times of emergency, as some of the most advanced medical treatment centers in the country; and expand the funding of regional medical leadership programs, such as the Ministry of Health’s Ilanot Medical Leadership Program.

2. Strengthening urban centers as a condition for regional development, with an emphasis on the cities in the northern envelope region

Without urban development in the northern envelope region (with an emphasis on Majdal Shams, Katzrin, Kiryat Shmona, Hurfeish,³ Ma'alot-Tarshiha, Shlomi, and Nahariya), there will be no leap forward in the region’s progress. Below are the main points of the program:

- Intensifying the development of plans to strengthen and build the community on a large scale.
- Significant support for urban renewal and providing incentives to change the economic viability equations of real-estate developers.
- Creating an innovative planning approach and building neighborhoods centered on creating community resilience through high-quality residential buildings, urban-based nature, neighborhood centers, and community organizers.
- High-quality public transportation and optimal connecting paths for pedestrians and bicycles, both between neighborhoods and relative to the entire region.

3. Asset-based regional economic development

This action seeks to build an advanced, 21st-century economy in the NBR that will allow increased productivity overall and increased disposable income per capita.

To this end, investments will be required in the growth engines that have already developed in the field – primarily advanced agriculture, the associated agrifood-tech field, and the developing med-tech industry. In addition, increasing the efforts of advanced manufacturing (for defense and civilian markets), which has been prospering throughout the Galilee, will affect the NBR and strengthen its economic base.

- The University of the Galilee in Kiryat Shmona will be a key growth engine for promoting smart and sustainable industry within the global academic collaborations it will create. This course of action will include the following, among others:

³ The Druze local governments and councils should receive special consideration in the detailed plan.

- Implementing the decision of the Minister of Education and the Chair of Israel's Council for Higher Education to recognize Tel-Hai College as the foundation for the university and approving broad-scope investment to expand its activities in various fields, with a special emphasis on applied research capabilities and the interface for industry.
- Continued investment to establish and develop the agro-food tech, med-tech, and advanced manufacturing industry through the establishment of a government foundation and assistance to start-ups in the incubators of the Israel Innovation Authority in the region as well as assistance in raising capital and employee retention.⁴
- Development of an employment and medtech center at Cabri Junction, based on the Galilee Medical Center in Nahariya as the major hospital in the region and creating infrastructure for connecting research in Nahariya.
- Benefits for professionals required for regional economic development, such as exemptions from tenders, benefits in development fees, and grants for purchase in the priority areas- for individuals and communities- with an emphasis on envelope region cities and towns.
- Large-scale government support for the development of advanced agriculture and/or conversion of traditional agriculture through grants for the establishment of agricultural enterprises.

4. Investment in the creation of excellent public services in the NBR

We seek to create a high-quality standard of life, no less and even higher than that prevalent in the center of the country, based on upgrading available public services. A series of actions in the education domain will include, among others:

- "A paradise for raising children"- investments in excellent formal education connected to a rich, diverse continuum of available informal education options, from preschool through high school.
- Investments in public infrastructures in the areas of leisure and sports – inside local communities and at a regional level.

A course of action in the domain of transportation and regional mobility will include, among others:

- Internal transportation mobility- investments in road infrastructure and significant expansions of public transportation services that will allow efficient transportation access throughout the area.
- The extension of the current railway service to Karmiel all the way to Kiryat Shmona and the extension of Highway 6 to Cabri Junction.

⁴ See the document of the AgriFood-tech Directorate for details of all the possible solutions for strengthening the Galilee ecosystem.

5. To achieve these goals, we must bolster the region's existing organizational infrastructure to achieve the best possible outcome

Based on past experience and analyses of the government's actions in the Galilee during the past 20 years,⁵ investments in the organizational infrastructure to aid in the implementation of the plan are an essential component for success. Plans rise and fall on the bureaucratic mechanisms that drive them. This course of action will include the following:

- Establishment of a strong and empowered regional planning administration, based on the regional clusters within the NBR, and transfer of national and relevant local governmental authority to the administration.
- Intensification and development of the required capabilities in the east and west galilee clusters, including financing a well-structured system for attracting high-quality employees, based on an integrated connection between employment and residential options.
- Intensification and expansion of regional, multi-sectoral leadership development programs (such as GalilEast).
- Strengthening human capital in local governments and regional clusters, as part of the civil reserve programs of the Israel Atudot project for the Israeli public sector, with an emphasis on young people.
- Improving accessibility to all aid programs that strengthen local government (human capital, work processes, and data) for all of the northern envelope's local municipalities and governments, with a national government commitment of 10 years.

This document was written by the Northern Foundations Forum, a group of foundations that have been investing in the region for years, and for whom strengthening and developing the region is at the core of their strategy. The forum considers joint multi-sector regional action a prerequisite condition for the development of the region. This document seeks to be the basis for a detailed plan, which will be written and led by regional organizations, enterprises, and officials. The Northern Foundations Forum includes the Stef Foundation, the Russell Berrie Foundation, the Roadburg Foundation, the Beyachad Foundation, the Spirit of the Galilee initiative, and the Galila Foundation.

For more information: Michal Raikin, 050-2446840, michal.raikin@gmail.com

⁵ See the report by Roy Folkman, "A regional economic implementation model in the Galilee", June 2021, Joint ELKA (Report on an Application Model for Regional Economic Development – MILKA North).