The Pillars of Regional Strategic Planning: Guidelines for the Israeli Context

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Regionalism is taking root in Israel with the formation of regional municipal clusters and recently, with regional strategic planning (RSP). New regional plans are being drawn, but in the rush to complete the new planning stratum, it seems that no coherent or agreed upon guidelines have been laid down to determine what constitutes a good regional strategic plan or even what constitutes a region. Our paper proposes a new coherent RSP framework, based on the key concept of functional spaces, and adapted to the specific Israeli context. We analyze mass movements in the Negev and the Galilee to outline functional areas. We also discuss the proper demography and urbanization destinations and propose a spatial scheme for regional planning. Finally, we lay down six foundational pillars that, if planned well, can march a region towards the overarching goal of inclusive and sustainable growth: A critical mass of population in the city, compact and renewed urban centers, mass transit, growth engines based on regional assets and innovation ecosystems, quality and diversity in all services and amenities, and regional government and partnerships.

Keywords: *strategic planning; urban functional area; polycentric regions; regional development; growth based on sustainable regional assets, Israeli planning.*

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INTRODUCTION: THE REVIVAL OF REGIONAL STRATEGIC PLANNING IN ISRAEL

In its formative years, Israel saw great importance in regional spatial planning, which served the new state in settling and developing its frontiers. Over the years, regionalism, and regional planning lost ground. The planning apparatus remained centralist, and the regional stratum received little attention. The landscape remained fragmented into multiple small and weak municipalities with generally no meaningful ability, resources, or mandate to plan strategically or implement development beyond the administrative turfs (Abada et al., 2018; Ministry of Interior, 2020; Razin, 2006). The regional level was expressed in the form of "District Planning Commissions" (a middle tier between national and local Commissions) but until recent years, they mainly functioned as a regulatory body with limited authority to determine comprehensive strategies and with no implementation mandate (Razin, 2015).

In this context, it became the norm that each ministry outlined its own administrative regional borders and devised its strategy within its subject of interest, what often results in lack of coordination, conflicting policies, misused or duplicate resources and stagnation of development. The regions (districts) outlines were dictated by historical arbitrary reasons and do not represent functional or strategic rationality (Ministry of Interior, 2020). Regional statutory planning has gone through two extreme ends: until the 1990s, it was often disregarded by the local or national level. Starting from then, comprehensive plans were drawn up for the districts and later for the metropolitan regions within them. The new plans gained prominence, especially in the realm of environmental protection (Razin, 2015). Yet, they provided limited leverage for regional growth strategies and moreover, the district plans were constantly overrun and changed by new plans from higher or lower tiers (Alfasi, 2006; Feitelson et al., 2021).

However, in the last few years Israel experiences an initial emergence of regionalism and as a result, regional strategic planning (RSP) is initiated in various arenas. This shift can be seen as the outcome of several processes: a global trend of new regionalism (see Albrechts, 2011; Healey, 2006; Razin, 2015; Neuman and Zonneveld, 2018), a regional (neoliberal) search for decentralization, and a metropolitan-centered planning approach in Israeli planning system (Hershkowitz, 2010). Another main catalysis for this is the formation of municipal clusters (Eshkolot), an institution that incorporates multiple neighboring municipalities to promote cooperation and efficiency in service provision (Abada et al., 2018). After solidifying and gaining momentum, several of the municipal clusters turned to draw regional strategic plans (guided and budgeted by the Ministry of Housing or by Israel Land Authority), with two already approved (Ashkelon sub-district and Western Galilee cluster) and five more in the making (the clusters of Kinneret-Amakim, Eastern Galilee, Beit HaKerem, Western Negev, and Eastern Negev). These plans received a sense of urgency with the crisis of the war that broke out after October 7th 2023, which devastated entire regions, cities, and communities.

Meanwhile, only during 2023-2024, the National Planning Administration took interest in this emerging trend and incorporated it into its update of the National Spatial Strategic Plan for 2050. The key policy it dictated is the reorganization of Israel into 28 functional regions which will be planned as organic units. Perhaps the most important aspect of this is the clear definition of two regional scales: the "metropolitan area" scale (a scale that was defined before) and the "urban area" scale that is encompassed in the metropolis (Planning Administration, 2024).

The emergence of RSP is a welcomed phenomenon, but it seems that in the rush to complete the new planning stratum, no coherent or agreed upon guidelines have been laid down to determine what constitutes a good regional strategic plan. The Planning Administration is currently devising guidelines for the RSP process. We utilize this moment to not only propose insights into the best *planning process*, but mainly to help define the best *planning substance or outcome*. In other words, drawing from the tradition of "the good city," (Friedman, 2000) we wish to offer guidelines not only for "how to plan" but also for "what to plan", a set of conceptual "pillars" that if planned together, may guide strategic planning in a way that will produce prosperous regions. Therefore, the paper is constructed in five chapters. The first provides an encompassing definition of what is RSP; the second proposes a framework for the baseline goals of RSP; the third analyzes the geographical definitions of regions; the fourth underscores the crucial aspects of demography and urbanity in RSP with a guiding spatial schema; and the last chapter elaborates the six pillars (or subjects) that RSP must deal with to achieve its goals.

WHAT IS REGIONAL STRATEGIC PLANNING?

Regional Strategic Planning (RSP) is different from statutory planning. The latter focuses mainly on land-use regulation and therefore has limited responsibility to achieving complex goals. Strategy is no subsequence for it, but it is a (highly missing) complementary layer of statutory planning, particularly in peripheral regions that must become proactive to achieve satisfactory development. RSP, therefore, is focused on achievement and transformation, not on enablement or prohibition (Albrechts, 2011; Van den Broeck, 2010).

RSP has several and sometimes confusing definitions, since neither "strategy" nor "regions" are agreed upon terms. This, among other things, is what makes RSP in Israel a loosely defined practice, a vessel into which each planner pours his own thoughts and agendas. We start with a substantive definition for strategy in regional planning, drawing from the turn to RSP in the European context (see Albrechts, 2011; Albrechts et al., 2003; Healey, 2006; Hersperger et al., 2019; Vasilevska and Vasić, 2009) and adapting it to the Israeli contexts. We see Regional strategic planning as *a broad plan, (1) incorporating multiple actors (2) in a functionally integrated large area, (3) that defines all the needed actions in multiple spheres, (4) to achieve big and important goals (5) in the long term.*

This definition is deliberately opposite to short term or narrow (single issue) planning, which is locked in confinements of regulation, budget, or even within the limits of imagination. So-called "tactical" "short-term" planning is the way most plans are made in Israel (and elsewhere, see Pelzer and Pot, 2023), whether for reasons of the governmental structure, or since the local (municipal) level is too weak to engage in meaningful farseeing planning independently, let alone exceeding its own municipal administrative borders to seek strength from the region around. Notice that parts 1, 2, 3 and 5 are the keys to achieving the core issues in part 4 – "big and Important goals." Let us analyze this definition, part after part.

First, the incorporation of many actors from a vast area (parts 1-2) – a region - in a planning partnership, provides strength, augmentation of resources, capabilities, and legitimacy. It "frames attention among those with significant allocative and authoritative power to focus the selection of priorities" (Healey, 2006: 527). By forming partnerships, the planning process becomes part and parcel of the implementation, since it jumpstarts the cooperation of multiple stakeholders, with shared goals, which is necessary to achieve breakthroughs. The region, as a geographical focal point, provides enough leverage to tackle "more-then-local" challenges, for which the urban scale does not suffice, such as building large infrastructures, mitigating the negative externalities of suburbanization, distribution of land revenue and taxes, pollution, drainage, tourists' movements across wide destinations, etc. (Neuman and Zonneveld, 2018). Naturally, the plan also exposes conflicts of interest among actors and must emphasize its resolution or mitigation.

Second, the focus on the distant future (part 5) is what enables the planners to mold policies without constantly being limited by the problems or obstacles of the present. This is a bigger problem than may seem: though some national-level plans did dare to lay down aspiring goals (e.g., high population goals in peripheral regions in National Outline Plan 35), the common method in local masterplans is to define goals according to present trends and prospects. The planners usually forecast population size by stretching earlier demographic trends into the future. Many of them refrain from considering game-changing events, such as new regulations, special budgets and so forth. Lastly, even if aspiring population targets are mentioned in statutory plans, no mechanism is responsible for realizing them.

This means that underdeveloped regions keep making plans that sustain their slow growth and thus perpetuate it. Only by looking at the long term it is possible to envision structural changes, diversion of negative trends, and to outline the big goals that lead to a truly desirable future picture - and to prescribe all the steps necessary to achieve it, starting from the immediate term (Albrecht, 2011; Pelzer and Pot, 2023). Without a turn to this type of strategic planning on the regional scale, no meaningful change of trends can be expected through statutory planning, what will be especially harmful for peripheral regions that suffer from negative demographic trends in the present and must seek a path towards meaningful change.

Third, a "big goal" is usually one that is complicated to achieve, what necessitates complex actions in various spheres (part 3). The advantage of RSP over statutory

planning is in its ability to view the whole field and formulate a comprehensive work plan to achieve its transformative goals (Albrechts, 2011). This means that the plan cannot remain a spatial outline of land-use but must define the list of "Breakthrough Initiatives" (BTIs) - key strategic projects that will have the most impact on the region's growth - for example, anchor institutions such as a university, a hospital, an innovation center or crucial infrastructures, such as a new train station or a connecting highway (Albrechts, 2011; Hersperger et al., 2019; Van den Broeck, 2010). The list of BTIs must be complemented with cost evaluation, potential sources of funding (government, private sector, philanthropy, etc.), needed statutory and regulation adjustments, new institutional arrangements, a timeline, and prioritization of projects. The product of RSP must be implementation oriented, a guidebook for the regional government and all collaborating actors for concentrated and coordinated efforts, and it should also be the main outline for the government when it seeks where and how to invest in regional development (Hersperger et al., 2019).

THE BASELINE GOALS OF REGIONS IN ISRAEL

This leads us to ask what are the "big and important goals" of regional strategy? Presumably, each plan should devise its own goals, which can differ greatly from those of other plans in other places or contexts. While this is true to a certain extent, not everything goes, particularly in RSP that should embrace a normative approach that opposes "the blind operation of market forces and involve constructing desired answers to structural problems" (Albrecht, 2011: 88).

The National Planning Administration (2024) made significant progress and defined these two goals: (1) creating benefiting living environments, quality of life, and reducing commuting; (2) reducing inequalities between regions and within them. We agree with these goals but wish to sharpen and advance their definition, especially in relation to the issue of growth that didn't receive proper attention.

The prolific planning researcher and philosopher John Friedman provides us with a sound guideline (2000: 466):

> *"If they are not to be seen as arbitrary, principles of the good city must be drawn from somewhere, they must be logically connected to some foundational value. Such a founding principle should be clearly and explicitly formulated […] I would formulate this principle as follows: Every human being has the right, by nature, to the full development of their innate intellectual, physical, and spiritual potentials in the context of wider communities. I call this the right to human flourishing"*

Inspired by this, we insist that there are at least three foundational goals that should and can be seen as the baseline for any regional plan in the Israeli context. These goals represent common public norms, which can best lead to "human flourishing," and promote the National Planning Administration's definitions. The issues at hand are:

Inclusive Growth – the need for sustainable economic growth is self-evident, but moreover, the Israeli population trend for the next decades promises continued fast increase which must be attended with sufficient supply of housing, infrastructure, services, and work opportunities in all regions of the country.

Equality of opportunities – the Israeli public is sensitive to socioeconomic gaps and sees their minimization as a high priority. The gap in life quality and life chances between center and periphery is a crucial national challenge to be dealt with.

Accessibility – a person's ability to reach the things he needs in the various aspects of his life (housing, education, health, etc.) is highly dependent on their availability near his place of residence. Regionality is crucial in this, since most people can and are willing to travel certain distances to attain various needs, but if these are not available – or available at poor quality – in a reasonable proximity (within the region), the life opportunities and quality are poorer.

Considering these issues, we propose that the baseline goals for every regional strategy making will include *inclusive and sustainable regional growth*. If sustainable growth is achieved within a region, then its fruits are accessible to all inhabitants who do not need to travel long distances (or migrate) to work, services, or amenities and don't need to settle for poor ones. If growth is achieved not only at the national level, but also within each region, this is a prominent route to create more equality of opportunities, social sustainability and thus, human flourishing. If this is adopted as a baseline goal in the practice of RSP, then any diversion from it in a specific plan must be explained by the planners and permitted by higher ranking authorities. This baseline, if agreed upon, enables us to continue and provide substantial pillars of strategic planning that derive from these goals. We start by defining the geography of the region.

REGIONAL GEOGRAPHICAL SCALES AND FUNCTIONALITY

What is a region and how to outline it? It is a spatial unit larger than a city or a settlement but how much larger? Indeed, there are various answers ranging from parts of continents to strips of several villages (in Israel, groups of rural settlements are municipally clustered under "regional municipal councils"). One direction to follow in this discussion is the functioning of human space, meaning, defining regions according to the intensity of movements between separate nodes. Thus, a given space is considered a region if its residents intensely move between places within it and less towards places outside it. There is a clear regional function portrayed by the directions of mass movement of people, to work, shop, recreate, or achieve various services and amenities.

This rationality is embodied in the concept of Functional Urban Areas (FUAs) that gained prominence in the European Union. It is primarily a statistically measured framework that outlines a city not based on its municipal or physical borders, but according to the settled area that leans on the city for work and services. This

functionality is measured by movements above certain levels and compared with the relative attraction of neighboring cities (Dijkstra et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2012). By this measure, the city is framed not as a cluster of buildings, separate from its suburban surroundings, but as the functional core of a surrounding linked integrated region.

As mentioned, Israel's Planning Administration lately outlined FUAs across Israel, culminating in 28 areas, while several FUAs compose a metropolitan area. But the connection between these two scales is not yet well explained. There is also little guidance in the literature of FUAs, since the statistical models generate one scale of FUAs and do not incorporate them into larger scales.

In contrast with many of the developed countries, the Israeli spatial context is highly polycentric (similar examples of existing polycentrism are the Netherlands, Belgium, or Switzerland). Besides the global city of Tel-Aviv-Jaffa, and other medium or small metropolitan centers (secondary cities) Jerusalem, Haifa, and Beer-Sheva, there are multiple small urban centers (tertiary cities) in relative proximity to the large centers. This polycentrism is not only morphological (physical) but also functional. This functionality is seen in the following analysis (Figures 1-4) of mass movements in two large regions – Southern Israel (the Negev) and Northern Israel. The analysis uses the data of a cellular survey (Ministry of Transportation, 2021) and portrays the average number of movements between all locations in the region towards all urban centers, during morning hours (6:00-9:00), the peak hours of the morning commuting.
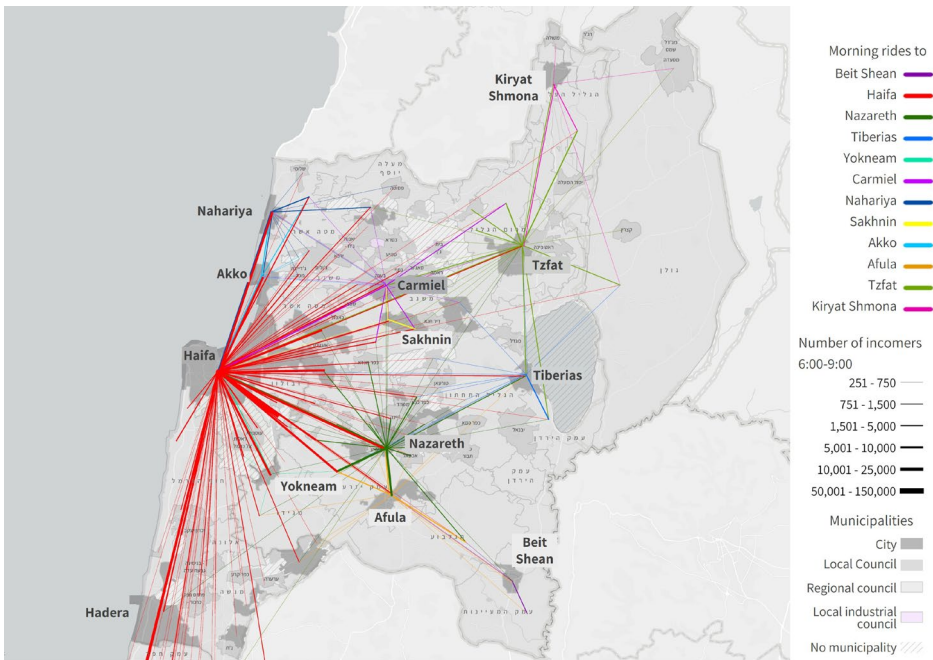
Figure 1: Morning rides to urban centers in Be'er Sheva metropolis (6:00-9:00), 2018-2019 (analysis of cellular data)
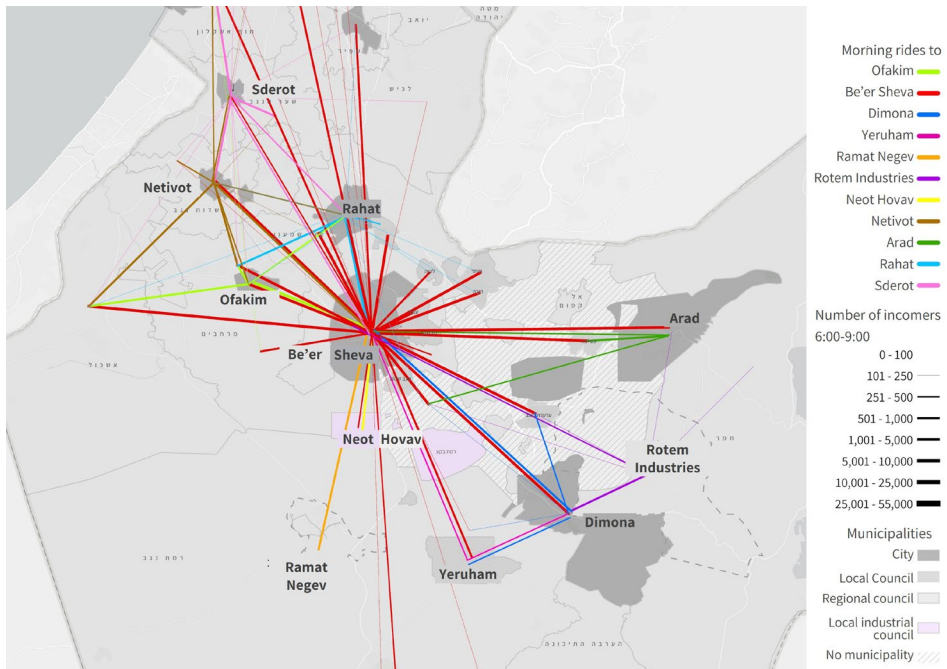
Figure 2: Morning rides to urban centers in Be'er Sheva metropolis (6:00-9:00), 2018-2019 (analysis of cellular data)
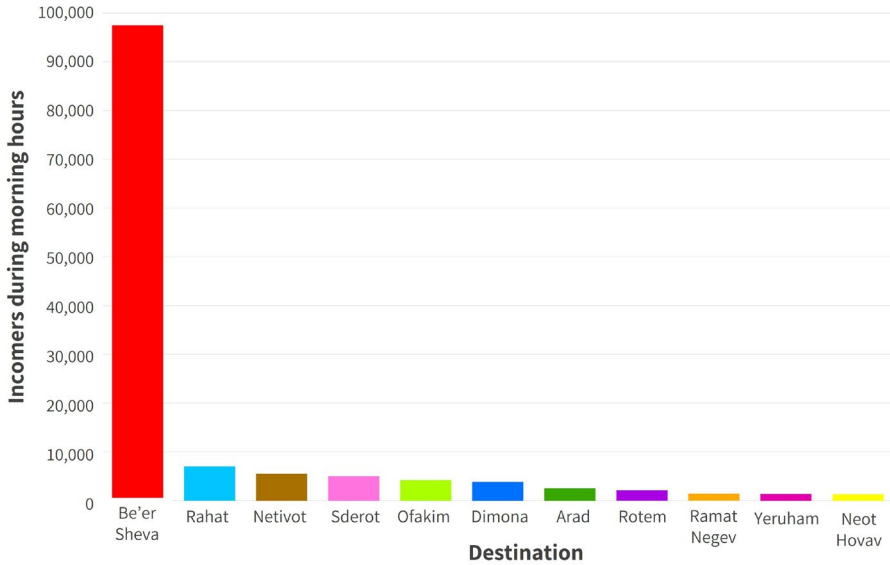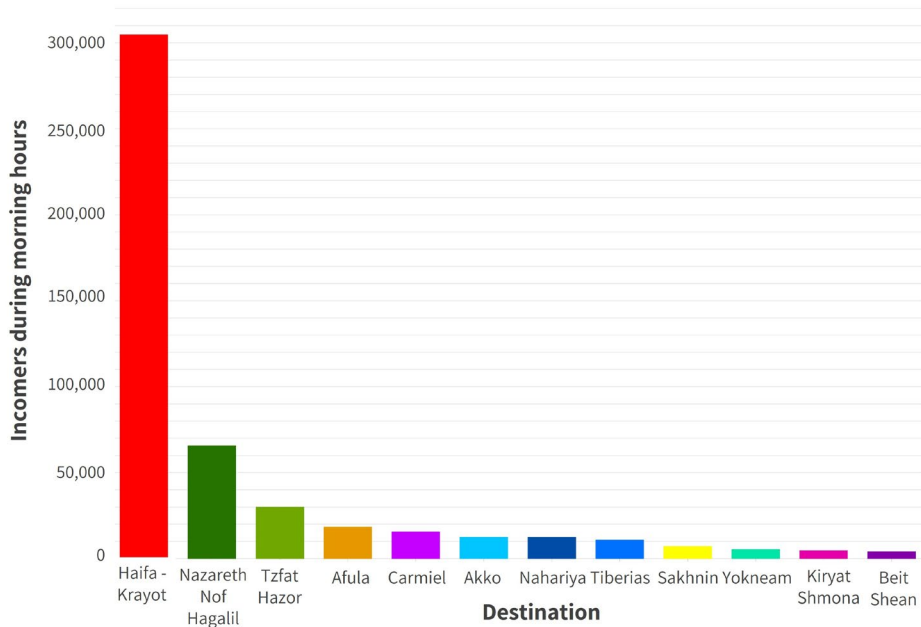

Figure 3: Morning rides to urban centers in Haifa metropolis and Northern Israel (6:00-9:00), 2018-2019 (analysis of cellular data)

Figure 4: Morning rides to urban centers in Haifa metropolis and Northern Israel (6:00-9:00), 2018-2019 (analysis of cellular data)

Two insights are highly visible in both cases: first, the metropolitan centers (Haifa and Beer-Sheva) are the overwhelmingly dominant destination in each region. They both attract more people from within the region than any other city. They also attract more people from their respective regions than Tel-Aviv does. This suggests that they function as independent centers, and that Israel is not monocentric or "a metropolitan state" (see also Razin and Charney, 2015) – Be'er Sheva and Haifa stand as additional centers.

Second, though they have much weaker attraction, the small cities *do* attract commuters from their respective (smaller) areas. The spread of movement flows is highly coordinated with the spread of urban centers. This means that people clearly tend to commute to the nearby city and not to further away cities unless it is to the metropolitan core. Obviously, the smaller cities attract far less than the metropolitan city. The second destination in the Negev, following Be'er-Sheva is Rahat which attracts 8,000 morning commuters, less than 10% of Be'er-Sheva with some 95,000 commuters. It is similar in Haifa, which attracts 300,000 commuters while the following urban agglomeration, Nazareth-Nof-HaGalil attracts only 65,000 commuters. The smaller the cities, the less they attract commuting (this is also visible in the difference in the commuting scale between Haifa and Be'er Sheva – the former being much more populated and attracts much more from its respective region than the latter). There is a visible polycentric structure in the Be'er

Sheva and Haifa regions, but it is not solid enough, so the metropolitan city is dominant while other centers are still weak. This is not surprising having that all of them haven't gained "critical mass" and are smaller than 100,000 inhabitants (most are less than 50,000) – an issue we expand upon in the following chapter.

This brings us to propose a conceptualization fit for the Israeli structure – that is strongly polycentric in the national scale (with Be'er Sheva and Haifa being independent centers) and with mild or emerging polycentrism in the metropolitan scale. We suggest that functional spaces will be categorized according to two superimposed regional scales:

1. **Functional Urban Areas (FUAs)**, the area of a small-medium size city – a "regional city" - approximately 500-1,000 square km.
2. **Functional Metropolitan Area (FMA)**, the area of a large "metropolitan city," with a strong urban core (CBD) that incorporates and serves several FUAs, approximately 2,500-5,000 square km.

The second scale is built from and contains the first scale. They complement each other. Each regional city provides work and services to a region while being itself reliant for similar services on the metropolitan core. Usually, the differences between the scales are expressed in the existence of higher-level functions in the core (international firms, large institutions, higher paying jobs, theaters, etc.) and medium-low level functions in the regional city (regional institutions, industry, etc.). It is the centrality of the core, being relatively accessible to most people in the metropolitan region, which enables it to provide a bigger pool of workers for employers and vice versa, and lower transportation costs for service providers and so forth. The best example of this multi-scale polycentrism is the Tel-Aviv metropolis, the largest and most developed metropolitan region. Within its functional area there are significant regional cities such as Netanya or Ashdod, and even Ashkelon or Hadera. These cities are highly dependent on Tel-Aviv, but they also function as service and work centers as of themselves, for their surrounding rural-suburban areas (e.g., Netanya serves the Northern Sharon area and Ashdod serves the Shfela Plato).

The simultaneity of the scales can be expressed, for example, in the daily commuting of a person to the close regional city (within the FUA) for work and errands, while occasionally traveling the longer distance to the metropolitan core for a specific medical procedure, a concert, etc. Polycentric functional structure was found to drive growth and equality of opportunities (Boussauw et al., 2018; Meijers et al., 2007), "an effective tool to overcome regional disparities" (Malý, 2016). RSP in Israel should embrace this structure and seek to further nurture it, while acknowledging that there are two scales to consider – urban and metropolitan.

Here, it is important to mention that another "semi-scale" can be added, a Secondary Functional Urban Area (SFUA), the area that relates to a very small city with limited and local function as a services provider, due to its size, small population in the area, or proximity to another larger and more dominant regional

city. There are often borderline cases of small but not negligible cities, which can be analyzed as SFUAs within a larger FUA (for example, Beit-Shean, a small town with clear function within its respective area, the Ma'ayanot Valley).

REGIONAL DEMOGRAPHY AND URBANIZATION

Further analyzing the cellular data of movements, we find that the size of a city's population highly determines the number of commuters to it. In the following two graphs (Figure 5) we see the correlation between the city population size and the number of morning commuters into it (not accounting for inhabitants of the city that travel within its borders). When examining all cities, there is a clear and strong correlation (R^2=0.91) between city size and the number of commuters to it, what suggests that there are agglomeration economies at play - the larger the city is, the more functional ties it has with its surrounding area. Moreover, the correlation is less clear when we check only small cities with less than 200,000 inhabitants (R^2=0.64). This difference suggests that there is some vague number, somewhere between 100-200 thousand urban inhabitants, which can be considered "critical mass" for a regional city. Cities with more inhabitants than that become even more attractive to commuters.

Figure 5: City size compared with incomers (into the city) during morning hours, based on analysis of cellular survey 2018-2019
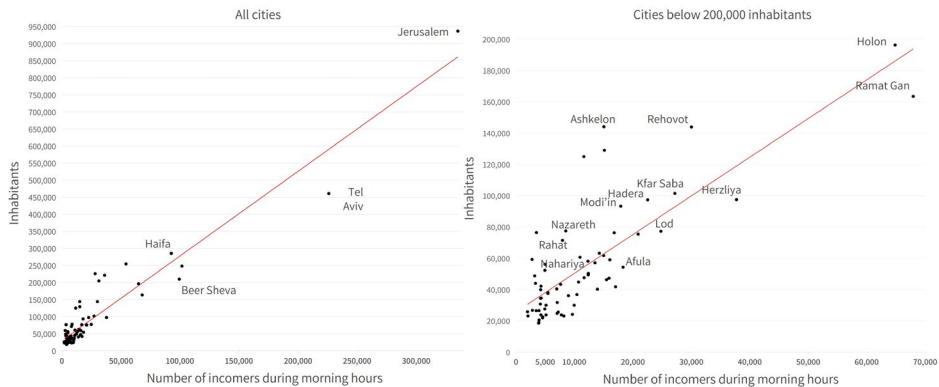

The question of "what is critical mass?" is tricky (Boussauw et al., 2018), since there is no clear number of people that makes a city big or small enough (an "optimum city size"). For instance, Camagni et al. (2013) found that the optimal size of metropolitan cities varies between 1 and 2 million people (see also Capello and Camagni, 2000). McCann and Acs (2015), similarly find that "there does appear to be a minimum threshold of approximately 1.5-2 million people in order for a city-region to achieve sufficient economies of scale to be globally competitive.

While acknowledging the complexity of the issue, we can observe the Israeli context and make some grounded assertion relating the desirable size of cities (we also urge for future research on the subject). First, we must clarify that a city size should relate to the entire urban agglomeration, regardless of municipal boundaries that separate its parts (e.g., Haifa should be analyzed together with its adjacent cities, the Krayot, Tirat Carmel and Nesher as one functional agglomeration). Second, we assert that the metropolitan city (the cluster of cities around the core CBD, e.g., Gush Dan) must be significantly larger than other cities in the FMA and indeed, focus efforts on breaching the 1-million threshold. And third, regional cities can vary in size but those in critical locations, serving large FUAs, must achieve a critical mass of more than 100,000 inhabitants.

A simple ideal-type spatial model for regional planning is offered here (portrayed in Figure 6), based on the above functional and demographic rational. The model portrays cities and their regions (FUAs) within a metropolitan region (FMA), with linking infrastructures that unite them into a functional organic system. The principles that determine the model are:

- The model is of a polycentric metropolitan region.
- The metropolitan city (the urban agglomeration that surrounds the core CBD) is the largest - by a considerable gap.
- Regional cities at a medium distance from the core (30 km radius) are large, and the further they are (45 km and more) the smaller they get (in terms of planning goals).
- Larger and more populated rural areas support larger regional cities.
- The most efficient infrastructures (fast trains) link the largest cities to the core.
- Complementary infrastructures (e.g., light rail, BRT, or regular bus lanes) complete the network, meaning, connecting between neighboring FUAs or between smaller cities to larger ones – intra-regional network.
- In the outskirts of the inner ring (10 km radius) "edge cities" can grow, especially where several transportation corridors intersect, providing advantages for business to grow.

Figure 6: Ideal-type spatial model for polycentric regional planning in Israel
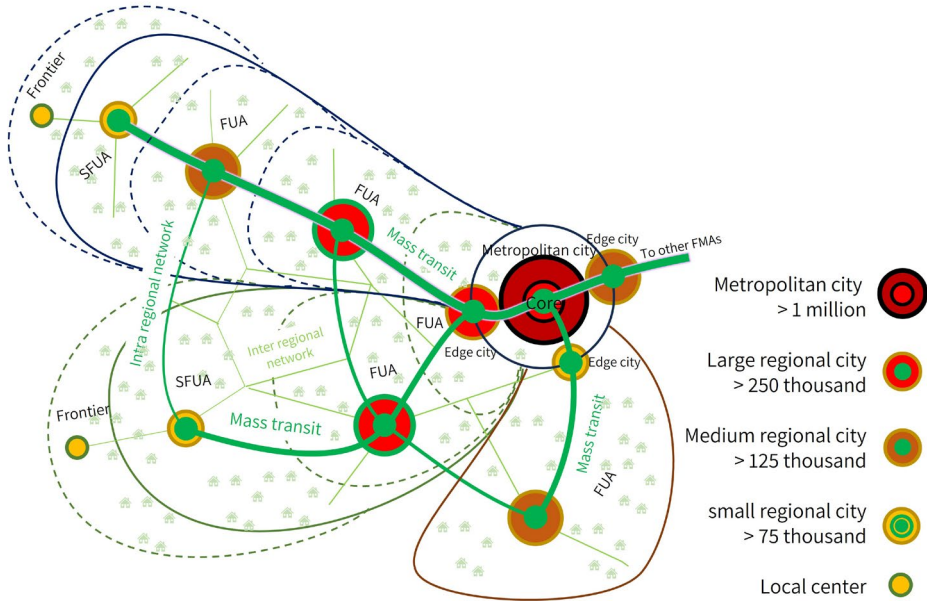
THE PILLARS OF REGIONAL GROWTH

The concept "function" has several meanings. In one sense, it relates to the present status of the working of a person or a mechanism. In another sense, a function is an assessment of the level or quality of the mechanism's work, since there is both good and bad functioning. For a functional area there can also be bad functioning. It is not sufficient to analyze the movement of people and to outline the geography of the functional space – it is also of importance to plan and develop it to elevate the levels of functioning. If people of a region need to travel far to reach an urban center with reasonable levels of services like commerce and employment (say, more than 30 minutes), then the quality of its functionality is poor. If the levels of education, housing, or healthcare within their reach in the region are lower than the national average, then this is an under functioning FUA or FMA.

Having established that RSP must strive to achieve inclusive and sustainable regional growth, we can now frame these goals as the achievement of good functioning for each FUA/FMA. We cannot delve here into the specifics of how to measure functionality, but we will attempt to outline the pillars that constitute a good functional region (and therefore, must be the focus of any strategy and a tool of measurement). Notice that the focus is not on the process of planning (participation, analysis methodology and so forth) but on its outcomes.

A good region is a (nearly) encompassing habitat for its inhabitants regarding all their aspects of life. The regional scale (especially the FMA) is wide enough to

include all infrastructures, work opportunities, leisure facilities, health, education, and academic institutions that a large population needs. In a high-functioning metropolis, most people will leave its borders only for vacations or other rare events and not for mundane needs, which are all met within their area. In the best scenario, nearly all their needs are met within the FUA, in high proximity to their home. When one aspect of life is poorly provided and is hard to reach within the FUA or the larger FMA, this will inflict badly on the region and hamper growth. Therefore, regional strategy must be comprehensive and make sure all pillars stand firmly and if not, devise concrete plans to improve.

A Critical Mass of Population in the Regional City

Demographic growth enables all other aspects of growth (and is sustained by them). A gathering of many people creates opportunities. Without people, there is a shortage of workers, what cause a shortage of new entrepreneurs; commerce has fewer buyers and thus less shops open; and services such as government offices or public transportation have less users and therefore are less frequent. The regional city in an FUA must grow and gain a "critical mass" to make the city a magnet for the regions' inhabitants within the context of the polycentric metropolis network (Boussauw et al., 2018).

RSP is crucial for determining (high) population goals and to navigate most of the growth into the urban area, since only it can put checks on competing suburban developments while the city grows. It is also positioned well to analyze an urban agglomeration as one functional city, even when it is separated into several municipalities (usually, for arbitrary historical reasons).

Compact and Renewed Urban Centers

The size of the city is not sufficient if its structure is sparse and does not produce urban vitality or if it fails to create functional ties with its neighboring cities. A big city creates an agglomeration with various economic advantages. The regional city and especially its center, must be compact, with urban fabric, mixed uses, and an emphasis on architectural quality and identity (Capello and Camagni, 2000; Feldman, 2000; Glaeser et al., 2001). Therefore, there must be incentives to grow and develop the urban core while limitations are put to mitigate competition arising from suburban commercial centers (having said that, a big city can develop secondary urban centers beside the prominent one).

RSP is crucial for renewing urban centers, since it is not enough to strengthen them by urban planning, the suburbs must be planned and developed in a manner that complements this goal and not competes with it.

Mass Transit

The key to enhancing the functionality of the FMA is to enhance the accessibility of FUAs to the metropolitan core. This can be gained primarily by fast trains. Lesser

modes of mass transit must complement the trains and create a network, within the cities and among them (Glaeser et al., 2001).

RSP is positioned well to plan the big infrastructures that connect FUAs, not just because it is mandated to view the entire metropolitan region, but because it analyzes the entirety of its components. The Ministry of Transportation plans at a regional scale but it is narrowly focused on infrastructures and does not partake in planning the cities or the population goals, a crucial component that projects on how to plan the spread and quality of infrastructures.

Growth Engines Based on Regional Assets and Innovation Ecosystems

Sustainable and inclusive economic growth can be achieved in many ways, yet there are even more ways to fail while seeking it. The first path towards it is in demographic growth (see pillar 1), since people bring employment, initiatives, and consumption volume to the region. The second important path is to properly identify unique and strong assets and qualities that provide the region with potential competitive advantages in case they are developed and turned into growth engines. Ideally, this is done from within an ecosystem of actors and institutions that work together to share advantages, diffuse knowledge, and promote policies and actions to create innovation in both technology and organizational capabilities. An asset is an object or feature that some economic sectors need and can produce value from (preferably, one that is connected to international trends), it is hard to lose or relocate it and it is not found in the same quality or quantity in other regions. The asset can be a unique tourist attraction, a robust agricultural sector, a natural resource, a cluster of specific industries, high human capacities of some sort, etc. (Orsi et al., 2024; see also OECD, 2020, 2021), or a combination of more than one of them.

Quality and Diversity in all Services and Amenities

A region will struggle to attract inhabitants or businesses if they find that certain aspects of life are underserved in terms of quality and diversity (in comparison to other regions). For example, if a new technology firm takes interest in relocating into the region, land subsidies or grants usually won't suffice to convince it. The most prized resource for such a firm is skilled workers. To attract such workers there must be available quality housing, nice parks and avenues, good education and healthcare, strong communities, a cultural vibe, and a strong sense of personal security. A significant gap in one of these aspects will project strongly on the perceived status of the area and will lower the housing demand from skilled workers, therefore lowering demand from business, and so forth (Florida, 2014; Glaeser et al., 2001).

Having that not all aspects of life are served within the municipal area of a single town or village, only RSP is well positioned to measure the various services that a person is accessible to within the wider region, and to devise a strategy to enhance them where needed.

Regional Government and Partnerships

The region is a territorial organic functional unit, where all actors are interdependent (Albrechts, 2011). Therefore, there must be a respective unit of governance and development that can provide services, form collaborations and partnerships, plan and above all implement the plans (it is worth noticing that many countries have "Regional Development Agencies"). The regional body should aid small municipalities by taking responsibilities and by augmenting resources and capabilities, promoting development actions that a weaker and smaller institution cannot undertake. Ideally, the regional institution is the primary vehicle to receive special governmental funding and implement large strategic projects (such as cluster development, infrastructure upgrading, establishment of new collages, hospitals, etc.) (see OECD, 2023).

CONCLUSION

Regional Strategic Planning (RSP) is gradually emerging across Israel. We have offered some guidelines for it, focusing on baseline goals and the planning key ingredients – its "pillars". These guidelines were constructed using insights from prominent writers on the issue and examples from the European context. Further, we made several inquiries of the Israeli spatial structure and analyzed the urban functioning in two metropolitan regions – Beer Sheva and Haifa. We started with a framework to define what is RSP: *a broad plan, incorporating multiple actors, in a functionally integrated large area, which defines all the needed actions in multiple spheres, to achieve big and important goals in the long term*. We then offered three foundational goals to guide the practice: inclusive growth, equality of opportunities and accessibility.

We developed insights regarding two crucial spatial and demographic aspects of RSP. First, the polycentric structure of Israeli space and how it is arranged in two layers – the functional urban areas (FUAs) and the metropolitan functional areas (FMA), each encompassing several FUAs and has a strong urban core that serves a vast area. We emphasized that RSP must be aware of the coexistence and interdependence of these two layers and not plan a region as if it exists in isolation. The polycentric structure is seen globally as a favorable pattern, which provides strength to regions and lowers commuting distance and therefore, it is important to nurture this already existing pattern in Israel.

Second, we have portrayed that a large population mass is a crucial catalysis of growth and highly determines the ability of a city to attract commuters and produce services, and the ability of a region to grow. Based on these two aspects, we offered a spatial schema of an FMA, divided into FUAs with an inner hierarchy of city sizes. The schema can serve to guide the planning of population goals in each region or city and how to plan and prioritize the infrastructures that connect them into one polycentric organ.

Lastly, we have listed six pillars of RSP, all of them together are crucial to achieving the underlying goals of inclusive and sustainable growth: *a critical mass of population in the regional city, compact and renewed urban centers, mass transit connecting them, growth engines based on regional assets and innovation ecosystems, quality and diversity in all services and amenities, and regional government and partnerships*. These pillars should be seen as interdependent and must all be addressed with a proper strategy, to achieve the baseline goals in every region. This holistic approach should replace the common tendency to focus on narrow aspects, to seek tactical short-term destinations, or follow and duplicate existing trends where they must be strategically diverted. To conclude, we propose a framework for what crucial elements to focus on in regional strategic planning and insist that all these elements must be taken into account, for a plan to truly be strategic and provide leverage for *inclusive and sustainable regional growth*.

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