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ERECTING A SEPARATION FENCE

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The idea of building a separation fence between Israel and the West Bank has been under consideration since the beginning of the suicide bombings in 1995 but has gained greater impetus since the outbreak of the current round of violence in late 2000. In recent weeks, the idea has begun to materialize. On June 23, the government authorized the first stage of the project, which involves building 115 kilometers of fence, at a cost of about \$1 million per kilometer.

It should be stressed that "fence" is a generic term for a physical barrier that will assume different forms in different locations. In places where Jewish and Palestinian population centers are close to each other, it might take the form of a high concrete wall that will not only prevent infiltration by terrorists but also give protection against light arms fire. In other places, the wall could really be an electronic fence.

The wall or fence is supposed to be part of a separation system, aimed at preventing any infiltration into Israel from beyond the so-called "Green Line." This system might cover an area to a depth of up to five kilometers (in unpopulated areas). It will include physical obstacles, monitoring systems and military and

police forces kept on high alert, with the aim of detecting and foiling any unauthorized attempt to cross into Israel. Passage into Israel is supposed to be possible only through supervised entry points.

The main incentive for building a fence is to prevent suicide attacks on Israeli civilians. The government is under considerable public pressure to present a workable solution. The Israeli security forces could not frustrate all the attacks, and Operation "Defensive Shield" and the subsequent pinpoint operations in Palestinian cities managed only to reduce temporarily the intensity of attacks. Another solution had to be found.

There is also a political agenda. The Minister of Defense, Benjamin Ben Eliezer, is under political pressure within his own party. His leadership is being challenged by M.K. Haim Ramon, who has advocated a political program based on the idea of unilateral disengagement. Ben Eliezer had to respond with a plan of his own, a central component of which is a fence designed purely with security considerations in mind, i.e., to thwart suicide attacks, and without the political implications of his adversary's plan. In Ramon's view, Israel has to decide unilaterally where the

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boundary between Israel and the Palestinian entity should be, to withdraw its forces to this line, and to establish a physical barrier along this line and dismantle all the settlements beyond it. Ben Eliezer's plan only envisages a physical barrier generally along the Green Line but leaves all the settlements intact.

By contrast, many on the Israeli right, including members of Prime Minister Sharon's own party, resist the idea of any separation fence at all. Their objection stems from the belief that a fence wrongly conveys the political message that Israel is willing to accept a line close to the pre-1967 Green Line as its future border with a Palestinian state. They also think that a fence implicitly distinguishes between the blood of settlers and that of other Israelis and manifests a willingness to abandon the settlers to their fate. Despite these concerns, however, Sharon could not stop the building of the fence because of public pressure and his inability to present another solution.

Supporters of the separation fence point to the fact that since the beginning of the confrontation, not a single suicide bomber managed to infiltrate into Israel from the Gaza Strip. Unlike the West Bank, Gaza is already encircled with an electronic fence.

The fence is not a panacea. Though it has some unquestionable advantages, it also has many weaknesses, mainly due to differences between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The line demarcating the West Bank is much longer (over 300 kilometers); and the topography is very complex and varies considerably from one region to another. Moreover, densely populated areas of Israel are much closer to Palestinian-populated areas. One particularly problematic area is the region of greater Jerusalem. This is a continuous urban area, checkered by Jewish and Palestinian

neighborhoods to the point where effective separation is practically impossible.

Secondly, a fence is a unilateral step and Palestinians can be expected to try to foil it. Possible responses include attempts to carry out more suicide attacks in order to prove its ineffectiveness, more attacks against the settlements in the West Bank than before, and more use of indirect fire (e.g., mortars or rockets), for which the wall is no defense at all.

Thirdly, the fact that the plan leaves all the settlements intact means that a great military effort must be invested to protect them and the roads leading to them. If a large proportion of the active IDF forces is tied up by this mission, there may not be enough left to man the fence. And a physical barrier without forces guarding it might be worthless.

Finally, it should be noted that the process of constructing the fence, with all its sensors, communications and observation posts, might take a year, if not longer. By the time the barrier attains a minimal degree of effectiveness, the situation on the ground might be completely different. For example, if the IDF incursions into Palestinian cities are transformed into a protracted or permanent reoccupation of most of the West Bank, Israel will be confronted with different kinds of security problems, for which the fence will not be relevant. On the other hand, if there is an agreed settlement of the conflict, there might not be a need for this kind of barrier, and the agreed border might be different from where the fence-line has been sited.

While most of these weaknesses do not apply to the proposal for unilateral disengagement, current political circumstances make it unlikely that that proposal will be adopted.