

The Security Fence: Solution or Stumbling Block?

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The more the construction of the barrier between Israel and Judea and Samaria – consisting primarily of a fence and complemented with some short sections in the form of a wall – progresses, the more it becomes a source of controversy in Israel and in Israel's relations with the outside world. The purpose of this article is to examine why this controversy developed, and whether it was inevitable.

On April 14, 2002, the Israeli government decided to erect the barrier, and the ministerial security committee assigned the responsibility for executing the "seam zone" plan prepared by the National Security Council to the Ministry of Defense. The decision was the outcome of mounting public pressure over the course of the current violent conflict with the Palestinians to protect the population of Israel within the Green Line from suicide attacks by means of a fence. Popular pressure intensified as it became clear to the Israeli public that in spite of the considerable achievements of the defense system in frustrating suicide attacks, it could not prevent them entirely or even reduce them to a "tolerable" level.

The concept of erecting a barrier

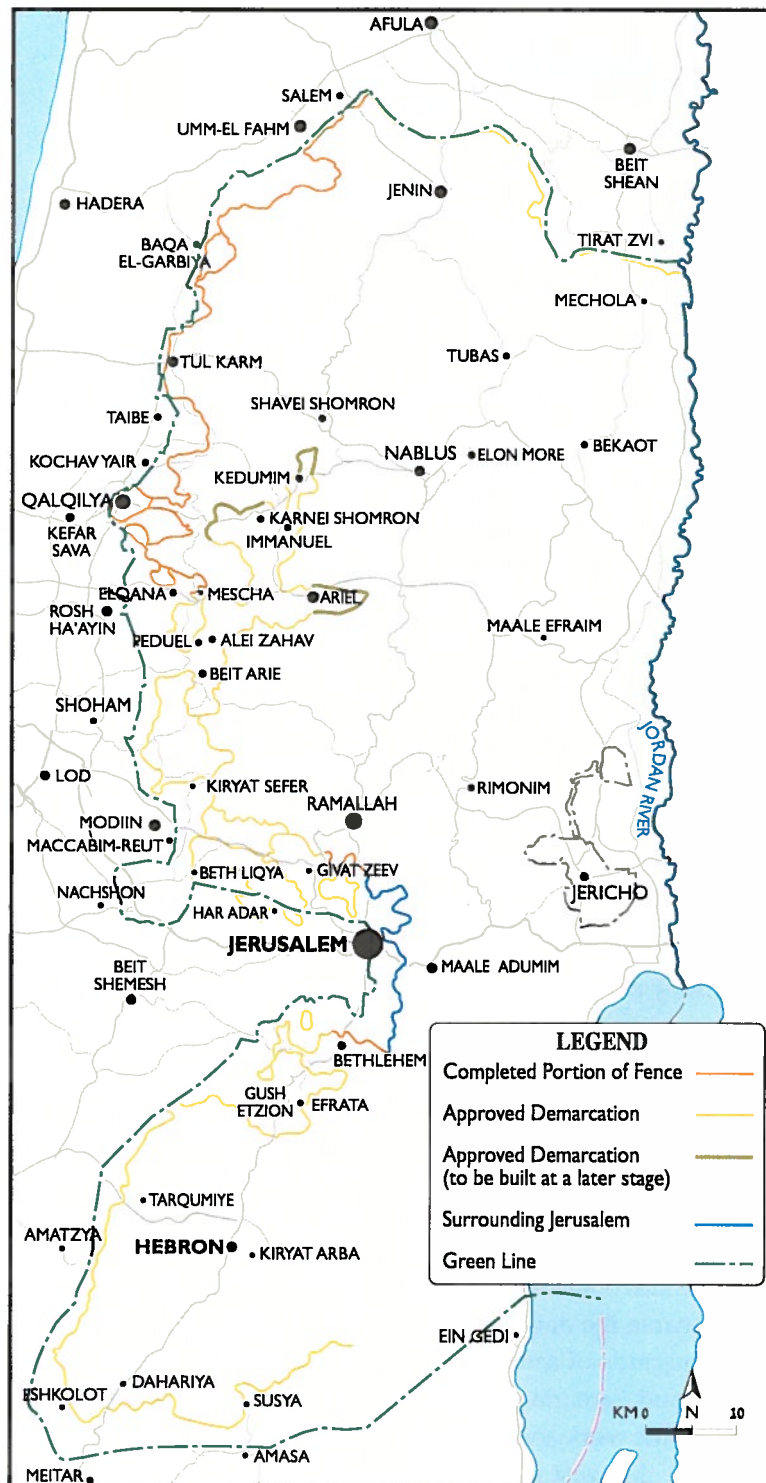
to prevent and provide warning of infiltrations has been adopted by Israel on the Lebanese border, in the Jordan Valley, and, with the start of the Oslo process, also around the Gaza Strip. Experience shows that such a barrier is highly effective. It is true that no barrier provides a hermetic seal, but the existence of the barrier reduces the attempts at crossing, hinders those who try to cross, and gives warning of attempts to cross. The delay and the warning make it eminently possible to intercept those who succeed in crossing the barrier, particularly when the entire system, including forces ready in standby positions, functions properly.

It is quite apparent that the construction of an effective barrier around the West Bank is a far more difficult challenge, because of the length involved, the close proximity of Israeli and Palestinian populated areas on both sides of the barrier, and the need to enable the daily passage of tens of thousands of settlers who live in Judea and Samaria, but who are dependent for work and services in locations on the west side of the barrier. Yet while this traffic can be exploited by potential terrorists to

cross the barrier, the IDF's extensive experience of managing crossings, as well as the improvements in technology to identify individuals, makes it possible to devise and implement effective solutions for the crossing points in the barrier, while the other problems can be solved through suitable investment of financial and manpower resources.

The Palestinians and their supporters use the term "wall" to describe the barrier because this serves the purposes of world propaganda against the barrier. In Israeli discourse the accepted term is "fence," a more accurate word because in most areas this is the most prominent component of the barrier. In fact, the barrier is composed of several elements: barbed wire, a trench (on the eastern side), patrol paths for the security forces (on both sides of the barrier), a three meter high intrusion detection (i.e., warning) fence, intrusion tracking dirt roads on the western side, and various means for observation and advance warning. In a number of places where Jewish settlements are close to the barrier, a wall is added to prevent direct shooting at the Israeli side from the eastern side of the barrier. Once the

The Security Fence Demarcation*



* based on the Security Fence map that appeared on the Ministry of Defense website in December 2003.

barrier is complete, it is expected to be very effective at preventing the infiltration of terrorists, as well as at preventing entry of illegal Palestinian workers, car thefts, and other crime originating from the Palestinian territories.

Within the Israeli public, among both the left and the right, there is broad consensus regarding the need for the fence, and in effect the decision to erect it was forced on the government by public opinion. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was opposed to the fence because of his fear that it would separate Israelis on one side of the fence from Israelis on the other side, and would send the Palestinians and the world at large what he considered the wrong message: that Israel is prepared to yield all the territory beyond the fence. However, the increased number of suicide attacks in urban centers within Israel strengthened public pressure to a point that he could no longer withstand it, and therefore he yielded and agreed to the construction of the fence.

The original purpose of the fence was, therefore, purely defensive. The Israeli public, aware of the effectiveness of the security fences around the Gaza Strip, the Lebanese border, and the Jordan Valley in preventing infiltrations, wanted a similar fence to stop terrorists from entering Israel from the West Bank. It is hard to find anyone in Israel or the world who questions Israel's right to defend itself by a legitimate means such as a fence, although there are some, Israelis and others, who claim that the fence is not consistent with

the kind of relations Israel should try to foster with the Palestinians in the framework of a permanent settlement. Yet after more than three years of a violent and bloody conflict, arguments concerning the future relationship with the Palestinians do not arouse much sympathy in the Israeli public, and in any event a fence can always be dismantled if the reality changes, just as the reality on the Israel-Jordan border changed.

Thus, the explanation for why the fence has become so controversial lies rather in the manner of implementation and not in the idea itself. In this respect, the fence can be seen as an interesting test case where an idea that is fundamentally simple and beneficial is distorted by the political and bureaucratic interests that fuel its implementation.

The Barrier's Political Message

When the security establishment was engaged in planning the route of the barrier, the considerations were primarily security-oriented, although it was also understood that it was not desirable to erect the barrier exactly on the Green Line because of the political message that this demarcation could send. In certain places the demarcation lay fairly close to the Green Line, while in other places it veered eastward into the territory of Judea and Samaria, particularly when it was possible to justify this through operational security reasons such as the proximity of Israeli settlements to the Green Line, the topography of the area, or the need to provide depth for

the barrier to increase its effectiveness.

Once Prime Minister Sharon and settlement leaders realized they could not withstand the public pressure, they reversed their previous fierce opposition to the fence and instead directed their efforts into changing the line of demarcation that was drawn up by the military so that it would send the political message they favored, and not vice versa. The design was to include within the fence

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as many settlements as possible, in order to convey the message that Israel intended to annex them in any potential settlement of the conflict. A good example was the struggle to include Ariel within the fence. If the fence does ultimately include Ariel, it will necessarily plunge many kilometers into Judea and Samaria and will perpetuate a situation whereby the area where the Palestinians live is chopped up into small enclaves with no links between them. Yet from security reasons, the addition of Ariel is superfluous.

Out of similar political reasons, many areas populated by Palestinians

lie west of the fence in the Jerusalem region, so as not to leave any opening for the idea that Israel may perhaps cede Palestinian neighborhoods within the framework of an agreement. The result, however, is that the fence misses its mark, in its leaving Israel without any effective means of preventing the entry of Palestinians from these now-enclosed areas into its own populated centers.

The prime minister has also shown signs that he intends to use the fence to implement his political concept of a Palestinian state. According to this plan, the Palestinian state would cover a shrunken area equal to about fifty percent or less of the area of Judea and Samaria, surrounded on all sides by areas under Israeli control, or as Sharon calls them, a western security strip and an eastern security strip. For this reason, on the initiative of the prime minister, the plan for a security fence was augmented by a plan for an "eastern fence," intended to separate the Jordan Valley from the Palestinian territories. And yet, as with the enclosure of Ariel, there is no security need for this fence. The few Israeli settlements in the Jordan Valley could easily be defended without an eastern security fence. Moreover, the eastern fence is particularly striking in the intensity of the provocation it provides, even for Israel's friends in the world, and as a result it taints all references to the security fence as a whole.

In order to clarify the difference between a fence whose demarcation is based primarily on security considerations and a fence based

primarily on political considerations, it is worth comparing the current demarcation of the barrier (partly approved by the government and partly based on the prime minister's plan for the barrier but not yet approved by the government) with the Green Line and the border proposed by the Geneva Accords. The proposed demarcation requires a barrier of 930 km in length, nearly triple the length of the 350 km Green Line. The map in the Geneva Accords, which includes some twists and turns because of the desire to include several settlements under Israeli sovereignty, would require construction of a barrier of 445 km. According to the Geneva Accords map, there are no Palestinian villages on the Israeli side of the border, whereas according to the government's proposed barrier there will be forty Palestinian towns with approximately 345,000 residents on the Israeli side of the barrier (including the Jerusalem region). However, a shorter fence that encompasses fewer Palestinians on the Israeli side is unquestionably more secure.

The political changes to the demarcation of the fence have led to the following outcomes:

- The route of the fence has become far longer and more tortuous, which increases the cost of erecting and maintaining it, requires more troops to patrol it, and makes it less effective.

- The fence has and will have a materially adverse effect on the daily routine of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, and therefore has become the focus of Palestinian

opposition and a convenient device for anti-Israel Palestinian propaganda.

- World opinion has concluded that this is a political fence rather than a security fence, intended to create facts that will influence the future of the territories and seize land from the Palestinians.

Bureaucratic Priorities

To the political considerations were added bureaucratic considerations

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that reflect how the security establishment planned to erect a barrier of this type. Although considering ostensibly security and related matters only, after more than thirty years of military rule in the territories, the security establishment has grown accustomed to the idea that in the bureaucratic planning process, the welfare of the Palestinian inhabitants will always come last, necessarily following other considerations. Below are three examples of how these priorities have created a situation untenable for the Palestinians:

- It was clear to planners that an effective barrier needs depth. Any

fence can be crossed, and therefore it serves its purpose only if it obstructs those who try to cross it and sounds a warning of such attempts. If the barrier has depth, then the forces defending the fence have sufficient time to intercept the infiltrator. In several places along the border between Israel and Judea and Samaria, Palestinian towns and villages are close to Israeli towns. The operational solution decided on was to build an additional depth-providing fence, located east of the Palestinian settlement. As a result, a situation was created where a Palestinian city such as Qalqilya is penned in by the fence on all sides. In this case the plan realizes the vision of the settler leaders, who, when they opposed the idea of the fence, argued that they did not object to a fence so long as it would not divide Israel from Judea and Samaria and would instead surround the Palestinian cities.

- Some Palestinian villages have cultivated land near the border, and again, the consideration of defensive depth was preferred over the wellbeing of the inhabitants. Thus, the route of the fence will separate between the villagers and their land, completely ignoring both the damage to the villagers' welfare and their acute sensitivity to any infringement on their ownership of land.

- In other cases, the barrier divides the population from centers that provide them with essential services, for example, when children confront an obstacle of this sort between them and their schools.

The Political Costs

Planners of the barrier did not confront the question of how the demarcation that was approved would aggravate the friction between Israel and the Palestinian populations and in the long run exact a higher price than the anticipated gain. It appears that they ignored the need to consider political and propaganda factors. It is difficult to imagine that had they considered such factors in advance, the route of the fence would not have been planned differently. The lack of awareness of the severe problems of the demarcation is also seen in the response to international reactions, comprised mainly of offended innocence: "How can the world not understand that we are only trying to protect ourselves against murderous terror?"

Hence the negative results thus far in the political and public relations arenas, caused by the way the fence was planned and constructed:

- Israel is acquiring a terrible image worldwide as a racist state that pens hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in enclosures, seizes their land, and makes their lives unbearably difficult.

- The regime that is most friendly to Israel, the Bush administration, is treating the fence as an obstacle to any progress, pressuring Israel to make changes in the demarcation, and deducting a considerable sum from the loan guarantees as sanctions because of the money invested in erecting the fence on Palestinian land.

- The fence hands the Pales-

tinians a convenient political weapon. It is no wonder that they are already presenting a demand to halt its construction as a condition for a ceasefire and talks between Israel and the government of Abu Ala'a.

The intensity of the political opposition worldwide to the construction of the fence as it is currently planned is so great that it is doubtful whether Israel will be able to complete it. The prime minister has already

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decided to leave a gap in the fence in the Ariel area. The result is that instead of building the fence in this region too, but along a logical route that does not draw fire, he has chosen to leave a gap that as such invites attacks. This means that the fence cannot serve its purpose entirely, because the planners of attacks will move the infiltration sites to the unfenced places. This trend is already evident. In recent attempted suicide attacks that were foiled, the would-be perpetrators set out from Jenin intending to cross into Israel in the Beit Shean valley, where there is no barrier as yet.

To many people in Israel, the construction of the fence ties in with the concept of unilateral separation, and they see the fence as an element in the implementation of this concept. But so long as Israeli settlements remain on the other side of the fence, this is not a real separation, and it creates a situation where people will suffer from many of the costs of unilateral separation without benefiting from its main advantages.

Possible Amendments

It is still not too late to reconsider the route of the fence, since most of it is not yet built. Only 136 km have been built out of the 556 km approved by government decisions. It is also possible to consider amendments in some places where the fence is already built. The aim of the changes should be to create a situation where not only is the main purpose security, but it will also *be clear* that the purpose is security, to the Israeli public, to the Palestinians, and to outside observers. If this is done, there is a better chance that it will be possible to complete its construction and that it will successfully achieve most of its security objectives. It seems that any changes should focus on the following points:

- Abandoning the idea of the eastern fence, which is a political and public relations catastrophe.

- Limiting the use of the depth-providing fence that pens Palestinian settlements into enclosed areas and looking for other operational solutions to the problem it intends to address.

■ Limiting cases where the barrier divides villagers from their land, or Palestinians from their essential services, such as education, health, and so on.

It is possible to argue that any fence demarcation that does not follow the Green Line exactly will encounter opposition from the Palestinians and from the international community, and therefore there is no point in making changes. There is some basis to the claim that the international community will not accept any barrier erected on Palestinian territory, but the force of the objection and the implications of the disapproval vary according to the demarcation, as shown by the fact that in the early stages of construction, when the fence was built closer to the Green Line and did not affect the lives of many Palestinians, opposition to the fence was very low key even among the Palestinians. Moreover, reducing the friction with the Palestinian population that leads to

growing bitterness among them is also important.

If changes are made to the line of demarcation, the fence stands a better chance of playing a constructive political role. Even now, one positive political ramification can be found

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among all the negative political developments. Construction of the fence has placed political pressure on the Palestinian leadership, since it is clear to them that its completion could create a situation where most

Israelis feel released from the threat of the violent conflict with the Palestinians. They fear that this situation would reduce the pressure on Israel to compromise with the Palestinians and be flexible in its attitude regarding a settlement. The state of affairs would be similar to Israel's situation on the Syrian border, where there is absolute quiet, and on the Lebanese border, where there is relative quiet. Consequently, the construction of the fence strengthens the motivation of the Palestinian leadership to play down the conflict and to renew the political process. The more the negative political aspects of the fence construction can be removed, the stronger its positive political effects will be, since Israel will be sending a message to the Palestinians that it is improving its security situation, but at the same time leaving the door open to an agreement and not creating facts on the ground that will prevent its future implementation.

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