

Fencing Out Terrorism: Precedents for Kenya's Security Barrier

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Brief Analysis

When faced with mounting instability, violence, or other threats next door, several countries have sought to bolster their borders with long, elaborate security barriers, but maintaining and patrolling these walls can be a challenge.

On April 21, Kenyan authorities announced plans to construct a barrier along the border with Somalia in order to prevent further spillover attacks by al-Qaeda affiliate al-Shabab. While the plan made international headlines, it is far from the first instance in which barriers have been proposed or constructed in the name of bolstering national security and well-being, with concerns ranging from militants to migrants to infected livestock. In addition to the well-publicized and much-criticized barriers along the Israeli-Palestinian and U.S.-Mexican frontiers, various regions have a long history of major border security projects. By no means exhaustive, the following list details the impetus and plans for the Kenyan barrier as well as similar projects in Saudi Arabia, Bulgaria-Turkey, Malaysia-Thailand, and Botswana-Zimbabwe.

KENYA

Although Kenya was no stranger to terrorism in the past, the frequency and lethality of al-Shabab's recent attacks are unprecedented. Given the reported failure of other measures -- including new counterterrorism legislation, increased police presence, and significant Western security assistance -- Kenyan officials felt compelled to pursue an extreme solution: constructing a border wall that will extend from Mandera County at the country's northeastern tip to the Indian Ocean. According to news accounts, the government believes such a wall is the best way to insulate Kenya from al-Shabab's hit-and-run attacks in the short term. While officials concede that the 424-mile barrier --

described less as a wall than a collection of "fences, ditches, and observation posts" -- is neither the ultimate nor the ideal solution to Kenya's desperate security situation, they nevertheless hold that it will, at the very least, do what previous measures have failed to accomplish: prevent al-Shabab terrorists from entering the country in the first place.

SAUDI ARABIA

Last September, in an attempt to prevent the kind of violent spillover experienced in Kenya, Saudi Arabia began construction on a 600-mile "Great Wall" along its border with Iraq. Reportedly intended to protect the kingdom from "Islamic State"/ISIS militants, the project was first proposed during Iraq's civil war in 2006. When completed, the barrier will be quite sophisticated, composed of ditches, triple-layer steel fencing, and watchtowers equipped with high-tech night-vision and radar cameras. The nascent barrier was already tested in early January when ISIS militants attacked a border post at Arar, reinforcing officials' conviction that the kingdom must be insulated from the chaos engulfing its northern neighbor.

This is not the first time Riyadh has sought to secure its borders with a long wall. In 2013, it began construction on a 1,100-mile security barrier along the southwestern border in response to heightened sectarian conflict in Yemen. The multi-billion-dollar barrier, complete with concertina wire, floodlights, and thermal cameras, has reportedly stemmed the flow of terrorists, criminal elements, and economic refugees into the kingdom. Despite this apparent success, the Yemen-based al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) routinely boasts about its ability to infiltrate the border. Regardless of the veracity of AQAP's claims, much remains to be done: areas of lush vegetation and mountainous regions interspersed with deep valleys and Yemeni villages remain difficult for Saudi border guards to patrol.

BULGARIA-TURKEY

In contrast to the Kenyan and Saudi barriers, proposed primarily as counterterrorism measures, Bulgarian officials approved the construction and expansion of a 100-mile fence along the border with Turkey to combat the swelling number of asylum seekers streaming in from the south. A combination of economic pressure, fears of militant infiltration, and a desire to be included in Europe's Schengen Area pushed officials to bolster the country's defenses.

According to news accounts, construction on the initial twenty-one-mile stretch of barbed wire fencing along a popular refugee crossing point was approved in early October 2013 and concluded approximately a year later. In January 2015, officials announced plans to extend the fence by eighty miles, covering the remainder of the border with Turkey. Prime Minister Boyko Borissov called this decision "absolutely necessary" to further relieve continued refugee pressures. While only the first twenty-one-mile section is currently in place, officials contend that the impact has been dramatic; an April 5 *New York Times* story reported that "the number of known illegal crossings fell to about 4,000 in 2014 from 11,000 the previous year."

MALAYSIA-THAILAND

Barriers between Malaysia and Thailand were first built as early as the 1970s, purportedly to combat smuggling. They were chiefly constructed of concrete, steel, and barbed wire, with iron fencing in some parts. Both countries built their own 340-mile walls, up to eight feet high, with a thirty-foot no man's land between them.

In 1991, Malaysia announced that it would build a sixty-mile concrete wall in the province of Kelantan, the only part of the Thai border that did not already have fencing. And in 2001, the two countries agreed to demolish the double-wall system and replace it with a single barrier composed of steel fencing on top of a concrete base.

In September 2013, Malaysia declared plans for a new ninety-mile stretch of electrified fences along the Kolok River in Kelantan, to which Thailand agreed. The project was expected to be completed in three years. The stated purpose

of the new fences was to combat smuggling -- Malaysia reportedly loses up to \$1.9 billion every year from the smuggling of goods such as rice, gas, diesel fuel, alcohol, cigarettes, fertilizer, and herbicides. Human trafficking is a concern as well.

Going forward, more barriers appear to be in the works. While the Malay government initially assigned a committee to study the options for a new fence along just Kelantan's border, its remit was later expanded to the Sabah and Sarawak provinces bordering Indonesia. The entire proposed fence would stretch over 1,600 miles. As of March this year, the study was still ongoing.

BOTSWANA-ZIMBABWE

Following an outbreak of hoof-and-mouth disease around the border with Zimbabwe in 2003, Botswana began building an electrified fence ostensibly to control the epidemic. Thousands of cattle had to be put down, in a country where cattle farming is the second largest industry. Yet Zimbabwean officials and many other observers believed the fence was at least partially aimed at keeping out refugees and illegal immigrants. At the time, the much smaller nation of Botswana (with a population of 1.7 million, compared to Zimbabwe's 11.8 million) felt threatened by the thousands of refugees fleeing the political and economic crisis spurred by strongman Robert Mugabe -- according to authorities in Botswana, as many as 2,500 Zimbabweans were being repatriated every month prior to the barrier's construction.

The resultant fence, which cost some \$3.7 million, is six feet high and stretches over 300 miles. It was designed to deliver a 220-volt shock -- painful, but not lethal -- but the electricity was never turned on. Similarly, police and army units were reportedly assigned to patrol the border, but they apparently have yet to do so on a consistent basis. In fact, Zimbabweans have torn down parts of the barrier, and fence cutting is common.

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