

Egypt Builds a Wall, Changes Its Tune on Israel's Barrier

by [David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

Apr 21, 2008

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Program on Arab Politics. He is the former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.



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Much ado has been made of the Israeli security fence isolating the West Bank. When it is completed in 2010, the barrier -- which runs roughly along the 1967 border between Israel and Palestinian territory -- will span nearly 500 miles. Israelis say the purpose of the structure is to curtail terrorist attacks against the Jewish state. There's little reason to doubt them: Despite a March attack that killed eight students at a Jerusalem seminary, statistics suggest that the barrier and a corresponding one around Gaza are working.

West Bankers condemn the structure because it encroaches into pre-1967 Palestinian territory, limits mobility, and separates farmers from their fields. Hamas, which has controlled Gaza since June 2007, describes its territory as "a big prison." Until recently, Egypt too was a vociferous critic. In 2003, Egypt's foreign minister at the time, Ahmed Maher, described the structure as "defying international legitimacy and world public opinion."

Even as Israel moves expeditiously to seal off its West Bank threat, however, Palestinians face the prospect of another wall hemming them in. This latest wall is not being constructed by the Israelis, though, but by Egypt, which seeks more protection from its Palestinian neighbors in Gaza.

Cairo has every reason to be concerned. In January 2008, Hamas demolished the Gaza-Egypt border fence, allowing an estimated 700,000 Palestinians -- nearly half of Gaza's population -- to stream into the Sinai desert. Initially, Cairo viewed the Gaza breach as an opportunity to solidify its pro-Palestinian bona fides. Then reality set in. Egypt, it seems, was concerned that Palestinians entering the Sinai might exacerbate Egypt's own terrorism problem. In April 2006, 23 tourists were killed in a car-bomb attack in the Sinai resort town of Dahab; two days later, U.N. Multi-national Force Observers, enforcing the Egypt-Israel peace treaty, were targeted by suicide attacks.

For Cairo, the threat extends beyond Sinai. Islamists in Egypt -- led by the Muslim Brotherhood -- have been making significant political gains in recent years, winning an unprecedented 88 of 444 elected parliamentary seats in 2005. The prospect of Hamas's hooking up with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood terrifies the government of Egypt. As one Egyptian political analyst describes it, "Hamas is the Muslim Brotherhood on steroids."

Less than two weeks after the Gaza breach, Cairo took draconian measures to return the Palestinians to Gaza. It arrested dozens -- including a group of armed Palestinians reportedly planning to attack Israeli tourists in the Sinai -- and quickly resealed the border with miles of barbed wire. Hamas cried foul and pledged that it would not allow the

border to remain sealed. In February, two Egyptian border guards were injured by Palestinian gunfire and several more were treated for broken bones after being hit by rocks thrown across the border.

With tensions along the border increasing, Egypt has softened its position on Israel's West Bank barrier. In March, Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit said, "Whoever wishes to build a security fence on his land is free to do that." Subsequently, it was announced that Egypt, with \$23 million in U.S. assistance, would build its own fence along the border with Gaza. Teams from the Army Corps of Engineers are expected in Egypt shortly to advise the project.

At least in part, Cairo's change in attitude was driven by Washington. For more than a decade, weapons have moved freely into Gaza via ubiquitous smuggling tunnels linking Sinai to Palestinian areas and bypassing Israeli scrutiny. Since Hamas's Gaza takeover, though, the issue has increasingly garnered attention, as longer-range katyusha rockets -- presumably transported via these tunnels -- have started falling on Israeli cities with greater frequency. During the 2008 budget discussions, Congress was so concerned about perceived Egyptian inaction on the tunnels that a clause was inserted to condition nearly \$100 million in U.S. aid on Cairo's countering these smuggling routes.

For Cairo, the U.S. pressure was a blessing in disguise. The Egyptian government gives a lot of lip service to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, while privately it is apprehensive about the militant nature of Hamas-ruled Gaza. These sentiments have only been heightened by recent political and social inroads made by Egypt's own Islamists.

At the end of the day, the Gaza border is above all else a matter of Egyptian national security. So despite the obvious comparisons that will be drawn between the Israeli and Egyptian barriers, Cairo had few alternatives other than to move ahead with a wall of its own. As Israel learned some time ago, good fences make good neighbors, especially when your neighbors are your enemies.

David Schenker is senior fellow and director of the program in Arab politics at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

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