

Israel's Newly Approved Security Fence Route: Geography and Demography

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Brief Analysis

Last week, the Israeli cabinet approved modified routing of the security fence, the first officially sanctioned changes since the cabinet approved construction in October 2003. The modifications, prompted by an Israeli supreme court decision last summer made to avert Palestinian hardship, are characterized by four major adjustments: (1) revised routing in several areas that will bring the fence closer to the Green Line (pre-1967 boundaries); (2) the elimination of all fence routes that create Palestinian enclaves or “double fences” (areas where Palestinians would have been completely encircled by the security fence); (3) the addition—for the first time on any official Israeli map—of fence around the Maale Adumim settlement bloc; and (4) final authorization of fence routing and construction near the Etzion bloc.

The Israeli Context

Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon twinned passage of the modified fence with a cabinet vote to evacuate Gaza and four settlements in the northern West Bank—in total, a withdrawal from 20 percent of the combined areas of the West Bank and Gaza. Given international support for Israel’s evacuation, Sharon understood that this was the ideal time to win passage of the modified fence route. With the timing of the two votes, he also sought to send multiple messages. Given that most Israelis see a correlation between the drop in terrorist attacks and the erection of the fence, he wanted to make clear to his public and to Palestinian rejectionists that Israel’s commitment to leave Gaza is not an implied accommodation of further attacks. In addition, Sharon hoped to highlight for his loyalists that, although he will lead the evacuation of settlements in Gaza and the northern West Bank, he is nevertheless taking significant steps—short of annexation—to secure the future of the West Bank settlement blocs that are largely adjacent to the Green Line. While the cabinet decision explicitly states that the fence route is not a delineation of Israel’s final border, observers will inevitably view the fence as providing clues to the contours of the West Bank’s final disposition.

How Much of the West Bank Is East of the Fence?

In 2003, the cabinet voted for a fence whose construction was divided into numerous stages; further authorization was prerequisite to the commencement of construction in the sensitive areas near the blocs of Ariel, Maale Adumim,

and Gush Etzion, as well as the entire southern route. This 2003 fence route was scheduled to encompass 16 percent of West Bank land, including all enclaves. Last week, the cabinet approved routes that will put approximately 5 percent of the West Bank on the “Israeli” side of the fence. It also approved, in principle, the routes surrounding the Ariel and Maale Adumim settlement blocs, to be completed after further authorization and planning. Taken together, if the fence near both of these blocs is built, the grand total of the approved fence route encompasses only 8 percent of the West Bank.

That 8 percent can be compared to the estimated 5 percent that President Bill Clinton regarded as the outcome of final-status negotiations. By contrast, official Palestine Liberation Organization maps, until recently, claimed that Sharon would build fences to encircle the Palestinians from all sides, taking approximately 50 percent of the West Bank and creating “bantustans” that would sharply undermine the idea of a two-state solution. Last week’s cabinet move seems to nullify, once and for all, that possibility. For example, the new map drops plans for a small fence in the northeast corner of the West Bank heading southward, which perpetuated the threat of encirclement.

How Many Israelis Are East of the Fence? How Many Palestinians Are West of the Fence?

Of the total 240,000 Israeli West Bank settlers, 74 percent live west (on the “Israeli” side) of the fully projected fence. By contrast, 26 percent of West Bank settlers live on the 92 percent of West Bank land east (on the “Palestinian” side) of the fence.

The fence modifications and the elimination of Palestinian enclaves reduces the number of Palestinians on the west side of the fence to 5,400 people, or 0.3 percent of all West Bank Palestinians. (This figure does not include East Jerusalem, which Israel does not consider part of the West Bank.)

Implications for Israeli Settlements

The largest modifications to the fence are in the southern West Bank. Below the Gush Etzion settlement bloc, located just south of Jerusalem, the fence will now largely follow the Green Line, which will put five small settlements numbering some 2,100 people on the “Palestinian” side of the fence.

An open question about the fence route has been its approach to the large settlement bloc around Ariel, which has a population of 40,000 and encompasses approximately 2 percent of the West Bank. As with the October 2003 cabinet decision made in order to avert a clash with the Bush administration, Israel has in principle approved the Ariel route but conceded for now to fence in only the individual settlements inside the bloc. In turn, the resulting so-called “fingernail” fences will not be linked together, nor will they be linked to the overall fence without prior consultation with the United States. It should be noted that last week’s cabinet-approved map includes a fifth “fingernail” not present on the last official map. Supporters of the Ariel bloc note that relatively few Palestinians live in the area, while detractors point to the fact that Ariel is located twenty kilometers inside the West Bank.

Another feature of the new map is that, for the first time, the fence around the Maale Adumim bloc is delineated, albeit in the same supplemental category of routes to be completed only after further authorization. The line drawn on the map includes not only the city of Maale Adumim—located east of Jerusalem with a population of 30,000—but also the satellite settlements of Kfar Adumim, Kedar, Almon, and Nofei Prat, adding another 3,300. Together, the bloc takes up 1 percent of the West Bank. Palestinian objections to fencing in Maale Adumim have focused on whether such a fence would sever Palestinian north-south links between Ramallah and Bethlehem, or at a minimum force a major detour. To address this problem, and concurrent with last week’s cabinet decision, Israel decided to construct a north-south Palestinian road that would cut through the area between the eastern outskirts of Jerusalem and the Maale Adumim bloc. The U.S. attitude to the Maale Adumim fence will be difficult to predict. On one hand, President George W. Bush’s April 14, 2004, letter to Prime Minister Sharon makes clear that certain settlement blocs will be incorporated into Israel under a final agreement. At the same time, the United States has tried to express sensitivity

to Palestinian opposition concerning this settlement bloc—which lies just east of the city that Palestinians consider their future capital—by opposing Israeli housing construction in the zone connecting Jerusalem and Maale Adumim.

Implications for the Palestinians

While the Palestinians will express concern about the fence “routes to be completed after further authorization and planning” in the Ariel and Maale Adumim blocs, they will be pleased about changes that should facilitate Palestinian freedom of movement, for example, moving the fence closer to the Green Line so that it incorporates more contiguous Palestinian land. Israel’s fence adjustments in the south will mean that an additional 12,700 Palestinians living in 29 villages in the outer Gush Etzion area and southern Hebron Hills region will now be on the “Palestinian” side of the fence.

With regard to Jerusalem, Israel has made the demographic decision to move the fence inside the city’s municipal boundaries in two new locations, linking an additional 20,000 East Jerusalem Palestinians to the West Bank. This complements the previous cabinet decision to move the East Jerusalem Palestinian refugee camp of Shuafat, with its 30,000 residents, to the “Palestinian” side. On one hand, the route is still problematic for those Palestinians living in East Jerusalem who depend on schools and places of employment on the other side of the fence. On the other hand, it suggests that Israel may not oppose modification of the Jerusalem municipal boundaries.

The new map confirms that all Palestinian enclaves—some not yet built—have been officially eliminated. Previously, five enclaves had been proposed around areas populated by a total of 104,000 West Bank Palestinians in order to protect Israeli settlements, major roads, and Ben Gurion airport; instead, local fences, increased patrols, and underpasses will be used to augment Israeli security while facilitating Palestinian freedom of movement. For example, the large enclave that was to have straddled Route 443, known as the Modiin Road (a second artery between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem) would have fenced in 51,000 Palestinians. In this area, Israel has decided to simply build a local barrier on the road itself and increase the number of patrols around it. To pass to the other side of the road, Palestinians will be able to travel freely through a series of underpasses.

Coincident with the cabinet’s approval of the new route, Israel’s defense ministry has unveiled plans to open five large crossing points along the West Bank fence, at least two of which on the Green Line are likely to be funded by the World Bank. Israel will contract out the management of these crossings to private companies, thereby minimizing interaction between Israeli soldiers and Palestinians, while providing these stations with a more businesslike environment. Israel’s defense ministry is also working on 24–28 smaller passages, in addition to the 31 agricultural gates already open and the 20–30 more in development.

Conclusion

While Sharon denies any link between the contours of the fence and the shape of a final-status deal, the fence is undeniably moving closer to the Clinton parameters of 2000. Early Palestinian fears that the fence would encircle them have not materialized. Moreover, with the fence placing 99.7 percent of West Bank Palestinians to its east and 74 percent of Israeli settlers to the west, the modified fence contours reinforce the trend of demography trumping geography. Taken together, this amended fence will serve not as a catalyst to impede a two-state solution, but rather to facilitate such an outcome.

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