

Fence Gives Israel Chance for Peace

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Israel has rejected last week's ruling of the International Court of Justice. The court issued a nonbinding advisory opinion Friday that Israel's barrier is an impediment to peace.

However, given the violence of the last four years between Israelis and Palestinians and the distrust that violence has engendered, the barrier has netted Israel security gains that are actually creating a political space for peace for the first time since 2000.

At the start of the Intifada, there were some Palestinian leaders who believed violence would be a tool of negotiations. Some Palestinian militants like the now-jailed young Fatah leader Marwan Barghoutti have argued that the only way Israel will yield land would be if Israelis bleed during the armed uprising.

"If the Intifada stops, the negotiations will not succeed. The Intifada and the struggle are two basic conditions for the success of the negotiations," Barghoutti told a Persian Gulf newspaper, Al-Bayan, in 2001. Palestinian polls say many Palestinians believe violence is a way towards a two-state solution, while many others believe the violence of the last four years has been aimed against Israel's very existence.

But Barghoutti's forecast has not been borne out. The terror made Israelis less pliable and instead more defiant.

When Israeli Labor leader Amram Mitzna proposed unilaterally leaving Gaza before the last Israeli elections in early 2003, critics ridiculed him as being naive in the face of terror, believing unilateral withdrawal would embolden further rejectionism. Labor, which had won elections at the start and end of the '90s amid periods of relative calm, had its worst electoral turnout in its 56-year history - winning fewer than 20 seats in the 120-member Knesset.

What a difference 18 months makes. The same Prime Minister Ariel Sharon who opposed Mitzna is now embracing his idea and has pledged to exit Gaza and evacuate all Gaza settlements. Instead of the idea being ridiculed, it is garnering support of 66 percent of the Israeli public, according to a recent Tel Aviv University "Peace Index" poll.

There is no doubt that concern about the future Jewish-Arab demographic balance may have shaped the thinking of Sharon, who until recently was dismissive of those who mentioned this issue to him. But, even if one figures in Sharon's stature with more conservative elements of the population, it does not explain such broad public support.

A key factor that does explain the surge is the drop in terror. From 2000-2003, there were 83 "successful" suicide

attacks against Israeli cities. This year, there were three. This does not mean terror is a thing of the past, or even that the Intifada has ended. Israeli military officials say Israel seized 58 suicide bombers inside the West Bank in the last six months.

Since the terror attempts persisted, it is important to understand that the drop in attacks is not due to the Palestinians forgoing this option. Rather, a big factor is Israel's security fence, which was pilloried by the International Court of Justice. The fence has been saving lives, and therefore is supported by 78 percent of Israel's Jews, according to the same recent poll. Until the fence was built, bombers simply walked into Israeli cities from the West Bank undetected.

But the fence also has had another function, namely to provide Israel's leadership with political breathing space to pursue diplomatic options. A rational debate cannot emerge over the din of bombs. Barghoutti was wrong. When the Israelis were getting blown up, Israeli attitudes hardened. The bottom line is that the security dividend of the fence is creating political space in Israel.

Critics, assuming the worst regarding the route of the fence, thought it would end the prospects of a two-state solution. In fact, it is close to tracking the route that President Bill Clinton considered as the contours of the two-state solution. The hope is that Israel will use the fence not just to save lives, but to do what it has begun and open up new doors. Sharon has indicated he favors coordination with Egypt and the Palestinian Authority in ensuring that a Gaza handover can move smoothly.

If the Palestinians demonstrate success and responsibility in Gaza, this is likely to mean confidence on all sides to continue withdrawals in the West Bank. Moreover, since there was no fence before the Intifada, Israel's fence would be much more permeable if terrorism would end. On the other hand, if the bombs go off again, all bets are off.

The fence has bought critical time. Now the test is for both Israelis and Palestinians to use that time effectively.

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