

# The West Bank Fence: A Vital Component in Israel's Strategy of Defense

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## The successes and operational failures of Israel's security fence along the Gaza border in the mid-1990s offer lessons for efforts to secure the West Bank frontier.

**D**uring the mid-1990s, Israel constructed an electronic fence around the Gaza Strip in the wake of a military redeployment mandated by the Oslo Accords. As part of this process, the Palestinian Authority was given jurisdiction over most of Gaza, including a one-kilometer-wide security perimeter established near the fence. This perimeter was never strictly monitored, however, and in late 2000, most of the Gaza fence was demolished by Palestinian aggression following the eruption of the so-called "al-Aqsa intifada."

Soon thereafter, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Southern Command attempted to uncover the reasons behind the barrier's operational failure. The lessons learned from that assessment guided Israel's reconstruction of the Gaza fence in 2001 and helped the IDF achieve unprecedented containment of terrorist infiltration from Gaza.

In the West Bank, however, suicide bombers and other terrorists continue to infiltrate Israeli cities with relative ease, as they have done throughout the past three and a half years of conflict. These conditions inspired the establishment of a "seam zone" in the West Bank based on the defensive model that has succeeded in Gaza -- that is, a multicomponent defensive layout that includes an electronic fence as the primary barrier.

In order to replicate the success of the Gaza fence in the West Bank, however, all of the essential elements of the Gaza defensive model must be implemented as a package, without any exceptions. Although the fence is a vital component of the defensive strategy that the IDF has sought to employ in its continued war against Palestinian terrorism, even a strong, well-designed barrier can be infiltrated as a result of various unavoidable factors (e.g., inclement weather, peculiarities in terrain, human error). Hence, a comprehensive defensive model is needed to help compensate for these potential failures in the fence itself.

## Essential Components

When the Gaza fence was reconstructed, the IDF buttressed it with an Israeli-monitored "security buffer zone" and established new rules of engagement to enhance its effectiveness. In addition, the military implemented a variety of important new security features such as enhanced interception capabilities, improved high-tech sensors, overlapping observation posts, and a continuous monitoring and videotaping system. This defensive array was thronged with professional, motivated Israeli troops who could combine the new security features with enhanced strategic, operational, and tactical intelligence capabilities in order to thwart any terrorist attempt to cross into Israel from Gaza.

Although most of these components have been implemented in the seam zone currently under construction in the West Bank, two key elements have been omitted: bulldozed security buffer zones and special rules of engagement for those military personnel responsible for monitoring the fence and its environs. Terrorists have been quick to exploit these omissions, and Israeli civilians have consequently paid a heavy price. In order to protect its citizens -- including those in large West Bank settlements -- Israel must assert control over the vital buffer areas needed to maximize the effectiveness of the fence (a measure sometimes referred to as "territorial overcharge"). In addition, the IDF must implement rules of engagement that give soldiers in the field increased authority to make timely decisions.

## International Law

Although the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is asymmetrical, the scale and intensity of Palestinian terrorist violence justify the application of international laws of war. Under these laws, civilian areas that are used for military purposes lose their immunity and become legitimate targets for seizure or destruction. Those designing the West Bank seam zone should assume that terrorists will continue to exploit the proximity of Palestinian and Israeli infrastructure in order to launch attacks against Israelis through a variety of means. The only feasible way for the IDF to prevent -- or at least reduce -- such attacks is to deprive terrorists of convenient territorial platforms from which to mount them. The military has sought to carry out this strategy in the most humane manner possible, taking all relevant factors into consideration in order to avoid causing harm to Palestinian civilians or undue disruption to their daily lives.

## Economic Improvement

Israel must look beyond direct security measures in crafting a comprehensive defensive strategy for the West Bank. Economic measures in particular could play a key role, counterbalancing Israeli military actions and helping both sides maintain a measure of peace and stability in a time of crisis. Indeed, one of the most important lessons that the IDF has learned in Gaza is the necessity of fostering an "economy of conflict" along the Israeli-Palestinian border -- that is, viable economic cooperation even in the absence of a negotiated solution to the conflict.

The Erez Industrial Zone at the northern border of Gaza epitomizes the potential benefits of this sort of cooperation. Unilateral and joint business ventures within this zone employ thousands of Palestinians and hundreds of Israelis, and these ventures have remained relatively stable even during recent periods of local and international economic crisis. Much of the zone's success can be attributed to the IDF's stringent security measures and to the higher wages that Erez's Palestinian workers receive relative to those in Gaza proper.

For the benefit of Israelis and Palestinians alike, the Erez economic model should be duplicated along various border areas in both southern Gaza and the West Bank. From this perspective, the dearth of buffer zones in the West Bank constitutes not only a serious security risk, but also an economic impediment. Indeed, there is a direct correlation between the seam zone project and the health of the Palestinian economy, which remains greatly dependent on its Israeli counterpart. Ideally, the West Bank seam zone will include cooperative economic zones similar to Erez, as

well as smoothly functioning corridors facilitating the import and export of goods, all of which would likely improve the daily lives of Palestinians and curtail the black market activity that aids terrorists. Although such economic measures cannot erase the animosity between the two peoples, they can soften the cumulative impact of longstanding hostility and increase the influence of Palestinian moderates.

## **Terrorist Adaptation**

The West Bank seam zone project must take other long-term factors into account as well. For example, if the IDF applies the lessons it has learned in Gaza and drastically improves its terrorist containment in the West Bank, one can safely assume that militants there will attempt to bypass the associated security measures by developing new tactics and technologies. As in Gaza, the use of indirect weapons (e.g., rockets and mortars fired from Palestinian territory into Israel) would most likely be the first tactic implemented, in addition to increased direct attacks against military and civilian targets inside the West Bank itself. The IDF must develop a military response to this probable scenario.

## **Implications for the Political Process**

By thwarting terrorists before they are able to kill innocents, the IDF can give negotiators greater flexibility in proposing peace initiatives. In doing so, the military would broaden the potential for political negotiations even as it enhanced its ability to safeguard the Israeli people from terrorism.

Yet, even if political negotiations resume and eventually result in the establishment of a Palestinian state, the forces of extremist Islamic ideology would not necessarily be deterred from fostering new waves of terrorism well into the future. The Israeli-Palestinian political process -- which includes the Quartet's visionary Roadmap -- depends on the substantial support of a strong defensive system in the West Bank, one capable of foiling terrorist attempts to infiltrate Israel. Indeed, the implementation of a new strategy in the West Bank reflects renewed Israeli determination to undertake significant defensive steps on the ground -- steps that, unfortunately, were neglected in the effort to achieve a peaceful solution in a purely political context. The seam zone project is among the most important of these steps.

## **A Vital Need**

Over the past several months, the West Bank seam zone has been the subject of much international and regional criticism, even from Israel's allies. From the Israeli perspective, however, this is a time of war. Demographic and economic realities have become more pressing than ever, and no Palestinian constituency seems willing to enforce obedience to a single, disciplined authority dedicated to dismantling terrorist organizations. Hence, Israel faces a choice between continuing its war against Palestinian terrorism without a defensive shield in the West Bank (in other words, suffering casualties without an effective solution) or shaping new strategic terms that support long-term Israeli interests.

The mission of containing Palestinian terrorism now rests squarely on Israel's shoulders. In accordance with its legitimate right to defend itself, the state of Israel must take radical, yet appropriate, steps to prevent terrorists from infiltrating its population centers -- terrorists whose *raison d'être* is to undermine the state's very existence.

Comprehensive defensive and offensive capabilities are indispensable if Israel is to confront terrorists wherever they are, impede their activities, and deter their instigators. For the time being, the security aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must take precedence over political issues such as settlements, borders, and refugees. ❖



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