

A Defensible Fence: Fighting Terror and Enabling a Two-State Solution

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In-Depth Reports

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Due to a number of daunting obstacles, a negotiated settlement to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict seems out of reach for the foreseeable future. Longstanding mistrust and bitterness persist between the two peoples, and the upsurge in Palestinian violence that began in September 2000 has only exacerbated these sentiments. Thus, Israel's decision to build a West Bank security fence in order to physically separate Israelis and Palestinians is, on one level, an admission of a failed partnership.

According to numerous polls, a majority of both peoples now favor a two-state solution that includes an Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank. Yet, neither side knows how to transform this vision into reality. Israelis do not trust the Palestinian Authority (PA) to fulfill its security obligations and halt terrorist attacks, while Palestinians remain convinced that Israel will never voluntarily cede the West Bank and Gaza. Seen from another perspective, then, a properly designed West Bank security fence could help dissipate the mistrust and violence while facilitating a two-state solution. An improperly designed barrier, however, would impede these goals.

Although the latter possibility is a matter of understandable local and international concern, relatively little attention has been devoted to the actual evolution and implementation of the fence currently under construction in the West Bank. A thorough analysis of the project's potential demographic and territorial implications indicates that it may serve as the best available means of facilitating long-term peace.

Development of the Fence Idea

Any discussion of the guiding principles and future prospects of the West Bank fence project must be informed by an understanding of the idea of separation as it has evolved within the Israeli political consciousness. The road to the most current manifestation of this idea -- namely, the fence -- has been a bumpy one, influenced by the often contrasting approaches of Israeli prime ministers Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres, Binyamin Netanyahu, Ehud Barak, and Ariel Sharon. Each of these administrations played a role in advancing the issue of separation as a result of their efforts to address Israeli demographic and territorial concerns.

With regard to demography, many Israelis have grown increasingly apprehensive about the prospects of maintaining a Jewish majority in lands governed by Israel. Although Jews will remain a majority within sovereign Israel for the foreseeable future, they are projected to become a minority in the area between the Jordan River and Mediterranean Sea within the next decade. As long as Israel remains in the West Bank and Gaza, this demographic forecast will pose a threat to the country's Jewish, democratic identity. At the same time, many Israelis have long argued that retaining a presence in the West Bank is necessary for security reasons.

Intertwined with both of these factors is the Israeli settlement movement, which is not as ideologically monolithic as it is commonly thought to be. The initial wave of settlement activity was led by individuals who were ideologically

committed to Israeli annexation of the West Bank. Such individuals have expressed sharp opposition to withdrawing from their settlements, which are often located deep within the West Bank. In contrast, the majority of Israeli settlers have been motivated by more prosaic factors (e.g., housing costs) and therefore have only limited ideological investment in the settlement movement. Most of these settlers live in a series of blocs located adjacent to or near the Green Line, Israel's pre-1967 border with the West Bank. In most cases, they moved to these blocs with the expectation that Israel would be permitted to annex them as part of an eventual peace settlement. Indeed, Palestinian officials have agreed to such annexations in principle during past negotiations, including the 2000 Camp David summit with President Bill Clinton.

These factors lie at the heart of Israel's current efforts to build a fence in the West Bank. In particular, the fence project emerged from a desire to protect the vast majority of Israeli citizens while preserving the country's core demographic and political identity. Working toward these goals without extinguishing Palestinian aspirations has required careful planning at all stages of design and implementation.

Building a Defensible Fence

The Israeli Ministry of Defense (MOD) has publicly detailed its planned route for the West Bank fence, and significant portions of the barrier have already been completed according to these plans. Nevertheless, several other scenarios have emerged as hypothetical alternative routes, some of which have played an important role in shaping the ongoing fence debate (see chapter 4 for maps illustrating the planned route and alternative scenarios).

The most controversial of these scenarios is encirclement. Many Palestinians suspect that Israel is planning to completely fence in various large clusters of Palestinian communities throughout the entire West Bank, creating discrete Palestinian cantons separated from each other, from Israel, and from the Jordan Valley. At the same time, they argue, nearly every Israeli settlement in the West Bank would remain intact in the noncantoned portions of that territory.

Palestinian officials have vocally accused Israel of implementing this scenario, largely in the hopes of swaying international opinion against fence construction. Yet, these accusations are at odds with the fence route actually being publicized and implemented by Israel. Given the international controversy surrounding the encirclement scenario, Israeli military officials have clearly and publicly indicated that no such fence is being built.

Other critics of the ongoing fence project have taken a different tack, suggesting that the barrier replicate the border proposed in the so-called "Geneva Accord," an unofficial peace plan drafted by a team of Israeli and Palestinian negotiators without the approval of their respective governments. Although this plan has generated support in various parts of the international community, a fence constructed along the route suggested by the accord would leave more than 100,000 Israeli settlers (most of them living adjacent to the Green Line) outside the barrier's protective envelope. Therefore, whatever its long-term prospects as a peace plan, it is not a realistic model for security fence construction.

In contrast to these nonviable scenarios, the fence currently being built by the Israeli Ministry of Defense will not cause disproportionate demographic pain for either party. Approximately 76 percent of Israeli settlers will be incorporated into 12.5 percent of West Bank territory on the Israeli side of the barrier, near the Green Line, while less than 1 percent of West Bank Palestinians will be "stranded" in these Israeli areas. Under this arrangement, 99 percent of the West Bank Palestinian population will be left in the remaining 87.5 percent of West Bank territory, the vast majority of which would be contiguous.

Moreover, the MOD fence can result in numerous positive consequences if implemented properly. First, it can drastically reduce the frequency of terrorist attacks within Israel, which have repeatedly undermined attempts to resume negotiations. In fact, completed portions of the fence have already curtailed terrorist infiltration from the

areas that they cover.

Second, in light of the currently dysfunctional political situation, the MOD fence is the best means of facilitating an eventual two-state solution. Aside from disentangling the two hostile populations, the barrier has the potential to become an effective provisional border.

Third, Israel has shown a willingness to modify the fence route in order to minimize Palestinian hardship. For example, in the wake of quiet U.S. diplomatic efforts over the past several months, Israeli officials privately indicated that they have abandoned plans to create a handful of Palestinian enclaves near the Green Line -- a measure that would have created undue hardship for more than 100,000 Palestinians.

Fourth, the controversy surrounding the fence has already catalyzed Israeli domestic debate regarding the future of the settlements. Recent polls show that most Israelis are willing to accept the evacuation of remote settlements as part of a fence arrangement. Accordingly, Prime Minister Sharon has announced that Israel will withdraw from all settlements in Gaza (where a security fence has existed since the mid-1990s), while Vice Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has called for unilateral withdrawal from much of the West Bank, including outlying settlements.

In contrast to these benefits, an improperly constructed fence, far from ensuring partition, would likely enshrine a de facto binationalism that would eventually destroy Israel as a Jewish state. As it is currently designed, the MOD fence could facilitate safe withdrawal from -- rather than continued occupation of -- the West Bank. In this sense, the barrier is in line with local and international aspirations for a final-status peace settlement.

Policy Recommendations

In light of these considerations, the United States should support construction of a West Bank fence that enhances Israeli security without foreclosing a future return to negotiations. Washington should also support vigorous, innovative measures to minimize the attendant hardships on the Palestinian people. Overall, the ongoing West Bank fence project must achieve the following objectives if it is to be politically defensible in Washington as well as in the eyes of local parties and the international community:

- avoid construction routes that preclude the formation of a contiguous Palestinian state or cause undue disruption to Palestinian lives,
- reduce violence by limiting the infiltration of terrorists into Israel,
- end the deadlock on achieving a two-state solution,
- advance the debate in Israel regarding the future of settlements, and
- provide an incentive for Palestinians to both fight terrorism and return to the negotiating table.

Even if negotiations do not resume in the short term, the fence can function as a provisional border that could be modified if Palestinians make real progress toward halting terrorism. In any case, regardless of the fence's immediate impact on the peace process, it has become increasingly clear that keeping Israelis and Palestinians apart now may be the only way to bring them together in the future. This book is available only in PDF format.

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