

A Fence That Makes Sense

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Mohammed Zuul, 23, blew himself up Sunday on a bus in the middle of Jerusalem, killing eight other people and wounding 50 more. The attack came on the eve of hearings in The Hague on whether Israel had the right to construct a fence to protect itself from assaults like these.

Zuul came from the village of Husan in the West Bank. His was the 10th "successful" suicide bomb attack from the Bethlehem area since violence began in the fall of 2000. Of those attacks, according to Israeli military records, nine have been directed at Jerusalem, which is approximately two miles away. Similarly, all the suicide bombing attacks against the Israeli seaside city of Netanya have come from the West Bank city of Tulkarm, which is seven miles away.

In all, Israeli military officials say there have been about 280 attempted suicide bombing infiltrations from the West Bank since the violence broke out. In at least 135 of these cases, the bombers successfully crossed into Israel. It is this toxic combination of frequency and proximity that has led Israel to build the fence.

But some Palestinians have tried to turn that argument around, saying it is the fence that is causing the violence. That's simply not true. Fatah's Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, which claimed responsibility for Zuul's attack, said it came in part in response to the fence. But in fact there is no completed fence between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, where Zuul came through. And an overwhelming number of the 280 infiltrations occurred before there was a fence at all.

The fence is there only to stop the attacks. This is undeniably the fence that terrorism built; if there was no terror, there would be no fence.

The establishment of a fence is supported by an overwhelming 83 percent of Israeli Jews, buoyed by the 100 percent success rate of halting Palestinian infiltrations from Gaza since early 2001, after the fence separating Israel from Gaza was rebuilt.

There is some irony that it is Israel that stands in the docket at the International Court of Justice at The Hague this week for taking a defensive measure.

After all, what are the Israelis supposed to do? Palestinian critics say Israel should not expect the Palestinian security services to protect Israelis and that Israel should not target Hamas killers for assassination. Now it seems that Israel should not passively defend itself by building a barrier, either. What's left?

As the building of the barrier continues, there are several misconceptions surrounding it that need to be cleared up. Some are minor. For example, Palestinians call the fence a wall, despite the fact that of the projected 480 miles, less than 15 miles will be a wall.

Another, more serious, allegation is that Israel is not building a fence to the west as a buffer but actually intends to encircle the Palestinians in enclaves with a second fence in the eastern part of the West Bank. It is true that some right-wing Israelis would like that, but this is not the fence that the Israeli military is currently building, and there is no plan for any such action in the future.

A third claim is that once the fence is built, it will preclude border changes. In fact, experience has demonstrated that on all fronts, with Syria (1974), Egypt (1979), Jordan (1994) and Lebanon (2000), Israel moved fences to accommodate diplomacy and withdrawal.

Palestinians have complained bitterly that the fence does not travel the exact route of the "Green Line" -- the pre-1967 war boundary -- but that instead it cuts deep into Palestinian territory on the West Bank. I believe that the line of the new fence makes strong political sense.

I tabulated the population figures of the 638 West Bank Palestinian villages and 128 Israeli settlements and found that Israel has approximately 170,000 people living in the 14.5 percent of the West Bank between the fence and the Green Line. In contrast, there are just 11,000 West Bank Palestinians in this area who will not have direct access to other parts of the West Bank. Are there hardships for those Palestinians? Yes, but they can be minimized by an array of actions now being undertaken, albeit belatedly, by Israel -- things like Israel busing Palestinian kids to school or building new roads. And we shouldn't forget that the 170,000 Israelis living there also face a hardship: the prospect of being blown up.

Apart from self-defense, a real benefit of the fence is that it could serve to disentangle the hostile, intertwined populations in the West Bank and set the contours of a possible two-state solution. As it stands, 99 percent of the 1.9 million West Bank Palestinians live in the 85.5 percent of the West Bank that is east of the fence, and 76 percent of the 223,000 West Bank settlers live west of the fence near the Green Line.

The creation of a fence has triggered a debate in Israel about the viability of remote settlements on the wrong side of the fence. Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, a Likud member, recently said that now that Israel was building a fence, such remote settlements were not needed for security. The fence will make it safe for Israel to leave most of the West Bank, not stay there. This debate would never have occurred so long as withdrawal meant trusting Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat rather than a fence.

By definition, a fence cannot resolve the conflict, but it might be able to manage it until the post-Arafat era begins. If it can save lives and begin disentangling these two hostile populations, this will be an important contribution.

David Makovsky is a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. A longer version of this article appears in the March-April Foreign Affairs.



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