

Israel's Fence

by [David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations.



Brief Analysis

During the first half of 2001, a new, fortified fence was constructed in the Gaza Strip, and since that time not a single Palestinian suicide bomber has infiltrated Israel from Gaza. Previously, in December 2000, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) had decided to create a 60-square-kilometer security buffer zone around Gaza. This buffer zone allowed the IDF to protect both the border area and the workers sent to fortify the fence in 2001. The IDF warned the Palestinian people in advance through pamphlets, lawyers, and the media that no one would be permitted to cross this zone.

At several points along the buffer zone, the IDF erected electronic observation posts with high-technology capabilities such as night vision. These posts enabled 4- to 5-kilometer views into Gaza and were supplemented by unmanned aerial vehicles with intelligence-gathering technology. Such devices, used in combination with motion detectors, were designed to help troops intercept individuals attempting to enter the buffer zone well before they reached the border. Indeed, because of this system of intelligence gathering both in and outside the zone, the IDF was able to capture several terrorists as they approached the fence.

This system translated into success on the ground due to the close coordination between overlapping levels of intelligence (strategic, tactical, and operational) and the transfer of key information to the soldiers responsible for security. Beginning with strategic intelligence gathered in Gaza cities, the IDF maintained an efficient system of communication that enabled it to thwart hundreds of attempts by terrorists to infiltrate Israel. An effective security system also requires motivated, professional troops. There must be contiguity among these troops as well—moving soldiers from unit to unit often results in wasted experience and the loss of valuable information.

Despite three years of violence, the fence has not hindered economic prospects. One of the outcomes of stable coexistence is improved economic conditions, which in turn diminish the level of conflict between two societies. In December 2000, nearly 3,000 Palestinians worked in the Erez Industrial Zone every day. Three years later, the improved security situation enabled an increase in the number of workers to 5,000. This increase was possible because of two factors: first, the Industrial Zone was protected by the IDF, which checked every Palestinian entering the area; second, the wages of Palestinian workers in the zone were approximately three times greater than wages in Gaza City, which encouraged the Palestinians to keep the zone free of terrorism. There are now nearly 180 low-tech industries in the zone, 50 percent of which are joint ventures between Israelis and Palestinians. Indeed, the zone

demonstrates that coexistence can occur in the midst of a difficult security situation.

The terrorism problem is much more severe in the West Bank than it is in Gaza. This discrepancy is directly attributable to the absence of a fence or comprehensive defensive system around the West Bank that is capable of protecting Israelis and saving lives. The defensive buffer currently in place around Gaza could be deployed around the West Bank with only minor cosmetic adjustments (e.g., due to terrain). Hence, a comprehensive security model that includes overlapping levels of intelligence, a security fence, and operational flexibility could be easily implemented in the West Bank, and would dramatically improve Israel's ability to fight terrorism.

DAVID MAKOVSKY

Discussions of Israel's new West Bank security fence have been plagued by a variety of mistakes (some honest, others clearly not) that need to be corrected if there is to be an honest and legitimate debate on the issue. Consider the following examples:

A Wall

Some call the fence a wall, when in fact only 3.6 of the 83 miles that have been built so far actually constitute a wall rather than a fence. The walled portions were built in an area where densely populated Israeli and Palestinian communities nearly adjoin each other or where Palestinian sniper incidents have occurred along an adjacent highway inside Israel.

Precludes Palestinian Contiguity?

Another misperception is that the fence will preclude the possibility of a contiguous future Palestinian state. Portions of the fence are in fact located inside the West Bank, first because 70-75 percent of Israel's 226,000 settlers live in 5 percent of West Bank territory adjacent to the Green Line, and second because such a move sends a message to terrorists that suicide bombs will not force Israel to concede that which it has been unwilling to concede at the negotiating table. Although the final layout of the fence is still indefinite, even the maximalist view argues that it should include only 10-15 percent of the West Bank (currently, it includes less than 3 percent). In other words, for those who believe that the fence will determine the parameters of the future Palestinian state, even the worst-case scenario—that is, maximal Israeli annexation with no subsequent negotiation—would still leave 85-90 percent of the West Bank east of the fence for that purpose (the fence will invariably trigger a debate inside Israel regarding the future of remote settlements on the eastern side of the barrier). In comparison, the Clinton parameters would have given the Palestinians 95 percent of the West Bank. Therefore, the fence is likely to facilitate contiguous Palestinian statehood rather than impede it, as critics argue.

Unfortunately, Palestinian officials gave National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice a highly inaccurate briefing this summer regarding the fence. According to them, Israel was building an encirclement fence that would include an eastern portion parallel to the Jordan Valley, thus leaving the Palestinians with only 45 percent of the West Bank. So far, there is no evidence supporting this assessment. Shortly after this briefing, Rice—and, subsequently, President George W. Bush—made harsh comments about the fence. Once the administration realized that it had been misled, Bush modified his comments amid the collapse of the Palestinian reformist government of Mahmoud Abbas. Currently, Rice is engaged in quiet "fence diplomacy" with Israel to deal with localized problems, when what is needed is an openly declared strategic approach to ensure that the barrier enhances Israeli security, takes into account the demographic realities of both Israelis and Palestinians, and does not affect the contiguity of the future Palestinian state.

Hardship for Both Sides

There is no doubt that those Palestinians who happen to live directly adjacent to the fence are experiencing some

hardship. Travel routes are being disrupted, including those used by some farmers, who now have only restricted access to their fields. In response, compensation packages for these individuals should be considered.

At the same time, it must be said that Israelis are experiencing hardship as well. Over the first three years of the intifada, the absence of a fence allowed for over 700 attempted infiltrations of Israel, including 127 suicide bombers who made it through and killed hundreds of Israelis. Therefore, it is not surprising that, according to a July 2003 Tel Aviv University poll, 80 percent of Israeli Jews support construction of a fence.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Ben Fishman.

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