

The Fence Need Not Be the End of the Road

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With Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy frozen, it is not surprising that the world is focusing its attention on the barrier that the Israelis are building in the West Bank. Israelis say it is about security. Palestinians say the "apartheid wall" is about Israeli imposition and land-grabs. For the Bush administration, it is about trying to manage a controversial issue that is shrouded in rhetoric.

One thing, however, is clear: if there were no Palestinian terrorism, there would be no Israeli impulse to build a barrier in the West Bank. There is a fence around Gaza and in the three years of the intifada not a single Palestinian suicide bomber from Gaza has reached Israel. Contrast that with the West Bank, which has been the source of 121 suicide bomb attacks. Small wonder that 80 per cent of Israeli Jews support the construction of the barrier.

At the same time, the Israeli perception is that there is no Palestinian body to combat terror. More than anyone else, Hamas and Islamic Jihad are the builders of the fence. Their commitment to terrorism -- and the unwillingness or inability of the Palestinian Authority to confront them -- provides the main impetus for construction. With no diplomacy and no security, the fence stands as testament to the belief that partition is more urgent -- and more achievable -- than peace.

The Bush administration seems increasingly willing to accept the fence as tomorrow's reality. While initially opposed to its existence on the grounds that it would hinder efforts to launch the roadmap for peace, the administration now focuses its deliberations on the contours of the barrier.

Indeed, the US is quietly engaging in "fence diplomacy," meeting Israelis and Palestinians separately to discuss the best route for it. That makes sense, so long as the administration is guided by strategic criteria, not the pressures of the moment. The three most important criteria are security, demography and the political future.

First, the fence needs to be built on terrain that makes infiltration into Israel -- not movement between Palestinian

towns and villages -- difficult. Second, it must incorporate as few Palestinians into Israeli areas as possible. If Israel is to remain Jewish and democratic, it needs to ensure a Jewish majority, not absorb areas that can undermine that majority. Third, the fence needs to preserve a political future for Israelis and Palestinians, not preclude it.

The fence needs to be a means of getting Israel out of Palestinian towns and villages and into a position where it no longer feels compelled to impede Palestinian movement through the myriad checkpoints set up to prevent suicide attacks.

Preserving a political future means understanding that the fence is not the end of the road. That means it must be built in a way that makes negotiations possible later on.

Broadly speaking, the fence's contours should be those of a buffer, largely along the western side of the West Bank; it should not be an "encirclement fence" that would surround Palestinian towns from the eastern side as well. Israeli officials deny that this is their intention.

One effect of a buffer fence would be to trigger a debate in Israel about settlers -- not about the majority, who live close to the pre-1967 borders, but about the minority who live in dozens of remote settlements deep in the West Bank. It is no accident that settlers have been among the most vociferous opponents of the fence.

At the same time, Palestinians have to realise that the key to dismantling problematic settlements and obtaining border adjustments is negotiation. This is critical if they are ever to shake off one of Yasser Arafat's self-destructive legacies: counting on a sense of entitlement to avoid making tough decisions and taking responsibility for counter-terrorism. For the Palestinians, victimhood is too often not just a condition, but also a strategy and, sadly, a self-fulfilling prophecy.

While prudence demands that the US be vigilant in its fence diplomacy, the administration does not have to see itself as the cartographer of a new Middle East. The fence is a way-station on the road to peace, not its substitute. Yet, handled correctly, keeping Israelis and Palestinians apart might ultimately be the best way to bring them together. ❖

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