

# The Good Fence

by [Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](#)

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute, a post he assumed in January 1993.



## Articles & Testimony

**F**or the first time since the start of the Palestinian uprising nearly three years ago, hope for real peace between Israelis and Palestinians is beginning to take shape. Strangely, the Bush administration is sending signals that it is against it.

I am not referring to the "road map" for Middle East peace, the temporary truce declared by Palestinian terrorist organizations or even the emergence of new Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas, who seems genuinely committed to peace but probably lacks the power to make it happen.

I am referring to the construction of the security fence now being built by Israel to create a long-overdue buffer between Israelis and Palestinians.

More than the road map, the truce or even Mr. Abbas, the fence stands a good chance of fundamentally transforming the strategic landscape between Israelis and Palestinians.

Indeed, if any initiative can revive the possibility of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict -- a solution that had all but vanished as a result of the terrorism and violence of what has come to be known in the Middle East as the "thousand-day war" -- it is the erection of a physical barrier between Israelis and Palestinians. With even moderate Palestinian leaders forswearing any serious effort to disarm terrorists or fulfill obligations to "dismantle terrorist infrastructure," constructing a fence may be the only effective protection against the next wave of suicide bombers.

The fence is not, as some have characterized it, a Middle East version of the Berlin Wall. For most of its route, the barrier is a mix of chain-link and barbed-wire fence and an old-fashioned dirt path, swept clean each day to show the footprints of infiltrators, complemented by a multilayered system of high-tech sensors and video cameras.

More importantly, though, the Berlin Wall separated one people, Germans from Germans, denying freedom to half; Israel's security fence will separate two peoples, Israelis and Palestinians, offering the prospect of security to both.

Israel has wisely chosen to build the fence at some distance within the West Bank proper, not to build the fence directly along the old "Green Line," the 200-mile-long armistice line that demarcated the pre-1967 frontier between Israeli and Jordanian territory.

Construction of the fence along the Green Line would carry the whiff of Israeli unilateral withdrawal to those borders, a longtime Palestinian demand, and with it the stench of defeatism that invites further terrorism. At the same time, Israel has declared that the fence does not define a political border, only a security perimeter, and that it remains committed to negotiating the final disposition of the territories in bilateral talks with the Palestinians.

This approach has powerful strategic implications.

For the Palestinians, construction of a fence inside the West Bank sends a clear message that failure to fight terrorism -- the proximate rationale for the fence -- comes at a steep price. The fear of losing control of territory for an indefinite period, even more than the prospect of gaining statehood, may finally provide the incentive for concerted Palestinian action against terrorists. That's why the fence has provoked an outcry of criticism from Palestinians.

The fence will also trigger important change within Israel, too.

The fence is likely to incorporate under Israeli control the majority of Jewish settlers, who already live very close to the Green Line, but will not include many smaller settlements and wildcat outposts, scattered around the West Bank. If the fence truly does help prevent terrorism, as has been the record of a similar fence that already encircles the Gaza Strip, then it may force Israelis to think more dispassionately about the costs and benefits of maintaining outlying settlements. It is precisely for this reason that the most radical leaders of the settlement movement decry the fence as a Trojan horse.

Taken together, the fence could produce that rare political hat trick: reducing terrorism against Israel, raising the incentive for Palestinians to fight terror themselves and fueling a constructive, self-induced internal Israeli debate about settlements.

For all these reasons, the Bush administration should support the fence. But news reports suggest that the administration may in fact oppose it. Indeed, the one issue said to have provoked heated debate when National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice visited Jerusalem this month was U.S. opposition to the fence.

On this critical issue, the administration should be clear: Both the idea of the fence and its construction east of the Green Line, within the West Bank, are good for peace.

Having established those two principles, Washington then has standing to discuss with Israel the exact route of the fence, about which the administration may have legitimate concerns.

Here, the third principle should be that the fence route should not run so far east of the Green Line or take in so much Palestinian territory that it prevents the future creation of a contiguous Palestinian state, incorporates in Israeli-controlled territory too many Palestinians or includes too many far-flung settlements. Those poison-pill outcomes would undermine the original wisdom of the fence.

When Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon comes to Washington next week, the White House should publicly endorse these principles regarding the fence. After having committed the prestige of his presidency on promoting Israeli-Palestinian peace, President Bush should not find himself on the wrong side of an initiative that may actually offer a chance to produce it. ❖

Baltimore Sun

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