

Implications of a 'Security Fence' for Israel and the Palestinians

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In-Depth Reports

***M**r. Eran's remarks represent his own views and not necessarily those of the Israeli government.

Dennis Ross, The Washington Institute: Many Israelis and Palestinians have a shared sense of urgency regarding the need to find a resolution to their ongoing conflict, even acknowledging the need to do so jointly. They disagree on at least one key point, however. Many Israelis feel that time is growing short and that their government will have to take action on its own if the two sides cannot create a workable partnership to resolve their conflict in the near future. For example, some argue that demographic realities may force Israel to make unilateral decisions regarding its borders. In contrast, although many Palestinians agree that there is no time to lose, they feel that unilateral Israeli measures would not be a prescription for stability and peace, but rather for continued conflict.

This discussion will focus on one such measure: an Israeli security fence. Many Israelis acknowledge that this measure will neither usher in peace nor completely end terror, but they clearly feel a compelling need to do something to improve their security. Nevertheless, the prospect of a security fence raises numerous questions that must be answered from the perspective of both sides. For example, what are the implications of taking this step for Israelis and Palestinians alike? Is it a step in the right direction or simply a temporary arrangement that reflects the current relational limitations between the two sides? Even if it is not a solution in itself (or even, in the short term, actually inhibits progress toward a solution), could it contribute to a final resolution in the long run?

The chief issue for this discussion is how measures such as a security fence might affect prospects for producing an ultimate joint solution, keeping in mind that true peace can only be reached through mutual effort. Hopefully, this discussion will help to clarify some of the larger security, political, and economic implications of building a fence.

Uzi Dayan: The fence issue is a particularly good lens through which to view Israeli- Palestinian relations. But any discussion of this kind must begin with certain facts about the area in question. Israel is 500 kilometers long from Eilat to the Lebanese border, and 70 kilometers wide on average. In some places, such as the area north of Petah Tikva, the distance between the so-called "green line" and the seashore is about the distance between Laguardia and Kennedy airports. The area of Israel not including Judea and Samaria (the West Bank) and the Gaza Strip comprises about 20,000 square kilometers.

The map representing the interim agreement between Israelis and Palestinians is more complicated. The total area of the West Bank is about 5,500 square kilometers. In Area A, all the jurisdictions are Palestinian. In Area B, responsibility for security is Israel's and all other responsibilities are Palestinian. Areas A and B combined contain the entire Palestinian West Bank population. Area C is Israeli and contains all the Israeli West Bank settlements -- about 140.

The green line appears only on unofficial maps. It does not appear on official maps of the Israeli-Palestinian agreements because of controversy over exactly where the line falls. Its total length is about 360 kilometers. As it passes through Jerusalem, the line follows the municipal borders of the city -- which differ, by the way, from the

1967 line.

Within the green line live about 2.2 million Palestinians. Within the rest of Israel, there are about 6.5 million people. Included in this latter figure are about one million non-Jews, most of them Israeli Arabs -- including the Arab population of east Jerusalem, who are not Israeli citizens -- 100,000 Druze and Christian Arabs, and 300,000 foreign workers, all together making up 18.7 percent of the Israeli population. Currently, more than 250,000 people are living in Israel illegally, some 100,000 of whom are Palestinian. In fact, nearly two-thirds of the foreign workers in Israel are illegal.

So far, more than 240 people have been killed in suicide attacks within the main populated areas of Israel. About 95 percent of them are civilians and most are women, young people, and new immigrants to Israel. This is the part of the population that frequents the discotheques, bars, restaurants, and so on.

Primarily in response to the threat of terrorism, Israel has begun to build a security fence or, as it is called in Israel, a "seam zone." This zone is actually a strip, from zero to 4-5 kilometers in width, and it is not a solid, continuous line. So far, we have planned and budgeted only 110 kilometers of the zone starting more or less from Jenin. One section -- a highway by Israeli standards, called the "Samaria crossing" -- goes around the settlements of Elkana, Ariel, and Maale Ephraim. The zone will also be built around the municipality of Jerusalem.

This security zone will serve as an obstacle to both vehicles and people, and there will be about thirty crossing points throughout the West Bank. Some of them are for Israeli and Palestinian cross-traffic, and some are exclusively for Israeli settlers near the green line. There will be a special regime in the security zone area; only those who are either working on nearby land or have commercial or other reasons to be there will be permitted to enter the zone.

The idea has proven effective in Israel's other border areas. One fence follows the Israeli-Lebanese border. There is another fence along the Golan Heights area, and another that circles the Gaza Strip. The Gaza fence is particularly effective; it is actually a security "system," consisting of a dirt road, followed by a portion of fence, then another road for patrols, and so on, all around the perimeter -- about 55 kilometers in area plus about 10 kilometers on the Israeli-Egyptian border. The area of the West Bank is much more complicated, not only because of the large distance covered, but because of the need to separate populations.

So, the primary goal of the security zone is to provide security for Israelis. The second major goal is to improve the economic situation in Israel. The terrorist attacks in the more densely populated areas of the country have greatly damaged the Israeli economy, causing a severe downturn in the tourism industry and forcing the government to bar Palestinians from working in Israel. The consequent economic losses have ranged from 10 to 14 billion shekels in each of the past two years -- a startling sum considering that Israel's annual security budget is 30 to 35 billion shekels. Preventing terrorists from reaching the main populated areas of Israel would help to revitalize the economy in addition to saving lives.

A third major goal of the security zone is to draw a clear line between legal and illegal residents in Israel. Without such a line, Israel will not be able to counter the growing problem of illegal immigrants and workers. The idea of a security zone is quite controversial in Israel. My assessment is that terrorism leaves us with no other choice, as the zone is needed for security reasons. Yet, this measure will also have a significant impact on how the affected areas are viewed politically in the future. If it were simply a matter of security, the issue would not generate so much debate.

As early as 2001, I had recommended to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon that we establish the security zone. He did not like the idea, and although I rescinded it at the time, I warned him that terrorist attacks would continue until we had no choice but to build such a fence. Clearly, now is the time to fully implement the idea -- better too early than too late.

Oded Eran: The construction of a security fence has indeed generated significant controversy among Israelis, and I for one have several reservations about this measure. Uzi and others have spoken at great length about the number of Israeli casualties inflicted during the ongoing terror campaign against Israeli society, and I cannot add anything to their assessment. Every government has a responsibility to protect its citizens and its national interests, and I must defer to experts such as Uzi on matters of security.

Yet, it is important to expand the discussion beyond the question of security, as there are other prisms through which the fence ought to be examined. For example, many are asking what impact this fence might have on the future permanent- status borders of Israel and the eventual Palestinian state. From this perspective, Israeli attitudes toward the fence vary according to whether one belongs to the right camp or the left camp.

More important, what happens to a society that has to live on the other side of this fence? This question is crucial because anything that affects the Palestinians has repercussions for Israelis as well. Notwithstanding terrorism and its impact on Israeli society, a fence could have several long-term consequences that have not been adequately factored into Israeli decisionmaking.

Since 1967, the West Bank and Gaza Strip have been almost totally dependent on the Israeli economy. This should come as no surprise -- despite the many perils, errors, and difficulties it has faced, Israel has long had a vibrant economy, successful in both absolute terms and relative to other states in the region. For over thirty years, thousands of Palestinians flocked to work in Israel, and countless Palestinian products were sold in Israeli markets. Consequently, the West Bank and Gaza experienced an economic boom. This boom came in spite of the various Israeli restrictions that have been applied at one point or another since 1967. For example, until the early 1990s, successive Israeli administrations barred several Palestinian attempts to develop medium and heavy industries in the West Bank and Gaza. Nevertheless, the Palestinian economy did very well compared to the Arab economies in the region precisely because it was integrated with the Israeli economy.

Such integration had several benefits for the Palestinians. In general, Israel represented a rich market for Palestinian goods. Moreover, Israeli markets were in many cases easier to reach than Palestinian markets. For example, the distance between Nablus and Haifa is shorter than that between Nablus and Hebron; in other words, many West Bank merchants could reap lower transportation costs by selling their goods in Israeli markets just across the border rather than in Palestinian markets on the far side of the territories. In addition, the earnings of Palestinian workers in Israel gradually came to constitute one-third of the Palestinian gross national product.

Because of the various benefits of economic integration, and in spite of the previously mentioned Israeli restrictions, Palestinians were able to develop their own small- and medium-sized enterprises in the West Bank and Gaza, which eventually contributed to the development of what I call a "Middle Eastern middle class." Although this category was not equivalent to a European middle class, the Palestinians did establish a kind of social stratum that had been virtually nonexistent in many parts of the Middle East prior to 1967. This trend in turn facilitated the emergence of a large segment of Palestinians who saw Israel as more than an occupier controlling their lives and their movement; many of them began to recognize that Israel was a politically and culturally democratic nation with a civil society, a free press, and numerous other liberties.

Some argued that Palestinian economic dependence on Israel (or on any one country, for that matter) would not be healthy in the long run. Given the economic conditions in other parts of the region, however, the Palestinians had little alternative. For example, would Jordan have been able to absorb even a fraction of the Palestinian workers employed by Israeli businesses? Certainly not, given the country's 25 percent unemployment rate and the fact that it already hosted foreign workers from several other nations, including Syria, Sri Lanka, and Iraq. Even if employment in Jordan had been a viable alternative for Palestinian workers, they would have had little incentive to choose it in light of the disparity between Jordanian and Israeli wages. Similarly, Palestinian merchants could not be blamed for

choosing the more lucrative Israeli market (with a per capita income of around \$17,000) over the Jordanian (\$1,500-\$1,700). The market factor is at work in the Middle East, just as it is anywhere else in the world.

To their credit, the Palestinians negotiated the Oslo agreements economically rather than politically, because they understood the importance of their economic situation in the medium term, if not the long term. They did not force an economic border; they went for a customs union, placing the two entities in one envelope and allowing for the free flow of labor and trade into Israel. But something went wrong almost immediately after the Oslo agreements were signed: terrorism. Israel responded with closures, and thus began the decline of the Palestinian economy. In the years since 1967, Palestinians had been far ahead of their Arab neighbors in many respects. Today, Palestinian unemployment is at 50 percent, if not more. About 60 percent of the population is under the poverty line, making under \$2 per day, and I cannot foresee serious improvement in the near future. The Israeli government has recently agreed to absorb about 30,000 workers, but any new terror attack will eliminate such a provision.

In essence, the fence does not add any security value to the closures. The nature of a gate is to be closed, not open, and the automatic "close it" reaction tends to become the rule rather than the exception. If you want the two sides to remain open to one another to any degree, you cannot build fences or gates.

Dayan: The gates of hell are always open.

Eran: I am not disputing that fences are necessary for security. But we consequently have to write off economic, social, and cultural relations between the two societies. I believe that a fence will almost irreversibly damage the possibility of further relations between the Palestinians and Israel.

Daniel Pipes wrote an article refuting the linkage between terror and poverty, but I suspect that those who plan to commit suicide do not have time to read such articles before their decision. The Palestinians do not have many other market alternatives; the surrounding Arab states are competing, not complementary, economies, and if you close off the Israeli option, they may not have a way out of their grave and chaotic economic situation. When this economic hardship continues and deepens -- given the additional political factors and the daily humiliation -- it will create a fertile environment for more terrorism.

Sari Nusseibeh: I received a telephone call a month or so ago from someone in Tulkarem. He called me to say that the Israeli authorities had just confiscated something like 20,000 dunams of land in the area of Qalqiliya, and that those who lived in the towns and villages nearby no longer had free access to the fields to which they normally went for work. I did not realize at the time that actions like this were part of Uzi Dayan's security zone plan being put into effect by Ariel Sharon.

I have had close contact with the walls being extended around the municipal border of Jerusalem, separating some of the inhabitants and neighborhoods from others, and making life for my university -- both students and teachers -- extremely difficult. Over the past months, we have tried various means of getting around this obstacle in order to carry out a normal teaching schedule. It may or may not serve the security interests of Israel, but the fence is already adversely affecting the lives of Palestinians.

Here we are with a fence rising up, separating us. And however high the fence, it cannot prevent terrorism. It may make terrorist acts more difficult to carry out, but for those bent on doing so, crossing into Israel is still possible. In the United States, the ocean itself could not prevent terrorists from penetrating the heart of the country. What provides security is joint action for a common future. And if Israel determines that building a fence is a sound policy, that fence should at least be built in coordination with the Palestinians and not at the expense of Palestinian territory.

Most of all, we must remember that terrorism does not come from the general population; it comes from individuals or small groups. The secret of containing terrorism is to get the larger population to stand up and vilify the violence

perpetrated against Israelis. If this population feels that there is hope of living in freedom, they will -- as in past years -- be the best allies of Israel in terms of preventing and containing terrorist activity against civilians.

Eran: There is a vicious cycle at work. The Israeli side cannot move forward before it has achieved security, while the Palestinian side says it is powerless to do anything in the face of all the curfews and closures. This is not a simple cycle to break. There is total chaos on the Palestinian side. While you may succeed with certain technical reforms under the current circumstances, a political and cultural process must be pursued that will create a credible Palestinian leadership. Israel has a long-term interest in helping to create a better Palestinian society.

In the meantime, we need dialogue on the issue of security versus the economic and social needs of Palestinians. I am not talking about negotiations on future political relations, but rather discussions about the practical aspects of daily life and the ramifications of certain steps taken by Israel. The United States could play a more active role on this issue, given the current absence of dialogue between the two protagonists.

David Makovsky, The Washington Institute: Sari, in terms of an ultimate negotiated border, are you willing to accept population swaps or mutual adjustments to the 1967 line?

Nusseibeh: So, David is asking whether some Palestinians should be outside of the fence. I am not doing the fencing. Uzi is. (Laughter.)

Ross: With demography as the criterion for drawing the border, no populations have to be moved if one goes south along the green line. Not so if the border is moved westward. Uzi, how do you react to the idea of drawing the lines demographically?

Dayan: There are two Palestinian villages within the current fence. One is called Barhta. It is a small village of 2,500. The 1948 armistice line divided it in two, right down the middle. So until 1967, there were two villages, with members of the same family living on both sides of the line.

There is another village called Bakah al-Shrqia; actually, there are two "Bakahs." Bakah al-Shrqia is to the east on the Palestinian side; Bakah al-Ghrbeia is to the west, an Israeli Arab village. Many Palestinians are living illegally in Bakah al-Ghrbeia, and in the end it was decided to include Bakah al-Shrqia on the Israeli side of the fence. I opposed this move in principle because I think that there should be a minimal number of Palestinians within the fence -- zero, if you ask me. Although it is not a good idea to cut Barhta in two again, it would have been better to have the fence fall between Bakah al-Ghrbeia and Bakah al-Shrqia. In any case, the Palestinian population of Bakah al-Shrqia constitutes almost all of the Palestinians who now fall within the fence, about 4,000-5,000.

In addition, between 7,000 and 14,000 Palestinians are living illegally in Um al-Fahum, an Israeli village along the green line that is home to 40,000 Israeli Arab citizens. This is a very unhealthy situation. According to the mayor of the city, Um al-Fahum's residents prefer to have a fence as long as their land falls on the Israeli side. It would be much healthier for everyone if all those living in Um al-Fahum were made full Israeli citizens. In other Israeli villages along the green line, about a third of the population are illegal residents.

Participant: How will you measure the effectiveness of the fence? Do you expect to eliminate 100 percent of Palestinian terrorism, or some smaller percentage?

Dayan: We are talking about real security, not merely a sense of security. There will not be a 100 percent success rate. But the fence can nevertheless be very effective once we build crossing points and unified commands on both sides, with industrial zones to permit Palestinians to come to work.

I do not support economic separation in the long term, but for now it is needed. The issue of Palestinian workers being kept out of Israel has nothing to do with the fence itself, but with the security situation. The fence will allow Israel to focus on improving the security situation and then to make ultimate decisions about border demarcation,

whether or not we have a Palestinian partner. I am not talking about solving the Arab-Israeli conflict, but about preserving the democratic Jewish nature of Israel while achieving some modicum of coexistence with our neighbors. The more coordination and cooperation we get from the Palestinians on our mutual borders -- particularly the sort of cooperation that we have with the Egyptians and the Jordanians (unfortunately, not yet with the Lebanese) -- the better the situation will be.

I agree that there is an issue with the Israeli settlements. But we have to fight terrorism while considering territorial compromise in this area. At first, we will have to continue to provide security to Israelis who live in the settlements or travel there, because if this fence is effective, it will actually put more pressure on those Israelis.

Participant: Dr. Nusseibeh, was the Palestinian failure to accept the Camp David proposal a strategic error? If so, what does it say about the current governance in Palestine? General Dayan, was the Oslo process a mistake?

Nusseibeh: The failure at Camp David was a strategic tragedy, and the responsibility for that tragedy lies with all of the participants, including the Americans. On the other hand, the Palestinian side should have tried to maintain the ongoing network of negotiations with Israel. It is not a mistake to disagree, but the tragedy was in allowing that disagreement to deteriorate to a total collapse.

Dayan: When my small daughter does not want to go to sleep, she usually asks a question, such as what life is all about. Questions about Oslo fall into this category. We lack the historical perspective to judge the peace process. There is a university in Beijing that does not teach the French Revolution because its chancellors do not believe there is yet sufficient historical perspective.

Clearly, Oslo did not progress the way we would have hoped or expected, and there are two immediately apparent lessons. First, it proved that Yasir Arafat is not the right partner. Second, it proved that we must not neglect the educational, economic, and cultural aspects of peace. Poverty is not a good excuse for terrorism, but it will usher in more of that sort of violence.

It will be very difficult to return to the parameters of Camp David 2000. The rejection at that summit was a low point in relations between our two peoples, leaving us in a very bad situation. Terrorism has increased, and people on both sides are very skeptical. Israelis do not believe that they have real partners on the Palestinian side; Palestinians do not believe that Israel will withdraw. Consequently, there is a great deal of desperation. At the same time, most people now understand that if Israelis have a real partner, they are willing to make painful territorial compromises.

I do not want to be a pessimist. I am optimistic in that I believe all of this is still in our hands. Israel has to fight terrorism, and at the same time it must come up with a much more complete initiative for helping the Palestinian people societally and economically. If this kind of initiative does not work in the coming one or two years, we will have to take action to determine our own borders. But we do not have to do this unilaterally if we have a partner with which to negotiate. I personally think we can still do it together.

Ross: The fence is not a desirable option; it is evidence of the failure of diplomacy and raises as many problems as it has the potential to solve. The question is whether there is an alternative. Unless a different environment is created, one in which there is no terrorism or violence, the fence option will continue to build its own momentum against the return to negotiations. ❖

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