

# Israel's Wall: A loss of security for all

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Whether it is in the form of a chain-link fence, a concrete barrier, a trench, or a tangle of barbed wire, "the wall" that is being built by Israel in the name of security is certainly, as Israeli military orders term it, an "obstacle". In areas, extending 8 meters (26 feet) high and up to 100 meters wide, the physical boundary that Israel began in April 2002 and with which it is unilaterally enclosing and isolating the Palestinian people of the West Bank is a severe threat to a population already suffering the effects of the longstanding Israeli occupation. It impinges on their basic rights to survival, livelihood, dignity, and freedom – the primary global concerns defined by the Commission on Human Security. B'Tselem, the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, projected in an April 2003 report that the barrier "will likely cause direct harm to at least 210,000 Palestinians residing in sixty-seven villages, towns, and cities". While "the wall" is a tangible obstacle to the human security of the Palestinians, it is only one manifestation of the effects of the illegal, belligerent, and humiliating Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In the guise of counter-terrorism and state security, the wall violates the fundamental rights of Palestinians and promises to further shrink the possible land-area for any future Palestinian state.

The wall is being built by Israel ostensibly to halt Palestinian attacks on Israeli civilians. If its construction were really about security, then it would straddle the 1967 border of the West Bank – the Green Line – or have been established on Israeli land rather than drawing international criticism and creating physical boundaries that will influence future discussions about sovereignty without any form of bilateral negotiation. The wall will not increase security, but extend the conflict. Its construction is leading Palestinians to believe that a two-state solution is no longer viable. In the current climate, a one-state solution will be resented by extremists on both sides, and Israel will further institutionalize an apartheid system with the West Bank and Gazan Palestinian enclaves as marginalized Bantustans – a recipe for the continuation of the struggle and threatened security of both nations. It cannot be said too often nor too confidently that the wall is not about security; it is an aggressive grab for land.

Although Israel claims that "the obstacle" is a temporary measure, the expense, effort, and sheer expanse of land confiscated speak otherwise. Most of the Israeli military orders

relating to the wall expire in 2005, but these orders are easily renewed. And by issuing temporary military orders, complex legal proceedings required for permanent property confiscation are unnecessary. If the wall were a stringent security measure based upon fear of attacks, the existing boundaries and checkpoints would be much more rigorously guarded. As it is, the majority of suicide bombers enter Israel through military checkpoints. And Palestinian newspapers run nearly daily photographs of children, elderly, students, and others clambering over the existing barriers near Jerusalem or families trudging through muddy hillsides in rural areas to avoid these checkpoints often within sight of soldiers or settlements.

“The wall” currently deviates from the 1967 borders or Green Line cutting into the West Bank in some areas as much as 7.5 kilometers. If completed as planned, this number will rise to 22 kilometers. In places where it does ride the Green Line, additional barriers are planned several kilometers to the east – or further within Palestinian territory – of the current wall. The wall is projected to cut off approximately 975 square kilometers of land from the rest of the West Bank. In effect, approximately 16.6% of the area of the West Bank defined by its 1967 borders will become a physically separate entity while much of the remaining area will rest under Israeli control – annexing de facto approximately 50% of the West Bank. The path of the wall itself creates a swath of destruction as houses are demolished, and orchards bulldozed to clear the area. As of June 2003, the wall already claimed the uprooting of 102,320 trees and in one town alone 85 buildings were destroyed. In the Jerusalem area, the wall will even run over a Palestinian graveyard.

For the Israelis, “[t]he lack of transparency regarding the path of the route flagrantly violates the rules of proper administration and hampers informed public debate on a project of long-term, far-reaching significance at a cost of hundreds of millions of shekels”. For the Palestinians, the wall is one more step towards their further displacement and will “cause further humanitarian hardship to the Palestinians”. The wall is helping to plunge Palestinians further into entrenched poverty. There is evidence that as of the autumn 2003 “there are 25,000 new recipients of food assistance as a direct consequence of the Barrier’s [sic.] construction”. Farmers cut off from their lands run the risk of losing their crops without proper access, and shepherds have to search for alternate grazing grounds. Movement of goods and equipment is curtailed and access to markets uncertain. With little hope for sustainable livelihoods in the so-called seam areas, many Palestinians are considering abandoning their land and risking its subsequent confiscation.

By imposing collective punishment, seizing and destroying private property, demolishing homes, making access to health and education difficult, separating families, annexing occupied land, and violating Palestinians’ rights to work and freedom of movement, Israel is violating a long list of human, social, cultural, and economic rights as well as international laws.

Israel has repeatedly imposed collective punishment upon Palestinian civilians. This punishment is administered in the form of curfews and restriction of movement and often results in the killing and injuring of innocent civilians. The wall is the latest manifestation of collective punishment and will effectively transform the West Bank and parts of the East Jerusalem area into a large prison for Palestinians. The Hague Regulations, or Hague Convention of 1907, which have been accepted by the Supreme Court of Israel, explicitly prohibit collective punishment for residents of occupied territories

As the October 2003 UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/58/3 states, “the route marked out for the wall under construction by Israel, the occupying power, in the Occupied Palestinian Territory...could prejudice future negotiations and make the two-State solution physically impossible to implement”. The route has serious political implications. By ‘creating facts on the ground’ that will be difficult to reverse, many fear that the land that lies in the seam area is in danger of being expropriated by Israel permanently, as “Israel has expropriated land for not being adequately cultivated [or] pursuant to military orders”.

The land that is in danger of being expropriated is strategic because of its resources – namely fertile farm land and access to the main aquifer in the area – in addition to the expansion of Israeli settlement. A member of the Palestinian Hydrology Group writes: “the appearance of the Wall was in no way a surprise, but an extreme physical application of the theoretical and the various efforts of Israel of the last decades to control the vital Western Aquifer...the Wall will make the upstream if the aquifer inaccessible to Palestinians ensuring that Israel will control both the quantity and quality of the water”. It is this Western Aquifer which supplies the necessary water to the most fertile Palestinian agricultural land.

The wall infringes on the right of freedom of movement as stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The enclaves “outside” the barrier, yet not inside Israel – the so-called “seam area” – have been designated closed military zones as of October 2, 2003. Palestinians over the age of 16 residing in these enclaves now require a specific written permit to remain in their homes. Palestinians wanting to enter this seam area require special permission authorized by a military commander. It is projected that approximately 400,000 Palestinians will be caught living in this closed seam area when the wall is completed. Along the projected 720 kilometers of the wall, there is only a proportionally small number of projected gates or “passages” designated as crossing points. There are no guarantees that permits are granted or if issued, respected on the ground. As it stands, the “gates” in the wall are open for only very short intervals (often 15 minutes) and do not follow a fixed schedule making timely access to health and educational services as well as employment nearly impossible. The military permit system is jeopardizing children and teachers from reaching their schools, farmers from reaching their crops, the sick from reaching healthcare facilities, and Palestinians from all walks of life from reaching their places of work, to say nothing of family or other social, cultural and commercial resources. As Palestinian families traditionally fear for their women’s safety and honour, preferring them not to travel too far to school or work, the wall is having negative effects on female education and employment. Until now most residents of the seam area have received permits, though they must be renewed in 1, 2, or 3 month intervals, but few residing outside the seam area are allowed to enter for any reason. One report even notes that soldiers guarding the gates in the wall are refusing shepherds access to their own grazing land on the grounds that they do not hold special permits for their goats.

Maybe because of its mammoth proportion and material nature, “The Wall” has fast become an issue of international concern. Solidarity movements are taking action and joining local residents to protest the wall, or accompany them to their fields or schools on the other side. Websites and activists groups have been formed to track the wall’s progress, to monitor the confiscation of land, provide case studies of those b

eing affected, and to coordinate advocacy campaigns and activities to help to stop the wall, destroy what has already been built, return confiscated land and compensate for the destruction of property and loss.

The Palestinian Environmental NGOs Network (PENGON) has taken the lead in the locally based campaign against the wall that is fast reaching around the world. The work against the wall is being institutionalized with PENGON and PNGO (the Palestinian Network of NGOs) hiring full time coordinators in the Qalqilia and Tulkarem areas to monitor the wall and manage local media relations and campaign activities. In addition, the wall was a main theme for Palestinian organizations participating in the World Social Forum in Mumbai in January. The Palestinian Authority, as of yet, has no clear agenda for addressing the issue, but is preparing itself well for the coming trial in the Hague.

In October 2003, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution demanding that Israel “stop and reverse the construction of the wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including in and around East Jerusalem”. 144 members voted in favor, while only 4 voted against (Federated States of Micronesia, Israel, Marshall Islands, and the United States) with 12 abstentions. In December, the General Assembly requested an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice in The Hague to determine the legal consequences of the construction of the wall. The date for these hearings is set for February 23, 2004. While Palestinian negotiators and advisors are preparing themselves for these hearings, one can only guess how many more facts on the ground will be in place by the time of their commencement.

While the wall continues to be an obstacle to peace, human security, real negotiations, or a viable Palestinian state, it is providing an issue that is beginning to mobilize different sectors of the Palestinian population to be active at a time when most energy had been exhausted in the three year long Al Aqsa Intifada, or uprising against the occupation. And despite the insecurity and uncertainty that Palestinians continue to feel in the hands of a hostile occupation and without a representative government, the past year has seen some very positive measures. In spite of numerous invasions, closures, and curfews, substantial programs have been undertaken in development and emergency response. These can be divided into four main fields: the continuing and improved service provision in different sectors, increased advocacy both domestic and international, an increased focus on institutional capacity, and finally prominent public debate on democratic transformation and reform. Some specific successes of 2003 worth mentioning are the completion of the Palestinian Participatory Poverty Assessment by the UNDP and the Ministry of Planning and the Welfare Consortium’s 36 million dollar program to aid development and encourage partnerships between the NGO, governmental, and private sector

While killing civilians on both sides must be condemned, preventive actions must be monitored to safe-guard the rights – whether they be human, civil, social, economic, or cultural – of all parties concerned. The wall will not provide security for Israel and continues to violate Palestinians’ rights. While there is much attention given to preventing so-called terrorist attacks, little is paid to the underlying reasons for them – poverty, inequality, and oppression. These issues need to be understood and addressed in order to ensure human security around the world. For the Palestinians, the immediate step in this.

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