

The West Bank Barrier: Origins, Implementation, and Consequences

Ilona Metais

Edited by Amir Hotter Yishay and Avery Franken

ABSTRACT - The Israelis call it a “security fence,” but the Palestinians call it the “apartheid wall.” From the original idea to its construction, the West Bank barrier, which separates Israel from the West Bank, is hugely controversial. This article begins by unpacking Israel’s motivations to build such an edifice, arguing that, despite its purported security purposes, evidence suggests that the barrier may also have been intended to prevent an influx of Palestinians living inside Israeli territory that would have threatened Israel’s claim to be a Jewish State. This research investigates the political, social, and economic consequences of the barrier for Palestinians, concluding with a discussion of the barrier’s implications for the Israeli-Palestinian relationship overall.

Before 2000, nothing would have convinced a right-wing Israeli politician to build a barrier separating Israel from the West Bank. Indeed, then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, who fervently supported Israel's territorial expansionism and strived towards Eretz Israel or Greater Israel—which would include all of Judea and Samaria—would not have welcomed the idea of relinquishing this biblical part of Israeli territory to the Palestinians (Usher 2006, 18). However, this idea grew into a reality when the violence of the Second Intifada (Palestinian uprising), starting in 2000, gave birth to a campaign of suicide bombings by Palestinian militants, killing 200 Israelis in the first year and 400 in the second (Jones 2009, 10). In the summer of 2002, the Israeli government approved the construction of a 723 kilometer-long barrier between Israel and the West Bank, claiming its purpose was to halt Palestinian suicide bombers' infiltration into Israel. However, this stated purpose is the object of substantial controversy worldwide. Was internal security the only reason why Israel erected the barrier? What impacts did it have on the Palestinians and their right to self-determination? What were the project's consequences on Israeli-Palestinian relations and Israel's international reputation?

Firstly, this essay provides an overview of the process leading to the construction of the wall. Secondly, it will explore the perceptions of Israelis and Palestinians vis-à-vis the fence/wall's objective and impact. The former sees the fence as a defense mechanism against a once very palpable terrorist threat. In contrast, the latter views the wall as a hindrance to its economic, social, and political development. Thirdly, this research shows that Israel had motives aside from its security concerns to build the West Bank barrier, namely demographic and political imperatives. Lastly, this paper will highlight the consequences the barrier had on the Palestinians' economic, social, and political developments and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict's evolution, focusing on heightened resentment on the Palestinian side that gave birth to the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement. Overall, this article aims to

unpack Israel's motives for building the barrier and its consequences on Palestinian society and relations between Israelis and Palestinians.

The West Bank Barrier: From the Idea to the Implementation

This section gives a factual background of the process leading to the completion of the West Bank barrier, focusing on how the barrier's deviation from the Green Line makes it an object of controversy and contention. The Green Line is the boundary demarcation that resulted from the 1949 armistice between Israel and Jordan after the 1948 war. Jordan occupied the West Bank between 1948 and 1967 before it came under Israeli control after its victory in the Six-Day War of 1967. Since then, the Green Line has ceased to be an international boundary between Israel and the potential Palestinian state.

The West Bank barrier was built gradually during the years following the failure of the Oslo Accords and the beginning of the Second Intifada. Yitzhak Rabin first proposed the idea of the West Bank barrier in 1995, along with the creation of the barrier around the Gaza Strip. However, its actual implementation occurred progressively, starting in March 1996, when the Israeli government erected checkpoints along the seam area guarded by a special Border Police to reduce Palestinians' infiltration into Israel. Secondly, after the outbreak of the second Intifada, Prime Minister Ehud Barak established a "barrier to prevent the passage of motor vehicles" in November 2000 from the northwest end of the West Bank to the Latrun area (Saddiki 2017, 11). It was only in June 2002, two years into the Second Intifada—which had already killed 500 Israelis—that the government approved the construction of a continuous barrier separating Israel from the West Bank (Frisch 2007, 10). The government decided to start the construction in the northern part of the West Bank, near Jenin, Nablus, and Tulkarem, because these were the major centers of terrorist operations and the Israeli towns close to the Green Line, like Netanya and Hadera, were the most vulnerable to suicide bombings (Frisch 2007, 10). Finally, in 2003, the

Israeli government decided to extend the barrier to the West Bank's whole perimeter (Frisch 2007, 10).

Today, the barrier is 723 kilometers long (Jones 2009, 10). Its path is tortuous, incorporating as many Israeli settlements as possible and thus separating Palestinian communities from each other and from the West Bank itself (Cohen 2006, 684). Most of the barrier is fences, barbed wire, and other obstacles; only 6 per cent is a solid, concrete wall (Cohen 2006, 684) standing five to eight meters in height (Frisch 2007, 12). Presently, the main point of contention between Israel and Palestine (and between Israel and the wider international community) concerning the barrier is that it does not follow the Green Line.

The nomenclature of this barrier has always been extremely controversial. The Israeli government called it a "security fence" or a "separation fence," implying that it is temporary and almost neighborly, giving Israel more legitimacy in its management of the terrorist threat (Rogers and Ben-David 2010, 203). In contrast, the Palestinian Authority's nomenclature sounds more brutal: the official Palestinian term is "apartheid wall," suggesting its permanence and similarities with segregationist policies adopted by the former South African regime (Rogers and Ben-David 2010, 204). This essay uses the term "West Bank barrier" as a default, non-partisan designation as employed by the UN in its report on the Humanitarian Impact of the Barrier (UNOCHA and UNRWA 2008). The significance of the different denominations of the barrier will be used in this paper to expose each side's perceptions of it.

The "Security Fence" Against the Terrorist Threat

Against the backdrop of the Second Intifada, the Israeli government's decision to build the security fence in the summer of 2002 is an ostensibly rational response to an urgent terrorist threat and increasing pressure from the population to implement enhanced security measures. Between 2001 and 2002, Palestinian suicide bombings killed 299 Israelis, who were casualties in violent attacks (Saddiki 2017, 16), like the seder massacre

in Netanya on March 28, 2002, which killed 31 Israelis (Jones 2009, 7). Between September 2000 and August 2003, Israel was the victim of 116 suicide bombings, of which 115 originated from the unfenced West Bank (Rynhold 2004, 62). Thus, it seems legitimate that Ariel Sharon's government coined the term "security fence" to refer to the West Bank barrier (Rogers and Ben-David 2010, 203). Such a violent wave of terrorist attacks brought fear and trauma to the Israeli population, which, in turn, pressured the government to build a fence to insulate Israel from Palestinian infiltration. It is estimated that 80 per cent of Israelis supported the building of a security fence in the West Bank following the failure of the Oslo Accords (Rynhold 2004, 60). According to the head of the General Security Service, Avi Dichter, the barrier "is the key to Israel extricating itself from the terrorist quagmire" (Rynhold 2004, 60). Since it was erected, many credit the security fence for reducing the number of successful suicide bombings in Israel, as only 24 Israelis were killed by them between 2003 and 2004 (Jones 2009, 10). This dramatic decline in fatalities further reinforces Sharon's government statement that the fence "is a security measure, not an expression of a political or any other kind of border" (Rynhold 2004, 61). Furthermore, the decreasing number of victims enhanced Israeli public morale as their fear of suicide bombings faded, signalling a return to normalcy (Avineri 2005, 72). Therefore, the Israeli government's security argument for building the fence seems valid as there is a correlation between its construction and the decline in Israeli civilian fatalities.

The "Apartheid Wall's" Problematic Route

The West Bank barrier's geographical route has (and continues to) elicit vehement opposition from Palestinians regarding the construction and existence of the barrier. Instead of running along the Green Line, created and agreed upon in 1949 with Jordan in the aftermath of the 1948 war (Cohen 2006, 688), 87 per cent of the barrier runs inside the West Bank and East Jerusalem (UNOCHA and UNRWA 2008, 4), prompting

Palestinians to claim that Israel willingly annexed parts of the West Bank. According to B'Tselem, an Israeli NGO that self-identifies as the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, the barrier directly harms at least 210,000 Palestinians living in sixty-seven villages, towns, and cities (Lein 2003, 9). Even though only 6 per cent of the West Bank barrier consists of actual concrete walls, the “apartheid wall” is the PA's preferred nomenclature (Rogers and Ben-David 2010, 204) to describe the barrier because it encompasses the barrier's ideological impact. The wall does not allow Palestinians to move freely like their Israeli counterparts, leading to widespread criticism of the barrier as a racist mechanism that subordinated Palestinians to Israeli control (Rogers and Ben-David 2010, 204).

Furthermore, the land confiscation from many Palestinian farmers gave Israelis increased access to agrarian land compared to Palestinians. Finally, this denomination was chosen by the PA because it believes that the barrier's main purpose is to separate two peoples, much like apartheid policies in South Africa. Accordingly, the barrier is seen by many Palestinians as a form of forced displacement and ethnic cleansing (Saddiki 2017, 21).

The “Separation Fence” Against the Palestinian Demographic Threat

This section discusses the evidence that Israel also constructed the barrier in response to the threat of ultimately being outnumbered by Palestinians, which would undermine Israel's status as a Jewish and democratic state. Israel is regulating this demographic threat through the “Right to Return” of all Jews in the world, who are immediately granted Israeli citizenship when making their Aliyah (“the act of going up” when Jews immigrate to Israel), and through stringent restrictions on citizenship to Palestinians (Usher 2006, 20). The “Separation Fence,” as Yitzhak Rabin called it (Rogers and Ben-David 2010, 203), could also represent a solution to demographic threats faced by the Jewish state.

Beyond immediate security threats, the difference in population growth between Israelis

and the Palestinians motivated Israel to build the barrier to ensure its survival as a Jewish state. The rate of natural increase of the Muslim-Palestinians is estimated at 3.5–4 per cent per year, whereas that of Israel's Jewish population is 1 per cent per year. It only reaches 2 per cent when accounting for the Jewish population that makes Aliyah (Jones 2009, 11). Given these statistics, estimates projected an equal number of Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs in the West Bank, Gaza, and Israel by 2012. By 2025, Palestinians would have constituted a majority (Usher 2006, 20). Hence, the prospect of Israel's survival as a Jewish State was threatened, and then Prime Minister Sharon was aware of it. Therefore, the West Bank barrier provided Israel with an efficient way to regulate this Arab demographic boom in its territory by closely controlling who passed the barrier into Israel and who did not. The long-term purpose of the barrier can thus be seen as a means to separate two populations and create two distinct territories (Cohen 2006, 686).

For Israel, this physical obstacle between Israel and the West Bank also marked the ideological border of Zionism (Jones 2009, 13). The barrier quelled the aspiration of the Israeli right-wing politicians to attain Eretz Israel, or in other words, the complete annexation of all of the West Bank and Gaza to restore the biblical territory of Israel. This ambition had to be held back because of the demographic realities on the ground. Indeed, because of the high birth rate of the Palestinian Arab population, Israel could not continue to aspire to a Greater Israel (which would have included the West Bank) and a majority Jewish state. Just as Israel's disengagement from Gaza was partly motivated by the fear of being responsible for 1.3 million Palestinian residents (Usher 2006, 20), Israel could not also exert control over West Bank Palestinians who would soon have outnumbered Israelis. In the same vein, Ariel Sharon's successor, Ehud Olmert, stated that “the most important and dramatic [step] facing us [is] shaping the permanent borders of Israel. We must create a clear border that reflects the demographic reality that has been created on the ground as soon as possible” (Jones 2009, 15). Therefore the idea of the separation fence also entails the logic of finite physical and ideological

borders to the State of Israel and Zionism.

The Consequences of the Barrier for Palestinians

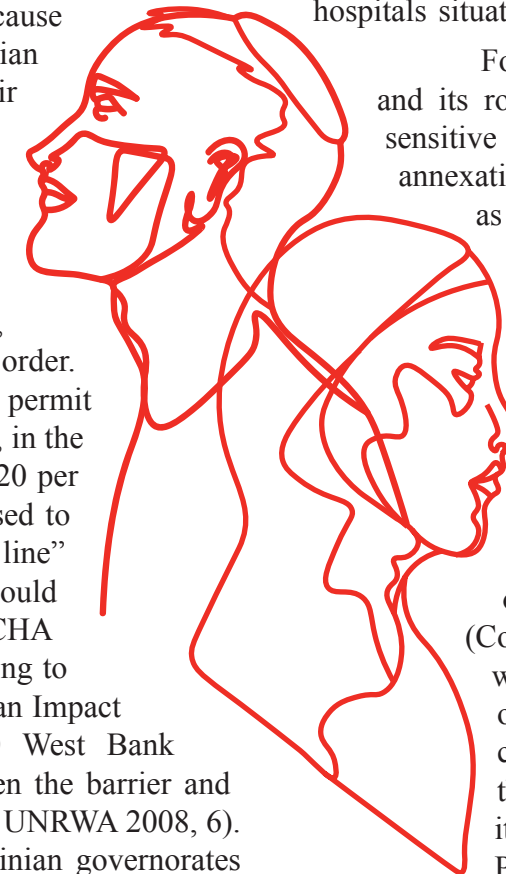
The barrier's route is problematic for the Palestinian economy because it separates some Palestinian communities from their agricultural land. In October 2003, the area between the West Bank barrier and the Green Line, designated by the Israeli government as the “seam zone” (Saddiki 2017, 15), was closed by military order. Only those who are granted a permit can access this area. As a result, in the northern West Bank, less than 20 per cent of the Palestinians who used to farm their lands in the “seam line” were granted permits and could resume their activities (UNOCHA and UNRWA 2008, 6). According to a UN report on the Humanitarian Impact of the Barrier, about 35,000 West Bank Palestinians are located between the barrier and the Green Line (UNOCHA and UNRWA 2008, 6).

Furthermore, the Palestinian governorates in Jenin, Tulkarm, and Qalqiliya, once considered the “breadbasket of Palestine” as they represented 37 per cent of the West Bank's agricultural land, are the most affected by the building of the barrier (Saddiki 2017, 20). The separation barrier also deprives the Palestinians of valuable water resources in the “seam area.” Palestinians argue that with the wall's construction, Israel could dominate all the strategic sites of freshwater in the region, especially those located in Jenin, Qalqilya, and Tulkarm (Saddiki 2017, 21). Consequently, the barrier is hindering the economic prosperity of these areas by preventing farmers from reaching their lands.

The social impact of the barrier on Palestinian communities is also dramatic because it severely restricts hundreds of thousands of Palestinians' freedom of movement. For instance, Palestinians require permits to go to the six

specialist hospitals inside Jerusalem. The difficulty and time it takes to get a permit have entailed a 50 per cent decline in the number of patients going to these hospitals (Saddiki 2017, 18). This restriction in mobility thus affects West Bank Palestinians seeking to go to schools, universities, and hospitals situated on the other side of the wall.

For the Palestinians, the barrier and its route are exceptionally politically sensitive because they consider it an annexation of some of the West Bank as the barrier fails to follow the Green Line. Indeed, B'Tselem estimates that Israel annexed 10 per cent of the West Bank during the construction of the barrier (Jones 2009, 10). Therefore, many international humanitarian voices and voices within Israel have supported the wall's construction only if it was along the Green Line (Cohen 2006, 685). For instance, while the International Court of Justice (ICJ) condemned the construction of the barrier inside the West Bank and deemed that it disproportionately harmed the Palestinians in its current state, it did not issue an opposition statement to its construction along the Green Line (Jones 2009, 4). Palestinians argue that this unilateral annexation by Israel of parts of the West Bank undermines the PA's credibility (Cohen 2006, 693) as a political body because it was utterly helpless in preventing Israel's wall from deviating from the Green Line into the West Bank. As a result, the PA's strength as a negotiating partner with Israel is extremely weakened, hindering the creation of an independent Palestinian state and thus undermining Palestinians' fundamental right to self-determination.



Consequences of the Barrier on Israeli-Palestinian Relations

For Israel, placing the barrier on the Green Line would have meant either evacuating the settlements on the eastern side of the Green Line or abandoning them on the Palestinian side of the wall. The former was not an option because Israeli governments generally struggle to fight against the settler lobby (Rynhold 2004, 69). Furthermore, leaving the settlements on the Palestinian side of the barrier would have created an alternative source of friction between Israelis and Palestinians. The settlers would have been more vulnerable to suicide bombers as they would have chosen them as a substitution (Frisch 2007, 8) for their other targets beyond the wall and inside Israel. To defend itself, Israel attributes responsibility for constructing the barrier and its effects on the Palestinians, brandishing the argument “no terror, no fence” (Cohen 2006, 691). This claim essentially implies that the need for a barrier is due to the Palestinian Authority’s inability to prevent terrorist suicide bombers from entering Israel.

The barrier's construction along its controversial route heightened Palestinian animosity towards Israel and gave birth to the Boycott, Divestment, Sanction (BDS) movement. In 2005, a group of Palestinian intellectuals created the BDS movement to compel Israel to respect international law in a non-violent manner (Chomsky 2014, 20). This would be done by “(1) Ending its occupation and colonization of all Arab lands occupied in June 1967 and dismantling the Wall; (2) Recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality; and (3) Respecting, protecting, and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN Resolution 194.” (Chomsky 2014, 20). According to Noam Chomsky, there is “near universal support” for the end of the Israeli occupation of post-1967 colonized Arab land and for the dismantling of the West Bank barrier. The BDS movement has had wide-ranging impacts on Israel, deteriorating its image on the international scene. For instance, following the 2014 Gaza war, Israeli ships were prevented from docking

at sports in South Africa, Sweden, and India.

Furthermore, the BDS pressure has been key to the EU's introduction of rules that prevented its members from funding Israeli companies based in illegal Israeli settlements (BDS Movement 2020). These events undoubtedly affect Israel's image, vis-à-vis the international community, and hinder its efforts to improve it. However, the recent normalization efforts between Israel and other Arab countries such as the United Arab Emirates or Bahrain through the Abraham Accords (United States Department of State 2020) could provide reasons to question the continued efficacy of the BDS movement and its ability to rally support for the Palestinian cause amongst its Arab neighbors. The question now is whether or not the BDS movement will adapt to these changing dynamics and stay relevant as an international organization defending Palestinians' rights.

Conclusion

While Israel's short-term and urgent reason to build the barrier was to respond to the suicide-bombing campaign triggered by the Second Intifada, the barrier also served Israel over the long-term by countering the Palestinian demographic threat. However, on the Palestinian side of the barrier, the consequences were dramatic economically, socially, and politically because it undermined their right to self-determination.

This essay has shown that the West Bank barrier has had very different repercussions on the Israelis and the Palestinians. The barrier provided more security for the former as the number of successful suicide bombings decreased dramatically after its establishment, justifying the “security fence” denomination. It also provided a way for Israel to respond to a more long-term threat to Israel's existence as a majority Jewish state. Therefore, it seems that Israel acted as a rational, utilitarian political actor by establishing the barrier as it maximized its people's security and ensured the survival of its state. Indeed, the lack of diplomatic recognition of Israel's building of the wall from the PA or the Arab world, the ICJ condemnation of the barrier, and the abandonment of Eretz Israel

as an ultimate goal seemed a small price to pay for the guarantee of Israelis' safety and the state's survival. Therefore, by building the barrier, Israel succeeded in fulfilling its part in its citizens' social contract with its citizens of keeping them safe.

However, for the Palestinians, the barrier was yet another catastrophe and led to bitter resentment. The barrier's tortuous route harmed hundreds and thousands of Palestinians on a personal scale. On a global scale, the barrier inflicted high economic and social costs on the Palestinians as it deprived farmers of their land and prevented them from reaching their schools and hospitals. In political terms, the PA has chosen the “apartheid wall” denomination because it sees it as a direct, racist attempt to impede Palestinians' human rights. The barrier has decreased the chance for Palestinian self-determination in concrete terms because it weakened the PA as a credible negotiating partner. Such violation of international law only increased the Palestinians' resentment vis-à-vis the Israelis and has led to the creation of movements such as the BDS, which took an international magnitude.

Today, Israelis and Palestinians have not had any successful peace agreement since the Oslo Accords, and the situation is at a standstill. The barrier impedes peace talks because it represents a unilateral annexation of parts of the West Bank to Israel and serves to demean the PA and the Palestinians. However, had the barrier been built along the Green Line, Israel would have had to evacuate some of its settlements from the West Bank, potentially leading to more fruitful negotiations and establishing an independent Palestinian state. In that way, Israel could have prevented long-term rising tensions and resentment with the Palestinians and international disapproval of the barrier's route, but this was a price that Israel was willing to pay to ensure its safety.

References

- Avineri, Shlomo. 2005. “Straddling the Fence.” *Foreign Policy* 147, no. 147: 72–73.
- Chomsky Noam. 2014 “On Israel-Palestine and Bds.” *Nation* 299, no. 3-4: 19–22.
- Cohen, Shaul E. 2006. “Israel’s West Bank

Barrier: An Impediment to Peace?”

Geographical Review 96, no. 4: 682–95.

Frisch, Hillel. 2007. “(The) Fence or Offense? Testing the Effectiveness of ‘the Fence’ in Judea and Samaria.” *Democracy and Security* 3, no. 1: 1–19.

Jones, Clive. 2009. “The Writing on the Wall: Israel, the Security Barrier and the Future of Zionism.” *Mediterranean Politics* 14, no. 1: 3–20.

Lein, Yehezkel. 2003. “Behind the Barrier: Human Rights Violations As a Result of Israel’s Separation Barrier.” position paper, Trans. Zvi Shulman, B’Tselem: pp. 4–9.

Rogers, Richard, and Anat Ben-David. 2010. “Coming to Terms: A Conflict Analysis of the Usage, in Official and Unofficial Sources, of ‘Security Fence’, ‘Apartheid Wall’, and Other Terms for the Structure between Israel and the Palestinian Territories.” *Media, War & Conflict* 3, no. 2: 202–29.

Rose, Steven, and Hilary Rose. “Stephen Hawking’s Boycott Hits Israel Where It Hurts: Science | Hilary Rose and Steven Rose.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 13 May 2013, www.theguardian.com/science/political-science/2013/may/13/stephen-hawking-boycott-israel-science.

Rynhold, Jonathan. 2004. “Israel’s Fence: Can Separation Make Better Neighbours?” *Survival* 46, no. 1: 55–76.

Saddiki, Said. *World of Walls : The Structure, Roles and Effectiveness of Separation Barriers*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book, 2017.

The Abraham Accords - United States Department of State. (2020, October 27). Retrieved November 19, 2020, from <https://www.state.gov/the-abraham-accords/>.

Usher, Graham. 2006. “The Wall and the Dismemberment of Palestine.” *Race and Class* 47, no. 3: 9–30.

“What Is BDS?” BDS Movement, 9 Feb. 2020, bdsmovement.net/what-is-bds.