



Israel's Security Fence:

Back to the Wall?

by Tekla Szymanski

According to the Peace Index survey published on March 1, 2004, the Israeli-Jewish public almost unanimously (84 percent) supports the fence, 13 percent oppose it, and 3 percent do not know. Although only 16.5 percent think the fence and the other physical means of partition can completely prevent terror attacks, 70 percent believe such means can significantly reduce the number of attacks. The wide public support for the fence crosses the political parties, reports Ha'aretz (March 10, 2004). The support for the fence is based on the widespread assessment that it can significantly reduce terror attacks, though only a small minority believes it can prevent them completely.

"We need to have a fence in order to have good friends on the other side," says Matan Vilnai, a Knesset member from the Labor Party and former IDF Deputy Chief of Staff. "We need the fence to safeguard a Jewish-democratic state. The fence is one precaution we must take to have peace. But it needs to be built on the Green Line."

The construction of Israel's separation wall (or security fence), roughly along the '67 cease-fire line, separating Israelis from Palestinians in the West Bank, is in full swing. The first phases of the fence have been completed, and the entire wall will be up by the end of 2004 at a total cost of US\$1 billion. As of Jan. 2004, 197 miles (317 km) of the security fence out of 452 miles (728 km) have been completed. As of Jan. 2004, 197 miles (317 km) of the security fence out of 452 miles (728 km) have been completed. The fence is 230 feet wide, including roads, ditches, barbed wire, and tracking paths.

So far, 7,800 Palestinians have found themselves outside of the fence, their villages physically separated from the fenced-in sections of the West Bank.

Former Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas once referred to the separation wall — a network of fencing, concrete wall, and barbed wire — in terms such as "apartheid" and the "racist wall."

But while for some the fence is an inconvenience, for others it has saved lives. "Saving lives is more important than preserving the quality of life," Benjamin Netanyahu recently wrote in an op-ed for The New York Times. "Quality of life is always amenable to improvement. Death is permanent."

Thus for Israelis, the fence has become a security blanket, it has become the "Anti-Terrorism Fence." And indeed, the number of suicide bombings within Israel drastically decreased with every mile built. According to Tel Aviv's centrist Ma'ariv (July 8, 2004), the fence is saving lives every day. Since the beginning of construction, an approximate 90 percent decrease in the number of successful terror attacks was registered. The fence has contributed to an increase in Israel's GDP and resulted in a 0.3 percent decline in unemployment. According to Israel's Defense Ministry, this economic improvement has offset the economic harm done by terrorism.

For the United Nations, on the other hand, the fence does not fit into the neat concept of the "road map;" it ruled in July 2004 that it ought to be torn down. Israel refused.

The fence has become a litmus test for Israel's willingness to make peace with the Palestinians; it has been placed prominently on the international agenda because it creates facts on the ground. London's Financial Times (Oct. 2, 2003) called the separation fence, "Sharon's wall [that] will be a disaster [and] will not work...It puts beyond reach any conceivable solution to the century-old question of Palestine...[and] further pre-empts a two-states solution....The idea that this will give Israelis security — let alone give the Palestinians justice — is a delusion."

According to Matti Golan, however, writing in Tel Aviv's financial Globes (Sept. 10, 2003), the security-, separation-, anti-terror fence, however one wants to refer to it, is actually a peace wall. "The fence would be better named the 'security and peace fence.' It should already be obvious that the only chance for a peace agreement with the Palestinians, if there is any chance at all, lies in them being unable to hurt us. So long as they can hurt us, there will be those among them who will try. The harder it becomes for them to kill us, the weaker will be their resistance to an agreement. In other words, the fence will not only enhance security, it will improve the chance for peace....To the Palestinians who claim the fence will harm the peace process, we must tell the truth: The opposite is the case. The fence will only help the Palestinians who truly want peace, by thwarting those who do not want peace."

Mandela, Rather Than Arafat?

But with every additional mile built, the fence — intended to separate between Israelis and Palestinians, between Israel and the West Bank and Gaza — could achieve just the opposite and, in the long run, knit the two people together under one democratic government. How? Because unilaterally separating the West Bank and the Gaza strip from Israel — thus preventing a viable Palestinian state — would permanently prevent a two-state solution and make Palestinian independence impossible.

But that's not all. Within a decade, Jews will become a minority on both sides of the fence.

Let's assume the Palestinians would openly declare that they have given up their dream of an independent state. What if they would instead start demanding, "one man, one vote" for each Palestinian living in the West Bank and Gaza and claim the right to partake in Israel's democracy?

What if they were to fight the "fight of Mandela" instead of the "fight of Yasser Arafat?"

Ironically, Israel's right-wing parties and settlers will soon be forced to agree on some sort of two-state solution within the next 10 years, at the very latest, in order to keep their dream of a "Jewish state" alive and to prevent that Israel will become an Apartheid state.

The United Nations Intervenes

On Oct. 21, 2003, the United Nations General Assembly overwhelmingly approved — by a vote of 144 in favor, to 4 against, with 12 abstentions — a resolution demanding that Israel stop and reverse construction of the fence. The resolution was adopted after the United States vetoed on Oct. 14 a similar resolution put forward by the U.N. Security Council that would have called the barrier illegal. The General Assembly resolution is not legally binding — but it is considered a reflection of international opinion. Israel's representative to the U.N. called the proceedings a "humiliating farce" and added that surrendering to manipulative games and illegal initiatives of the Palestinian observer made a mockery of the U.N.

On Dec. 8, 2003, the U.N. General Assembly approved by 90 to 8 a non-binding, symbolic resolution asking the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague to render an advisory opinion on the legal consequences of the separation fence.

The hearings opened on Feb. 23, 2004.

On Jan. 15, 2004, the ICJ came out with a statement authorizing the League of Arab States, at its request, "to participate in the proceedings in the case concerning Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory." And on Jan. 22, the ICJ authorized the Organization of the Islamic Conference, at its request, to participate in the proceedings as well.

The United States promised Israel to submit, in writing to the ICJ, its opposition to the so-called Fence Trial. The document to be submitted would express American support for resolution of the security fence controversy through future peace negotiations. Several European countries submitted similar letters to the court.

Israel's media reacted with anger to the prospects of dragging Israel to court over the fence — a necessary barrier that Israelis regard as protecting their lives. "Does the international community wish to continue the systematic destruction of its institutions on the altar of the Arab-Israeli conflict?" fumed an editorial in Jerusalem's conservative, English-language Jerusalem Post (Jan. 6, 2004). "The ICJ is expected not only to consider the [legitimacy of the fence], in blatant violation of

its own precedents and rules, but to rule against Israel. As a result, the march to declare Israel an international outlaw state will continue."

The editors of Tel Aviv's liberal Ha'aretz agreed in principle (Jan. 6), but they also warned the Israeli government: "Defending the fence now being built could also fatally compromise the entire idea of a fence designed to defend Israel from terror attacks. Justice Minister Yosef Lapid...urged his ministerial colleagues to reconsider the route that the fence is to take. To avert the ominous South Africa analogy, the government must change not only the route of the fence, but the wrongheaded political thinking behind that route."

Five months later, the government indeed had to change the route a bit. Israel's Supreme Court ordered on June 30, 2004, to reroute a 25-mile section of the barrier northwest of Jerusalem. However, it accepted the state's position that the fence was essential for national security and was not being built for political reasons, but that Israel had to balance security considerations with the needs of local residents.

On Feb. 22, 2004, a day before the hearings in The Hague were set to begin, a suicide bombing on a bus in Jerusalem left eight Israelis dead and 70 maimed.

The ICJ Has Spoken

On July 9, 2004, the ICJ, as expected, and after receiving written arguments from more than 40 countries, decided 15 to 1 (the American judge ruled against) that the fence was illegal and against international law; that it should be removed; and compensation to Palestinians, whose lands have been confiscated, be paid. The ICJ further stated that the fence "gravely infringes a number of rights of Palestinians residing in the territory occupied by Israel."

Syria's newspaper Teshreen promptly called the decision a "historic victory for the Arab cause," and the Tehran Times cheered, "the world has finally woken up to this great Israeli crime."

But the court's decision was non-binding. And it failed to mention the issue of Palestinian terror. "[The ruling] fails to address the essence of the problem," fumed Ha'aretz on July 9, 2004, "and with it the very reason for building the fence — Palestinian terror." Tel Aviv's centrist Yediot Aharonot went further: "The court has simply swallowed whole the Palestinian side of the argument and regurgitated it as a legal ruling. We don't doubt that if the judges had been asked to rule on Israel's existence, they would have decided 'that the Jewish state itself is an illegal entity.' "

But a July 12 editorial in Yediot Aharonot admitted that the security fence represented a limit to the aspirations of both the Palestinians and the Israelis: "For the Palestinians, who consider the fence from its eastern side, it says: 'Thus far and no further. All of your national dreams and yearnings, from a state to [the right of] return, you — the Palestinians — will have to realize and implement them in the areas up to the fence; what lays beyond the fence is separated and blocked off forever. For you, it is a foreign country.' To the Israelis, who see the fence and its wall-like sections from the west, it indicates — in a very concrete and tangible fashion — the end of Jewish expansion in the Middle East and a final border to Zionist aspirations on the ground. This is our land. Beyond the fence, it is the land of

others, not ours." The editors added, "In the Israeli Palestinian conflict, the fence is creating the awareness of partition that hasn't yet been internalized. Aided by the fence, the concept, the route and the bricks — the partition will be internalized."

Non-binding or not, the ICJ's decision served as basis for the U.N. General Assembly's Resolution that was approved on July 20, 2004, by 150 countries in favor, 6 against (the United States, Israel, Australia, the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Palau) and 10 abstentions (Cameroon, Canada, El Salvador, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Uganda, Uruguay and Vanuatu). The U.N. Resolution decreed that the fence ought to be dismantled and the ICJ's ruling obeyed.

But, alas, the U.N. General Assembly's Resolution, too, is non-binding. "Thank God that the fate of Israel and of the Jewish people is not decided in this hall," remarked Israel's ambassador to the U.N., Dan Gillerman, after the vote.

Israel's Insurance Policy?

In the beginning, at the early planning stages, the idea of erecting a separating wall was applauded by many Israeli commentators. They applauded an immediate physical separation from the Palestinians to boost Israel's security and to fight terror (Israel's defense ministry reported that in 2003, 30 percent of planned terror attacks were prevented because of the fence). The security fence was, and still is, regarded as an "insurance policy" should the road map fail.

According to an opinion poll conducted in July 2003, 70 percent of the Israeli public — representing a broad consensus from across the political spectrum — support a unilateral political and territorial separation from the Palestinians in the form of a security fence. And according to the Peace Index survey published on March 1, 2004, the Israeli-Jewish public almost unanimously (84 percent) supports the fence (13 percent oppose it, and 3 percent do not know).

The Israeli public thus supports a two-state solution and, until that happens, a reduction of friction between the two peoples. "Unilateral separation provides a short-term alternative that will at least allow for conflict management," asserts Gerald M. Steinberg of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, "... creating a modicum of stability and a foundation for resumption of formal negotiations toward an end to the conflict."

Initial Praise Turns Into Preaching

Just after construction of the fence had started, Tel Aviv's centrist Ma'ariv wrote in an editorial: "Yesterday — too late for 530 Israeli dead — the cornerstone was laid for the separation fence between Israel and the areas controlled by the Palestinian Authority. Better late than never!" Over time, however, Israeli commentators have come to question the merits of a wall.

"Since the beginnings of Zionism, Jewish settlers have felt a need to surround themselves with a fence, while their Arab neighbors were happy with the hedges of

Barbary fig plants around their villages," wrote Yehuda Litani in *Yediot Aharonot* (July 31, 2003). "The separation fence being built in the past few months, which turned into a bone of contention between President Bush and Prime Minister Sharon, continues that trend. [The fence] is a symbol of the isolation Israel has imposed on itself. It is the symbol of Israel's shortsightedness. [...] An entire nation that pins all its hopes on a separation fence, not on a binding bilateral agreement, places its trust on castles in the air. [...] Walls, watchtowers, and roadblocks provide an illusion of security. But that is false security [...] that causes the postponement of the only possible solution. A good fence is no guarantee for good neighborly relations; in our case, this is a bad fence that will produce even worse neighborly relations."

"The barricade has created a physical and emotional scar running through the heart of this bitterly contested landscape," wrote David Newman, a professor of political geography at Ben Gurion University in Israel, in the *Los Angeles Times* (July 28, 2003). "[I]n fact, a new border is being created."

On July 10, 2003, Minister of Foreign Affairs Silvan Shalom said that Israel would attempt to reach a solution to the disagreement on the fence, in accordance with understandings between Israel and the United States. "I heard President Bush's comments that the fence was appropriate for a period in which there was terror," Shalom said in an interview on Israel Radio. "We don't want to return to that period of terror. This fence will be very effective in preventing extremist organizations from carrying out terror operations....The Americans want a different route, but they say that as long as the fence is related to our security and doesn't harm Palestinian lives, it can continue....The fence is intended to help the peace process, not to destroy it as the Palestinians claim," Shalom added. "It is meant to prevent extremist groups from dismantling and ending the peace process. Therefore the fence will continue to be built. Of course we want to do all we can in coordination with the Americans, but friends can also disagree."

On July 11, 2003, *Ha'aretz* reported that Israel would consult with the United States as it finalizes the route of the security fence, including the section around the community of Ariel. Israel wanted to take into account the wishes of the U.S. government, as long as they did not conflict with Israel's security needs. Israel is open to alternate suggestions from the United States and hopes to find solutions that cause "the minimal amount of infringement and hardship."

The Settlements: In or Out?

The debate, however, continued over the position of the fence — especially around large Israeli settlements — and whether the fence should be built around them, deep into Palestinian territory, or not. After a suicide bombing on July 12 near the entrance to Ariel — a large settlement in the West Bank east of Tel Aviv — that killed one Israeli, the debate heated up, because the fence stops just near this town. Right-wing politicians and settlers argued that large settlements should be included within the fence so that suicide bombings, such as the one near Ariel, could be stopped. Gideon Ezra (Likud) said that the attack at Ariel proved that the partition fence must be erected to the east of the settlement so that it would be included "within" it — even though this would mean that a substantial area of the Shomron would have to be annexed. Ophir Pines (Labor), however, gave the viewpoint of the Israeli left, saying that it is clear that Ariel cannot be included within the fence,

"because this would violate Israel's understandings with the entire world, causing the wall not to be built at all." According to an opinion poll conducted by the Israeli Radio station Reshet Beth on Aug. 12-13, however, 63 percent of the Israelis (69 percent of Likud voters and 41 percent of Labor voters) believe that the security fence must include Ariel.

Then, on Oct. 1, 2003, the Israeli government decided by an overwhelming majority to authorize the planned outline for the central part of the fence, stretching from Elkana to the north to Umm Darajeh near Arad in the south, thus enclosing Ariel on three sides. Defense establishment experts are of the opinion that once the NIS 4.5 billion (approximately \$1 billion) budget is approved, it will be possible to complete the entire fence within 18 months to two years. The central part of the fence is to include to the east all the settlements of western Samaria, the area around Modi'in, Etzion, and the southern Hebron Hills, in open defiance of the United States' urgings to leave the settlements outside of the fence — a move that, according to the New York Times (Oct. 2, 2003) "could draw penalties from the Bush administration." The administration threatens to deduct about \$100 million — the cost of the central part of fence that will stretch almost 14 miles into Palestinian areas to the east of the Green Line — from the three-year, \$9 billion loan guarantees it extended to Israel last March.

About 80 percent of the settlers in the West Bank live in the areas to be included within the fence. According to Ha'aretz (Oct. 3, 2003), "At least 75,000 Palestinians (excluding the project of "Enveloping Jerusalem," which will take in an additional quarter of a million Palestinians) will find themselves inside enclaves and will be cut off from their own sources of services. On the other hand, in the collective Palestinian consciousness, and also that of the Israelis, the broad areas to the west of the fence have been in fact annexed by the state of Israel."

"There is joke about a government committee that wanted to plan a donkey, but ended up with a two-humped camel," snapped Nehamia Strasler in Ha'aretz (Oct. 3, 2003). "The Israeli government has gone further than that. It wanted to build a fence that would be an obstacle to prevent terror attacks, but ended up deciding on a route full of deeper fjords than in Norway, with underground passages, tens of thousands of Palestinians trapped between double fences, a withdrawal from 12 percent of the territory in the West Bank and total surrender to the settlers — and at a fantastical budgetary cost of [about \$1 billion], at a time when [hundreds of millions of Israeli shekels have been cut from the health budget — TS]....If the fence had been built according to the plan presented by former interior minister Haim Ramon two years ago, it would have been built along the Green Line, on the shortest possible route, and would thus be efficient in maintaining security. After all, every zigzag makes security more difficult and infiltration easier. The fence Ramon proposed would have cost a more reasonable sum. But the government decided on [another] route....Sharon, who strenuously opposed the fence because he did not want to lay down a political border, in the end decided on the most political fence possible."

The Fence in 2002 — Off to a Slow Start

The idea of separating Israelis and Palestinians before a final peace agreement has been around for years; it has been repeatedly dismissed, refined, postponed, and

now revived. Polls have shown that the majority of Israelis welcome a unilateral separation between Israelis and Palestinians, followed by the severing of economic, cultural, legal, and political contacts. They believe that a heavily fortified fence with adequate surveillance systems and sophisticated tracking devices will enhance Israel's security and will bring to an end the suicide bombings — just as former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak envisioned in February 2001: "Us here, them over there."

On April 15, 2002, the Israeli cabinet, swept along by public pressure to stop the escalating suicide attacks, decided to begin construction. By Aug. 14, Israel's security cabinet approved the first 115 kilometers (about 70 miles) of the security fence. The plans call for a wall roughly along the 1967 border, or the Green Line. Construction will begin in the north and reach Jerusalem within a year, where a 30-mile fence will encircle the city. In some places, the fence will deviate from the Green Line and incorporate areas to the east in order to include large Jewish settlements that have sprung up since. Some Arab villages will be left west of the wall, separated from their Arab neighbors.

In June 2002, 20 Israeli companies began to lay the infrastructure ahead of construction. Two companies — one Israeli, Magal, and one American, the U.S. — based company Detection (which built its reputation by fortifying the border between the United States and Mexico) — will share the approximately US\$750 million contract to fortify the separation fence. Magal will complete the electronic fence along the Green Line, and Detection will fortify the fence that will encircle Jerusalem.

The Devil's in the Details

While most Israelis supported the idea of a security fence in theory, there was considerable disagreement within Israel over the details of plan. On July 19, 2002, Alex Fishman, writing for Yediot Aharonot, revealed an alternate plan being floated by a group of prominent Israelis from across the political spectrum led by Gilad Shar, Barak's chief of staff, and Uri Sagi, the former head of Israel's military intelligence agency. Like the cabinet's plan, Shar and Sagi's blueprint envisions a unilateral Israeli separation from the Palestinians within three years, with peace talks following after the fact.

But, unlike the cabinet, Shar and Sagi made their plans for the future of the settlements public: 68 settlements in the West Bank and all the settlements in the Gaza strip would be dismantled, their occupants relocated to the Galil, in northern Israel, and the Negev, in the south. An international peacekeeping force would replace the Israeli Defense Forces in the West Bank and Gaza; Palestinian refugees would be allowed to settle in the evacuated Jewish settlements. Barring renewed violence, final peace negotiations could begin then. Shar sees a compelling reason to dismantle the settlements: "Better," he says, "to be unified in a divided land than to be divided in one land."

All Just Talk?

After only a few months of painfully slow construction, the fence seemed to have united the inhabitants of the land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River, though perhaps not in the way Shar intended. Christian and Muslim Palestinians,

secular Israeli Jews, religious Israeli Jews, Israeli doves and hawks, Israeli Arabs — all spoke out in opposition to the fence.

The project got off to a rather bad start. Critics lamented that the work was not proceeding fast enough — contractors initially completed only 98 feet (30 meters) in three months. Moreover, they complained, at US\$1 million per .62 miles (or 1 kilometer), it is too expensive and poorly planned. "Such a slow pace, [when] all [the] while Israelis are killed on a daily basis, is criminal," fumed Yossi Sarid, head of the opposition Meretz Party. But, he admitted to reporters from the Jerusalem Post, "It was a timely decision and a good thing that they decided to build [the fence]. I only hope that it actually gets done."

In July 2002, Israel's state comptroller published a harsh report exposing grave misconduct, foot dragging, and the mishandling of funds. Yediot Aharonot's Felix Frish dismissed the government's promises "to swiftly go ahead with the construction of the fence" as "just talk." Certainly, a wide array of people in the Middle East, from Israeli settlers to Palestinian activists, hoped he was right.

Strange Bedfellows

On June 16, 2002, soon after construction started in the northern town of Gilboa, the Supreme Monitoring Committee for Arab Affairs in Israel derided the fences as "fortifying Israel's conquest and sovereignty in the occupied territories..." and as "an attempt to impose a reality of conquest on the Palestinian people." The same day, the Yesha Settlement Council, a regional association of Israeli settlers in the occupied territories, voiced its opposition, and Dani Atar, a local leader from the settlements in the Gilboa Hills region near Jenin, complained that the fence would leave the settlements in the region "wide open to terrorist attacks."

The Palestinian Authority's chief negotiator Saeb Erakat added his voice to the opposition, saying the wall will create "the world's biggest prison." And Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat himself called the plan "a fascist, apartheid measure [that] we do not accept [and] continue to reject by all means."

According to a report in Cairo's semiofficial, English-language Al-Ahram Weekly, Fatah's secretary general in Jenin, Kadura Musa, voiced his alarm as well: "The first phase of the fence would require the confiscation of 7,500 acres of Palestinian land. The land theft would only offer Palestinians more incentive to find ways around the fence." The Palestinian Authority's chief cartographer, Khalil Tufakji, likewise warned that the fence would leave at least 11 Palestinian villages on the Israeli side. "It is unclear what status their citizens would have," Al-Ahram noted darkly.

The popular Israeli writer and peace activist David Grossman added his voice to the chorus of opposition: "It is very dangerous to establish such a border fence right now," he argued in Yediot Aharonot. "It is yet another action aimed at giving the Israeli public a temporary illusion of security; its main effect will be to supply Israelis with a counterfeit replacement for a peace process....The fence's major drawing power for most Israelis is that it has never been tried. So they can believe in it for a while."

Politicians were using harsher words. Yediot Aharonot quoted Yossi Sarid, the head of the left-leaning Meretz Party, accusing Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Israeli Defense Minister Benjamin ("Fuad") Ben-Eliezer of impotence for having failed to confront the settlers — who, he argued, unnecessarily burden the Israeli Defense Forces — before constructing the fence.

Of Israel's three major dailies, Ha'aretz has always been the most critical of the plan: "The fence will not eliminate all terror attacks. Like a speed bump, it will only slow them down....It is the defense minister's duty to remove the unauthorized settlements without delay and implement a different policy....The principle that should guide planners is that the fence should provide an 'insurance' of sorts, not a de-facto annexation.

"It is not difficult to list all the flaws of the separation fence," the paper's editors wrote. "The fence is a unilateral development on Israel's part, without any consultation with the Palestinians and against their wishes."

But amid its tenacious opposition, Ha'aretz found reason to hope that "the fence would reduce the intolerable price in blood that has been paid with the lives of peaceful Israelis practically every day" and that after some cooling off, "a new, tangible reality of separation between two national, geographic entities would ensue. This reality," Ha'aretz hoped, "[might] gradually become part of the consciousness of both peoples. The change could be revolutionary: a physical change that leads to a psychological change, with which it may be possible to rehabilitate the much longed — for political change."

A Political Wall?

Many in the conservative Israeli press opposed the wall because it implicitly abandons the idea of "Greater Israel" — that is, modern Israel plus Gaza, the West Bank, and, depending on the commentator, parts of Jordan and the Sinai. Many right-wing commentators saw the erection of the fence as a victory of Palestinian terrorism and as Israel's defeat.

The English-language Jerusalem Post didn't object to the fence in theory, but argued, "It would be a mistake to build a fence along the Green Line....It will be assumed by both sides that anything east of the fence will ultimately fall from Israeli control. The fence, therefore, must be built to generously incorporate blocks of Israeli communities.... [This] maximizes the amount of territory with which Israel would enter into some future final-status negotiation."

Tel Aviv's religious, right-wing Hatzofeh despaired of peace negotiations beginning any time soon. The paper asserted that what it calls the "Oslo War" would continue to rage, and the fence would provide Israelis with little protection: "A separation fence is insufficient to prevent attacks on Israeli soil. If it becomes difficult for terrorists to infiltrate Israel, [they] will still be [able] to fire mortars over the fence." The paper joined Knesset member Shaul Yahalom, of the National Religious Party, in lamenting, "We are...witness to Ariel Sharon establishing a Palestinian state, headed by Arafat and his ilk, and we see the government of Israel going blindly after Sharon and Fuad [Ben-Eliezer] in building this political wall."

Those supporting the wall stressed that it would provide Israelis with greater security. Tami Shelo of Ma'ariv argued, "After the collapse of the negotiations and the military disaster that followed, a physical separation is the last option in order to stop terrorism...." Shelo, however, hinted at another point of dispute on the horizon: "Sooner or later, the fence will turn the settlers into second-class citizens, by stressing the fact that 'we are here and they are there.' Then, when the army is forced to spend more and more time and resources in securing the settlements which remain 'outside' the fence, public pressure will grow to get rid off them altogether."

Eid Salim, the Arab Israeli deputy mayor of Gilboa, likewise welcomed the project for the security he hoped it would provide. "Whoever is against terror must be in favor of the fence," he told reporters. "But that doesn't mean that such a fence can't have doors."

Foreign Minister Shimon Peres tried to ease fears on both sides of the proverbial and actual fence. "I don't believe it's an absolute solution," Ha'aretz quoted him as saying. "I believe that in modern times, fences, trenches...[and] weapons... don't bring security. I think the only way to real security is achieving peace through political agreement. So, when we build the fence, we don't have to stop the struggle for a different relationship."

Itzhak Rabin's Stance Revisited

Israel has debated the possibility of unilateral separation from the Palestinians for many years. Yitzhak Rabin once told Yasser Arafat he wanted separation "not out of hatred [but] out of respect." In 1995, Minister of Internal Security Moshe Shahal, and later his successor under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Avigdor Kahalani, proposed erecting a buffer zone along the Green Line, which would include obstacles and roadblocks — but would not be an actual fence. The plan was abandoned after the National Security Council and the counter-terror unit in the prime minister's office determined that such a separation zone would not fulfill its goal as an effective buffer against terror.

At the end of 2000, as the Al-Aqsa Intifada was gaining steam, Ehud Barak devised the notion of "unilateral separation" as a reaction to Arafat's threat to declare statehood without reaching a peace agreement first. Barak was prepared to evacuate a number of settlements, but his loss to Ariel Sharon at the polls put a quick stop to the plans he harbored.

The problem that had jettisoned all previous attempts, Danny Rubenstein observed in Ha'aretz, is the presence of "more than 200,000 Israeli settlers living in the West Bank on the other side of the Green Line."

In June 2001, Prime Minister Sharon ordered Israel's various security bodies to start work on a separation plan, despite the idea's ill-fated history. A month later, the cabinet approved the results of their research. Despite the cabinet's approval, Sharon remained ambivalent about the planned fence and dismissed its proponents as "people who don't know how to read a map."

But in February 2002, in the middle of a new wave of suicide bombings, Avi Dichter, the head of Israel's security force Shin Bet, urged Ben-Eliezer and the prime minister to go ahead finally with the proposed security buffer. As public pressure mounted, an Israeli army study that predicted that such a buffer would block 80-90 percent of the suicide bombers entering Israel from the occupied territories sounded good.

Ben-Eliezer had initially dismissed Barak's unilateral approach as "no more than a slogan" that would not help safeguard Israelis' security. But with each new suicide attack, Ben-Eliezer seemingly became more willing to consider new solutions. And the prime minister — who, until recently, feared the fence would aid the creation of a de facto Palestinian state — now fears his own political survival may be in jeopardy if the security situation does not improve.

Time to Embrace, Time to Stay Apart

Liberal and conservative commentators in the Israeli press began to reflect on the historical implications of a security fence along the Green Line. This is the closest Israel has come to acknowledging the 1967 borders as a final settlement since the Six-Day War.

In 2002, responding to international critics and dovish Israelis (who insisted that the future borders of a Palestinian state could only be determined through negotiations) as well as Israeli hawks (who believed Israel ends at the Jordan River), Ben-Eliezer and Sharon strenuously denied that the fence was meant as a border. Until today, they still do. "It's not a border — it's a wall," Ben-Eliezer states. "We're trying to prevent terrorists from entering our house."

"Israelis have learned that the Palestinians they courted in Oslo as worthy neighbors are actually, whether by commission or omission, child sacrificers," writes Amotz Asa-El in the Jerusalem Post. "And we Jews have been educated by our prophets, more than three centuries before even the Great Wall of China was built, to see in the Moloch cult the worst possible crime against man and God. That alone is a reason to build not a fence, but a wall, between us and them. How many of us still have the appetite to trade, reside, or just talk with them? King Solomon said in Ecclesiastes that while there is 'a time to embrace,' there is also 'a time to refrain from embracing.' This is such a time.

Map of Israel's Security Fence (March 2005):

<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/mapImages/42276136a5831.jpg>

<http://www.tekla-szymanski.com/engl8fence.html>
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