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Israel's Security Fences, Separating Israel from the Palestinians

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Summary

Israel is building a fence or wall that, it hopes, will prevent terrorist infiltration into Israel from the West Bank Palestinian areas. Many Israelis endorse the fence as a way to stop terror attacks against Israel. Some Israelis oppose the fence because they believe it will become a permanent boundary that will stop Israel from annexing the West Bank. Other Israelis oppose the fence because they fear that it will become an obstacle to further peace negotiations. Most Palestinians oppose the fence because they believe it will define the boundaries of non-contiguous segments of a truncated Palestinian state. This CRS report includes known details on cost, dimensions, and location of Israel's fences, and arguments supporting and opposing the West Bank fence now under construction. The report will not be updated.

Background

Israelis and their supporters differ over the future relationship between Palestinian Arabs and Israel. Some Israelis and their supporters maintain that Arabs may live either in a separate Palestinian Arab state composed of the West Bank and Gaza or within the Jewish state of Israel, providing the Jewish nature of Israel is protected.¹ Other Israelis prefer to separate Arabs and Jews physically in two states. A smaller group of Israelis advocates either expelling all or most of the Arabs from Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza or annexing the West Bank and Gaza to Israel and treating the resident Arabs as alien citizens of Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, or another Arab country. The separation debate renewed after June 2002, when the Israeli government began constructing a fence to separate Israel from the occupied West Bank.

Israel began building a Gaza fence in 1993 to stop Palestinian infiltrators from entering Israel. In early 1995, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin called for the separation of

¹ Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics estimates Israel's population at the end of 2002 as 1.3 million Arabs and 5.4 million Jews. Israeli Arabs are full citizens.

Palestinians and Israelis, and established a separation committee within his cabinet to pursue the goal of separating the occupied territory Palestinians from Israel. After Rabin's assassination, Prime Minister Shimon Peres let the matter drop. His successor, Binyamin Netanyahu, subscribed to physical separation and endorsed a proposed fence to separate the Palestinian lands from Israel and Israeli-controlled settlements in the occupied territories.² Ehud Barak also favored a fence separating Palestinians from Israelis, but the construction of the West Bank fence did not begin until the administration of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

Fences Separating Israelis and Palestinians

Syria, Lebanon. The United Kingdom and France demarcated the boundaries between Lebanon, Syria and Palestine in 1922 with a description of the border and a series of cairns, or stone pillars, to mark the boundary. Syria and Israel apparently used some of the same cairns to set the 1949 armistice lines.³ Since 1967, Syrian and Israeli forces have been separated by a United Nations patrolled buffer zone. Israel completed the fence separating Lebanon from Israel in January 2001, following the May 2000 Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon. The wire and barbed wire electrified fence runs along the 1922 international border as demarcated by the United Nations in 2000. The fence skips a few places where the border divided a village. Hizballah⁴ built watchtowers on the Lebanon side of the fence, and the Israelis use watchtowers, electronic sensing devices, remote controlled reconnaissance aircraft, and jeep-mounted patrols along a road on the Israeli side of the fence. The Lebanon-Israel border is 79 kilometers (49 miles) long, the pre-1967 Syrian-Israeli boundary is 76 kilometers (48 miles).

Jordan. Not all of the 238 kilometers (149 mile) Jordan-Israel boundary is fenced; the segment along the shore of the Dead Sea is not fenced. Much of the remaining border is lined with a double fence with a patrol road between the fences. Some fences were moved following the 1994 Jordan-Israeli peace treaty and the border rectification included in the agreement.

Gaza. The fence separating the Gaza Strip from Israel was begun in 1993, and expanded and upgraded in 1999. Several contractors took 4 months to construct the 51 kilometer (32 mile) wire and barbed wire fence. A buffer zone and road along each side of the fence allows the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) to patrol the boundary. The existing 11 kilometer (6.8 mile) fence along Gaza-Egypt boundary was joined to the new 51 kilometer fence and also is patrolled by the Israelis.

West Bank. Israeli Defense Minister Benjamin Ben Eliezar supervised construction of the fence beginning in June 2002. The first 115 kilometers (72 miles) extends from just south of Qalqilya northward through Qalqilya and Tulkarm to Salem, then turns east paralleling the Israel-West Bank boundary until it turns south about one-half way between

² Interview with the *Financial Times*, 8 June 2003.

³ Hof, Frederic C. *Line of Battle, Border of Peace?* Washington, Middle East Insight, 1999. 60 pages.

⁴ Literally the "Party of Allah"; a Lebanese Shia Muslim political party and liberation militia; called terrorist by Israelis and the United States.

Jenin and the Jordan River. (See a map of the fence on page six.) It is not clear if the north-south fence on the eastern slope of the Jordan Valley will join with a proposed fence that will surround a southern enclave, including Hebron and Bethlehem.⁵

The first phase from Qalqilya north to Salem was scheduled to be completed in June 2003 at a cost of \$1.6 million per mile (or \$1.6 million per kilometer according to one source). The fence under construction around Qalqilya is concrete, eight meters high (26 feet) topped with barbed wire and sensing devices, and has a trench four meters wide and two meters deep, and a road for military patrols on the Israeli side. According to the Israelis, the wall will have gates to allow Palestinian workers to commute to jobs in Israel or farmers to get to fields cut off by the wall, but as of August 1, 2003, there were no agricultural gates through the completed segment from Qalqilya to Salem. The Israelis will allow no structures within 35 meters (38.3 yards) of the fence on the Palestinian side. According to the Palestinians, the fence will be in Palestinian territory, not in Israeli territory or along the border, and will include bulges to incorporate blocks of Israeli settlements on the Israeli side of the line, as, for example, the Israeli settlement groups east of Nablus or the cluster of settlements between Qalqilya and Nablus.⁶ Israel issued military orders confiscating some 80 square kilometers of Palestinian land needed for the fence.⁷ Also, an Israeli press source reported that Israel is planning a second, parallel fence to run along the Israeli side to buttress the fence now under construction.⁸

The total length of the West Bank boundary is 404 kilometers (252 miles). The estimated length of the Israeli fence will be between 350 and 450 kilometers (220 to 280 miles), depending upon the final configuration. According to a June 9, 2003 *Newsweek* report and other sources, the Israeli government has approved the segment around Jerusalem, and is considering a proposal for the segment that will run from Nablus south to Hebron. The total cost of the 350 kilometer fence is estimated at \$220 million. The fence will divide Palestinian areas of the West Bank into two or possibly three parcels, a northern parcel including Qalqilya, Tulkarm, Jenin, Nablus, and Ramallah, a southern parcel including Bethlehem and parts of Hebron, and a Jericho parcel.⁹ There will be a gap between the north and south parcels at Jerusalem, and the territory outside the parcels, with the possible exception of Jericho, will remain under Israeli control. If a Palestinian state coincided with the areas within the fences, it would consist of three or four parts, one

⁵ Grossman, David, Israel's Fence, *Tikkun*, July 15, 2002. Jordan Valley Fence May Keep a Promise, *Agence France Presse*, March 19, 2003.

⁶ Hammer, Joshua, Good Fences Make ..., *Newsweek*, June 9, 2003, pps. 32-33. Israel's "Security Wall": Another Land Grab. PLO Negotiation Affairs Department, [http://www.nad-plo.org/maps/Qalqilya_land_grab.htm]. Jordan Valley Fence May Keep Promise, *Agence France Presse*, March 19, 2003. Dobin, David, Israel's Security Fence, *Near East Report*, July 15, 2002, reprinted in Jewish Virtual Library, [<http://www.us-israel.org/jsource/Peace/fence.html>].

⁷ Plett, Barbara, Israel Fence Revives Old Controversies, *BBC News*, 19 June 2002. Another source said 77 square kilometers; Buel, Meredith, Israel Fence, *Global Security*, June 4, 2002.

⁸ Ettinger, Yair, Separation in the Making, *Haaretz*, June 27, 2003.

⁹ Israeli forces withdrew from 80% of Hebron in January 1997, retaining control over the other 20%. About 35,000 Arabs and 400 Israelis are in the Israeli sector, and 120,000 Arabs in the Arab sector.

north of Ramallah, one south of Bethlehem, the Gaza Strip, and Jericho, which appears to be less than one-half of the total area of the West Bank and Gaza.

Pros and Cons of the West Bank-Israel Fence

Israeli Arguments Favoring the Fence

- The Gaza fence reduced the number of border crossing attempts and terror incidents linked to the border. Terror attacks across the Gaza-Israel boundary ended once the fence was finished.
- The fence is a temporary security measure that does not preclude future peace negotiations.
- Checkpoints will permit normal commerce, will allow the passage of Palestinian workers to Israeli jobs, and will allow Palestinian farmers access to fields on the other side of the wall.
- The \$200 million cost and the time and resources expended are not too high a price to pay for stopping terror attacks that would kill or maim Israelis.

Israeli Arguments Opposing the West Bank Fence

- The West Bank belongs, or should belong, to Israel for religious/historical reasons, for economic reasons (the watershed and agricultural land), or for security reasons (as a buffer separating Israel proper from a Jordan-Syria-Iraq alliance). The fence will prevent Israel from annexing the West Bank.
- The fence establishes a boundary between Israel and a Palestinian state, a fait accompli that will eliminate the negotiations that could lead to a peace treaty and permanent peace.
- The fence creates a barrier against future cooperation between Jewish and Palestinian states. A permanent fence creates a permanent barrier to peaceful coexistence.
- The fence will not be effective in stopping terror attacks against Israel. The Gaza fence lowered the number of terror attacks only because the terrorists shifted their operations to the West Bank.
- The fence will provide a haven and operational vantage point for terrorists attacking Israel. In Lebanon, Hizballah guerrillas moved their base of operations against Israel up to the border once the fence was built. Previously, Hizballah was kept away from the border by the Israeli presence and patrols.
- The fence will cost too much and may waste resources that could be used on other projects.

Palestinian Positions Regarding the Fence

- The fence creates a permanent border with Israel that forecloses any further negotiations over land and borders.
- The wall creates a non-contiguous three or four-part state that must rely on Israeli sufferance for movement between the segments or with the outside world.
- Israel is building the wall on Palestinian land and is using the wall to protect Israeli settlements also built on Palestinian land. The wall will

isolate some farmers from their fields and orchards, and separate Palestinian workers from jobs in Israel.

- Rather than build confidence between the two nations, the wall will perpetuate animosity between Palestinians and Israelis.
- The fence violates the fourth Geneva convention that bars non-military construction in occupied territories. The fence gives Israel control over Palestinian land, underground water tables, and Palestinian access to markets.

Implications of the Fence for the United States

On June 26, 2003, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice told an audience at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London that President Bush envisioned Israeli and a Palestinian states living as good neighbors "... in which there would be no need for any kind of physical separation." Rice reportedly told Israeli cabinet ministers on June 29, 2003 that the United States did not view favorably the Israeli wall.¹⁰

Following a July 25, 2003, White House meeting with Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmud Abbas, President George Bush said: "I think the wall is a problem.... It is very difficult to develop confidence between the Palestinians and Israelis... with a wall snaking through the East (sic) Bank."¹¹ Four days later, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said at the White House that Israel would continue to build the fence. President Bush said he hoped "... that in the long term a fence would be irrelevant."¹²

For some observers, the fence does not mesh well with the "road map" peace proposal that calls for the creation of a Palestinian state.¹³ If the reports are correct that the fence will create two or three separate enclaves in the West Bank, then the Palestinian state would be non-contiguous. President Bush favors a contiguous state, a point echoed by Israeli Prime Minister Sharon at Aqaba on June 4, 2003, when he said "... we understand the importance of territorial contiguity in the West Bank, for a viable Palestinian state."¹⁴

¹⁰ Reuters, Rice Remarks, 4th Add, June 26, 2003. Amr, Wafa, U.S. Advisor Puts Pressure on Israel over Fence, Reuters, June 30, 2003.

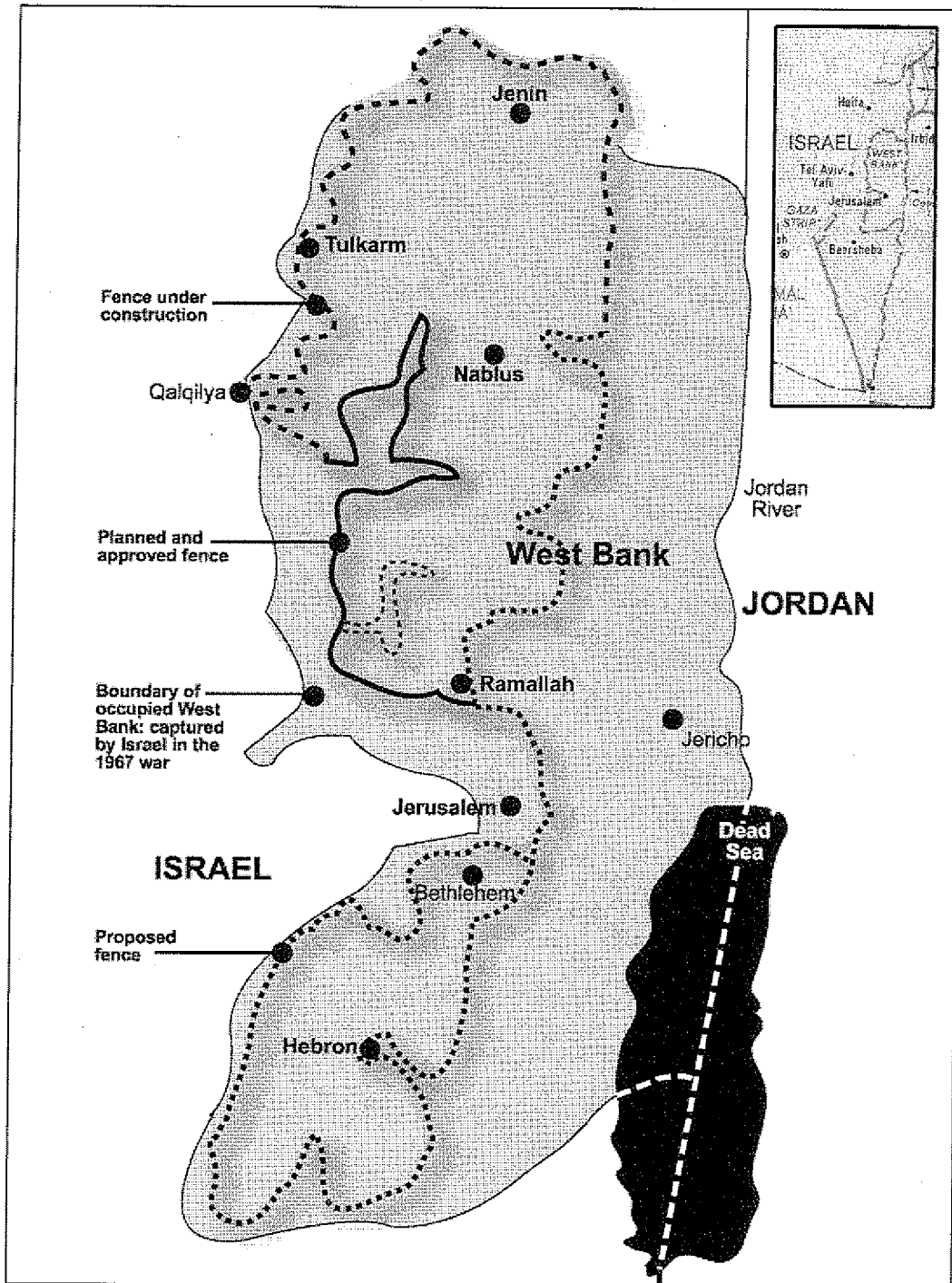
¹¹ US Bush Abbas Text, Associate Press, July 25, 2003.

¹² Sharon, Bush News Conference on Peace Process, Jerusalem, Voice of Israel (radio) July 29, 2003, reported in Foreign Broadcast Information Service, July 29, 2003.

¹³ Russia, the United Nations, the European Union, and the United States (known as the "quartet") published a "road map" to peace on April 30, 2003, that called for the creation of a provisional Palestinian state at the end of three years.

¹⁴ Freeman, Jan, Contiguity Error, *Boston Globe*, June 8, 2003. Haaretz, PM Sharon's Aqaba Summit Speech, June 5, 2003.

Figure 1. Proposed Israeli Fence, West Bank



Source: NEWSWEEK, June 9, 2003. Adapted by Richard Woods, CRS