

## Why Israel is *Really* Building the Wall

Jeff Halper

The Israel Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD)

-Reprinted from *The Wall in Palestine*, PENGON/Apartheid Wall Campaign

The obvious facets of the separation wall – Israel's "defensive fence" – are known: its supposed rationale as a barrier against terrorism, its physical dimensions, its impact on the living conditions, economic activities and agricultural enterprises of the Palestinians. But why is the wall *really* being built? What does it represent in terms of Israel's disposition towards the country and the Palestinians? And what does it signify in terms of Israel's integration into the wider Middle Eastern region?

Let's begin with the wall itself, and the several conceptual stages through which it has passed.

*Barak's Security Separation Plan.* When it was first raised in October, 2000, between the collapse of the Camp David negotiations and the Taba talks, soon after the outbreak of the Intifada, the concept of "unilateral separation" was Barak's way to pressure the Palestinians to be more "forthcoming" in agreeing to his proposals. The separation plan, prepared under the overall guidance of the Prime Minister's Office, would go into effect if the uprising continued, if the Palestinians declared statehood, or whenever Israel felt fit to implement it. It had four main aims:

1. *Security:* to provide physical security to Israeli citizens, including settlers;
2. *Controlling the Occupied Territories:* to prevent the Palestinians from achieving any territorial, infrastructural or political gains outside of negotiations (as Israel had done in the seven preceding years of the Oslo "peace process," when it doubled its settler population and installed a massive system of "by-pass roads"). Indeed, the plan was intended to protect the "integrity" of Israeli-controlled Area C, its settlements and Israeli-only road system;
3. *Punishment and Pressure:* to extract from the Palestinians a high economic price for their intransigence through ever-constricting closures, trade restrictions, sanctions and other measures; and
4. *Unilaterally determining borders:* to erect massive physical barriers to "protect" those parts of the West Bank Israel "wants and needs to defend," while confining Palestinians to pockets of "self-rule" – all of which would become permanent if the Palestinians were not more "forthcoming" in negotiations.

When Barak first raised the notion of "separation" there were some that noted a major contradiction. For decades (and until today) Israel's policy towards the Occupied Territories has been one of incorporation, of making the Occupation irreversible, of creating "facts" on the ground that would forever preempt a viable Palestinian state. "Separation" seemed to contradict that policy. That discrepancy is resolved if one adopts the "two-state solution" advanced by Barak and, today, by Sharon. Saddled with three and a half million Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, Israel has an interest in seeing a Palestinian state emerge that relieves it of that population while leaving it in *de facto* control of the entire country. If a Palestinian state arises in the nooks and crannies between Israel's settlement blocs – 42% of the West Bank in Sharon's view; 85% in Barak's – it will only contribute to Israel's long-term interests.

*The "Security Fence."* After Barak's defeat and the rise of the Likud-Labor-Shas "National Unity Government" in February 2001, the idea of a "separation fence" was pursued, ironically (or not), by the liberal wing of the Labor Party. It still embodied the theme of a border. Indeed, this is what "sold" the wall to the liberal public from Labor to Meretz to sections of Peace Now and the "moderate" Israeli peace camp – the notion that by erecting a "fence" along the Green Line, Israel was in fact creating the border between the two states. Explicit in the conception of "border" was the notion of "separation," which had been transformed from a threat directed at the Palestinians to a promise of security for Israelis as the Palestinian Intifada reached into Israeli communities. This combination matched the public mood exactly: a guarantee of Israelis' personal security while disconnecting from the Palestinians and the cursed West Bank. (Well, almost. The Labor Party advocates retaining the major settlement blocs, but this "detail" is missed or its importance minimized by the public). Presented in this way, the "separation fence" acquired a great deal of credibility among the Israeli public, who consider it a purely technical solution to the "security problem." Thus the wall itself is a "non-issue" in Israel, as is its enormous impact on Palestinian society, economy and life.

*The Wall's Operational Phase: The Non-Border Border.* Although the Labor Party has a confused position on the issues of security, separation and wishing to retain the main settlement blocs, the Likud and its right-wing partners suffer from no such obfuscation. For them, the West Bank – Judea and Samaria – are integral parts of the Land of Israel that can never be detached. Their fear that the wall might actually become a border, that it could lead to a separation not only of populations but of Israel from its historic patrimony, led many in the more extreme circles of the right – the National Religious Party representing the settlers, the National Union of Avigdor Liberman and Benny Alon, as well as parts of the Likud – to oppose the plan altogether. Trapped, however, with Labor in the National Unity Government of 2001-2003, Sharon and the right acquiesced, with a proviso. The "fence" would be built but would meander some distance inside the "Green Line" so that it would be taken for a border. On that basis the initial line of the wall, meandering some 330 kms along and 2-6 kms inside the Palestinian side of the line, was fixed. Neither Labor nor Likud considered it a border at this stage.

*Back to a Border.* Still, the wall followed the 1967 line a little too closely for the Israeli right wing. Settlers felt that either their settlements fell on the "wrong" side of the wall, or else that those close to the wall were themselves being "ghettoized." Once the Sharon government freed itself of Labor, it was able to reconceptualize the project. Conforming to Sharon's suggestion that a Palestinian state might emerge in Areas A and B, he had no problem if the "fence" followed the contours of those Palestinian areas. The major settlement blocs (including "Greater Jerusalem") would thus be on the "right" side of the wall, permitting freedom of movement for settlers and unimpeded incorporation of their settlements into Israel proper. Palestinian towns and cities close to the Green Line would be ghettoized, and the border of a future Palestinian state delineated in a way acceptable to much of the right. Not only did he now accept the idea of the wall as a border, but he also adopted the Labor Party's demand, voiced by the "peace candidate" Amram Mitzna in the 2003 campaign, for a longer wall running along the entire length of the West Bank "from Beit Shean to Arad." He also announced the construction of an eastern wall between Areas A and B and the Jordan Valley all the way to the hills below Hebron, thus enclosing the Palestinians completely into a bantustan-prison-state. Whether this eastern side is feasible financially and politically remains to be seen, but it certainly suits Sharon's political conception of Sharon.

Thus both Labor and the Likud share a fundamentally similar program: separating from the Palestinian population while confining it to islands, thus retaining control of the entire country. This is precisely the conception and goal of South Africa's bantustan program during its apartheid years. But there is a deeper aspect to this. The wall is simply the latest – and perhaps most graphic – example of Israel's "divorce" from the Middle East.

Geographically as well as culturally, politically and economically, Israel faces away from the Middle East, towards Europe and, beyond, the US. Israel belongs to the European Bloc at the United Nations, the European basketball league and participates in the Eurovision song contest. Its back is not only to the Palestinians but to the wider Middle East of which Israelis know very little – and care less. Now it is a back reinforced by a wall of separation from the region as a whole. The Saudis may have thought they were offering Israel a tempting deal by exchanging full regional integration for an end to the Occupation. They assumed that Israel wanted regional integration. Indeed, this could have been the final victory of Zionism; one could have expected dancing in the streets of Tel Aviv. But Israel has no interest in integrating into the Middle East. It seeks to be a kind of Singapore, an island state connected to the West, only its physical location having anything to do with the surrounding region. This is the larger meaning of the wall, and it does not bode well for the future.

**Article Taken out of the PENGON report titled  
*The Wall in Palestine: Facts, Testimonies, Analysis and Call to Action***



**PENGON/Apartheid Wall Campaign**  
[www.pengon.org](http://www.pengon.org), [outreach@pengon.org](mailto:outreach@pengon.org)  
**02-6565890/87**