

# A Defensive Posture

## Walling off the Palestinians may offer Israelis a false sense of security

By BARBARA OPALL-ROME

**T**EL AVIV—If Israel's collective anxiety these days could be measured by an electrocardiogram, the monitor would show extreme spikes followed by alarming periods of near-death flat lines. Israelis become intensely agitated by news of each terrorist attack, only to plunge into numbing apathy once they ascertain that family and loved ones have not fallen victim to Israel's woefully inconclusive war against terror.

With Israeli society divided into what one prominent physician here called sufferers of pre-traumatic and post-traumatic stress disorder, it's understandable that Israeli politicians are competing in a populist preelection scramble to concoct new and improved security schemes aimed at calming national anxieties. The latest is a so-called security barrier, or smart fence, aimed at walling off Israeli civilians from Palestinians living west of the Jordan River, the area known as the West Bank.

Defense Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer—leader of Israel's left-of-center Labor Party—claims credit for the notion of the fence, which his ministry began building in early June. So do former prime ministers Benjamin Netanyahu and Ehud Barak, as well as other politicians left and right, all eager to win the hearts and votes of the terrified Israeli electorate.

Considering the statistics—more than 525 Israelis killed, with more than 360 of them civilians, and in excess of 3,000 wounded since the end of September 2000—the notion of a security separation/defensive barrier/smart fence sounds reasonable. Proponents note that only 24 of the Israeli deaths are attributed to terrorists who managed to get past the walls and fences around the well-fortified, if much smaller, Gaza Strip.

If only the military thought the West



*The Great Israeli Wall.*

PAUL CONRAD

Bank fence was a good idea.

Although military leaders here decline to speak out publicly against the security separation, their opposition to the program is increasingly clear when they comment off the record. "Yes, it likely would reduce the friction on a daily basis, but it would also send the wrong message to Palestinians, Israelis and the world," a senior military official said. His sentiments are reflected in varying degrees throughout the Israel Defense Forces

general staff. "In some ways," he added, "a physical separation signals that we have given up the idea of resolving the conflict. It could mean that we are on our way to becoming a fortress state, without any hope for the future."

Of more immediate operational concern, according to several senior officers here, is that a defensive barrier would constrain IDF freedom of movement and rapid-response capabilities. The proposal ultimately envisions a nearly 250-mile,

continuous, sensor-stuffed fence that could require trenching, placement of land mines and building of tracking roads and perimeter patrol paths. There would be a limited number of gates for authorized pedestrian and vehicle access.

In private conversations, Israeli generals note that military history is replete with failed fortifications, beginning with Israel's own biblical conquest of the walled city of Jericho. Modern military experts say that such barriers hamper an army's ability to counterattack and lull civilians into a false sense of security. There's also the unknown: What new kinds of terror and targets might thwarted Palestinian radicals invent?

And then there's the money. Cost estimates for the full bells-and-whistles version of the security barrier probably will exceed \$1 billion—more than 10% of Israel's annual defense budget of about \$9.8 billion, which includes \$2 billion in U.S. military grant aid. Although Ministry of Defense officials eventually hope to convince Washington to foot part of the bill, the strain on Israel's already tight budget is unreasonably onerous, the generals say, especially given expectations of completing the project within two years.

Unsurprisingly, the generals prefer to spend the money on additional fighters, attack helicopters, advanced weaponry and intelligence capabilities. But with their back literally to the wall on this one, it appears that sooner or later most Israelis—depending on where they live in relation to the 1967 border with what used to be Jordan—will get their sought-after separation from West Bank Palestinians.

While it may calm the collective Israeli heart condition, the tangibility of its contribution to enhanced security is doubted by the people who know the threat best.

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