

Separation Anxiety

By Erik Schechter

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From the slopes of Kibbutz Ma'aleh Gilboa, eight kilometers west of Beit She'an, one still has a clear view of the small Palestinian village of Jablun, nestled over the pre-1967 Green Line.

But the earthmoving machines are at work. And what looks like the beginnings of a winding, country road will eventually sprout into another section of the controversial security fence - an eight-meter-high concrete barrier reinforced by electronic sensors and a gravel trace path to detect trespassers.

Beyond the work in the field, which some see as hectic and others as lethargic, lurks a debate that ignores political identities, reflects the terror war's damage, and encapsulates the ideological perplexity that it brought in its wake.

Despite recent speculation in the press, there is no evidence of a strategy in the offing to slice up the West Bank into isolated Palestinian cantons. If anything, despite his denials, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has been downright sluggish in building the fence.

The construction project only began last June. One-third of the fence - a 220-kilometer arc running from Elkana in the west to Mehola in the east - is scheduled to be completed by December. No one knows when the rest will be built.

However, pressure is building from below to quickly complete the fence - even if supporters cannot agree on its purpose. Some see it as a political border set down by Israel. Others insist it is a temporary security precaution that will boost Israeli confidence in the peace process.

Whatever the spin, support for the fence reflects a belief that neither peace negotiations nor IDF military operations will stop suicide bombers.

"The IDF failed to defeat terror, and the Oslo process exploded in our faces," says Yehiam Prior, a physicist at Rehovot's Weizmann Institute of Science. "We've got to the point where there is no more trust left in the PA to support negotiations."

Prior's answer to the seemingly intractable Palestinian-Israeli conflict is Hipardut (Hebrew for 'separation'), a group he founded in 2001 that supports unilateral withdrawal from 90 percent of the West Bank. Israel would annex most of the settlements. At the same time, unilateral withdrawal would close off the country to illegal Arab immigrants, 150,000 of whom are living in Israel, he says.

"We are talking about a political border, not just a fence," he says.

Its implication goes way beyond a cement-and-barbed wire barricade designed to keep out suicide bombers. Indeed, novelist A.B. Yehoshua frames unilateral withdrawal as no less than the belated fulfillment of the Zionist dream.

"Borders are like doors in a house which claim everything inside as the responsibility of the master," he says. Everything beyond those doors

belongs to someone else. Yehoshua says a clearly delineated border will allay Arab fears of Israeli expansionism.

Supporters of unilateral withdrawal portray themselves as far-thinking individuals caught between an odd coalition of leftists and rightists.

"Yossi Beilin [who opposes the fence] is one of those who believe in negotiations at all cost..." says Maj.-Gen. (res.) Danny Rothschild. "And the settlers oppose the fence because it puts some of them outside the border."

Prior cites a number of Labor party high-rollers, such as MK's Haim Ramon, Binyamin Ben-Eliezer, and Amram Mitzna as fellow travelers. Yet Hipardut has been eclipsed by backers of a more modest fence concept.

Prior says it is all a game of big tent politics. Many who espouse a security fence also support unilateral withdrawal, but believe they can preempt right-wing opposition with a low-key approach.

"But we believe that it is a mistake to say that any old fence will do," he says. "Look at the fence near Kalkilya: It is shaped like a jellyfish. It's not defendable."

A few scattered cement blocks are all that separate the Palestinian village of Rantis from the olive groves that lead the way into Israel. There is a closure on the West Bank, but that will not dissuade the group of Palestinian men waiting at a safe distance.

Once the four Border Police jeeps parked here leave, the Palestinians will walk by foot or get transported by car into Israeli towns along the Green Line. The men are probably day laborers just trying to eke out a living for their families.

Then, again, one of them could be a suicide bomber.

In a field a short drive up Route 465 from Rantis, a group of local municipal officials and public personalities wearing red suede gloves unwind a symbolic roll of barbed wire for the security fence they want erected. They do not want to wait for a cabinet decision on the fence's planned route. They do not want to wait for a protracted evacuation of isolated settlements. They want a security fence - now.

"In the last few months, we lost 77 Israelis to terrorism," says Maj.-Gen. (res.) Uzi Dayan, ex-chairman of the National Security Council, and head of the Committee for Building the Security Fence, a new pro-fence umbrella group. "That's more than we lost in a whole year in southern Lebanon."

Dayan says that, until it is completed, all the fence does is funnel terrorists and car thieves into Israeli areas not yet sealed off.

It does not have to be that way. He says - as have others - that not a single suicide bomber came from the Gaza Strip, which is hemmed in by a barrier easier to pad [sic] than the one being built

around the West Bank. But Dayan will not discuss what route his proposed fence should take.

"That's always been a way to stymie progress on the fence," he says. "So long as it is contiguous, that is okay by me."

While Dayan is the public face for the Committee for Building the Security Fence, the group was hammered together by Herzliya lawyer Ilan Tzion, a scrappy veteran of the cause.

In July 2001, Tzion formed his own Fence for Life organization after a suicide bomber from Kalkilya detonated himself right outside a disco in Tel Aviv's Dolphinarium complex, killing 21 young people. A year later, Tzion unsuccessfully petitioned the High Court of Justice to force the government to begin work on the security fence.

The Committee for Building the Security Fence has attracted support from Hebrew University political scientist Shlomo Avineri and Maj.-Gen. (res.) Ilan Biran, and is building a Knesset lobby including Shinui, Shas, Labor and even some Likud members.

Municipal officials from towns like Shoham and Omer, which have been plagued by Palestinian car theft, have also jumped on board. But Tzion has kept groups that advocate unilateral withdrawal at arm's length.

"Their views are not realistic," he says.

Is it realistic to spend a proposed NIS 3 to 4 billion on a fence when the Defense Ministry is facing budget cuts?

Tel Aviv University economist Danny Ben-David, a member of the new committee, cites a study by colleagues that estimates the financial cost of terrorism within the Green Line at NIS 14 to 19 billion a year.

The fence, Ben-David says, will pay for itself after a few months, but there is no time to delay.

"Our GDP per capita is freefalling at a rate of 3 percent per year," he warns.

Tzion blames all this on one man: the prime minister.

"Sharon is a settler at heart," he says. "If he were really interested in building the security fence, it could have been done a year and a half ago. The whole project can be completed within a year."

According to Yisrael Harel, a former Yesha Council chairman and founder of the settlers' periodical *Nekuda*, settlers are split on how to deal with the popular push for the fence.

One faction, he says, has taken a pragmatic line, contending it would be too politically damaging to play spoiler. Ariel Mayor Ron Nachman, who once decried the fence as a "mistake," successfully lobbied the Sharon government to include his town of 17,000 within its line.

A handful of settlers have even become enthusiastic supporters of the idea.

"Even if the fence would provide communities

within the Green Line with only 50 percent security," says Elyakim Haetzni, a prominent hard-right lawyer from Kiryat Arba, "it would be immoral to deny them it."

So long as their communities are not uprooted, the settlers would willingly play garrison on the other side of the wall.

"The fence is a cage for the Palestinians," says Haetzni, "and we will be the zookeepers."

But Harel is quick to note that most settlers are not so accommodating. The National Union party is dead set against the fence.

"We've opposed the idea of this fence since the beginning," said David Wilder, spokesman for Hebron's Jewish residents. "Fences just tell the terrorists that you're scared. The best defense is a good offense."

Harel fears that a fence will become a political border, but says there are practical reasons for opposing it, besides Land of Israel ideology.

"The fence won't stop terrorism in the long run," he insists. "So far we've been lucky with the

Kassam rockets, but one day, the Palestinians will learn how to make them more effective."

Or they will tunnel underneath.

This past Tuesday night, two snipers from Kalkilya crawled through a drainage ditch beneath the fence and fatally shot seven-year-old Noam Leibowitz as she was riding with her parents on the Trans-Israel Highway.

Most settlers are joined in their opposition to the fence by members of the Left, who also believe that it will turn into a border.

"Unilateral withdrawal reflects desperation," says Yossi Beilin, architect of the 1993 Oslo Accords. "Negotiations work. There were years when there were fewer terrorist attacks."

Beilin says the fence is too expensive and will end up taking in more Palestinians on the Israeli side, upsetting the country's demographic balance. Furthermore, the land sandwiched between the Green Line and the fence will serve as the next rallying cry for the Palestinians.

"It will become the next Shaba Farms [the

disputed Har Dov region on the Lebanese border]," he says. Beilin spearheaded the campaign for unilateral withdrawal from southern Lebanon.

"Unilateral annexation is illegal under international law," says Yehezkel Lein, a researcher for the B'tselem human rights group. It is a position seconded by lobby Peace Now.

Lein cites a 2002 state comptroller's report that states most terrorists cross into Israel proper via checkpoints. A fence, he says, would not change that. Still, Lein is loath to see himself as an ally of Sharon and the Hebron settlers.

He says the prime minister will bend to pressure from the Center and Right and annex much more of the West Bank in the end - a victory, he says, for the settlers. An independent Palestine may yet emerge, but it would be too cramped and poorly shaped to function.

"You can call a clubhouse a country club, but that still doesn't make it such," he says.▲