

Just a wall?

by Tim Morris

According to Israel the West Bank Barrier is a security measure. Opponents argue that it is set to become a de facto border, pre-empting final status negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians and incorporating illegal settlements into Israel.

The Israeli government began building the Separation Wall in June 2002. Now half-completed, it is projected to run for almost 700km. Almost 75% of its total length is inside the West Bank, rather than along the Green Line, the internationally-recognised border between the state of Israel and the West Bank. In some areas – notably in occupied East Jerusalem and around the Palestinian city of Qalqilya – the Wall is an eight-metre-high structure of solid concrete. Twice the height of the Berlin Wall, many of these sections have armed sniper towers every 300 metres. Elsewhere it is part concrete, part fence. It is surrounded by a buffer zone with trenches, barbed wire, electrified fencing, thermal imaging, video cameras, aerial drones and other security measures.

The Wall cuts deep into the West Bank – one section penetrates 14km into Palestinian territory – in order to envelop Israel's extensive network of settlements and their planned expansion areas. Fifty-six Jewish settlements – home to over 170,000 settlers – will lie between the Wall and the Green Line. When the additional Jewish settlements in East Jerusalem are taken into contact, three quarters of the 425,000 settlers will be living behind the Wall. If current plans are implemented the Wall will annex 10% of the territory of the West Bank. The total construction cost is over \$2 billion – six times the annual budget of UNRWA.

The Wall has been the subject of four UN resolutions, one – vetoed by the US – in the Security Council and three in the General Assembly. In July 2004 the General Assembly overwhelmingly reaffirmed the judgement of the International Court of Justice that the wall is in violation of international law and called on Israel to demolish it or relocate

it to the Green Line. However, the international community has taken no substantive action to stop the construction of the Wall in occupied Palestinian territory.

The lands between the Wall and the Green Line have been declared by Israel as a 'seam zone' where all residents and landowners must obtain a permit to remain in their homes and on their lands. When the Wall is finished some 65,000 Palestinians will require permits to cross the Wall into the rest of the West Bank. In areas where it is completed, schoolchildren living in the seam zone and attending schools on the Palestinian side and farmers wishing to go to market have to queue up awaiting the arrival of an Israeli military jeep to come and open the gate. Gates generally close at four o'clock in the afternoon. Palestinian ambulances are not allowed to enter the seam zone. Some Palestinians who have not renewed their Israeli-issued ID cards are now permanently trapped inside the seam zone, afraid that if they go through the gate into the West Bank they will be barred from returning to their families. Fearful for their security, some parents have stopped sending their daughters to school on the other side of the Wall. Because the

ICJ declared not just the Wall but the gate system and the permits illegal, the UN and NGOs are not applying for permits for their local staff, thereby jeopardising their ability to continue mobile health services and supplementary food distribution.

If, as many suspect, Israel intends the Wall to become its permanent international border, the seam zone will be formally annexed by Israel. There is speculation that, instead of offering seam zone residents Israeli citizenship, they will be exchanged for an equal number of Jewish settlers who will relocate behind the Wall.

The Wall itself takes the West Bank's most valuable agricultural lands and water resources, along with Palestinian East Jerusalem. Settlement expansion to the east of the Wall and Israeli control over the Jordan Valley will take more of the lands and resources necessary for a future Palestinian state. Without access to these vital land and water resources, or the Palestinian capital East Jerusalem, there can be no viable Palestinian state. Without a viable Palestinian state, there can be no viable peace.

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Information in this article is derived from:

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