

B460. "Israel's Security Barrier Could Use Tweaking, Not a Wrecking Ball" USA Today (August 4, 2004), p. 11A.

When the Israeli Supreme Court ruled in June that the country's security fence violated Palestinian rights and international law, Israel's many critics in the world cheered. After all, they assumed, even its own court sees the injustice of the "wall."

But though the three-judge panel acknowledged the plight of Palestinian residents, it also called for only slight changes to the barrier. Now, Israel will shift it along the West Bank while still guarding against suicide attacks. (The Defense Ministry agreed to do just that last week.)

The application of that decision won't be popular at the United Nations, but it's the best, if an imperfect, solution.

Historically, barriers have been effective in cooling off hostilities between two groups and setting the table for peaceful settlements. Most telling are the 11 years of fighting (1963 to 1974) between Greek and Turkish Cypriots over who would govern the island. A fence built in 1974 separated the two communities, ended the bloodshed and is widely credited for moving the sides toward a peaceful accommodation. The fence between Israel and Lebanon helped pacify that border, too.

Numbers illustrate the need

The new barrier in the West Bank has stopped most of the suicide bombers, an essential step toward the ever-elusive establishment of a Palestinian state. The numbers are incontrovertible:

* From October 2000 through August 2003, 73 attacks occurred inside Israel, killing 293 people and wounding 1,950.

* Since the construction of the barrier began in August through June of this year, three attacks have occurred, killing 26.

Even so, the United Nations recently demanded that the barrier be torn down. And a month ago, the International Court of Justice (the "principal judicial organ" of the U.N.) said the barrier "violates Palestinian humanitarian rights."

No one is holding that a barrier is a cure-all, but the reduction in tensions has already allowed Ariel Sharon's government the political cover to make overtures toward an agreement. Israel has indicated a willingness to withdraw troops from Gaza and parts of the West Bank. It has also agreed to tear down some settlements without concessions from Palestinians.

Almost never mentioned is that the barrier leaves many settlers isolated on the Palestinian side, a clear signal that, eventually, these settlers must go. The existence of these settlements is a main bone of contention between the sides.

Relocation, not removal

The U.N. calls the barrier a "land grab," a characterization often repeated by Palestinian advocates. Overlooked, though, is the fact that only a few segments of the barrier -- less than 15% of it -- must be shifted because much of the fence follows closely to the much-hailed Green Line.

That is the original demarcation line, from 1949, that separates the West Bank and Israel. Palestinians say this line should be the recognized border of a future Palestinian state. If the U.N. were less inclined to wholesale condemnation of Israel and more mindful of these facts, it would have demanded the relocation of some segments of the fence and the compensation of Arabs displaced by the redrawn border.

The wall, barrier or fence -- take your pick -- may be an eyesore and an unfortunate symbol of a failed peace effort. But a greater failing would be to tear it down and allow terrorists to ravage Israel.