



Israel's Berlin Wall?

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The United States is threatening to withhold aid to Israel because of the country's ongoing construction of a 370-mile-long barrier dividing the city of Jerusalem and the Palestinian-populated West Bank region.

The controversial barrier, which includes a 200-mile-long concrete and barbed wire fence, has become a sore point in the peace negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians, who have been in a bloody conflict for over two years.

Why build a fence?

President Bush said last week that part of a \$9 billion aid package, slated to help with Israel's current recession, could be deducted as punishment for the wall's construction.

The fence, according to the Israeli government, is a security measure designed to keep suicide bombers out. The government blames almost all of the suicide bombings that have taken place over the last few years on Palestinians from the West Bank.

"It is a fence that separates the suicide bombers from the population centers in the state of Israel," said Defense Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer. "Every extra day that passes without the fence being built could cost us more victims."

The fence would seal off the Palestinian-controlled part of the West Bank from Israeli-populated parts of Jerusalem. It measures 100 yards in width, includes sensors and security cameras and a complicated system of checkpoints and trenches. It is the second of its kind in Israel. Gaza already is sealed off by a patrolled fence that Israelis say has proven effective at limiting attacks.

What the other side says

Palestinians and other critics of the fence call the structure a new "Berlin Wall," referring to the historic 96-mile-long wall that divided the German city of Berlin into East and West for almost 30 years, forcing East Berliners to stay within its borders.

They also argue that part of the wall's route winds through some Palestinian villages -- sometimes separating farmers from their land -- and would not only divide communities, but take disputed land and place it in Israeli hands. The physical barrier, they say, could become a political and geographical division making impossible the independent Palestinian state Palestinians and U.S. officials hope to create by 2005.

“To us it’s suffocation,” Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat told CNN. “It’s sealing our towns and villages and refugee camps.”

For many Palestinians, the fence’s checkpoints would be the only route out of and into their communities, meaning long waits for security checks.

A combined Palestinian and Jewish state

Some Israelis who live on the Palestinian side of the fence also worry their homes could be left out of Israel if the fence turns into a national border. Israeli authorities have promised to re-route the fence in order to ensure Israeli homes stay on the Israeli side.

Mideast analysts, such as *New York Times* writer Tom Friedman, point out that the fence could backfire on Israel. If the wall eats away at Palestinian land and destroys the Palestinian dream of an independent state, Friedman maintains, Israel could become a combined state of Jews and Palestinians, where Palestinians could demand voting rights.

He argues that since by the year 2010, there will be more Palestinian Arabs than Jews living in such a combined land mass, the principle of one man, one vote, could lead to more Palestinians voting in Israel, putting Israel in danger of losing its identity as a Jewish homeland.

“If Palestinians lose their dream to have an independent state, then the only thing that might guarantee for them a dignified life will be asking for the right to live in one state with the Israelis,” Israeli Supreme Court clerk Mohammed Dahleh told Friedman.

“We will say, ‘Don’t evacuate even a single West Bank settlement. Just give us the vote and let us be part of one community,’” since Israel has made it into one space anyway, Dahleh said. “This call will find great resonance within the international community.”

President Bush also sees the fence as jeopardizing the peace process.

“I think the wall is a problem,” he said in July during a meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. “It is very difficult to develop confidence between the Palestinians and the Israelis ... with a wall snaking through the West Bank.”

The United States will soon decide whether the fence construction is an illegal settlement activity and therefore warrants a fine.

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