

## GEOGRAPHICAL RECORD

### ISRAEL'S WEST BANK BARRIER: AN IMPEDIMENT TO PEACE?

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*If you entrench yourself behind strong fortifications, you compel the enemy to seek a solution elsewhere.*

—Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831)

The construction of walls has long been a tool in regulating—or attempting to regulate—human passage and the defense of territory. Walls encircling cities or bisecting open spaces are generally built to keep “others” out, the most famous case being the Great Wall of China. Walls are also used to keep people in, as with the Berlin Wall, which remains notorious even after it was dismantled. A new and infamous wall is the barrier that Israel is erecting to keep people in and out simultaneously. It is intended to protect Israelis from the plague of West Bank suicide bombers by keeping them out of Israel and by containing them in parts of the West Bank. From the Palestinian perspective the wall is a land grab, intended to create a de facto annexation of land to Israel. Inasmuch as Israel’s current policy of “realignment” calls for unilateral territorial adjustment by 2008 should negotiations fail, this perspective is understandable.

For the international community, what is seemingly at issue is the precise location of the wall, and there has been enormous attention to, and condemnation of, its current and future course. Of the various walls currently deployed in international ethnoterritorial conflicts, among them those in the western Sahara, or Jammu and Kashmir, Israel’s appears to be the only one on the map of public interest. Several questions immediately arise. What is so controversial about Israel’s wall? What are its significance and likely impacts in terms of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? Why does the attention given to it dwarf the concern expressed about the other walls that are scattered across the globe? Can Israel’s wall make a positive contribution to the pursuit of peace? Although these questions may involve a measure of speculation, they invite examination of issues that make up the context of the dispute and that also relate to other ethnoterritorial conflicts. Why are walls built, whom do they serve, and, perhaps most important, how do they become obsolete?

The list of famous defensive walls includes structures both large and small, both recent and ancient. Among them, China’s Great Wall is preeminent in notoriety, size, and age, although Hadrian’s wall, separating what today is Scotland from England, has greater proximity to Western tourists and history. One message of these

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