

An Economist at the Wall

by Sam Perlo-Freeman

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This August, I spent three weeks in the West Bank with the International Solidarity Movement, a non-violent, Palestinian-led movement supporting the struggle for Palestinian freedom, and an end to the Israeli occupation. While I was there, I participated in an ISM march along the route of the wall/barrier that Israel is constructing in the West Bank.

The Wall, most of whose route is on the Palestinian side of the Green Line, is causing enormous suffering and hardship to the Palestinian communities either side of it. In some of the areas we passed through, unemployment had reached 95%, as a result of workers being cut off from their jobs and farmers from their land. Large swathes of olive and citrus trees have been destroyed to make way for the Wall, and farmers face intense difficulties in accessing their land on the other side. Even if they are granted permits to go through, often after long delays, they can't get permits for their laborers to harvest the crops. The twisting route of the wall, taking in Israeli settlements, greatly restricts mobility, making normal economic life impossible. The Wall also cuts off a large proportion of the West Bank's water resources.





Perhaps most shocking was the casual cruelty displayed by the Israeli authorities towards the Palestinians affected by the wall. In the village of Falameya, 500 promised permits for farmers to go through the Wall to their land were eventually provided - all in the names of dead people, children, the elderly, the disabled, and people who had moved away. In Jbarra, a village cut off by the Wall, children going to school on the other side have to pass through a gate, where the soldiers often keep them waiting for hours, fail to turn up at all, arrive only to say that they've "lost the key," and regularly humiliate and insult them.

Not everything I saw was negative; north of Jerusalem there has been massive non-violent resistance to the Wall by Palestinians, internationals and Israeli activists, which has often successfully obstructed building, in spite of severe repression by Israeli forces. In some cases, Israeli courts have ordered sections of the Wall to be moved towards the Green Line; in Budrus, a village of just 1,000, sustained non-violent resistance, with strong involvement by women, caused the army to move the Wall to the Green Line, even without a court decision.

The economic damage caused by the Wall, the loss of land, employment opportunities and factor mobility, is very easy to see. I will add a few thoughts on the subject from an economics of conflict perspective.

First of all, the vast unemployment and deprivation caused by the conflict as a whole, but greatly exacerbated by the Wall, creates a huge impetus to continued violence, providing a large number of young men with very little to lose or to occupy their time - the opportunity cost of joining armed resistance groups is very low. The Palestinians are in the position of "desperate bargainers," where despite the enormous military odds against them, they will likely continue the conflict, as what is effectively being offered them (a collection of isolated enclaves behind the Wall) falls far below even minimal aspirations. A rational actor will accept a peaceful offer if it is better than they could expect to gain by conflict; but if the offer is below some minimum threshold of acceptability, they may prefer to gamble on conflict. Thus, while the Wall may reduce the number of successful attacks, it guarantees the indefinite continuance of the conflict.

From an Israeli perspective, the Wall's ostensible purpose is as part of the mix of prevention and pre-emption deployed to combat suicide bombings. However, consideration of the route of the Wall precludes such an explanation. It is not simply that the Wall unnecessarily includes large numbers of Palestinians on the "Israeli" side. It is that the convoluted route enormously increases the length of the Wall, and therefore the cost of building and patrolling it. Therefore, it cannot be seen as part of a cost-minimizing mix of measures to provide a given level of security. The Wall must therefore be seen as a physical means of pursuing the fundamental Israeli-Palestinian conflict over land and resources. It also plays a role in internal coalition-building, gaining the support of ordinary Israelis who hope it will increase security, but also of settlers and their supporters, who hope that the Wall will make the settlements behind it permanent.

Ultimately, the Wall threatens to render impossible what most observers regard as the only viable solution to the conflict - a 2-state solution based on Israel's pre-1967 borders. It has been declared illegal by the International Court of Justice, and in my view should be opposed by all who hope for a just peace in the Middle East.

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