

The Racist Separation Wall in the West Bank

A look at its economic and social effects and its ramifications on the future of the Palestinian People

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Before discussing the economic, environmental and social effects of the Wall, it must first be placed in its correct context. I do not wish here to go far back into the historical concept of the Wall in Israeli political thinking, but it should be pointed out that walls first began to be built in 1994, when the Gaza strip was completely encircled by a fence, and in 1995, when sections of the Wall were constructed in Shweika, Tulkarem, and Habla, south of Qalqilia. The Wall, as a large-scale political project, was actually started in June 2002, following operation "Defensive Shield" to reoccupy the West Bank. This resulted in war crimes committed by the Israeli military both in Jenin and Nablus, and the extensive destruction of the infrastructure of all Palestinian cities as well as the Palestinian Authority. This operation was followed by an extremely tight siege around every city and village, which remains in effect to this day.

The connection that is being made here between "Operation Protective Wall" and the start of the construction of the "Protective Security Wall" – as it was called by Israel – is very clear. This is the most comprehensive, colonial and racist project undertaken since the occupation of the West Bank in 1967, and its implementation will alter the contours of the future of historical Palestine on the ground and put an end to the Palestinian dreams of an independent state and national identity.

The implementation of such a project requires certain preconditions, the most important of which are:

1. A nation exhausted from bandaging its wounds and burying its martyrs daily by the tens, compounded by a miserable economic situation under which every Palestinian will be forced to think only about how to put food on the family table.
2. The preservation of a token national authority, destroyed, encircled, and left struggling for survival, which the Occupation can always use to justify its crimes and aggressions.
3. A favorable international climate.

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4. Elements concerned with meeting the humanitarian and subsistence needs of a besieged people, which will consequently engage local and international organizations in meeting these needs.

Work on the first phase of the Wall's construction began in the north of the West Bank, stretching for 145 km and running between Zbouba/Salem, to the north-west of Jenin, and Masha, to the south-east of Qalqilia. Anyone following the route of the Wall will notice that it zigzags inside the West Bank in order to annex the settlements and the largest area of fertile agricultural land with the smallest possible population density and, as it turns south towards Qalqilia, it penetrates further inside the West Bank in order to isolate the second largest water basin in the West Bank, and facilitate its annexation to Israel. Although only in its first phase, it has already isolated more than 2.5% of the most fertile land in the West Bank, which serves as the area's food-basket. Inside the area which falls between the Wall and the Green Line, 11,500 Palestinians living in 16 agricultural villages have been separated from their fellow Palestinians living in the West Bank, and from their fellow Palestinians living within the 1948 Israeli borders, with whom they maintain familial and marital ties. More than 73,000 Palestinians living in 51 villages have been separated from their lands, which either now fall on the other side of the Wall or were in large part destroyed by the Wall. In addition, more than 102,000 trees, among them 83,000 olive trees, have been uprooted. When the Wall is completed as planned, stretching for 786 km around the West Bank, it will leave 343,000 Palestinians isolated between the Wall and the Green Line, and destroy and isolate the lands of 522,000 further Palestinians. While it annexes 43.1% of West Bank land, it will leave the remaining land in the form of severed islands and ghettos under Israeli sovereignty over historical Palestine, which extends from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea. When the construction is completed, as can be seen in the accompanying map, it will divide the West Bank into three major ghettos:

The Northern ghetto: to include Jenin, Tulkarem and Nablus

The Central ghetto: to include Salfeet and Ramallah

The Southern ghetto: to include Bethlehem and Hebron

A scattered group of enclaves, such as Jericho, Qalqilia and groups of villages surrounding Jerusalem, will surround these major ghettos along the edges of the West Bank. Large blocks of settlements, such as Ariel, Ma'aleh Adumim, Gush Etzion, Givat Ze'ev, and a network of bypass roads run alongside the Wall and deep into the West Bank for a distance of 22.5 km, as is the case in Ariel, in order to protect it and annex it to Israel.

The Wall is built adjacent to residential buildings, so as not to leave any room for future Palestinian constructional expansion. In expropriating the majority of Palestinian agricultural lands and water resources,

it leaves the Palestinians with 5% of their water, and consequently destroys the agricultural sector, which in turn will drive what is left of Palestinian society away from agriculture and self-sufficiency and into the labor market.

In order to understand the repercussions for Palestinian society, let us consider some examples.

Qalqilia, for instance, used to receive 85,000 Palestinian shoppers who came each week from inside the 1948 borders and from other parts of the province. After two years of closures, approximately 6,000 of the city's 41,600 inhabitants left Qalqilia and settled in its suburbs; 600 of 1,250 businesses closed their doors and 5,686 of the 12,550 Dunams of Qalqilia's 1948 lands now lie beyond the Wall, or else were confiscated to allow for its construction. More than 200 families from Qalqilia have lost their ties with their relatives and other fellow Palestinians in the neighboring villages of Qalanswa, Taiba, and al-Tira. As a result of these damaging changes, 70% of the people of Qalqilia today depend on humanitarian aid. Furthermore, during my last visit to Qalqilia, I was told by the mayor of a new and unfamiliar phenomenon, whereby at least one new case of mental breakdown is reported each month in the city.

Another example is Jayyouse – a village in Qalqilia Province, with a population of 3,500 – which lost 70% of its agricultural land when it was isolated behind the Wall. Two years ago, the village greenhouses covered 175 Dunams of land; today that area has been reduced to 70 Dunams. Hundreds of Dunams of citrus trees were lost to drought because their owners could not reach them. In Nazlet Issa, a suburb of Tulkarem, a shopping plaza, which housed more than 218 businesses providing total economic support to more than 700 families, was completely destroyed. Thus, an area that was lively and active around the clock became deserted except for settlers and the occupying army's vehicles. In the city of Tulkarem and surrounding villages, the inhabitants lost their sources of income, and the unemployment rate drastically increased; the lands are no longer accessible to the people and, even if some manage to reach their land, they have no markets in which to sell their produce. In addition, the Wall separates them from their places of work inside the Green Line. As a result, a high percentage of Tulkarem's residents live on international food programs and humanitarian aid.

It is obvious that a process of strangulation and impoverishment has been unleashed against the population. They are deprived of their sources of income and suffer daily tyrannical, demeaning and insulting procedures at the gates, implemented in order to dictate the movement of Palestinian civilians between adjacent areas. This also applies to all the cities and villages that border the Green Line. After Israel publicly declared its annexation of isolated lands behind the Wall, a military order published on 2/10/2003 proclaimed these areas a closed military zone. From this time on, special permits were required to move in

and out of these areas or to inhabit them. The goal of annexing these lands and expelling its inhabitants became obvious, but this time a 21st century technique was employed, that can only be called “voluntary displacement” – voluntary because it can be claimed that Israel did not ask these people to leave; they decided to do so of their own free will, after it became very difficult to earn a living in their villages.

Jerusalem probably provides the most extreme example. The Wall in Jerusalem is 82 km long and passes through Arab neighborhoods and villages inside East Jerusalem. Its construction coincided with the announcement of two new settlements in Abu Dis and Jabal al-Mukabbir, and the seizure of hundreds of homes in Silwan and the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood. The Wall in Jerusalem came into existence in order to crown the policy of grave restrictions which the occupying state has been imposing on the Palestinian population in Jerusalem since 1967. Upon completion, it will isolate more than 120,000 East Jerusalem residents from their own city; it will completely isolate all the industrial zones and the commercial enterprises which were transferred to the suburbs following the Oslo Agreement, when Israel consolidated its siege on Jerusalem and prevented West Bank residents from entering the city.

Al-Ram and el-Ezeria are two models of Jerusalem suburbs which were centers for commercial activity and constructional investment throughout the previous decade. After the closure of Jerusalem in the early 1990s, and its isolation from the West Bank through the use of check-points, economic and commercial investments and, subsequently, the construction sector, were re-directed to suburbs such as al-Ram, el-Ezeria, and to some extent Beer-Nibala. By virtue of its central location between the northern West Bank and Jerusalem, the town of al-Ram became an important commercial juncture where business people from all over historical Palestine would solicit, finalize and sign their trade-exchange agreements. El-Ezeria, south-east of Jerusalem, was similarly affected on account of its being both close to Jerusalem, and a part of the West Bank, which lead many business people and construction company owners to invest in its new projects.

On the other hand, racist occupation policies towards the Palestinians in Jerusalem – excessive housing, property and income taxes, and the deterioration in the economic situation of Jerusalem business people which resulted from the city's isolation from the West Bank – compelled many to move to suburbs such as el-Ezeria, al-Ram and Beer-Nibala. During the past few years, these suburbs have witnessed strong construction activity, which brought about a noticeable increase in the number of commercial and residential buildings and workshops. These suburbs attracted tens of thousands of people holding Jerusalem identity cards, and thousands of other people from different areas of the West Bank. All of these people came to live and work in these suburbs because of their proximity to Jerusalem and high levels of commercial activity. In

areas such as Anata, north of Jerusalem, there are more than fifteen thousand workers who relocated from all over the West Bank because of its proximity to Jerusalem and other places of work inside the Green Line.

Today, the Wall poses a great threat to all these investments, threatening to transform these areas into disaster zones, not only economically, but also in terms of the populace, as these lively suburbs could become marginalized, or even lifeless. In el-Ezeria, where the section of the Wall which separates it from Jerusalem has been completed, a passerby can immediately see the closed shops, partially-constructed buildings and vacant apartments and buildings, whose tenants have moved to the old city of Jerusalem. Here they have rented small apartments or, if they cannot afford to rent, live in the houses of family relatives. The Wall in el-Ezeria is not yet complete, as the plan calls for the construction of another section on its eastern side, which will annex the settlement of Ma'aleh-Adumim and the remaining lands of el-Ezeria to Jerusalem. This part of the project will deal a fatal blow to what is left of economic activity in el-Ezeria. While those Palestinian residents who carry Jerusalem identity cards can move back to Jerusalem, the remaining residents will have no choice other than to stay where they are. The same situation applies in al-Ram, where more than three hundred families are preparing to leave or have already left. Business men anticipate that 90% of the shops along the Jerusalem-Ramallah road will cease trading because the Wall passes right through its center, and that the various local and international institutions in al-Ram will relocate to other places in Ramallah or Jerusalem. After the completion of the Wall, which will isolate it from Jerusalem and the villages that are dependent on its services, al-Ram will be transformed from a commercial and service center catering to clients and customers from Jerusalem and north-western villages, into a deserted town.

The Wall in the northern provinces and villages destroys agricultural land, isolating it and preventing its owners from reaching it. At the same time, the occupying forces deliberately destroy agricultural produce in areas such as Jenin, Qalqilia, Nablus, and Tulkarem, either by setting it on fire, uprooting the trees, or poisoning the plants. Often it does so with help from the settlers or by releasing wild pigs into Palestinian lands. In other areas, such as Nazlat Issa, al-Ram and el-Ezeria, the Wall destroys other commercial and economic investments on which the Palestinians depend for their livelihood. While it must be emphasized that the Wall is designed primarily to seize Palestinian lands, it must also be understood that it targets the very existence of Palestinians on these lands, and therefore anything that might make their life easier and allow them space to lead dignified life also becomes a target. It is obvious that there is a systematic policy to deprive the Palestinians of any chance of growth or economic independence, and that the long-term plan calls for their forced displacement. Meanwhile, the short-term plan calls for turning the Palestinians into slaves – cheap labor – to work in the industrial areas that are being, or will be, established on the eastern side of the Wall. On one hand, the polluting factories will be moved to the Palestinian side, and on the other

production costs for Israeli companies will fall, since the policies of the occupation have left the Palestinian labor force with no other options for making a living.

Under the Oslo Agreement, it was decided to create nine industrial zones along the Green Line for joint investments and for attracting Palestinian, Arab and other capital funds. However, according to the new plan, twelve industrial zones will be created, but this time they will all be deep inside the West Bank, inside the settlements, on confiscated Palestinian lands and on the eastern side of the Wall. In this way, the occupying forces would complete the confiscation of everything owned by the Palestinians on this land, simultaneously transforming them into slaves inside industrial zones that encompass polluting factories Israelis would never accept inside the areas that they occupy. At the same time, as Prime Minister Ariel Sharon explained, Israel will not be required to pay out significant sums of money in these areas, because it will seek help from the European Union in implementing his "withdrawal plan", which includes these industrial areas, and it will also be able to rely on wealthy Palestinians who wish to invest their money in such areas. Thus, Israel would succeed in supplying its industries with cheap labor. After ridding itself of workers who are no longer needed, Israel would save its treasury 2.5 billion NIS annually, the sum transferred by foreign workers to their overseas relatives. It will also have tightened its grip over the Palestinians, put an end to their dreams of independence and national identity, and limited Palestinian demographic expansion, which threatens the Jewish character of the Zionist state. Many Palestinians will be forced to emigrate in pursuit of better living conditions. In other words, what Israel is creating on the ground is a system of slavery and a racist separation system even uglier than that which dominated South Africa; it appears that the International Court of Justice took note of this fact when it issued its strongly-worded decision. The question which remains is, "How will this decision be implemented, and how will Israel be made to abide by it?"