

“Good fences make...”

The Separation Fence in Israel and its Influence on Society

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INTRODUCTION

Twenty years after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the question is still asked in many places whether “good fences make good neighbors.” This is a quote from Robert Frost’s poem *Mending Wall* (Frost 1914). In a recently published book, the former SED-Generals Heinz Kessler and Fritz Streletz (2011) praise the benefits of the Berlin Wall. Without it, there would have been war, they argue, although the public seems to have made a different judgment. For many, walls and fences belong to a long-obsolete world of conflict between nation-states, and the end of a bipolar world order was seen as the beginning of a so called “borderless world” (Ohmae 1995). But in fact, after the worldwide euphoria over the demolition of the Berlin Wall, border conflicts actually expanded in the globalized 21st century. The future of border conflicts continues to be discussed intensely. In a recent contribution to these debates, Michael Gehler and Andreas Pudlat (2009) put out an edited volume entitled *Borders in Europe*, whose contributors draw a multifaceted picture of the history and social importance of Europe’s borders. The European Union is certainly a special case. The Schengen Agreement regulates the free movement of goods and people within the EU, but the boundaries of member states certainly have not lost importance, as shown by intensified border controls in Denmark, Italy, and France last year.

All these developments have stimulated interest in international “border research.” In clear contradiction to the “borderless world” prognostication, border conflicts have increased during the last 20 years. New walls

and new fences are thus often playing new and important roles in social conflict. This time around, scholars take boundaries to mean not only the lines between nation-states, although these certainly remain significant because of their external effects. Current scholarship from various institutions is based on a much more differentiated concept of borders, as seen in the work of John Agnew, G.H. Blake, David Newman, or Anssi Paasi. The new approach aims “to understand the boundary phenomenon as it takes place within different social and spatial dimensions” (Newman 2003). These authors argue that the construction of new fences and walls has long-term repercussions on both sides of the border they create. Although they often do serve protective functions, at least for a short time, artificial boundaries can become a catalyst for intra-societal conflicts and conflictual constellations. However, the study of long-term interactive effects of borders and the societies they encompass is a large enterprise, and this contribution focuses on more direct effects of fences and walls.

GENERAL ASPECTS OF BORDERS AND THE ISRAELI SITUATION

During the last few years, the erection of walls became an issue of debate in North America along the US-Mexico line and in Greece along its mainland border with Turkey. Saudi Arabia, too, is considering the option of fencing itself off completely from Iraq and Israel. Above all, however, the cordoning off of the West Bank, which for Israel also includes Judea and Samaria, has received great attention and much criticism globally. The Israeli policy marked a temporary climax to the discussion about borders and walls, but even the European Union has had to deal with conflicts over border fences since the accession of Cyprus and the failure of the Annan-Plan to be ratified by referendum in 2004.

The actual significance of physical demarcation for the development of amicable relations with neighboring states and peoples remains unclear. In this context, the conference “Fences, Walls and Borders: State of Insecurity?” held in 2011 in Montreal, raised the question of whether we have entered a new phase of fixed borders after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Contrary to the expectations of many after the end of the Cold War, the 21st century has seen a new boom of security along national borders. The question is whether the return to border fences and walls as a political tool

is symptomatic for a new era of international relations. State actors pursue different legal, economic, and demographic strategies when they tighten border security by erecting walls and fences. However, different national motivations for the physical demarcations and the respective geographic circumstances make it difficult to see any overall pattern internationally.

The separation fence¹ in Israel is a prominent example of such a demarcation. It is not an international symbol like the Berlin Wall was. However, it is an important within the Middle East conflict, which regularly sends global shock waves. From the Israeli point of view, the separation fence is a response to the violence that erupted during the course of the Second Intifada. Viewed in isolation from the international context, border issues in Israel and Palestine offer the possibility of examining the meaning of borders for society and society's influence on the geography of the state.

During Benjamin Netanjahu's visit in Washington D.C. in 2011, President Barack Obama tried to contribute new impulses to the discussion of a peace solution in the Middle East. His demand that Israel return to a modified version of its 1967 borders failed to generate popular support in Israel. According to a *Dahaf* survey from the same year, 77 percent of Israelis reject a return to these borders (Hoffmann 2011). Recent clashes between Syrian and Palestinian demonstrators and Israeli soldiers along the border on the Golan have transformed this area, where a cease-fire agreement had held for years, into a combat zone again. The border fence between Israel and Egypt will be completed in 2012. This barrier should prevent illegal immigration of Africans to Israel. The representative of the Knesset Ya'acov Katz recently pointed out that every year about 7000 people immigrate illegally over this border to Israel, commenting that if "infiltrators continue to enter at this rate, there will be 50,000 by the end of 2012, 40,000 in Tel Aviv [...] It pains me that ten percent of Tel Aviv's residents will be infiltrators" (Harkov 2011). Israel seems to have problems on every border. However, the boundaries in the north and south of the country are different from the demarcation of the West Bank on a decisive point: the separation fence along the West Bank is not a national border.

1 | Depending on one's point of view, the fence is called different things: separation fence, security barrier, apartheid wall etc. In this contribution, the term "separation fence," which underscores its function of separating societies, is used.

Let us now examine the West Bank as a materialized territorial demarcation and turn the focus inwards onto the residents of the state of Israel. The interactions between boundaries and people's lives can be understood using material indicators, although this is a very complex undertaking. Newman points out that "the linkage between territorial demarcation and the formation of ethnic and/or national identity is a "chicken and egg," mutually enforcing, relationship" (Newman 2004). Israel's very heterogeneous society is certainly a large field for social experimentation. The following discussion thus focuses on the political elite at the time of construction of the separation fence; social reactions are examined using monthly "Peace index"² surveys by Ephraim Yaar and Tamar Hermann.

FENCES, WALLS AND THE SETTLEMENTS

In the Middle East, the perception of boundaries plays a central role in conflicts of nation building, territory, and resources. In Israel and Palestine, for both sides the concept of the border "is a vague, elusive and problematic term, after they have lived more than one hundred years without clear boundaries, but lived with constant, mutual attacks" (Grossmann 2003). The drawing of political borders generally fails because of the fact that internationally accepted borders may serve to separate something from something else but they only work if the people they separate recognize them as legitimate (Wokart 1995). The conflict in the Middle East shows that a national border can encourage mutual recognition of national sovereignty. Since the peace agreement with Egypt in 1979 and with Jordan in 1994, the boundaries between Israel and these two Arab neighbors have been set. The borders with Lebanon, Syria, and the Palestinians have yet to be settled, however. The absence of immovable national boundaries is the driving force behind today's political and social discussions in Israel.

Under the administration of Ariel Sharon, Israel began with the construction of the separation fence along the West Bank in June of 2002. According to government sources, it does not signify a political and diplomatic separation from the Palestinians (Landau 2004; Tirza 2006). The fence is ostensibly intended to fulfill only security functions for the citi-

2 | Yaar, Ephraim; Hermann, Tamar: Peace Index, available online: [www.tau.ac.il/peace/\(08.02.2012\)](http://www.tau.ac.il/peace/(08.02.2012)).

zens of Israel (Rabinowitz 2001). For the former UN ambassador and negotiator in the peace process with the Palestinians, Dore Gold, the fence is a purely military barrier (Gold 2003). Ariel Sharon's government insisted that this arrangement does not reflect a new political border between Israel and Palestine (Tirza 2006). Since its founding, the concept of border is of central importance for Israel, and its boundaries have been subject to constant changes since 1948. The unilateral construction of the separation fence could be seen as defining a new horizon for relations between Israeli and Palestinian societies. It is doubtful that the eastern border, in the form of an impenetrable wall, will ever guarantee security for the state of Israel. As a consequence, a basic question arises. Will the fence function as a border between both societies at all, and if so, how?

One example of the problems associated with the wall as a means of improving security lies in the fact that Israeli settlements were established beyond the Six Day War armistice line of 1949. Their position clearly complicates the regulation of a state border along the West Bank. A large number of settlements are located beyond the bounded territory. The presence of settlers, whose properties expressly belong to the state of Israel, precludes any possible claim that the wall is intended to mark a political border. Eva Horn argues that settlers are not on this or that side of the border. Rather, their political significance derives from the fact that they themselves represent the border (Horn 2004). The settlements therefore mark a different argumentative level in the Israeli-Palestinian border conflict. Characteristically, Eyal Weizman has employed the term "elastic borders" (Weizman 2009). For this reason, a political significance can hardly be ascribed to the separation fence. According to Georg Simmel, a political border should symbolize the consciousness that power and right do not extend to the other side (Simmel 1983). So far, however, settlements in the occupied territories have prevented the creation of a politically binding, mutually recognized border between Israeli and Palestinian society. "At no stage has the state of Israel defined its own borders – optimal, official, secured – or acted to constitute these borders and win international recognition for them" (Zertal 2005). In the Middle East, national borders are judged necessary for the production of identity, peace, and security (Rabinowitz 2001). The lack of such borders, argues Tom Segev (2007), means that the citizens of Israel live in uncertainty and tentativeness, which hinders their search for their own identity.

IMPACT ON SOCIETY

Quite concrete demands arise from this approach for the constitution of the Israeli society. The unilateral initiative of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to seek recognition of a Palestinian state made national borders an even more urgent issue on the political agenda. Territorial borders are anything but obsolete. Especially in Israel and Palestine, their importance will increase. The state of Israel is facing a development that will determine its future. The final definition of its state borders forms the central component of the Middle East peace process because borders are not only a place of differentiation and demarcation, but also of transition, convergence, and mixture. As Stephane Hessel (2011) said in an interview with *Die Zeit*, “I can cross the border separating me from my neighbor, but I cannot cross all borders. Still, if there were no borders, we would feel no need to cross them.” Through the construction of the separation fence, the isolation of society takes place from inside and outside by defining “Palestinian” as an exclusion criterion. Therefore, the separation fence functions as a social demarcation. This perception is of great importance because the majority supports the idea of separation within the Israeli society. The search for societal limits lies behind the objective of differentiating oneself from the Palestinians, but it could also indicate a process taking place in space within the society. In this way the separation fence might be seen as an element of social cohesion. “Society is characterized by the fact that the space of its existence is enclosed by clearly deliberate borders and internally belongs together” (Simmel 1983). The separation fence could be an expression of the direction society is taking. Indeed, Barry Rubin describes the focus on political security, apparent since the outbreak of the Second Intifada, as a new paradigm for Israeli society (Rubin 2006).

The border-society mindset is related to social motivations for the construction of the separation fence. Boundaries are the result of social relations within a society (Simmel 1983). Or, as Newman puts it, the “existence of lines and territorial compartments in the form of states creates a territorial frame within which the social construction of national identity has an important territorial dimension” (Newman 2004). The constitution of the Jewish population was particularly strongly influenced by the experience and trauma of the years 1939-1945 and 1973, according to Moshe Zimmermann (1996) and Tom Segev (1995). The border situation

and threats from the outside have always been a central part of the history of the state of Israel (Primor 2010). “This unique border situation is assumed to influence the individual, his comprehension and conceptualization of reality, and the interrelationship between individual and collective processes” (Shalit 1987). Georg Simmel describes the security function of the border as a framework that has meaning, much like a work of art, for the social group (Simmel 1983). With the help of such a “work of art,” the Israeli society has been trying to create a buffer from the world and to enclose itself since the foundation of the state. From this viewpoint, the construction of the separation fence becomes a metaphoric mirror of the society. Approval or disapproval of this fence reveals one’s attitude about the social order. Danny Tirza called the separation fence, therefore, a “political seismograph” (Weizman 2009).

Acceptance among the Israeli population of the construction of the separation fence was very high at the outset; surveys by Ephraim Yaar and Tamar Hermann (2003) showed an agreement of 57 percent among Israelis in June, 2002. The majority desired social separation at that time (Primor 2010; Witzthum 2004). Palestinians, too, desired separation (Arian 2002). The demand and search for security, according to Moshe Zimmermann, has moved people to vote for a separation of both populations (Zimmermann 1996). A vast majority of the Israeli population supports the demarcation along the West Bank and is therefore against the idea of soft borders in the Middle East. From this perspective, the separation fence can stimulate the images of danger, self-protection, and defense. As terror and violence spiraled upward, a large majority of public opinion (71 percent) supported Sharon’s national unity government and its policies to achieve peace and security in 2003 (Arian 2002). Interesting to note is the increased participation of the “undecided population” during the last elections. The political divisions of right and left have lost their social bases (Primor 2003). Ten years after the beginning of construction, the separation fence is there for all to see along the West Bank. It separates the conflicting parties. And for the first time most Israelis now can clearly visualize where a possible future border would be. Although these boundaries are not necessarily permanent because they also create new realities and affect people’s lives (Newman 2004), the social protests in Israel during the past summer can be understood as a consequence of the inner dynamics set in motion by the placement of these artificial boundaries.

CONCLUSION

The demarcation has become a guiding theme of policies supported by the majority (Elizur 2003).³ An epochal political transformation is being caused by the construction of the separation fence and in the consolidation of left and right positions on the issue (Baskin 2002; Witzthum 2004). Ariel Sharon succeeded, by constructing the separation fence, in taking up an original idea of the Israeli left and in reconstructing it with his own territorial vision (Lagerquist 2004). Neither Zionist revisionism nor complete separation had been able to prevail within Israeli society, but the realization of a physical and social demarcation has generated a new sense of national unity (Lagerquist 2004). David Grossman argues, significantly, that the Israeli enthusiasm for the construction of the separation fence is more a psychological need than a well-considered diplomatic and military policy (Grossmann 2003). “Israelis and Palestinians will eventually have to sit down together to solve their problems. Since such negotiations are unlikely for the time being, however, a properly constructed fence could serve as an interim measure” (Makovsky 2004). According to this view, the separation fence acts as a preliminary stage for peace negotiations in the Middle East. It can contribute to overcome the emotionality stoked by the demands to a return to the 1967 borders, a line that has become the “default boundary” (Newman 2004) for all political negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

Where borders are drawn, power is exercised. In this respect the border discourse is at the same time a national discourse. The separation fence became a mirror of the Israeli society. Do good fences make good neighbors? Within the state of Israel, the separation fence seems to be making the majority adjust to necessary changes. In this context, Robert Frost’s famous question could be reversed: Do good fences make good inhabitants? Territory plays a significant role in the way in which their identity is expressed. This perspective should be considered, although border walls and fences are sometimes negatively connoted. The “social protesters” in Israel have yet to express their views on this topic, but at least the European media are reporting on internal political and social

3 | According to Peace Index, approval of the politics of the “unilateral dissolution” was at 60 percent of the Israeli population in 2012 (Yaar, Ephraim; Hermann, Tamar: Peace Index, available online: [www.tau.ac.il/peace/\(08.02.2012\)](http://www.tau.ac.il/peace/(08.02.2012))).

conflicts in Israel in detail for the first time. This I regard as a positive development. Israeli society defines itself no longer through the distinction to the Palestinians or the “Arab world.” They look with increasing scrutiny at their own social groups. Similar to the German border discourse in the 1920s, the West Bank borderland will have to be re-understood as a common cultural space (see Kreienbrock 2010). Geography still serves the art of war in the Middle East, but it can become part of the art of change if there is an overarching counterstrategy. The emotionally charged borders of 1967 urgently need a new accentuation. Israel is situated at the transition from imperial to national borders. The separation fence stands as a symbol for the security needs of Israel. As a security border it has taken on an integral role in everyday life. The separation fence is thereby becoming a cultural institution and serves by discursive practices to break the recurring argument of the “non-defensible borders of 1967” (Gold 2003; Landau 2004; Sharon 2005; Tirza 2006)⁴. A good fence does not make equally good neighbors and inhabitants, but a secure fence along the West Bank can help to give the necessary stability, the stability of a national border, that the Israeli society needs in order to find a way to peace in the Middle East. Even if it means that the settlers in the West Bank who live beyond the fence will be separated and thus become the losers of this intra-societal process.

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4 | See also Benjamin Netanyahu, quoted by Natasha Mozgovaya: “Netanyahu to AIPAC: Israel cannot return to ‘indefensible’ 1967 lines”, in: Haaretz 24.05.2011.

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