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The One-Fence Solution

By GERSHOM GORENBERG

Col. Dany Tirza switches into four-wheel drive, swerves around the water-filled ruts in the mud track in front of him and steers up a slope. Though he has an office in Jerusalem in the Israeli Army's Central Command and another in a Defense Ministry building in Tel Aviv, this car is Tirza's real HQ, and his real workplace is the Israeli countryside along the Green Line, the border between Israel and the land it has occupied since 1967. At the top of the hillock, he climbs out, hangs his assault rifle over his shoulder and looks out at his handiwork: a curtain of concrete stretching across the plain, broken by gray towers.

Beyond the wall, a low hill rises, covered with close-set houses: the town of Qalqilya, home to 43,000 Palestinians, at the very western edge of the occupied West Bank. On this side of the wall, the Israeli side, cars rush past on the newly opened north-south Trans-Israel Highway. The spot where we stand is on the outskirts of Kfar Sava, a Tel Aviv suburb.

On foreign maps, Qalqilya is outside Israel, on the Palestinian side of the Green Line. But the official maps of the Israeli government don't show the Green Line. For Israeli governments, the pre-1967 boundary is an armistice line that belongs to the past, and the real border remains to be set in future peace talks.

But if there is no border, there is now a barrier, a giant fence being constructed along the length of the country that will give physical form to the division between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Dany Tirza, 44, cleanshaven, with dark hair beginning to gray, is the man in charge of setting its precise route. The fence, Tirza asserts, is not a political measure, but a military one; Israel's army remains on both sides of the barrier, and Israeli settlements remain beyond it. Its intention, Tirza says, is to end the "unbearable ease" of terror. Less than a mile of open country, he notes, separates Qalqilya from Kfar Sava, and the Palestinian town was the base for the suicide bombing at the entrance to a Tel Aviv disco in June 2001, in which 21 Israelis died.

Yet in some way -- a way very much up for dispute -- Tirza is now designing a border between Israel and the West Bank, unilaterally imposed by Israel. For much of its length, the barrier will be a 240-foot-wide swath of barbed wire, sensors and roads, rather than a concrete wall. In either form, it will be a work of monumental proportions, a statement etched upon the land.

Tirza admits, in his quiet, confident, barely inflected voice, that the barrier "is something that will apparently last for many years," becoming the "reference line" for any peace talks, even if not the final line. Diplomatically, the barrier project has sparked widespread objections: at the first meeting between Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian prime minister, and Ariel Sharon, Israel's prime minister, in May, Abbas demanded that Israel stop building the barrier. And at a late June meeting with Israel's security cabinet, Condoleezza Rice, the United States' national security adviser, reportedly said that the United States objected to the fence's construction. Along its route, both Jews and Arabs have angrily protested decisions about where it will run.

Tirza designed the wall that stands here, in front of Qalqilya, nearly 30 feet tall. He also put in the embankment that rises nearly to the top of the wall on the Israeli side. "I made ramps," he explains, so that "in a really extreme case" an Israeli tank can climb the embankment and fire into Qalqilya.

As we watch, an olive green jeep climbs a ramp, stops so that the patrolling soldiers can look across and descends. The sunlight has become harsher; the barrier no longer looks like a curtain but like a prison wall. Palestinians say they're the ones jailed -- the barrier will completely surround Qalqilya, with just one exit, to the east, via an Israeli checkpoint. Or perhaps, as an Israeli critic suggests, Israelis are the ones inside the barrier, inside a fortress or a ghetto of their own making. The barrier is a statement, true, but its meaning is up for grabs.

When operation rainbow -- the unit that Tirza heads -- was established a decade ago, the Oslo peace process was beginning, and the mood was "euphoric," Tirza says. He is driving north from Qalqilya along the so-called seam zone, a bit of Israeli officialese used to avoid reference to the Green Line or the word "border." His cellphones keep ringing. Between interruptions, he describes the mood in the army in Oslo's early days. "Our effort was to switch the diskette, from being an army responsible for everything -- to use a bad word, an occupying army -- to an army working with Palestinians to build peace." He smiles wistfully. "It was an extraordinarily exciting mission. Yesterday you saw an armed Palestinian through cross hairs, and today you're driving with him to make peace."

Tirza prepared maps for negotiations and took part in the talks. During the Oslo process, he says, "Arafat named me Abu Kharita," Arabic for "father of the map." Three summers ago he flew to the United States as an adviser to Prime Minister Ehud Barak at the Camp David summit meeting. In his laptop he carried the maps he had drawn of Israel's proposal for the borders of the Palestinian state-to-be. Precisely what Israel offered, and what West Bank land it proposed keeping, has been the subject of bitter disagreement since the summit meeting's failure. Palestinians say that Israel wanted to break the West Bank into cantons; Israelis reject that claim. The maps have yet to be published. Presumably, they remain in Tirza's high-security laptop, on which he is now designing the barrier: the computerized plow beaten, if not into a sword, at least into a shield.

The idea of building a "separation line" around the West Bank bounced around in the 90's, in the army and among Israeli politicians. "There was a very clear security need" even then, Tirza says. But there were heated arguments over where it should run. The question of what land to keep or give up is Israel's most bitter political issue, and at that point a fence was a commitment no one was ready to make.

But as Palestinian terror attacks on Israeli civilians escalated in 2001, the idea became more popular. The head of the Shin Bet security service, Avi Dichter, backed it, as did Maj. Gen. Uzi Dayan, head of the National Security Council. Public pressure built, with some politicians on the left saying that Israel should build the fence and then withdraw unilaterally behind it.

Sharon remained cold to the idea. Only in April 2002 was the proposal for the first section of the fence put before members of the cabinet. It included an arc along the northwest corner of the

West Bank and shorter sections along the north and south sides of Jerusalem. The tactic, Tirza says, was to deal with the most burning problems first while stepping on the fewest toes politically.

Even so, it was months before the cabinet approved the route of the first section. Later came an O.K. to continue the fence around the north edge of the West Bank -- though only after a regional council in the area put pressure on the government by building its own cut-rate fence, using volunteers and money raised abroad.

While fine-tuning the line under construction, Tirza is planning the next and longest stage of the fence, which will stretch south to Jerusalem, then continue around the rest of the West Bank. He tours the countryside, talking to army commanders and locals, marking the route first on paper and then checking it against a computer database he built during the Oslo years that shows land ownership, topography, power lines and water resources. On his screen he can call up aerial photos, zoom in, overlay his proposals.

Some of his opponents would say that what's missing from the screen are human beings. The barrier project has been sharply criticized not only by Palestinians but also by the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem for restricting Palestinians' rights to movement inside the West Bank, separating farmers from their fields and taking Palestinian land. Ghassan Khatib, the Palestinian Authority's minister of labor, calls the fence "a land-expropriation project" that will cause suffering to innocent people but do nothing to stop terrorists.

Tirza, though, says that he is setting the route to minimize taking private property. He says that special gates, controlled by the army, will allow farmers to reach their land. The B'Tselem report predicts that "hundreds of thousands of Palestinians" will become dependent on Israel's approval to cross the barrier -- adding to the hardship of checkpoints and blocked roads that "have brought Palestinian movement to almost a complete halt" since the conflict began three years ago. Tirza argues that with the barrier in place, the existing hardships will fade. The great advantage of the fence, he says, is that beyond it, the Israeli Army will be able to reduce its presence, impose fewer curfews and block fewer roads.

Perhaps a greater controversy focuses on the basic principle Tirza follows: the barrier should run where "there will be the maximum number of Palestinians beyond it and the minimum number of Israelis. If I've got an Israeli settlement," he says, "I'll go around it. The Green Line is a reference, but only a reference." Inevitably, that tangles discussion of the fence with the settlement debate. Despite government denials, both domestic and foreign critics assume that the fence is a government statement of intentions about land to be annexed in the future.

Tirza stresses his own role as technician, not politician. He draws the line on instructions from Prime Minister Sharon, the defense minister and the army's chief of staff. When decisions are particularly fraught -- as when deciding how deep into the West Bank the fence should stretch to take in a settlement -- he submits several alternatives to the cabinet. For the next stage of the fence, he hints, he has drawn one map that would leave the settlement of Ariel, a town of 15,000 people 10 miles from the Green Line, outside the barrier -- and another that would put it inside. (A Sharon spokesman says that the prime minister prefers the latter plan.)

But the settlement issue is only a piece of Tirza's challenge. For 36 years, Israel hasn't simply ignored the border, but erased it. After the Six-Day War, in 1967, Defense Minister Moshe Dayan (Maj. Gen. Uzi Dayan's uncle) began merging the West Bank economy with Israel's, allowing Palestinian workers to pour into Israeli cities daily. New Israeli towns have been built close to the Green Line on both sides, creating a checkerboard of Jewish and Palestinian communities. Arab towns just within Israel, separated from neighboring West Bank communities between 1948 and 1967, have renewed tight connections. There's no "seam" at the Green Line. The two fabrics have been woven into one. Tirza's job is to cut that fabric.

Tirza admits that there are tough calls in his job, "the kind of thing you're not at peace with." For instance, setting the line in the foothills east of Tel Aviv, where the suburbs spill over the Green Line. The Israeli settlements of Oranit and Shaare Tikva now stand on either side of Azzun Atma, a village that is home to 1,500 Palestinians. The highway from Tel Aviv to the settlements runs across the southern tip of Azzun Atma. Until the current violence, you could turn north from the highway into the village. Today the entrance is blocked by rubble, part of the army policy of limiting Palestinian movement. You can leave the village by car only on a narrow road heading north. The trip to Nablus, which once took 40 minutes, now lasts six hours or more, villagers say.

Abdulkarim Ayoub Ahmed, the 43-year-old accountant for Azzun Atma's village council, lives in one of nine houses south of the highway, which means he can no longer drive from the village to his home. Ahmed's family, like most in the village, grows hothouse vegetables. Now they have to carry their produce across the highway by hand to get it to trucks that can carry it to the market in Azzun Atma. Next to the rubble blocking the road, Ahmed points at the head of a surveyor's spike in the earth, with red markings around it. There are more markings on a lamppost nearby. They show where the fence is supposed to run, surrounding Azzun Atma and cutting Ahmed off from the village altogether.

Ahmed's car is parked on the other side of the rubble, closer to Azzun Atma; he drives me past fields of hothouses to the village hall, where he brings out a series of maps left by the army to announce construction of the barrier. The third map arrived in March. "It was the worst," Ahmed says. "It goes around the village." The paper shows an enclave a mile and a half wide at its widest point, with a bottleneck open to the north.

Then came a fourth map: a crosshatched stripe shuts the bottle. An army checkpoint will control access to the village. "It will strangle us," Ahmed says. "It will destroy our lives."

The army's lawyers have promised that there will be a gate in the fence for the families to use, but Ahmed says he can't believe that the army will allow them the open access they want. His children's school will lie beyond the fence; he'll have to pass through the gate even to get to the grocery store.

At the edge of Azzun Atma, the last hothouse is a few feet from the simple chain-link fence around the Israeli settlement of Shaare Tikva. A young Palestinian tells us that the hothouse belongs to his uncle, who raises tomatoes and cucumbers. According to the maps, he says, the barrier will run here, and the hothouse will be demolished. "If they take that, we'll have nothing to live on," he says.

The distant pounding of a pneumatic hammer striking rock hangs beyond our conversation like the soundtrack of a disturbing movie. Work is under way on the barrier north of the village, but construction hasn't yet begun on the loop around it. "We hope they won't build it," Ahmed says quietly. "We pray they won't."

Benny Kaizer, on the other side of the chain-link fence, can't wait to see the barrier complete. Kaizer, 54, is the secretary -- the town manager -- of Shaare Tikva. The settlement, he says, is one of the few built entirely by private initiative, with no ideological movement behind it. "The land was sold by Arabs, for greenbacks, in canyons at midnight, so no one would see them," he says. Today, 4,500 people live there, in well-landscaped red-roofed homes that look cut and pasted from a Sunbelt suburb. The streets have names like Anemone and Iris.

Kaizer takes me to the edge of town -- to the spot where two Palestinians cut the chain-link fence late one night in May. Each carried an AK-47 and loaded magazines. There have been several attacks like this at settlements; the intruders' standard M.O. is to enter a house and murder people. By pure luck, Kaizer says, the settlement's private guards happened on the breach in the fence a couple of minutes after it was cut, and within moments soldiers arrived. We stroll between the houses, as if on a real-estate tour. "Here the terrorists were killed," he says, indicating a spot. There are bullet holes in the stucco of homes nearby. If the barrier had been in place, he says, it never could have happened.

Nonetheless, Kaizer and the leaders of settlements nearby are just as unhappy as the Palestinians are with Tirza's chosen route. They want the fence around Azzun Atma to make a smaller loop, less than a mile wide -- so that the houses of the main part of the village are inside but the farmland and hothouses are outside. Otherwise, he says, "the enclave will run close to the road" into the settlements. "We don't want a terrorist with an AK-47 only 70 meters from our schoolbuses."

Tirza says that the issue is settled. He says that the current map is the final one -- that's where the fence will stay. As for villagers like Ahmed who live south of the road, the probable solution is that the gate will be opened for them three times a day, and if they need to cross at other times, they'll be able to call the army patrol to open it.

The only hardship at Azzun Atma, Tirza says, is that the barrier will mean driving farther to get to the regional center of Qalqilya. But it will take less time than it does today, he says, because beyond the fence, the army will be able to fade out of people's lives. "Despite what lots of people say" -- the slight smile appears -- "we don't like being an occupying army."

Within Israel, there are two themes to rising criticism of the government over the barrier. The first is that the prime minister is delaying continuation of the fence at the cost of Israeli lives. "Sharon will do everything not to continue," says Haim Ramon, a Labor Party Knesset member who is an advocate of the fence. "Any settlement that's not inside clearly won't be part of Israel," Ramon says. But "if he includes a lot of territory, he has a problem with the Americans."

The second theme is that Sharon wants the barrier -- but in the wrong place. Rightists say he is giving too much away. Leftists say he is trying to annex much of the West Bank. They cite

Sharon's intention -- confirmed by his spokesman Raanan Gissin -- to continue the fence eventually all the way around the West Bank, creating an Israeli buffer zone between the West Bank and Jordan, along the Jordan River and Dead Sea.

Palestinian opposition is sharper and virtually universal. The fence is meant to "consolidate existing settlements," says Khatib of the Palestinian Authority.

If the readings of the fence are contradictory, suggests Yaron Ezrahi, an Israeli political theorist, it is because the project itself is a bundle of contradictory impulses, "an embodiment of the Israeli dilemma." It expresses the "idea of a two-state solution," yet implies the failure of the Israeli left's historic desire to end the occupation through negotiation. "It's the cutting apart of Siamese twins -- by one twin, to save himself," Ezrahi says. At the same time, "it reflects the bankruptcy of the right's idea that the Palestinians can be defeated by force."

The barrier, Ezrahi says, contains an unintended architectural allusion to ghetto walls. In the long run, it "will make bad neighbors," he asserts. "It takes terror and projects it on the future" as a permanent condition. As "political installation art," the fence expresses fear and broken dreams.

Tirza also has a philosophic view of the barrier. "It gives order to space," he likes to say.

We're in his office. The first section of the barrier is nearing completion. His proposal for the next stage of the fence has been awaiting cabinet approval for at least three months. In the meantime, he is preparing the orders to seize land for military use so that the legal procedure can begin the moment he gets the go-ahead.

"Giving order to space," Tirza says in a professorial tone, "is a central issue in how people relate to places." Open, undefined space is threatening. "When you mark the expanse, you know what's yours and what belongs to the neighbor," he says. "Only after putting up an agreed fence is it possible to take it down without anyone worrying that someone else will take his backyard."

And yet, this fence is not agreed. "Agreement would be best," he says. "To our great sorrow, there's no one to agree with. Terror threatens us. The Palestinians aren't taking action. We must take our own steps. That includes giving order to space." He is a man who has suffered disappointment but still hopes for peace. He appears satisfied with his work.

Correction: August 31, 2003, Sunday A picture caption on Aug. 3 with an article about a controversial barrier being built to separate Israel from the West Bank misidentified a piece of equipment on a road near the structure. It was an Israeli military vehicle, not a tank.

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