

PM adviser: no plans for 'eastern fence' in West Bank

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Israel does not plan to build a separation fence in the eastern part of the West Bank because of the likely negative political fallout in the international arena, the man who heads the team plotting the route of the fence told Haaretz on Tuesday.

"The State of Israel will not build a separation fence in the eastern part of the West Bank because of the diplomatic damage it is likely to endure as a result," said Colonel (res.) Dan Tirza, who is considered the most senior professional adviser to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on the issue of the fence.

"Legally and publicly, the building of the separation fence in the eastern sector is likely to cause serious damage to the state," he said. "So we shouldn't invest money in it."

Tirza also revealed that there will be a 2.3-kilometer hole in the eastern section of the separation fence being built around Jerusalem. The section where no fence or wall will be built is in the area of the Jerusalem-Ma'aleh Adumim road. It is still not clear what type of obstacle will be placed in the area. The Israel Defense Forces has prepared three alternatives that will soon be presented to Sharon and Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz, and will then be brought to the government for approval.

The inclination is not to completely seal off Jerusalem so as not to leave Ma'aleh Adumim, which has some 32,000 residents, outside of the separation fence. Tirza said that Kfar Adumim, which is home to 350 families and is east of Ma'aleh Adumim, will not be inside the fence.

Tirza's team, which meets once a week, includes members of the Defense Ministry, the IDF, and representatives of all the relevant planning and legal authorities in the country. The state prosecutor's office has barred the addition of settlers to the committee, despite such requests. Nevertheless, members of the committee, including Tirza, meet with settler representatives to hear their opinions about the route of the fence.

Tirza said his committee has tried to limit the damage wrought by the fence, and that they did not ignore the Green Line. "But one has to remember that the Green Line is not a defensive line," he said. "In places where I can, I move the route of the fence so as not to destroy olive groves and hot houses. Not a single home has been destroyed as a result of the route of the fence. Except for some homes built illegally in the area of Baka al-Garbiyeh."

So far, 26 petitions have been submitted to the High Court of Justice on the issue of the fence. Fifteen were either rejected or a settlement was reached between the sides. Eleven are still being considered by the court. Of these, eight have led to a delay in construction of the fence.

"The reason we haven't lost until now on these petitions is because we tried to take as many considerations into account as possible during the planning phase. We tried to find solutions with the local residents or their lawyers."

Tirza also said a number of Israeli lawyers, who represent Palestinians who own land along the route of the separation fence, are trying to "stir things up" and prevent their clients from reaching understandings or deals with the Israeli government over financial compensation for the seizing of their land.