

Ha'aretz Editorial: Confusing fence route
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Hidden in the language of the political interviews given in preparation for the prime minister's visit to Washington in 10 days lies the future of the separation fence. The nature of the fence, whose purpose was to provide protection for Israeli citizens against terror attacks, has undergone a number of changes. At first, it appeared to closely follow the Green Line; in the end, it evolved into a political plan aspiring to redefine the border between Israel and a future Palestinian state, on the basis of Israel's point of view. For this Israel has sustained intense criticism, not just from the Arabs and the European countries - the American administration also cannot quite suffer such a broad chunk taken from Palestinian territory.

The result is yet another Israeli compromise and a new plan for the circuit of the fence. This time it appears to be a cancellation of the Jewish cantons that were included within the previous plan. These salients also held in them thousands of Palestinian citizens, who could not access their work places or even receive essential medical care through the shortest possible route. On the basis of the new plan, the settlements of Ariel and Immanuel will be surrounded by a local fence without being linked to the main perimeter fence. In other words, the separation fence will be constructed along a contiguous line, while the fence that was based on an ambitious plan - until American opposition was voiced, and which was authorized by the government -- will be relegated to the status of "a vision," an expression probably lacking in any real meaning.

It appears, at least insofar as the route of the fence is concerned, that Sharon succeeded in lifting American pressure from him. The question remains whether the fence, even along its new circuit, will fulfill its security purpose. It is already clear that three major problems have not been solved: the fence surrounding Jerusalem in the area of Ma'aleh Adumim; the legal petitions filed with the High Court of Justice regarding the ownership of properties and the disruption of daily lives; and the safeguarding of settlements east of the fence.

The completion of the fence construction by the end of 2004 may not only be postponed but also have enough gaps to permit attackers to make their way into Israel. In an interview with Haaretz, the prime minister promises that with the completion of the fence Israel will be able to expel the thousands of Palestinians living in its territory illegally; however, the other dangers will not go away. For example, the settlements beyond the fence will continue providing an excuse for the presence of the Israel Defense Forces in the territories, and for the continued violence between Israel and the Palestinians.

The problematic process of decision making on the issue of the fence and the faulty result, at least at it appears on the map, raises the suspicion that the prime minister is interested more in annexation than a defensive fence. Only a precise route, which will limit the fence along the Green Line, could lift all such suspicions and fulfill the fence's security purpose.

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