

## **On Fences and Neighbours**

Christine Leuenberger

*... And on a day we meet to walk the line  
And set the wall between us once again.  
We keep the wall between us as we go.  
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.*

*And some are loaves and some so nearly balls  
We have to use a spell to make them balance:  
“Stay where you are until our backs are turned!”  
We wear our fingers rough with handling them ...*

*“... Before I built a wall I’d ask to know  
What I was walling in or walling out,  
And to whom I was like to give offence.  
Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,  
That wants it down!” I could say “Elves” to him,  
But it’s not elves exactly, and I’d rather*

*He said it for himself. I see him there,  
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top  
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.  
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,  
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.*

*He will not go behind his father’s saying,  
And he likes having thought of it so well  
He says again, “Good fences make good neighbors.”*

Robert Frost, *Mending Wall*

Walls, barriers, fences, and checkpoints are ubiquitous in Israel and Palestine; they enclose or separate buildings, neighbourhoods, communities, and territories. In 2002, the Israeli government began building a “security fence” consisting of concrete walls along densely populated areas and a “fence system” in rural areas. The “security fence” is the culmination of various exclusionary Israeli policies regulating movement and interchange between Israeli- and Palestinian-controlled areas.<sup>1</sup> Once completed, it is projected to be 721 km long – twice as long as the internationally recognised Green Line, the 1949 armistice line marking the boundary between Israel and the West Bank.<sup>2</sup>

The terms used to describe this barrier reveal the politics of the speaker. For Israeli proponents, the “security fence” is also the “anti-terrorist fence”, which, according to Israel’s government, was built in “response to suicide bombers who enter into Israel”.<sup>3</sup> For its Israeli opponents, the “Apartheid Wall” serves to segregate different ethnic groups and to appropriate land and water resources. For West Bank Palestinians, “the Wall” is part of a “wall system” that includes Israeli infrastructure and Israeli-controlled no-go areas inside the West Bank. It dismembers the territory into disconnected Palestinian enclaves, and its functions are best encapsulated in terms such as “segregation”, “colonisation”, “apartheid”, and “annexation”.<sup>4</sup> The international community also grapples with the terminology, struggling to find a designation that is not laden with the political bias of one side or the other in the conflict. Some international news agencies, such as the British Broadcasting Corporation, refer to it as the “West Bank Barrier”.

Israelis and Palestinians agree that this wall has come to embody an ever-growing cultural divide between them. Already in 1923, the Zionist Vladimir Jabotinsky suggested that Jewish settlers construct an “Iron Wall” in order to disengage from Arabs, so that the Zionist mission could succeed.<sup>5</sup> Yet at that time, no physical wall had to be built for the psychological distance between the two peoples to increase. From early Zionism to more recent studies by anthropologists, politicians and scholars have identified and simultaneously reinforced a cultural gulf between Israelis and Arabs.<sup>6</sup>

The partition of the West Bank – through the establishment of barriers, no-go areas, and an Israeli road system to which Palestinians have limited access – channels Palestinians and Israelis into separate but often parallel geographical spaces.<sup>7</sup> Israeli law prohibits citizens of Israel from entering Palestinian-controlled areas, and stipulates that Palestinians need special permits to enter Israel or to cross Israeli-controlled areas within the West Bank. These closure mechanisms and policies provide for only a few spaces in which Israelis and Palestinians may still meet.<sup>8</sup> They mainly include potential friction points such as checkpoints.

By 2011, over 522 closure mechanisms existed in the West Bank, including roadblocks, fixed and temporary checkpoints, barrier gates, and crossing terminals into Israel. Many Palestinians must pass through them daily to reach schools, work, and medical facilities, or to attend social functions.<sup>9</sup> These crossing points are some of the few spaces where Palestinians and Israelis may still meet one another. They have become the ‘public stage’ of the conflict, where collectivities, not individuals, face each other; where soldiers with M-16s encounter civic resistance; where Palestinian van drivers and porters, at times, resist the occupation by moving the roadblocks at night;<sup>10</sup> where a Palestinian coffee vendor refuses the request of an Israeli soldier to provide free coffee. They can become sites for potential confrontation. During the Second *Intifada*,<sup>11</sup> checkpoints became public spaces for violence and hostilities.<sup>12</sup>

The checkpoints “invariably serve to ... increase the space, physically and conceptually, between neighbors”.<sup>13</sup> They embody the power imbalance between the sentries and Palestinian civilians. Some Israeli soldiers are said to suffer from “checkpoint syndrome”, sustain psychological damage by being put in a position of power whilst feeling permanently under threat.<sup>14</sup> Palestinian checkpoint crossers complain of humiliation, random violence, and a culture of impunity amongst the soldiers. Conversations between Palestinians and Israelis, shielded from each other by bulletproof glass, are unlikely to increase trust. Instead, technology built for protection helps reinforce the perception of each other as a threat to security and livelihood.

Palestinians and Israelis now meet mainly at potential friction points; but the closure policies have also practically halted cross-border interaction. Some policymakers have long recommended cross-community and trans-border cooperation as a step toward peace,<sup>15</sup> but closures, barriers, and travel restrictions have severely weakened cross-border friendship and professional contacts. After the Wall was built, a Palestinian professor could meet his Israeli colleague solely at a checkpoint – the only space where they could continue to discuss joint projects. Most people, however, don’t go through the trouble. Travel restrictions, permit refusals, and checkpoint delays mean that virtual communication such as e-mail, Skype, and Twitter increasingly substitute for face-to-face

meetings. For many Israeli and Palestinian academics, politicians, and peace activists, it is now easier to meet in Turkey, Jordan, or Germany than across the border in each other's backyard. Spaces in which to discuss peace have become increasingly difficult to come by amongst all the obstacles built to separate and "protect" the two peoples from one other.

### **A New Age of Walls**

With the fall of the Berlin Wall, a new era of open geographical spaces and unparalleled mobility seemed to replace a world divided along ideological and political lines. Globalisation, ostensibly, brought about the death of nations. With the development of a worldwide "information superhighway", physical borders seemed to become obsolete. Since 1989, however, walls and fences have again been built across the globe, dividing people, cultures, and territories. Indeed, one of the results of global interconnectedness is a proliferation of borders, checkpoints, and physical and virtual frontiers.<sup>16</sup>

How can we explain the rise of such new strategies of exclusion? The post-1989 emergence of global capitalism produced unprecedented wealth, unmatched economic opportunities, and stark inequities.<sup>17</sup> States faced new sets of problems – waves of immigrants, illegal activities along borders, rising ethnic violence. Politicians, policymakers, and security forces, seeking to curb such social problems, reverted to the historically widespread strategy of constructing 'strategic defence systems' such as barriers, walls, and fences.<sup>18</sup> Such technologies of division can allegedly create security, curb terrorism, and minimise ethnic violence. They are also put up so as to inhibit illegal immigration, smuggling, and drug trafficking. The post-1989 hopes for freedom and mobility have therefore gone hand-in-hand with a 'new age of walls'.<sup>19</sup>

Since 1990, numerous political barriers have been built or proposed across the globe, such as those between Mexico and the United States; the United Arab Emirates and Oman; India and Pakistan; and Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Increasingly, social barriers have been built *within* countries. In Baghdad's Green Zone, for example, fortresses separated US

forces from the local population during the Second Gulf War and its aftermath. Within the Italian city of Padua, in Californian suburbs, and in the Brazilian city of São Paulo, barriers create ever more walled-off and ‘secure’ communities, and guard against the unwanted Other.

New strategies of segregation have also remade US cities. In downtown Los Angeles, the commercial district features elevated “pedways” accessible only via the security systems of individual skyscrapers. At the same time, gang violence continues at street level, separated from the raised and secure spaces of business. Borders are, therefore, everywhere: “They are exemplified in today’s road-blocks, check-points, fences, walls, CCTV systems, safety zones, mine fields, and killing zones.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Barriers for Peace, or Barriers to Peace?**

States have erected political walls, fences, and barriers since at least 1990 BC. Athens’s Long Walls, Hadrian’s Wall, and the Great Wall of China are amongst many others built to resolve regional disputes. History teaches us that barriers may have a range of short-term advantages, yet in the long run they obstruct peaceful relations. Watchtowers, checkpoints, and fences don’t tend to reduce fear, social exclusion, and mutual suspicion, but to generate them; they often become sites of tension and violence themselves. Walls, after all, can become “the malevolent face of the people who live on the other side”.<sup>37</sup>

At the same time, they reinforce the cultural gulf between people on either side. Stories about ‘them’ (those on the *other* side of the barrier) being different from ‘us’ (on *this* side) become ever more widespread. As people on the ‘other’ side recede into physical distance, “signals reminding us that they are human become fainter”<sup>38</sup>. The Other is more likely to become an abstraction and a stereotype. When encountered at friction points such as checkpoints, the Other becomes visible as part of a collective Otherness: threatening, unfriendly, and dangerous.<sup>39</sup>

More than twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Germans continue to speak about the “Wall in the head” that culturally and psychologically separates former East from former West Germans.<sup>40</sup> Twenty-eight years of separation, therefore, still have to be overcome. Whereas the Berlin Wall transformed into a nearly insurmountable mental wall between East and West Germans, the West Bank Separation Barrier, too, reinforces “a psychological barrier” that may long outlast its physical structures.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, when the artists JR and Marco pasted images of Palestinians and Israelis onto both sides of the Wall, they hoped the people on each side would see themselves in the other. Their aim was to “... bring people to see how similar they are, and how funny ... [the] project [was] ... meant to show the urgency of seeing the other”.<sup>42</sup>

Yet throughout history it has been those who cross borders who have experienced cultural communality, where others experience only cultural incompatibility. People who retain social contacts across political or social divides have always been less fearful, and don’t tend to adopt the “sectarian consciousness” produced by partitions.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, walls only matter if we make them matter. Walls, barriers, and checkpoints function because guards, soldiers, and civilians enforce their propensity to separate, to control, to defend, and to divide. (Genghis Khan observed: “The strength of walls depends on the courage of those who guard them.”)<sup>45</sup>

Perhaps, then, walls can be reimagined in terms of what they mean and what they can do to a community. Practices of exclusion might then give way to performances of inclusion. During a political demonstration in Jerusalem in 2004, one demonstrator started to climb the Wall:

The audience gasped in awe as in just a few seconds the courageous climber was standing up on the wall ... After a moment of silence, dozens of people lined up below him and quickly followed his example. Suddenly stripped of a whole layer of beliefs and psychological investments, the massive concrete construction flickered and shifted meaning ... For a brief moment, the wall was just a wall.<sup>46</sup>

Germans climbed the previously insurmountable Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 and toasted the beginning of a new era. The wall did not ‘fall’, but these climbers in their thousands stripped it of its ability to divide. Today the Berlin Wall is a tourist attraction. Cobblestone markers across the city remind us where the wall once stood, dividing a nation for much of the twentieth century. Chunks of the wall are sold as memorabilia. The West Bank Separation Barrier, too, may one day become an emblem of its time; pieces of concrete and metal might remind us that walls like it have historically served to divide, less so to unite. They have never yet solved a conflict, but have always become an integral part of it.

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<sup>1</sup> See B’Tselem, ‘Behind the Barrier: Human Rights Violations as a Result of Israel’s Separation Barrier,’ Position Paper, April (Jerusalem: B’Tselem, 2003); B’Tselem, ‘The Separation Barrier: Position Paper September 2002,’ September (Jerusalem: B’Tselem, 2002), accessed Sept. 27, 2010, <http://www.btselem.org/english/publications/Index.asp?TF=15&image.x=7&image.y=4>; for a detailed barrier route see <http://www.btselem.org/English/Maps/Index.asp>; for how the barrier relates to other closure mechanisms see Valerie Zink, ‘A Quiet Transfer: The Judaization of Jerusalem,’ *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 2/1 (2009): 122–133.

<sup>2</sup> In an advisory opinion, the International Court of Justice (2004) used the term ‘Separation Wall’ as the most accurate term to describe the West Bank Barrier when understood in terms of its material effects. The ruling also declared its construction as illegal under international law (see International Court of Justice (2004) ‘Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory: Advisory Opinion’ (July 9), accessed June 11 2009, <http://www.icj-cij.org/docket/index.php?pr=71&p1=3&p2=1&case=131&p3=6>).

<sup>3</sup> See Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, accessed Oct. 12, 2008, [www.mfg.gov.il](http://www.mfg.gov.il). Various NGOs argue that other factors, such as the inclusion of Jewish settlements, demography, and the interests of Israeli real-estate developers also determined the construction and routing of the barrier. See Bimkom and B’Tselem, ‘Under the Guise of Security: Routing the Separation Barrier to Enable the Expansion of Israeli Settlements in the West Bank’ (Jerusalem: Bimkom and B’Tselem, 2005), accessed Sept. 27, 2010, <http://www.ochaopt.org/generalreports.aspx?id=97&f=2005-01-01&t=2008-04-30>; UN OCHA, ‘The Humanitarian Impact on Palestinians of Israeli Settlements and other Infrastructure in the West Bank’ (UN OCHA: Jerusalem, 2007): 46, accessed Sept. 27, 2010, <http://www.ochaopt.org/generalreports.aspx?id=97&f=2005-01-01&t=2008-04-30>. For debates on whether it is the barrier or other measures – such as checkpoints within the West Bank - that have increased security, see BBC News, ‘Israel: ‘No Need to Finish’ West Bank Barrier,’ May 19, 2009, accessed May 29, 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8058609.stm>.

<sup>4</sup> UN OCHA (2007) 'The Humanitarian Impact on Palestinians of Israeli Settlements and other Infrastructure in the West Bank' (UN OCHA: Jerusalem); UN OCHA (2008) 'West Bank: Access and Closure April 2008' (UN OCHA: Jerusalem); UN OCHA (2008) 'OCHA Closure Update Occupied Palestinian Territory' (30 April-11 Sept 2008) (UN OCHA: Jerusalem) accessed Sept. 27, 2010, <http://www.ochaopt.org/generalreports.aspx?id=97&f=2005-01-01&t=2008-04-30>.

<sup>5</sup> Jabotinsky, Vladimir (1923) 'The Iron Wall', accessed July 23<sup>rd</sup> 2011, <http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:xJZYWrMsMZ4J:www.informationclearinghouse.info/article14801.htm+jabotinsky+iron+wall&cd=5&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us&source=www.google.com>.

<sup>6</sup> Rabinowitz Dan (2010) 'Oriental Othering and National Identity: A Review of Early Israeli Anthropological Studies of Palestinians', in Ilan Pappé and Jamil Hilal (eds.) *Across the Wall: Narratives of Israeli-Palestinian History* (London: I. B. Tauris): 45-73.

<sup>7</sup> See B'Tselem: The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories (2002) 'The Separation Barrier: Position Paper September 2002' (Jerusalem: B'Tselem); B'Tselem (2003) 'Behind the Barrier: Human Rights Violations as a Result of Israel's Separation Barrier', Position Paper (Jerusalem: B'Tselem); B'Tselem (2006) 'A Wall in Jerusalem: Obstacles to Human Rights in the Holy City' (Jerusalem: B'Tselem). See also Leuenberger, Christine and Izhak Schnell (2010) 'The Politics of Maps: Constructing National Territories in Israel', *Social Studies of Science*, 40/6: 803-842. Also published Online First, September 1, 2010 as doi:10.1177/0306312710370377.

<sup>8</sup> The policy of closures and its associated infrastructures of separation commenced in 1991 and have been continuously reinforced throughout the West Bank since the second Intifada in 2000. See Keshet, Yehudit Kirstein (2006) *Checkpoint Watch: Testimonies from Occupied Palestine* (New York: Zed Books).

<sup>9</sup> UN OCHA (2011) 'West Bank Movement and Access Update' (UN OCHA: Jerusalem); UN OCHA (2008) 'West Bank: Access and Closure April 2008' (UN OCHA: Jerusalem); UN OCHA (2008) 'OCHA Closure Update Occupied Palestinian Territory' (30 April-11 Sept 2008) (UN OCHA: Jerusalem).

<sup>10</sup> According to International Law the Palestinian Territories are under Israeli occupation. Moreover, Israel's border can only be determined through peace negotiations and not through annexation. The Israeli government, however, maintains that the Israeli presence in the West Bank has a unique legal character and does not constitute an occupation due to Israel's need for self-defense and its replacement of Jordanian rule over the West Bank, which didn't have the right to sovereignty over the territory.

<sup>11</sup> 'Intifada' literally means 'shaking'. Israelis tend to understand the term as indicative of a Palestinian war against Israel, whereas Palestinians equate it with a popular uprising against an occupying regime (see Prime: Peace Research Institute in the Middle East, *Leaning Each Other's Historical Narrative: Palestinians and Israelis* (Beit Jallah, PNA: A Prime Publication, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Zureik Elia, David Lyon, Yasmien Abu-Laban (eds) (2010) *Surveillance and Control in Israel/Palestine: Population, Territory and Power* (London: Routledge): 29; Hammami Rema (2004) 'On the Importance of Thugs: The Moral Economy of a Checkpoint', *Middle East Report* 231: 26-34.

<sup>13</sup> Hallaq, Eyad (2003) 'An Epidemic of Violence', *Palestine-Israel Journal: Two Traumatized Societies* 10/4, accessed Jan 21 2009, <http://www.pij.org/index.php>.

<sup>14</sup> Furer, Liran Ron 'Checkpoint Syndrome' *If Americans Knew*, accessed May 18 2009, [http://www.ifamericansknew.org/cur\\_sit/checkpoints-articles.html](http://www.ifamericansknew.org/cur_sit/checkpoints-articles.html); Keshet, Yehudit Kirstein (2006) *Checkpoint Watch: Testimonies from Occupied Palestine* (New York: Zed Books).

<sup>15</sup> Mitchell, George J. (2001) 'Sharm El-Sheikh Fact-Finding Committee Report - Mitchell Report', accessed April 24 2010, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mitchell\\_Report\\_%28Arab%E2%80%93Israeli\\_conflict%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mitchell_Report_%28Arab%E2%80%93Israeli_conflict%29); Panorama (2007) *Mapping of Mainstream Israeli and Palestinian Organizations Willing to Engage in Dialogue* (Jerusalem: Panorama: The Palestinian Center for the Dissemination of Democracy and Community Development); Panorama (2007) *The Evaluation of Cooperation Between Palestinian and Israeli NGO's: An Assessment* (by Maya Kahanoff, Walid Salem, Rami Nasrallah and Yana Neumann) (Jerusalem: Panorama: The Palestinian Center for the Dissemination of Democracy and Community Development).

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<sup>17</sup> Saskia Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> Brent L. Sterling, *Do Good Fences Make Good Neighbors? What History Teaches Us about Strategic Barriers and International Security* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> Julian Borges, 'Security Fences or Barriers to Peace?', *The Guardian* (April 24, 2007); Stefano Boeri, 'Border-Syndrome: Notes for a Research Program,' in *Territories*, ed. Anselm Franke, Eyal Weizman, Stefano Boeri, and Rafi Segal, (Berlin: KW and Verlag der Buchhandlung Walter König, 2003).

<sup>20</sup> Eyal Weizman Eyal, 'The Geometry of Occupation,' Centre of Contemporary Culture of Barcelona (CCCB), conference lecture at the cycle 'Borders' (March 1, 2004): 2, accessed March 1, 2009, [www.urban.cccb.org](http://www.urban.cccb.org).

<sup>37</sup> Sterling, Brent L. (2009) *Do Good Fences Make Good Neighbors? What History teaches us about Strategic Barriers and International Security* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press); Pain, Rachel (2000) 'Place, social relations and the fear of crime: a review', *Progress in Human Geography* 24 (3): 365-387; Shirlow, Peter (2003) 'Who Fears to Speak': Fear, Mobility, and Ethno-sectarianism in the Two 'Ardoynes', *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics* 3 (1): 81.

<sup>38</sup> Westrum, Ron (1991) *Technologies and Society: The Shaping of People and Things* (Belmont, Calif: Wadsworth): 269; see also Parizot, Cedric (undated) 'Hardening Closure, Securing Disorder: Israeli Closure Policies and Informal Border Economy between the West Bank and the Northern Negev (2000-2006)' (Jerusalem: French Research Center of Jerusalem CRFJ, CNRS).

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<sup>39</sup> Hagan, John and Wenona Rymond-Richmond (2008) 'The Collective Dynamics of racial Dehumanization and Genocidal Victimization in Darfur', *American Sociological Review* 73 (6): 875-902.

<sup>40</sup> Leuenberger, Christine (2006) 'Constructions of the Berlin Wall: How Material Culture is used in Psychological Theory', *Social Problems* 53 (1): 18-37.

<sup>41</sup> Interview I 2008. See also Leuenberger Christine (2011) 'From the Berlin Wall to the West Bank Barrier: How material objects and psychological theories can be used to construct individual and cultural traits', in Katharina Gerstenberger and Jana Braziel (eds.) *After the Berlin Wall: Germany and Beyond* (Palgrave Macmillan): 59-83.

<sup>42</sup> See 'Face2Face', accessed March 25 2012, <http://face2faceproject.com/>; Leuenberger Christine (2011) 'The West Bank Wall as Canvas: Art and Graffiti in Palestine/Israel', *Palestine-Israel Journal: Jerusalem – In the Eye of the Storm*, 17 (1& 2), accessed June 22 2011, <http://www.pij.org/details.php?id=1350>.

<sup>43</sup> Shirlow, Peter (2003) 'Who Fears to Speak': Fear, Mobility, and Ethno-sectarianism in the Two 'Ardoynes'', *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics* 3(1): 81.

<sup>45</sup> Sterling, Brent L. (2009) *Do Good Fences Make Good Neighbors? What History teaches us about Strategic Barriers and International Security* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press): 319.

<sup>46</sup> Marton, Ruchama and Dalit Baum (2005) 'Transparent Wall, Opaque Gates', in Michael Sorkin (eds), *Against the Wall* (New York: The New Press).