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# The Wall and Bil'in

- ◇ What is the Wall?
- ◇ How are Palestinians affected?
- ◇ Why is it being built? Is it legal?
- ◇ Case Study: Bil'in—what are the villagers doing about the Wall that cuts them off from half their land

This backgrounder is intended for the teacher and provides information on the Wall and the village of Bil'in. See also the student handout.

In 2002, Israel starting building the Wall—sometimes called a fence or barrier—around part of the Palestinian territory it occupies called the West Bank. The stated purpose is to protect Israeli citizens from Palestinian attacks. The barrier, which is not yet complete, has already affected the lives of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. The barrier encircles Palestinian towns and villages, separating communities and families from each other, farmers from their land, workers from their workplaces, students and teachers from education, and the sick from healthcare. Some people describe the West Bank as an open air prison because of the barrier.



Part of the barrier is made of 8-9m concrete slabs, mostly in urban areas. In rural areas, it consists of barbed wire, patrolled roads, electronic, ditches and is about 50m wide. There are watchtowers and sniper positions along the length of the 700km long barrier.

Did you know...Like the Great Wall of China, the barrier can be seen from space.

A full map was only made public after the construction had started. The Green Line is the internationally recognised border between Israel and the West Bank (which is occupied by Israel). The barrier does not run along the Green Line but cuts into Palestinian land – 80% of the barrier is in the West Bank.

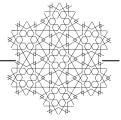


## What's in a name?

There are disagreements about what to call the construction. Each word that is used creates a certain image of what it is and what its effects will be – so none is neutral and each one is controversial.

The official Israeli line is to call it a **fence** or **security fence** – suggesting the main reason for building it is Israeli security. Critics of this view call it a **wall** or occasionally **barrier**. Some add a word, such as **apartheid wall** or they call it a **separation wall**. The International Court of Justice used the term 'wall'.

**Settlements** – illegal under international law – are towns for Israeli Jews only established since 1967 in the occupied territories. Palestinian homes are destroyed and land is seized for the settlements, and now almost 40% of the West Bank is out of bound to Palestinians. In order to ensure the comfort of Israeli settlers, resources including water are allocated unequally and Palestinian freedom of movement is curtailed – meaning their human rights to healthcare, education, work, economic well being and contact with families are often violated. Although settlements are widely recognised by the international community to be a barrier to peace, they are continuing to expand unimpeded.



## How are ordinary Palestinians affected?

- ◇ Limited access to work and basic services
- ◇ Communities and families split up
- ◇ Destruction of livelihoods
- ◇ Slicing up of West Bank
- ◇ Destruction and confiscation of land, homes and resources
- ◇ Consolidation of occupation and Israeli control over Palestinian lives
- ◇ Irrigation networks damaged
- ◇ Education severely disrupted
- ◇ Soaring unemployment
- ◇ Even less water for Palestinians



The path of the barrier snakes, and loops and detours, eating up Palestinian land. Land in its path, or on either side, has been taken from Palestinians by the Israeli authorities for “military needs”. Homes have been destroyed and over a hundred thousand olive and fruit trees which Palestinians were dependent on to make a living have been uprooted. Palestinians will not be compensated for the land confiscated and property damaged in order to build the wall.

Some people’s land has been destroyed entirely. Others, such as the inhabitants of Bil’in, find themselves on opposite sides of the barrier from their land (which happens because the barrier doesn’t run along the Green Line). In the first phase of the building of the barrier alone, more than 50 communities were isolated from the majority of their lands.

Palestinians have had no choice but to depend more and more on agriculture for their survival, due to Israeli policies limiting their movement. But now the Wall is leading to people losing their main and sometimes only source of income.



These signs along the barrier say in Hebrew, Arabic, and English: ‘Mortal Danger – military zone – any person who passes or damages the fence endangers his life’.

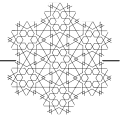
Being near the barrier can put Palestinians in danger. Amnesty International reported the case of two schoolgirls, aged 12 and 14, playing near the barrier, shot by Israeli soldiers from a fortified watchtower. No-one has been brought to justice for these killings.



**Moving around**—There are gates in the barrier which people can go through to get to their land if they have a permit. Getting a permit, which is only valid for one gate, is a very difficult, uncertain and long process, and is often unsuccessful for reasons that are unclear. Even for permit holders it is not easy – the gates are not always open (often only for three times a day for 20 minutes according to the UN), they often have to travel long distances, usually along unpaved roads, to get to the gate (which is only possible for the fit and healthy). Plus, tractors and other vehicles are often not allowed through the gates, so agricultural produce cannot be transported. Permits to access cultivable land are often given to parents who are too elderly to farm the land but denied to those younger family members who could do the farming.

### The barrier severely limits people’s freedom of movement. Why is this right so crucial?

It is a right which links to other rights – the right to medical care, education, work, economic wellbeing, contact with families. Because of restrictions to their movement – many Palestinians in the West Bank cannot access basic services or sustain a livelihood. For instance due to restrictions on their movement, students and teachers struggle daily to reach schools and universities.



## Why is the barrier/wall being built?

According to the Israeli authorities, it is "a defensive measure, designed to block the passage of terrorists, weapons and explosives into the State of Israel."

Critics, including human rights organisations, say there is a hole in this argument: If the barrier was just for security, why is it not built on the internationally recognized Green Line? Why does it run deep inside Palestinian land and not between Israel and the West Bank?

### Why is 80% of the barrier in the West Bank?

The barrier's route has been determined by the location of Israeli settlements in the West Bank – often leaving additional land around them so that they can expand. The settlements are Jewish only communities which are in violation of international law. The UN suggests that the purpose is to incorporate these into Israel and expand Israel, changing its borders. When the barrier is complete, 76% of the settler population and 10% of the West Bank will lie behind the barrier on the 'Israeli' side.

The former Israeli Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, was reported by the BBC as saying, "When you fence areas and communities in the West Bank, you end a lot of their dreams," and "In the plan, there is no Palestinian state".

Measures that Israel undertake in the Occupied Territories in the name of security must comply with its obligations under international law – do they?

UN Office for Humanitarian Affairs has prepared a powerpoint covering different aspects of the route. See [here](#) for a list of their presentations—the relevant one is from March 2007

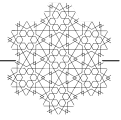


In July 2004, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) – otherwise known as the World Court – ruled that the barrier violated international law on a number of counts. The ruling related to those parts of the barrier which did not run along the internationally recognised Green Line but deviated from it, cutting into the West Bank.

The court issued an advisory opinion calling for:

- ◇ the construction of the barrier in the West Bank to be stopped immediately
- ◇ the parts of the barrier built inside the West Bank to be dismantled
- ◇ the Palestinians who suffered losses as a result of the barrier to be compensated
- ◇ the international community to act to prevent the construction of the barrier

The Israeli authorities have disregarded the ICJ's finding and recommendations, and continued with the construction of the barrier. The court stated that while Israel has the right and duty to protect its citizens against violence, its actions must comply with international law.



## Bil'in

Bil'in is a village in the West Bank, approximately five kilometres from the Green Line. Nearby lies Modiin Illit, one of the fastest growing settlements, stretching ever closer. The part of the barrier being built around Modi'in Illit runs along the land of six Palestinian villages and Bil'in is one of these villages.

Agriculture is the principal source of livelihood for Bil'in. The village has around 750 acres of olive and almond groves and grazing fields. Over half the land is being cut off from the village by the barrier. Thousands of the village's olive trees have already been uprooted as a result of its construction. Sale of olive oil is a major part of the livelihood of many families. Being cut off from their land will mean economic devastation for the people of Bil'in.

There are currently around 30 000 settlers in Modi'in Illit. The planned expansion will make it resident to 150 000 settlers – 5 times the current number. Two Israeli human rights organisations, B'Tselem and Bikom did a report. They say, "Our findings also prove that Israel's goal is to gain control of privately-owned Palestinian land."

### Resisting the wall...

Palestinians have filed dozens of petitions against the barrier's route, held countless demonstrations, organised tours, risked their lives to harvest their crops, replanted olive trees, and anything else they can think of. Sometimes they have done this alone, and sometimes in co-operation with Israeli and international sympathisers.

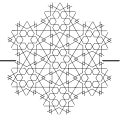
The people of Bil'in formed the Bil'in Popular Committee which is the centre of strategy in the village against the wall. Since 2004, in Bil'in, every Friday afternoon unarmed Palestinian farmers, workers, mothers, students, together with Israeli and International activists have been marching to the barrier singing and waving flags, and confronting the Israeli soldiers. Stones are sometimes thrown. The demonstrators face teargas, stun grenades, rubber-coated steel bullets, beatings and arrest. According to Amnesty, hundred of demonstrators have been injured as soldiers fire plastic-coated metal bullets and some demonstrators are beaten with rifle butts. The weekly Palestinian-Israeli demonstrations in Bil'in have become a symbol of non-violent protest and of solidarity.



See [here](#) for a short video taken by a young teenage girl in Nil'in, a neighbouring village where the wall also runs through. Her video shows a blindfolded Palestinian from Bil'in being shot in the foot

A group of Israeli supporters wrote a letter to potential supporters in which they said:

If the non-violent struggle in Bil'in fails, and the barrier remains in its current route, the message will be that non-violent popular struggle is ineffective in the occupied territories, and that the only mode of opposing the 40-year long Israeli occupation is a violent one



## Legal

Bil'in does not only use demonstrations to resist the Wall – it also taking legal steps to challenge the barrier's path. The village has hired an Israeli human rights lawyer who has been appealing to the Israeli Supreme Court. In the appeal they argued that the Wall, built on their land, cut them off from half their fields and orchards and that the route was planned not on the basis of security but to accommodate settlement expansion.

In 2007 the Court ordered the government to redraw the route of the barrier near Bil'in. Chief justice Dorit Beinisch wrote in the decision: "We were not convinced that it is necessary for security -military reasons to retain the current route that passes on Bil'in's lands."

The Israeli defence ministry which is responsible for building the barrier said it would "study the ruling and respect it." However, the barrier declared illegal has not been dismantled, the State has not presented a plan for the amended route and construction has resumed in the settlement.

On 9 July 2008, to mark the fourth anniversary of the ICJ declaration that the Wall was illegal, the village began legal proceedings against two Canadian corporations who have been involved in constructing, marketing and selling residential units in the illegal settlement of Modi'in Illit. They argue the corporations are aiding, abetting, assisting and conspiring with Israel in carrying out an illegal act.



Here, Israelis and Palestinians are celebrating together the decision of the Supreme Court, though many suspected at the time that the decision would not be implemented.

Activists coming from abroad to demonstrate alongside Palestinians is not a new thing. For example the International Solidarity Movement (ISM) was founded by Palestinian activists in 2001. Activists from abroad help in a number of ways: for example by protecting families whose homes are threatened with demolition, assisting the injured or disabled to access medical care and walking children to school. According to ISM, the message these activists send to Palestinians by coming is that despite the occupation isolating the Palestinians "we see, we hear and we are with you."