No trespassing *The wall separating Israel and the West Bank*

A World Divided

In a supposedly borderless era, countries are rushing to wall themselves off from neighbors

BY SIMON ROBINSON

THE THEME OF EARLY APRIL'S MEETing of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, a political and economic forum for eight South Asian countries, was "connectivity." Despite the fact that this talkfest slogan was so obvious as to be meaningless, regional leaders took it seriously enough. During the meeting they agreed to work toward a South Asian community that has a "smooth flow of goods, services, peoples, technologies, knowledge, capital, culture and ideas ..." Yet even as the agreement was being drafted, bureaucrat underlings back home were contemplating new ways to separate themselves from neighboring countries—not through trade barriers or diplomatic hurdles, but with actual, physical walls.

Pakistan, for example, has recently talked about putting up a fence or burying mines along its mountainous border with Afghanistan. This would hardly be a regional first. India began building a wall along its border with Pakistan in the late 1980s to stop the infiltration of militants and terrorists. The barrier, which is mud in places and a tangle of razor wire in others, now extends along more than half the border. India is also constructing a fence along its eastern frontier with Bangladesh to block the passage of political and economic malcontents from its impoverished neighbor.

Nor is this kind of activity confined to the subcontinent. All around the world, countries are busy throwing up walls. Iran is building a bulwark along its border with Pakistan to stop illegal crossings. Botswana erected a 480-km electric fence along its boundary with Zimbabwe. Saudi Arabia is spending hundreds of millions of dollars on massive ramparts to separate itself from Yemen to the south and from Iraq to the north. Thailand wants a concrete barrier along part of its border with Malaysia. The U.S. is erecting a controversial fence along its Mexico flank. Israel is building a separation barrier between itself and the West Bank.

Good fences make good neighbors, the saying goes. But at a time when the world is supposed to be more interconnected than ever, isn't there something a little odd about the rush to fortification? It's as if countries have decided, "I'm happy to do business with you, but just don't come near me," veteran Indian journalist Suman Dubey told me recently. "We're opening our minds and economies to each other, but physically we're making it harder than ever to move around."

One reason for that, according to Dan Schueftan, deputy director of Israel's National Security Studies Center and a longtime advocate for a wall between Israel and the Palestinians, is that open societies like those in Europe and North America are realizing they are under threat from uncontrolled immigration. "We now know that we can only be more open if it doesn't threaten our way of life," Schueftan says. "The idea that just delineating a border on a map will stop people coming is becoming more and more unrealistic." Openness sounds good, he says, "but it's actually a calamity. Immigration is changing demographics in places like Europe, and I can't think of anything in the next century that is more important than dealing with that." Schueftan foresees a world with more walls, even within countries. "There are very few good neighbors, so we need very many high walls," he says.

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Viewed in a limited context—as a short-term deterrent to terrorism or as a means of containing a population, for example—walls can achieve their objectives. The slab surrounding the West Bank has dramatically reduced the number of suicide bombings inside Israel. The Berlin Wall successfully divided a city for decades. But Danny Seidemann, an Israeli lawyer and legal counsel to Ir Amim, an organization advocating for a Jerusalem that is shared by Israelis and Palestinians, says walls are more than just concrete and barbed wire. They are corrosive symbols of social and economic rifts and iniquities, divisions that eventually must be healed, not merely bottled up. "Physical barriers are a legitimate, limited tactical response to terrorism, but they're ultimately counterproductive," he says. "The idea that concrete can stand in the way of deeply rooted historical trends is nonsense."

More than that, Seidemann suggests, a wall reflects badly on its builder. It is a physical manifestation of failed policies, a last resort in lieu of a better solution. "When a wall becomes an ideology or a panacea," Seidemann argues, "it says a lot more about the people who built it than those it's keeping out." Of course, nations have the right to protect themselves. But it's worth remembering that walls trap those who are hunkered down behind them as well as those who are turned away. ■

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