

Stories from the Wall

More than a decade after construction started on the separation wall, one Palestinian and one Israeli explain how the barrier has affected their lives.

Text: Anna Kokko

In 2002, the Israeli government approved the construction of a separation barrier between the West Bank and Israel, with the aim of restricting the entry of Palestinian militants into the country.

The decision came in the middle of the second Palestinian intifada, sparked by the failure of the Oslo Peace Accords. The uprising was forcefully suppressed by Israel, killing more than 3,200 Palestinians. 950 Israelis lost their lives, approximately 450 of them in Palestinian suicide bombings within Israel.

Although Palestinian attacks decreased following the construction of the wall, the reasons for it have been debated. Some credit the wall, while others claim it was because of the Israeli Operation Defensive Shield in 2002, combined with a unilateral Hamas ceasefire in 2005. Critics point out that the drop occurred before major parts of the wall had even been finished.

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 62% of the wall has now been constructed. 85% of the barrier is built on the West Bank territory, meaning that it does not follow the internationally recognized 1967 border. In fact, the planned road, 712 km, would be more than twice the length of the Green Line.

In its advisory opinion eleven years ago, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) declared the wall inside

the West Bank and East Jerusalem illegal and called for Israel to tear it down.

More than a decade later, the wall continues to divide the locals' lands and opinions. While some have been walled off from their property or family, for others the wall means safety. Yet because of the barrier, many of the persons interviewed for this article might never meet in real life.



Family business turned military base Ali Ayyad (Palestinian):

When Ali Ayyad traveled to meet his sick brother in the United Arab Emirates in March 2014, Israel finished constructing the wall around his hometown, Abu Dis, leaving Ayyad's hotel on the other side of the barrier.

For Ali, 61, the hotel had always been much more than a workplace. His father built the house for his family in the 1950s in an area with a beautiful view over Jerusalem. When he died in 1978, Ali became the owner of the hotel. It was there where he met



his Norwegian wife, and where they raised their two daughters.

A key, some stamps, and photo albums are almost all that Ali has left from the building. "I try not to think of those years with nostalgia. That would hurt too much," he says.

Problems started in 1996, when the Israeli military declared the hotel a closed military area. With the help of his diplomatic contacts, Ali managed to negotiate the siege to be ended after ten days. In 2003, the family was thrown out for the second time. Israel had decided that the territory should belong to East Jerusalem and was planning to annex it with the barrier.

As Ali and his siblings were all holders of West Bank IDs, none of them were allowed to travel back to the area, which was now considered a part of Israel. The hotel was declared an absentee property, based on the Israeli law that usually applies to houses

left behind by Palestinians that were forced to flee in 1948.

"Legal circus" longer than a lifetime

Ali chose to complain to the court, starting a "legal circus" that is still ongoing. Twice, the Israeli authorities attempted to build a wall next to the hotel, but after a few phone calls to his contacts, Ali managed to get a certificate banning the construction. He feels like sentenced without knowing what crime he committed.

"It's as if I was living in one of Kafka's novels," he says.

The case has reached the High Court of Justice, where Ali is trying to revoke the status of absentee for all his siblings. The problem is that Israel has declared the building a "security property." In reality, Ali considers the location important because the road bypassing the hotel would lead directly to the planned settlement of Kidmat Zion.

The businessman has little hope of dismantling the wall. Wherever Israel expands, he says, it remains. He is also disappointed by Palestinians who worked in constructing the wall or sold cement for its completion. "They say it was for their livelihood, but in the process they jailed themselves," Ali says.

Now, the Cliff hotel is empty and surrounded by fences and barbed wire on all sides, with no traces of the garden that was still green two decades ago. Yet the owner claims he will continue the fight "as long as he's still standing on two feet".

"I have no short-sighted schedule for this project. This

probably won't be solved in my lifetime," he says. "Whether my daughters or nieces want to keep up the struggle, is up to them. But I couldn't sell my soul."

Driving past the protective fence Barak Gatenyo (Israeli):

When Israel started constructing the wall in 2002, Barak Gatenyo was 13 years old and living in Tel Aviv under the constant fear of terror attacks.

Since public buses were targets for suicide bombings, Gatenyo had to rely on his parents to take him to school. Public places like malls and restaurants were better off avoided. Gatenyo would

visit friends only in his neighborhood.

"I was a child living in conflict," Gatenyo says. "Like the Palestinians, we just have to continue to live with it."

One of Gatenyo's friends was injured while riding a bus that exploded. His sister missed a bus that was later blown up. But after the construction of the wall begun, Gatenyo claims, there was a sharp decrease in terror attacks.

"It is a very simple equation for Israelis to understand, which is why most of us support the fence," he says.

A graduate student in security studies, Gatenyo says that it was not only the wall but





also Operation Defensive Shield in 2002 that decreased the threat from the West Bank. During the operation, Israelis arrested several Hamas leaders and destroyed a large part of their material.

Now Israelis worry instead about the civil war in Syria, the rise of radical Islamism in Iraq, and Hamas militants in Gaza. “People don’t say: ‘Thank God we have the fence!’ but rather, ‘Thank God we have the Iron Dome!’” he says, referring to the missile defense system that intercepts rockets fired from Gaza.

“There will always be a wall between us”

Although Gatenyo thinks there will always be a wall between the future two states, he believes it should follow more closely the internationally recognized 1967 border between Israel and the Palestinian territories. Eventually, once both sides have forgotten about terrorism and occupation,

the Israeli government should amend the road of the barrier.

The 28-year-old claims Israelis are well aware of the wall’s negative effects on Palestinians, among them the separation of families on different sides of the barrier. Yet the land annexed by the wall – about 6% of the West Bank according to Israeli human rights organization B’Tselem

– is not that significant for him.

“You cannot build a house on such a small portion of land. Even some crazy settlers couldn’t do it,” he says.

Kfar Yona, a town in the region of Netanya where Gatenyo’s parents moved in 2006, is situated only three kilometers from the wall. When the student takes highway number six to the east, he can always see the barrier on the side of the road. For him, it is like any other building.

“I tend not to overthink about it,” he said. “I guess it makes me feel more secure – if something happens, it’ll be there to protect you.”

Anna Kokko is a freelance journalist based in Brussels.

Think about the text

Ali and Barak have completely different perspectives on the Wall and its effects. Is it possible for you to put yourself in both men’s shoes?

Search the Internet and find reliable information about what international organizations, such as the United Nations, say about the Separation Wall.

Can you think of other examples in modern history that somehow remind you of the impact of the Israeli Wall?