

guardian.co.uk

Comment

In the shadow of Sharon's wall

Israel must tear down its ring of concrete, razor wire and watchtowers around my town

Marouf Zahran
The Guardian, Monday 23 February 2004 01:57 GMT

[A larger](#) | [smaller](#)

My town and its people are slowly suffocating. The government of the Israeli prime minister, Ariel Sharon, is building a grotesque wall. He is building it on land that belongs to Palestinians: land occupied by Israel and held in violation of international law. He is building it, like a tightening noose, around my town, Qalqilya.

Qalqilya is a lovely town, an ancient Canaanite town, home to approximately 45,000 Palestinian men, women and children. We are a town of farmers and, as is traditional in Palestinian society, our farmland surrounds the town centre. For centuries, Qalqilya's citizens have risen each morning to work their fields, returning in the evening to their families, friends and neighbours. Qalqilya is on the Green Line, the border between what became Israeli in 1948 and the Palestinian territory Israel occupied in 1967. In 1948, Israel took nearly 80% of our farmland. Since then, we have made do with the rest.

We had a decent life, we prospered. We were a rare oasis of coexistence where Israelis came to buy our fruit, eat in our restaurants and visit our zoo. More than 40 Palestinian-Israeli business ventures were based in our town. Almost all of us speak Hebrew and see Israelis as our neighbours, not our enemies.

Then came Sharon's wall - a wall of concrete 8m high, with razor wire, sniper towers, trenches and electric fences. The wall tightly encircles our town and cuts us off from our farmland and our livelihood. Armed Israeli soldiers control one narrow gateway from which we are allowed to enter and leave - if we are lucky enough to have a permit. On the rare occasions when our farmers are able to visit their fields, they are met by withered, untended crops, dying in the shadow of an ugly concrete wall. In the process of building its wall, Israel confiscated our land, demolished greenhouses and uprooted orchards. One-third of Qalqilya's water supply is inaccessible - the wells now lie outside the wall.

Israel allows very few people to enter Qalqilya, thereby cutting us off from family and friends in 32 neighbouring villages and devastating our local businesses. More than 75% of our citizens are unemployed and our tax revenues are a mere trickle. Meanwhile, the Israel Electric Company, which provides our electricity, has threatened to cut off power to Qalqilya if I cannot come up with \$1.5m (£800,000) to pay our municipal electric bill. As mayor, I am responsible for Qalqilya's wellbeing. But I can only watch helplessly as Israel squeezes the very life out of my town.

Sharon claims that he is building his wall to provide Israelis with security. If that were true, he would have built the wall on the Green Line. But his wall has nothing to do with security, and everything to do with his final plan for the "Palestinian problem". Sharon's "vision" is to confiscate as much Palestinian land as possible, leaving millions of Palestinians to live in ghettos - decaying, impoverished towns, encaged by concrete walls, electrified fences and razor wire, breeding only hopelessness and despair. If Sharon gets his way, today's Qalqilya will be the prototype for tomorrow's Palestinian "state".

For nearly three years before the start of the current intifada, not a single Israeli civilian was killed inside Israel by an act of terrorism. There was no wall then - but there was a

peace process and a genuine Palestinian belief that Israel would end its occupation and allow the Palestinians to live in the same freedom and security it demands for Israelis.

Instead of reinstilling that belief, Israel is only creating more animosity. Since the wall's construction, the number of Qalqilya residents supporting Palestinian extremist groups has risen sharply.

Sharon's wall is not about peace. It is not about security. It is about the hatred that Sharon has for my people as non-Jews in land he wants for his Jewish state, the hatred he has for our quest for freedom and independence based on equality.

Today, the international court of justice will begin its hearings on the legal consequences of Sharon's wall. The residents of Qalqilya are praying that the court and the international community will finally take action. At what point in the implementation of Sharon's final plan for the Palestinians will Israel be held legally and morally accountable for its actions?

When President Bush next meets Israeli leaders, he will have a wonderful opportunity to win the Muslim and Arab hearts and minds that he wants for his war against terrorism. Just as President Reagan changed the world by challenging President Gorbachev to tear down the Berlin Wall, so too can Bush change the world by calling on Sharon to tear down his wall. It is time to start building bridges instead.

Marouf Zahran is mayor of the Palestinian town of Qalqilya in the occupied West Bank

www.nsu-pal.org

guardian.co.uk © Guardian News and Media Limited 2011