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What Israel's Border Wall Experience Tells Us



AP Photo/Hussein Malla

COMMENTARY

By: Raphael Benaroya

Americans are locked in a fierce debate: to build or not to build a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border. And what's in a wall? Israel's experience with the barriers separating it from its many contentious neighbors offers some answers.

Look first at Israel's 290-mile border with the West Bank, where the main goals are stopping terrorism and deterring entry of illegal labor. The barrier includes razor wire, electronic intrusion-detection fences, anti-vehicle ditches, footprint detection technology, aerial surveillance, and more. In urban areas, there are true walls more than 25 feet high, with cameras, listening devices, and other sensors. Control rooms monitor

activity 24/7, and rapid-response teams deploy against every incursion. All this is similar to the purposes and plans for the U.S. wall.

How effective has the West Bank barrier been? Attacks and resulting casualties fell 80 percent almost instantly after the wall went up, according to Israel's Foreign Ministry. Illegal labor entry dropped comparably, even as legal movement of people and goods through checkpoints remained robust.

Meanwhile, Israel's northern border with Lebanon and Syria fronts on active war zones, with Hezbollah, ISIS, Syrian rebels, and Iranian militias operating on the other side. In this sector advanced intrusion-detection technologies enhance military-style physical structures and procedures that go well beyond U.S. plans.

But even here, where a vastly bigger threat has led to vastly bigger measures, the barriers have proven an effective deterrent. Hezbollah has attempted to infiltrate many times, but succeeded only once.

The Gaza Strip presents different challenges, thanks to uniquely sophisticated methods of Hamas terrorist infiltration and weapons smuggling. So Israel adds tunnel-sensing technology to its protective mix. No concrete walls run along the surface; however, construction of a 40-mile-long reinforced concrete wall below ground is underway.

Also, the Gaza barrier extends more than a mile into the Mediterranean, to counter Hamas naval commandos. And subsurface seismic sensors have been added to detect tunneling. As elsewhere, round-the-clock command-and-control centers direct rapid-response teams when trouble arises.

Results? Israel has disrupted dozens of tunneling attempts and, according to the Jewish Virtual Library, "not a single suicide bomber has managed to cross Israel's border with Gaza."

Israel's southern border with Egypt is more like America's with Mexico. Concerns are less with terrorism and more with illegal immigration, human trafficking, and drug smuggling. There, Israel has erected a 150-mile-long smart fence with observation towers, cameras, radar, motion detectors, barbed wire and 24/7 monitoring with rapid-response teams.

The Sinai barrier's impact has been significant. According to Israel's Ministry of the Interior, 17,000 African immigrants entered Israel illegally in 2011, immediately before the fence was built. After completion of construction in 2013, only 43 crossed. In 2016, just 11 did. In 2017, zero crossed.

Just as significant as the fence, however, have been government policies for managing immigration in tandem with physical deterrence.

Israel promotes legal guest worker programs. As the U.S. Library of Congress has documented, hundreds of thousands of migrant workers from Asia and Europe, as well as Palestinians, have been employed through these programs in agriculture, construction, eldercare, and other industries.

At the same time, Israel has enacted several laws to discourage illegal migrants. These laws include barring such individuals from sending money out of the country and requiring employers to withhold 20 percent of guest workers' pay until they are going home, to ensure they do not overstay their work visas. Employers are also punished if they employ illegal laborers.

Equally critical to the effectiveness of the Sinai barrier has been Egyptian cooperation. The same is true at Israel's border with Jordan, which has only "minimal" fencing. This underscores the value of partnerships

between neighboring nations in achieving common border goals.

So, what is a “wall” and how does it translate into border security?

Clearly, a wall must be many things, according to immediate challenges and needs. But whatever its physical makeup, a wall cannot stand alone. As pointed out by Professor Efraim Inbar, president of the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security, no physical structure can be foolproof. “What is important,” he says, “are actions beyond the fence, combined with intelligence gathering.”

Here is the lesson from Israel: A wall, while absolutely necessary, is only part of the solution. An effective border barrier must include different purpose-specific structures and supporting technologies matching varied terrain, threats, and goals. It also requires active monitoring and appropriate government policies, supported by cooperative neighbors.

Most importantly, a real dialogue across the political spectrum is needed to develop an intelligent mix of solutions, in addition to a wall.

(A longer version of this article appeared on foreignpolicynews.org in January.)

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