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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

How I Learned to Love the Wall

By **IRSHAD MANJI**

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ON March 28, Israelis will elect a new prime minister to replace the ailing Ariel Sharon. But I'd bet my last shekel that I'll continue to hear the phrase "Ariel Sharon's apartheid wall." It's a phrase spoken — make that spewed — on almost every university campus I visit in North America and Europe.

Among a new generation of Muslims, this is what Mr. Sharon will be known for long after he leaves office: unilaterally erecting a barrier, most of it a fence, some of it a wall, that cuts Arab villages in half, chokes the movement of ordinary Palestinians, cripples local economies and, ultimately, separates human beings.

The critics have a point — up to a point.

They're right that Palestinians are virtually wailing at "the wall." When I went to see its towering cement slabs in the West Bank town of Abu Dis last year, an Arab man approached me to unload his sadness. "It's no good," he said. "It's hard."

"Why do you think they built it?" I asked.

The man shook his head and repeated, "It's hard." After some silence, he added, "We are not two people. We are one."

"How do you explain that to suicide bombers?" I wondered aloud.

The man smiled. "No understand," he replied. "No English. Thank you. Goodbye."

Was it something I said? Maybe my impolite mention of Palestinian martyrs? Then again, how could I not mention them?

After all, this barrier, although built by Mr. Sharon, was birthed by "shaheeds," suicide bombers whom Palestinian leaders have glorified as martyrs. Qassam missiles can kill two or three people at a time. Suicide bombers lay waste to many more. Since the barrier went up, suicide attacks have plunged, which means innocent Arab lives have been spared along with Jewish ones. Does a concrete effort to save civilian lives justify the hardship posed by this structure? The humanitarian in me bristles, but ultimately answers yes.

That's not to deny or even diminish Arab pain. I had to twist myself like

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an amateur gymnast when I helped a Palestinian woman carry her grocery bags through a gap in the wall (such gaps, closely watched by Israeli soldiers, do exist). It made me wonder how much more difficult the obstacle course must be for people twice my age, who must travel to one of the wider official checkpoints nearby.

I appreciate that Israel's intent is not to keep Palestinians "in" so much as to keep suicide bombers "out." But in the minds of many Palestinians, Ariel Sharon never adequately acknowledged the humiliation felt by a 60-year-old Arab whose family has harvested the Holy Land for generations when she has to show her identity card to an 18-year-old Ethiopian immigrant in an Israeli Army uniform who's been in the country for eight months. In that context, fences and walls come off as cruelly gratuitous.

For all the closings, however, Israel is open enough to tolerate lawsuits by civil society groups who despise every mile of the barrier. Mr. Sharon himself agreed to reroute sections of it when the Israel High Court ruled in favor of the complainants. Where else in the Middle East can Arabs and Jews work together so visibly to contest, and change, state policies?

I reflected on this question as I observed an Israeli Army jeep patrol the gap in Abu Dis. The vehicle was crammed with soldiers who, in turn, observed me filming the anti-Israel graffiti scrawled by Western activists — "Scotland hates the blood-sucking Zionists!" I turned my video camera on the soldiers. Nobody ordered me to shut it off or show the tape. My Arab taxi driver stood by, unprotected by a diplomatic license plate or press banner.

Like all Muslims, I look forward to the day when neither the jeep nor the wall is in Abu Dis. So will we tell the self-appointed martyrs of Islam that the people — not just Arabs, but Arabs and Jews — "are one"? That before the barrier, there was the bomber? And that the barrier can be dismantled, but the bomber's victims are gone forever?

Young Muslims, especially those privileged with a good education, cannot walk away from these questions as my interlocutor in Abu Dis did. If we follow in his footsteps, we are only conspiring against ourselves. After all, once the election is over, we won't have Ariel Sharon to kick around anymore.

Irshad Manji, a fellow at Yale, is the author of "The Trouble With Islam Today: A Muslim's Call for Reform in Her Faith."

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