

Israel's Right to Self-Defense

“The State of Israel, like any other sovereign nation, retains the inherent right to defend itself and no one—no one—should expect her or the Israeli people to negotiate with or capitulate to terrorist organizations whose cause is her destruction.”

—House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-MD)



Despite its success at stopping terrorist attacks, Israel has moved its security fence several times to ease the barrier's impact on the daily lives of Palestinians.

More than any other nation, Israel faces a strategic military and terrorist threat that is both constant and comprehensive.

Palestinian terrorists have carried out more than 25,000 attacks since September 2000, claiming the lives of more than 1,100 Israelis and forcing Israel to employ security guards to police the entrances of shops and restaurants. On the walls of Israeli high schools are plaques that commemorate students killed in suicide bombings carried out by Hamas and other groups.

Israel also faces serious threats beyond its borders. The terrorist network Hizballah sits in southern Lebanon just across Israel's northern border with a force of jihadists armed with more than 10,000 rockets, some of which are capable of striking Israel's major population centers. In the summer of 2006, Hizballah used some of its arsenal, firing more than 4,000 rockets and mortars into northern Israel, killing dozens of innocent civilians, injuring thousands more and forcing more than one million Israelis to flee the northern part of the country or remain in bomb shelters for a month.

Israel Balances Security With Democracy

Facing enemies so ruthless that they hide bombs in ambulances, dispatch women and children to carry out terror attacks and show no compunction about targeting Israeli homes, businesses and schools with bombs and rockets, Israel has worked to protect its citizens while upholding the values that make the Jewish state a Western-style democracy.

Israel was analyzing and refining its security measures long before other nations had even begun confronting the threat of modern terrorism.

As a result, its governmental institutions have been pioneers in integrating homeland security with respect for basic freedoms. The Knesset is one of the only parliaments in the world to have formulated guidelines to govern the administrative detention of terrorist suspects, and the Israeli Supreme Court has outlawed torture.

Israel's Military is Guided by Moral Constraints

Israel's dedication to preserving itself as a humane democracy is evident even in the institution that has the most to lose from lowering its guard to threats in

order to protect civilian lives and liberties.

When defensive action is required, Israel's armed forces operate under guidelines that have prompted some to call it “the most moral military in the world.”

Even though airstrikes offer commanders the chance to hit enemy targets while protecting troops from close-quarters combat, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) has routinely rejected that option when it risked killing civilians. Frequently, Israeli troops have been called upon for more dangerous urban ground combat missions in terrorist strongholds from Lebanon to the West Bank and Gaza.

While terrorist enemies faced by the IDF hide amid civilians to avoid Israeli reprisals and exploit accidental casualties for propaganda purposes, Israel's soldiers are guided by rigorous rules that restrict even the times when they may shoot in self-defense.

Additionally, the IDF has often given up the element of surprise when targeting towns used as cover by terrorist groups, warning residents ahead of time through leaflets, radio broadcasts and phone calls to leave the areas for the duration of the operations.

Israel's Security Fence is Effective and Ethical

Israel's anti-terrorist security fence, which runs along the West Bank frontier, offers a case study in how the Jewish state is utilizing other, non-military means to fight terrorism.

Composed of chain-link fencing, sophisticated electronic sensors and security cameras for 95 percent of its length, the security fence has been an indispensable component of Israel's efforts to ensure the safety of its citizens. Before there was a fence, Palestinian terrorists were able to simply walk short distances from Palestinian territory into Israeli population centers and detonate suicide bombs. While still only partially completed, the barrier has already proven stunningly effective, reducing the number of Palestinian suicide bombings by more than 90 percent.

In one case, two would-be suicide bombers set off from Jenin in the northern West Bank toward a high school in a nearby Israeli town. The presence of the fence forced them to make a detour, providing enough time for Israeli security forces to capture them and prevent the planned attack.

Israel Has Reduced the Fence's Impact on Palestinians

While demonstrating Israel's determination to protect its citizens, the fence also showcases its willingness to calibrate its battle against terrorism to accommodate innocent Palestinians. The fence's very existence diminishes the need for Israeli security forces to patrol Palestinian towns, reducing security-related disruptions of Palestinian life, and dramatically minimizing the need for Israel to maintain security checkpoints and roadblocks.

Only five percent of Israel's security barrier is composed of concrete barricades. These have been erected in areas with a history of Palestinian sniping or in densely populated urban areas where constructing the entire fence system would dramatically impact Palestinians' personal property. At great expense, Israel has so far installed more than 80 gates in the fence for farmers, students and other Palestinians who have to move between both sides of the barrier.

Israel has even shifted the fence's route in compliance with an Israeli Supreme Court ruling aimed at easing its impact on the lives of Palestinians. Israeli

Chief Justice Aharon Barak said that the alterations to the fence, while risky, were required by his nation's fundamental values. "We are aware that in the short term, this judgment will not make the state's struggle against those rising up against it any easier," Barak wrote. "This is the destiny of a democracy: she does not see all means as acceptable, and the ways of her enemies are not always open before her. A democracy must sometimes fight with one arm tied behind her back."

America Has Backed Israel's Right to Self-Defense

Through congressional resolutions and presidential statements, the American government has repeatedly recognized the legitimacy of Israel's defense of its citizens.

Both the House of Representatives and the Senate passed resolutions articulating that message during the deadliest months of the Palestinians' campaign of violence against Israel. U.S. policymakers have also recognized that Israel's obligation to protect itself has sometimes required action against terrorist organizations harbored beyond its borders in order to deter future attacks.

For instance, Israel was forced to undertake military operations in Lebanon in July 2006 following a major cross-border attack by Hizballah, which had operated with impunity along Lebanon's border with Israel. In response, President Bush strongly endorsed "Israel's right to defend herself," and both chambers of Congress overwhelmingly passed resolutions backing Israel's defensive operations.

Israel's far-reaching efforts to protect its people from terrorism while upholding its commitment to human rights should continue to serve as an inspiration to other nations, including the United States, who can draw on Israel's experience of fighting terrorism without sacrificing core Western values.

Even before its completion, Israel's security fence has led to a more than 90 percent reduction in Palestinian suicide bombings.

Key Points

- More than any other nation, Israel has gone to great lengths to determine how to fight terrorism while preserving its commitment to democracy and civil liberties.
- Democratic checks and balances such as Israel's Supreme Court and parliament play active roles in developing Israel's counterterrorism policies.
- Israel's military operates under strict rules of engagement designed to minimize civilian casualties.
- Even before its completion, Israel's security fence has reduced Palestinian suicide bombings by more than 90 percent.
- Israel continues to minimize the impact of its security fence on the Palestinians.
- The United States has consistently backed Israel's right to defend itself and protect its citizens.