Barriers between Israel and Palestinian territory also block relationships

by Christa Case Bryant in the January 21, 2015 issue

(The Christian Science Monitor) When Linda Casher moved to an Israeli collective near the Gaza Strip as a young American woman in the 1970s, she would often mingle with Palestinians at outdoor markets amid the mounds of pomegranates and rows of hanging chickens. She even welcomed Palestinian women from Gaza to her kibbutz.

But the closest she has gotten to a Palestinian from Gaza lately was when Hamas gunmen emerged from the sea onto a nearby beach in last summer's war.

Two miles south of this community stands a towering cement wall at the Erez checkpoint, the only Israel-Gaza border crossing for travelers. Israelis have not been allowed to enter the Gaza Strip in years. The number of Palestinian workers crossing daily from Gaza into Israel has dropped from tens of thousands to zero.

"We have a great big barrier between us and the Arabs, so we don't see them," said Casher, who sees the separation as imperative for security.

Twenty years of fruitless negotiations, three conflicts with Gaza in the past six years, and growing fears of extremism in the Palestinian territories and around the Middle East have all contributed to a skepticism among many Israelis that peace is possible. As hopes for a resolution have retreated, Israelis have increasingly walled themselves off from their Arab neighbors.

An Israeli who used to work as a lifeguard at a beach in the Gaza Strip remembers that not long ago he could ride his motorcycle to and from his home in Israel. Now he's barred from crossing into Gaza, an area he called home for more than 15 years.

The man, who did not want to be named, spent long nights on the sea with Palestinian fishermen, who split their profits with him. He helped them outside of work, too, sometimes resolving problems with Israeli tax authorities.

He and his Palestinian colleagues shared the attitude, “If you need something, I will help you.”

Then, in the 1990s, Israel built a barrier around the Gaza Strip and handed control of civil affairs over to Palestinians. One day one of his Arab workers came to him and said he’d been detained, interrogated, and beaten by Palestinian authorities. They suspected him of feeding intelligence to his Israeli boss—wrongly presumed to be a security officer.

“They almost killed me because of you,” the worker told him. “I will never come [to work] again. I just wanted to come and tell you.”

In the West Bank, Israel erected a serpentine barrier and heightened security coordination with the Palestinian Authority. Although 30 percent of the barrier has yet to be constructed, a Palestinian suicide bombing hasn’t happened in the area since 2009. Some say that stems less from the wall and more from the role of PA security forces and a realization that violence doesn’t pay. But in many minds, the barrier stands as a defense against terrorists.

In fact, barriers—reminiscent of the ancient Judean fortresses—are now widely embraced as an effective way to fortify modern Israel despite the international opprobrium they bring. In 2013, Israel completed a 145-mile fence along the Egyptian border at a reported cost of 1.6 billion shekels ($430 million).

The same year, Israel refurbished its outdated fence along the Golan Heights border with Syria with concertina wire, electronic sensors, and infrared cameras. With a long barrier already in place along the Lebanese border, that leaves only one section of Israel’s land boundaries unfenced—a section along the peaceful Jordanian border—and plans are under way to erect a barrier there as well.

Many young Israelis, such as the 14-year-old son of the former lifeguard in Gaza, can’t remember talking with a Palestinian face to face.

“I don’t hate Arabs; I hate Hamas,” said the son, who wants to go into the Israeli air force. “There are some Arab people and Israeli people who want peace. But it won’t happen, because of the terrorists.”

With the two populations cut off from each other, Israelis often don’t have a personal frame of reference against which to compare the rhetoric used in times of conflict.

“You don’t see Palestinians, so you can envision them however you want,” said Daniel Bar-Tal, a veteran political psychologist. “What people are afraid of the most is the unknown.”

A forthcoming book, *Scenes from School Life*, depicts Israeli students who stand up for Arab rights as facing tremendous peer pressure, according to *Haaretz*.

“I’m ready to kill someone with my hands, and it’s an Arab,” said one student, adding her contempt for a girl who criticized those who want revenge against Arabs. “Those people have no place in our country—both the Arabs and the leftists.”

Whatever the motives, the increasing isolation of Israelis from their Arab neighbors will make peacemaking more difficult, analysts say.

It is also having an effect on business. As much as 40 percent of the Palestinian labor force once worked in the Israeli economy. Israelis took their cars to Palestinian mechanics, shopped for cheap goods in their souks, and flocked to Gaza’s beaches. But now Israelis are banned from entering not only Gaza but Palestinian cities in the West Bank, which are under the control of the PA.

Despite the worsening atmosphere between Jews and Arabs, poignant examples of humanity still occur daily.

• A new bilingual anthology of Arab and Jewish Israeli authors, called Two, gives voice to 41 writers. “This is my homeland,” said Tamar Weiss, one of the editors. “Literature and poetry is our field, and that’s where we can do our little effort.”

• In late August, an Israeli settler couple was headed home in the West Bank when several Palestinians threw stones at their car, causing it to flip over and land in a ditch. Other Palestinians rushed to the scene, calmed the couple, and helped usher them and their toddler to a hospital. “I was afraid, but I know how to distinguish between terrorists and human beings, and these were human beings,” the mother told the Israeli newspaper *Yedioth Ahronoth*.

• Yakov Nagen, a rabbi and member of the Interfaith Encounter Association in Israel, recently was an honored guest at an Arab man’s wedding. Five years ago, during the Jewish New Year, the main fuse in the rabbi’s home tripped, leaving the family with no electricity (observant Jews refrain from turning on anything electrical during such holidays). So he found a young Arab man who agreed to flip the power back on. “Everything comes from God,” the Muslim said. During their exchange, it came out

that the young man had resigned himself to never marrying after losing a loved one. Nagen shared the story of a friend who had been widowed by a terrorist attack, yet found the strength to rebuild her life. Inspired by a letter from the rabbi, the Arab man got married four years later and invited Nagen.