

# Letter from Jerusalem

## How to Take Down Walls: Twenty-Five Years after the Fall of the Berlin Wall

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Ramallah, 9 November 2014

On 9 November, a group of Palestinian non-violent resistance activists knocked a hole in the Israeli separation wall near Jerusalem. The activists, connected to local “popular struggle committees,” issued a statement saying: “No matter how high walls are built, they will fall. Just as the Berlin Wall fell, the wall in Palestine will fall, along with the occupation.” This was a symbolic act on a symbolic day. A day that means a lot to Germans, who this year commemorated twenty-five years since the end of their post-war divide. And a day that means a lot to Europe, and ultimately the world, symbolizing the end of the Cold War.

Along with the statement, the activists published some photos and a video documenting the act. In the video, half a dozen young men use massive hammers and other tools in order to knock a small hole in the thick brick structure, through which they push a Palestinian flag. The youngsters cover their faces with *kufiyyas*, the classic garment of Palestinian resistance. The images of the Palestinian youth hitting a hole in the wall went around the world. The symbolism is more than obvious and others have played on it before. Celebrated Palestinian artist Khalid Jarrar has artistically deconstructed the absurd situations the wall creates. Jarrar filmed a tennis match over the wall, played between two Palestinians separated by the wall. In his exhibition “Whole in the Wall,” he cut a hole in the shape of historic Palestine in the wall and produced hand made sport objects from pieces cut from the wall.

Compared to the Berlin wall, the Israeli separation barrier – referred to by Palestinians as the Apartheid Wall – looks much more massive in many locations, where it reaches a height of eight meters.

Elsewhere, it takes the shape of a secured fence. On the Palestinian side, it is covered in colorful graffiti, as was the Berlin wall on the West German side. However, the Berlin wall was accompanied by a buffer zone called *Todesstreifen* (death zone), with official orders to East German border police to shoot at anyone trying to flee the German Democratic Republic (GDR).

Ironically, the Israeli separation barrier today is much easier to penetrate. This is due to the fact that, unlike the Berlin wall, its function is not only to prevent West Bank Palestinians from crossing into Israeli territory. A more important function for the separation barrier reflects Ariel Sharon's political calculation: built deep inside Palestinian territory, it effectively confiscates almost ten percent of the West Bank land. And it incorporates major Jewish settlement blocks around East Jerusalem into Jerusalem, in order to manifest the "Jewish character" of the city. Meanwhile, crossing the wall illegally is still very easy, and thousand do so regularly, contradicting the official version of a "security barrier." I myself constantly drive with fellow travellers through various checkpoints at the wall with my yellow-plated (Israeli) car without any further controls.

However, the fall of the German wall did not happen through hammers or other tools. When Germans in fact started to use their hammers on the wall to break out little pieces (which are sold today everywhere in Berlin; the abundance of touristic wall artifacts raises the question of whether many are not simply random pieces of stone), its regime had already come to an end. The happy people tapping on the wall with their small hammers were named *Mauerspechte* (wall peckers) in German, becoming symbols of the end of Berlin's and Germany's division. The underlying causes of the wall's destruction were much more significant, foremost among them Gorbachev's reformist policies during the last years of the Soviet Union and the changes in the Eastern bloc, as well as the growing protest movement in East Germany.

The Berlin Wall did not fall by the force of hammers but of many courageous people. In 1989, the East German civil rights movement openly confronted the hardline GDR political elite when they started their weekly "Monday demonstrations" in the Eastern city of Leipzig. While the East German secret police – the infamous Stasi (state security) – continued to attack individual activists with ruthless force, they were helpless when the protests reached tens of thousands of participants. The East German government was confronted with a tough choice: was it ready to follow the brutal Chinese approach, manifested famously in the killing of hundreds of students during the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989? Luckily, the East German government adopted a much more passive approach. The civil rights movement continued to gain unprecedented strength and self-confidence in the streets of East German cities, including East Berlin. The power of a morally superior non-violent struggle unfolded. Since its establishment in 1961, both the Berlin Wall (officially and quite ridiculously labeled the "anti-fascist protection rampart") and the government decision to lock in its own people, which cost the life of at least 245 victims according to official statistics, was indefensible.

Today, the Israeli separation barrier violates the rights of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. In 2004, the International Court of Justice clearly ruled on the illegal nature of the wall. But for it ultimately to fall, the right circumstances still need to be created.

Internationally, political action is needed to move toward more accountability for and action against the illegality of the occupation of Palestinian lands in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip (which is encircled by a massive wall as well). Locally, a powerful civil rights movement has yet to grow.

Many activists are already working toward this end, and the weekly Friday demonstrations in the West Bank are legendary. The holes being punched in the separation barrier remain symbolic acts of protest in this regard. The image is powerful. Yet before the system of oppression and control, of which the wall is only a part and an expression will be dismantled, a widespread movement must be created which uses all its moral superiority as a freedom struggle to bring closer the happy day when the fall of yet another wall will be celebrated.

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