



State Comptroller Report | February 2023

National-Strategic Fields of Operation

The Effectiveness of the Seam Zone Barrier – the Operational and Functional Response



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Background

In July 2001, the Ministerial Committee for National Security Affairs (the State Security Cabinet) approved the Seam Zone comprehensive plan, a component to effectively deal with terrorism through a regime preventing and thwarting infiltrators from the Seam Zone into Israel. The plan included, among other things, the establishment of a physical barrier from the Jordanian border near Tirat Zvi in the north to the Masadot Yehuda area in the south (the Seam Line). In 2002, the execution of the Seam Zone plan began, contributing to a significant reduction of terrorist activity from Judea and Samaria to Israel. When the Seam Line Fence was built, the military order of battle operating in the Judea and Samaria region (the West Bank) included several dozen battalions, some of which were engaged in ongoing security activities along the Seam Line Barrier. According to the operational doctrine set then, the Seam Line Fence would alert of any attempt to cross or cut the fence and the operational response would be based on a military force that would arrive quickly at the location and would handle the incident. However, over the years, the military order of battle in the West Bank was reduced from 2002 to 2019 until March 2022 by about 70%.

Concurrently with the order of battle reduction, a phenomenon was raised of Palestinians sabotaging and damaging the fence to create breaches for infiltrating Israel from the West Bank. Some of the damage was characterized by destroying all fence components over many kilometers. Much of the damage that was repaired was breached hours or days later. The order of battle reduction affected the IDF's ability to guard the fence, and in 2017 the IDF Central Command decided to stop repairing the recurring damage to the fence.

In the first half of 2022, terrorists who infiltrated Israel through breaches in the Seam Line fence carried out three attacks resulting in 11 casualties. Following, the IDF launched at the end of March 2022 and during the audit period, Operation "Breakwater" to tighten the Seam Line defense and prevent infiltration from the West Bank to Israel.



Key Figures

11 murdered in March – May 2022

in three terror attacks by terrorists who infiltrated Israel through breaches in the Seam Line Fence

554 km

the length of the Seam Line route. Of which, 124 km are walled, 364 km are fenced, and 66 km are unobstructed at all

48%

of the Seam Line Fence was unfit as of the end of 2021

1.4 million

entries of infiltrators into Israel identified by the Combat Intelligence Collection Corps in the Ephraim and Menashe Regional Brigades area in 2021. Less than 1% of the entries received a response from the forces

3,600 infiltrators on average per day

through breaches in the Seam Line fence as of May 2022 and after the reinforcement of forces from the end of March 2022

only 6,823

arrests of infiltrators were carried out by the Israel Police in 2021 (compared to about 1.4 million Infiltrators entering Israel in the Ephraim and Menasha Regional Brigades area)

NIS 8.3 billion

the establishment cost of the Seam Zone (the Seam Line barrier and other components) until the end of 2021

NIS 161 million


the maintenance cost of the Seam Zone in 2021

NIS 360 million

the sum allocated by the State Security Cabinet in April 2022 for the construction of 40 km of wall, instead of the existing Seam Line fence (out of the estimated cost of constructing a wall along the entire Seam Line at about NIS 2.4 billion)



Audit Actions


 From September 2021 to July 2022, the State Comptroller's Office audited the effectiveness of the operational and functional response at the Seam Zone Barrier, focusing on the Menashe and Ephraim Regional Brigades area. The audit was conducted in the IDF: at the Central Command, the Ground Forces, the Planning Directorate, and the Operations Directorate; In the Ministry of Defense: at the Defense Ministry Fence Authority, the Department of Production and Procurement (DOPP), the Department of Engineering and Construction, and the Budget Department; and at the National Security Council. Completion examinations were conducted until August 2022 at the Israel Police, the Israel Border Police (Magav), the General Security Service, and the Directorate of Defense, Research & Development.


During the audit, the State Comptroller's Office shared with the public the audit process by meeting with heads of security departments and Civilian military security coordinators from local authorities and settlements adjacent to the Seam Line Barrier.

The Knesset State Audit Committee sub-committee decided not to bring this report in its entirety before the Knesset but to publish only parts thereof, to protect state security under Section 17 of the State Comptroller's Law, 1958 [Consolidated Version].

Key Findings





 **The Seam Line Fence's Fitness** – by the end of 2021, close to half of the length of the Seam Line fence was unfit or partially fit according to the Judea and Samaria Division indicators, enabling infiltration without warning. In the Ephraim and Menasha Regional Brigades areas, where 62% of the Seam Line fence is within their territory, 61% (about 73 km) and 34% (about 34 km) were unfit or partially fit, respectively. From the Central Command and General Security Service's data, it was raised that by the end of March 2022, thousands of Palestinians infiltrated through the breaches in the Seam Line Barrier every day, both on foot and by vehicle. Central Command documents raised that the Combat Intelligence Collection Corps in the West Bank in 2020 and 2021 identified about 918,000 and about 1.4 million (respectively) entries of Infiltrators into Israel through the breaches in the Seam Line Barrier in the Ephraim and Menashe Regional Brigades areas.


 **Updating the Political Echelon of the Decrease in Repairs of Breaches in the Seam Line Barrier** – the IDF (Central Command) decision in 2017 not to repair the recurring damage to the Seam Line Barrier was not preceded by an orderly process,



including an examination of the expected effects, also regarding the order of battle reduction. This decision does not consider the insurance agreement between the Ministry of Defense and the lead contractor of the Seam Line fence maintenance, according to which the repair of most of the damage is included in the agreement with no additional payment. It was also raised that this decision was not documented in the Ministry of Defense and the IDF documents and was not submitted to the Minister of Defense for discussion and approval. The above IDF (Central Command) decision has led to a continuous deterioration in the barrier's fitness (from 92% fitness in 2018 to 52% fitness at the end of 2021, according to Judea and Samaria Division data), and led to the abandoning the seam line barrier and losing governance in the region, without applying another solution preventing infiltration into Israeli territory.


 **The Involvement of the Political Echelon in Coping with the Breaches in the Seam Line Fence** – the loosening of the defense in the Seam Zone, established at a cost of NIS 8.3 billion until 2021, by reducing the order of battle and the increase of breaches in the fence, was presented to the decision-makers at the Ministry of Defense, to the Prime Minister and the State Security Cabinet from 2017 onwards. However, the State Security Cabinet did not discuss actions to improve the effectiveness of the Seam Line Barrier until the murder of Israelis in terror attacks by terrorists who infiltrated Israel through breaches in the barrier in March and April 2022. It was also raised that after 2017 the barrier's physical condition continued to deteriorate and simultaneously the order scope of battle the IDF assigned in the Seam Zone continued to decrease, thus undermining the fence awareness and governance in the Seam Zone and increasing the security risk. Finally, this risk has been realized over the years, especially in 2022. Furthermore, during the audit, in April 2022, and following a series of terror attacks, a budget of NIS 360 million was allocated by the State Security Cabinet for the construction of a wall to replace a 40 km long fence segment in the Menashe Regional Brigade area out of the estimated cost of building a wall along the entire Seam Line at about NIS 2.4 billion. This may reduce infiltration in a specific segment; however, in the absence of a complete and comprehensive plan, there is concern that the infiltration will continue and the risk posed in respect thereof.


 **Defining the Military Forces' Mission to Prevent Infiltration in the Seam Zone** – until the terror attacks in the first half of 2022, the definition of the IDF's missions regarding the infiltration of Palestinians from the West Bank to Israel was not clear and was not coordinated between the various operational echelons (General Staff, command, division, brigade). The uneven messages and the change in the definition of the mission, from infiltration prevention to reducing it to channeling and monitoring it, occurred without any change in the Minister of Defense's instructions regarding the role of the Seam Line Barrier.


 **Intelligence Collection Activity Through Mobile and Stationary Observations and Various Technological Means** – the information gathering array, which serves as an essential component of the operational response in the Seam Zone, is deficient.



For example, the deficiencies in the coverage of Intelligence collection – where the existing observation systems do not observe a significant part of the Seam Line Barrier area, the shortage of observation staff (10%–25% of the facilities are not manned) and the limitations of the current observation means. Given the above deficiencies, the IDF forces' ability to cope with infiltrators is impaired. Equipping the IDF with specific means of Intelligence collection operations rooms in the Seam Zone by the end of 2023 (several dozens of particular means of Intelligence collection) is expected to improve the Intelligence collection capabilities in the Seam Zone. However, given the plan does not include the establishment of all the required observation sites, the upgrading of all existing sites, and the integration of a specific observation system in all the regional brigades' operation rooms responsible for the Seam Line, the Intelligence collection response will continue to be incomplete.

 **The Central Command's Operational Response to Prevent Infiltration into Israel** – in contravention of the requirements under the Thwarting and Preventing Infiltration into Israeli Territory Order, in 2019–2021, the IDF forces in the Menasha Regional Brigade did not respond to every infiltration incident detected through the observations. Over the years, the rate of their responses to such incidents continually decreased.

 **Infiltration Following Operation "Breakwater"** – in early May 2022, the Chief of Staff approved a plan to continue Operation "Breakwater" and its expansion out of the IDF budget. The plan's budgetary scope was NIS 472 million, of which NIS 415 million in 2022. About 63% (NIS 295 million) of the plan's budget is for the reinforcement of the routine security operations along the Seam Line by reserves battalions, and about 8.5% (NIS 40 million) is for repairs to the fence and adding physical components to the fence area. Despite the significant reinforcement of the military order of battle in the Seam Zone from the end of March 2022 at the height of the reinforcement, almost doubling the order of battle in the entire West Bank area, infiltration into Israeli territory was not prevented (up to about 6,000 unlawfully present persons enter Israel per day) and the implementation of the required operational response. This is given the extensive damage still being caused to the fence (about 100 breaches per day on average, although nowadays they are repaired within a day, according to the Central Command and the Defense Ministry Fence Authority) and the loss of governance along the Seam Line. Hence, as indicated by the statement of the Chief of Staff, the existing operational response has failed. It was further raised that the IDF forces reinforcing the Seam Zone area from May 2022 and securing the breaches in the fence are staying in temporary and unregulated guard posts, not adapted to the conditions in area, and for an extended stay of several months long.

 **The Israel Police's Handling of Infiltrators and Their Collaborators** – according to the Israel Police data, in 2021, the number of arrests of infiltrators entering Israel was infinitesimal at 6,823 arrests out of an estimated 1.4 million infiltrators entering Israel (according to data of the Combat Intelligence Collection Corps in the West Bank) in the Ephraim and Menashe Regional Brigades areas. This figure is highlighted, given that the



number of infiltrators entering Israel is biased downward due to the gaps in intelligence collection and as it does not include all the areas. Furthermore, by the West Bank Borders Police data, the number of detained infiltrators for questioning (3,185 in 2021) was minimal compared to the scope of the infiltrations (as mentioned, about 1.4 million Infiltrators entries in 2021). It was also raised that 5% of all the drivers assisting them questioned during the audited period were arrested.



The Effectiveness of the Maintenance and Operational Response to the Seam Line Barrier – given the Central Command's decision in 2017 not to repair the fence in the event of repeated damage, the extent of the fence repairs by the company responsible for maintaining the Seam Line fence in the Ephraim and Menashe Regional Brigades area (Company A) decreased by about 78%, and the periodic maintenance by the company decreased by about 30% on average, according to the Judea and Samaria Division data. Still, the scope of the Ministry of Defense's contractual agreement with the company remained at about NIS 10 million per year. Moreover, although the Borders and the Seam Line Administration has the complete data on Company A's activity to maintain the indicative barrier, it was not aware of the company's activity reduction in 2018–2021. It did not present it to the Department of Production and Procurement (DOPP) to update the company's agreement following the IDF (Central Command) decision. Hence, the Department of Production and Procurement continued to extend and renew the contract with Company A for a similar financial scope.



Analysis of the Contractual Format with the Fence maintenance Contractor Before the Renewal of the Agreement – for the establishment of fences and their maintenance, the Ministry of Defense has been holding public tenders since 2002, in which the three companies were declared winners. These tenders included contracts for maintaining the fence for several years. Since the end of the maintenance period stipulated in the construction tender, these engagements continue, as of the audit end until the end of 2024, by an exemption from a tender renewed every few years. The average contract scope exempts from a tender, for this matter, in recent years was about NIS 18 million per year. A long-term engagement through an exemption from tender, even though possible under the Tender Obligation Law, may create a "captive customer" on all its effects.



Measures Taken During the Audit to Improve the Seam Line Barrier Effectiveness – during the audit and following Operation "Breakwater", some measures were taken to rectify the deficiencies: (a) The order of battle in the West Bank has been reinforced by the establishment of two Israel Border Police (Magav) companies that began operating in December 2021 and March 2022; b) Beginning with the start of Operation "Breakwater", breaches in the fence are routinely fixed; (c) Cooperation from the middle of 2022 between the IDF, the General Security Service, and the Police for








reducing the infiltration; (d) Temporary forces were assigned by the IDF for reinforcing the Seam Zone area and for securing the breaches in the fence; (e) A budget of NIS 360 million was allocated by the State Security Cabinet for constructing a wall to replace a 40 km long section of fence in the Menashe Regional Brigade sector; (f) Measures were taken to strengthen the intelligence collection response in the Seam Zone.

Key Recommendations

- 💡 The National Security Council should ensure the formulation of a comprehensive multi-year plan including all the aspects required to establish and maintain an effective barrier preventing infiltrators from crossing into Israel. As coping with infiltration from the Seam Zone requires the attention of all security and enforcement bodies, it is recommended that this plan will be led by the National Security Council, coordinating an inter-ministerial team, including representatives from the defense bodies, the Ministry of National Security (formerly Ministry of Public Security), the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Finance and other relevant parties. As part of the plan, encouraging Palestinians holding employment permits to enter Israel through the crossings should be considered. This should be regulated by adapting the number of crossings, their location, and the service quality to the desired number of people passing through them. It is further recommended that the Prime Minister and the Minister of Defense present the multi-year plan before the State Security Cabinet for its approval, including allocating budgets and setting a schedule for its implementation. These will reduce the infiltrators and the security and criminal risk involved, affecting Israel's sense of security.
- 💡 Given the reduction in the order of battle assigned to routine security in the West Bank area in general and the Seam Zone area in particular, it is increasingly important that the orders be clear and coordinated along the entire chain of command, adapted to the threats posed to the West Bank area and the resources allocated for that purpose. The echelon in charge (at the General Staff, command, and division level) should approve the orders to the echelon subordinate and verify their compliance with the assigned tasks.
- 💡 Given the terror attacks that began in March 2022 and the formulation of the plan to upgrade the observations array, approved by the Chief of Staff, it is recommended that the Central Command and the Defense Ministry Fence Authority consider completing this plan, including the operational concept in intelligence collection in the Ephraim Regional Brigade. It is further recommended that the Planning Directorate and the Operations Directorate, in cooperation with Central Command, consider the implementation of the systemic concept in the Menashe Regional Brigade as well as throughout the Seam Zone, according to the plan priorities such as the level of risk and proximity to the settlements. Furthermore, the IDF should staff the intelligence collection sites with observation staff according to standards to exhaust the intelligence collection potential fully.



-  It is recommended that Central Command, in cooperation with the Planning Directorate, the Operations Directorate, and Ground Forces, formulate a solution effectively protecting the Seam Zone against the threats and present to the General Staff additional resources required for the protection at the required level and according to the orders. It is further recommended that the IDF examine and define the operational and infrastructural conditions needed for the security posts of the IDF forces reinforcing the Seam Zone area, securing the breaches in the fence, and accordingly respond.
-  Given the existing threats and as the reinforcement of forces in the Seam Zone is temporary, it is recommended that the IDF, as part of an inter-ministerial team, include representatives from the defense bodies, the Ministry of National Security (formerly Ministry of Public Security), the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Finance and other relevant parties, formulate a response and a long-term operational concept providing protection for the Seam Zone area and for Israel's home front, approved by the Prime Minister and the Minister of Defense. Furthermore, it is essential to continue combining the IDF, the Israel Police, and the General Security Service forces in cooperation with the Ministry of Justice for effective systemic enforcement actions, especially against the those assisting the infiltrators, increasing deterrence and improving governance in the Seam Zone.
-  It is recommended that the Attorney General examine the policy of enforcement and prosecution of the infiltrators at the Seam Line and guide the enforcement bodies accordingly to increase deterrence that would assist coping with the infiltration.
-  It is recommended that the Israel Police and the IDF consider locating the infiltrators holding employment permits who prefer to pass through breaches rather than through the regulated crossings, and in the process, examine, in coordination with the Attorney General, the enforcement policy to deter the employers and drivers of the infiltrators.
-  It is recommended that the Ministry of Defense Director General consider engagement alternatives with a fence maintenance provider enabling holding a public tender towards the end of the current agreement period.

Breaches in the Seam Line Barrier



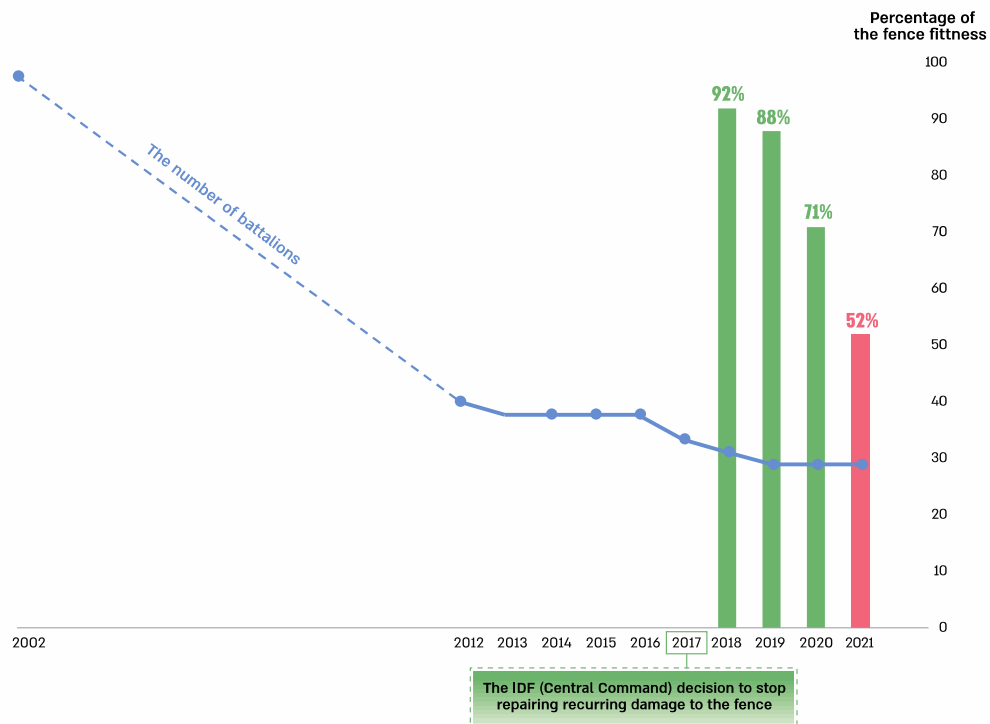
Photographed by the audit team in March 2021 (before the start of the audit).



Photographed by the audit team near a settlement in the center of the country in February 2022.



Changes in the Central Command Order of Battle and the Fence Fitness in the West Bank Areas, 2002–2021



Source: Judea and Samaria Division, processed by the State Comptroller's Office.



Summary

The Execution of the Seam Zone plan, in which considerable resources invested, is essential to cope with the danger of terrorist infiltration into the State of Israel. Maintaining the effectiveness of the Seam Line Barrier requires continuous operational activity along with effective maintenance activity. Deficiencies were raised regarding the political echelon and the decision-making echelon of the defense bodies dealing with the ineffectiveness of the Seam Line Barrier and the defense bodies' actions exhausting the resources for the maintenance of the fence and the protection of the Seam Zone. Following a series of terror attacks in the first half of 2022 in which 11 people were murdered, the IDF changed its approach, increased the scope of the forces operating in the Seam Zone, and invested budgets in restoring the fence and replacing part thereof with a wall (at a total cost of approximately NIS 400 million), along with improving the cooperation between all the relevant defense bodies. These actions, which incorporated a change in the approach with a concentration of resources and effort from all defense bodies, reduced the number of infiltrators, but did not eradicate the infiltration.

To ensure the barrier effectiveness is maintained and that the recent investments and measures will contribute to reducing the infiltration as a whole, and following the statement made by the Prime Minister and the Minister of Defense in April 2022 that the construction of the barrier along the entire length of the Seam Line is part of the defense concept and for this purpose a multi-year plan is required; the National Security Council should formulate a comprehensive multi-year plan covering all the aspects needed to establish and maintain an effective barrier deterring infiltrators from crossing into Israel. As coping with the infiltration from the Seam Zone requires the attention of all defense and enforcement bodies, it is recommended that this plan be led by an inter-ministerial team, including representatives from the defense bodies, the Ministry of National Security (formerly Ministry of Public Security), the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Finance and other relevant parties. Within the plan, Palestinians holding employment permits should be encouraged to enter Israel through the regulated crossings by adjusting the number of crossings, their location, and the quality of service provided to the desired number of people passing through them. It is further recommended that the Prime Minister and the Minister of Defense present the multi-year plan to the State Security Cabinet for its approval while allocating budgets and setting a schedule for its implementation. These will reduce the number of infiltrators and the security and criminal risk involved, affecting Israel's citizens' sense of security.

