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## Understanding Checkpoints

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One of the most onerous aspects of the situation in the West Bank is the system of checkpoints which block Palestinians from getting to work, school, hospital or even to visit friends a few miles (sometimes a few blocks) away without being stopped and delayed, often for hours. This is well-known here in the United States, especially because the Bush administration has made clear that it wants many of the checkpoints removed. Less understood is that very few checkpoints separate Israel from the Palestinian areas. The overwhelming majority of them are internal barriers which serve not to protect Israel from terrorists but simply to ease life for settlers and which, in the process, make Palestinian lives miserable. In fact, no one suggests taking down any checkpoint or border crossing that separates Israel from the West Bank or Gaza. The entire controversy is over the internal checkpoints and their harmful effects on Palestinians trying to go about their lives.

Terrible as the situation is, some people find humor in it, so ridiculous is the rationale for aspects of the checkpoint system.

Like this for instance: A "Hummous Hut" employee is stopped by a soldier who misunderstands "hummous" for " Hamas." A woman driving with her dog is stopped at a checkpoint and explains that, while she does not have papers to enter Jerusalem, her dog does. These light-hearted vignettes—from the 2005 Oscar-winning short film *A West Bank Story* and Suad Amiry's book *Sharon and My Mother-in-Law*, respectively—use humor to explain the physical barriers scattered throughout the West Bank in simple, human terms.

For Israelis, the reason for instituting roadblocks and checkpoints since the beginning of the second intifada in which over a thousand Israelis were killed is also simple and human—to stop suicide bombers from entering Israel. "The method of roadblocks has proven itself," Israel's Defense Minister Ehud Barak told a group of soldiers on January 29th. "There is no way to effectively fight terrorism without actual daily control of the area," he said.

However, according to a group of twelve retired Israeli generals, some of whom were involved in setting up West Bank barriers, the system of over 560 roadblocks and checkpoints, which increased by 50 percent in two and a half years, needlessly harms Palestinians and ineffectively protects Israelis. (According to the Israeli human rights group, B'tselem, as of November 2007 there were 99 permanent checkpoints, 36 of which were on Israel's border and 63 within the West Bank. The remaining 486 barriers [as of November 2007] are roadblocks, such as dirt mounds, concrete blocks, fences, trenches, and gates.)

At a Van Leer Institute conference on February 13th, these experts, informally called the "checkpoint team," presented a position paper, which they also sent Barak. In it they assert that, while some barriers stop terror, others damage the Palestinian economy, breed resentment, and, in turn, create more terror. According to Shlomo Brom, one of the group's members and former chief of the army's planning committee, quoted in Laurie Copans' February 13th *Associated Press* article, "The feeling of humiliation and the hate the roadblocks create increase the tendency of Palestinians to join militant groups. . . ."

These barriers, furthermore, do not always stop attacks. They did not stop the February 4 suicide bombing in Dimona that

killed one and injured eleven, Brom went on to note.

But the major problem that the defense officials cite is not with the checkpoints on Israel's borders (to stop attacks like the one in Dimona, they support finishing the fence along Israel's border). The cause of the most needless hardship, they say, is the hundreds of barriers that form a complicated network of checkpoints and roadblocks, which divide the West Bank into separate, isolated sections.

>From the outside, the technical terms that are often used interchangeably to explain West Bank barriers seem confusing. According to the group, however, the differences are important and should be demystified.

The West Bank barriers fit into two major categories: checkpoints and roadblocks. Checkpoints can be permanent (toll booth like) structures manned by Israeli soldiers or temporary checkpoints (flying checkpoints) that are placed according to intelligence and are meant to be taken down. The majority of West Bank barriers are roadblocks that come in many forms, such as concrete blocks or earth mounds or trenches that stop cars from using a particular road.

It is this mixed system of barriers that can make a thirty-minute trip from the village of Azun to Nablus take two hours. In a March 6 *Washington Post* article, Griff Witte described such a trip taken by emergency-room doctor Karim Edwan. To get from his village of Azun to work in Nablus, Witte writes, "Dr. Edwan must take at least two cabs, skirt a barbed-wire fence, climb a dirt mound, talk his way through multiple Israeli checkpoints and remove his shoes for a full-body security check."

The checkpoint team calls for a reevaluation of the barriers that cause hardship, like that caused Dr. Edwan, without serving a specific security purpose. One of its members, retired Brigadier-General Ilan Paz, who served in the West Bank during the Intifada, gave the example of a checkpoint that he established that no longer serves its intended purpose. "I founded the Qalandia checkpoint years ago as a flying security checkpoint for a specific reason," he told *IRIN*, a UN news source, on February 14 "to prevent a specific attack we had intelligence on . . . that checkpoint hasn't been removed years later."

According to Paz, the Qalandia checkpoint demonstrates that when there is specific intelligence, checkpoints can be very effective in stopping attacks. However, as things change on the ground, they can become useless and even detrimental. In some instances, the defense experts noted, barriers were put in place, not to stop terror attacks but to separate roads used by Israelis and Palestinians. And, while no longer serving that purpose, they remain in place.

According to Ron Schatzberg, another member of the group, "Near Jenin there is an Israeli settlement called Sheve Shomron. Since the start of the Intifada Palestinians have not been allowed to travel on the area's main road, due to security concerns. A three-meter-high wall has since been erected, a new road has been built for settlers and an army division has based itself there." "However," he was cited in *IRIN*, "Palestinians still can't use the main roads."

The team believes that by ending the system of separate roads for Israelis and Palestinians in the West Bank not only could earth mounds that stop car traffic be removed, but Israeli security could be enhanced because "militants would find it harder to mount attacks without harming Palestinians," *IRIN* reported.

Furthermore, instead of maintaining ineffective checkpoints inside the West Bank, the team proposes finishing constructing the barrier around it, and removing some permanent checkpoints, particularly those that have a major impact on Palestinians without providing Israelis security. These checkpoints could be replaced, as needed, with temporary flying checkpoints that rely on intelligence that is gathered and used in cooperation with Palestinian security services, as was done before 2000.

These changes, they propose, would ease Palestinian movement and enhance Israeli security in several ways, not the least of which, through strengthening the economy in the West Bank and aiding in the confidence building demanded by the current U.S. led peace process.

This process, and the U.S. administration officials that are pushing for it, have been frustrated by inaction on checkpoints. In a March 9 David Ignatius *Washington Post* op-ed, a U.S. official described this frustration, "What they [the Israeli military] said they would look at hasn't happened. The IDF has been doing the same stuff the same way [on checkpoints] for seven years, and they haven't bothered to change."

The checkpoint team has proposals for change, but without concerted efforts, it could become just another proposal. Making it something more, in clearly difficult times, will take risk, work, and coordination by both Palestinians and Israelis. Or, as Elvis Presley once put it, “a little less conversation, a little more action please.”

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