

The Palestinians

It's the little things that make an occupation

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Those seemingly minor inconveniences that make life hellish



DURING 2006, according to B'tselem, an Israeli human-rights group, Israeli forces killed 660 Palestinians, almost half of them innocent bystanders, among them 141 children. In the same period, Palestinians killed 17 Israeli civilians and six soldiers. It is such figures, as well as events like shellings, house demolitions, arrest

raids and land expropriations, that make the headlines in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. What rarely get into the media but make up the staple of Palestinian daily conversation are the countless little restrictions that slow down most people's lives, strangle the economy and provide constant fuel for extremists.

Arbitrariness is one of the most crippling features of these rules. No one can predict how a trip will go. Many of the main West Bank roads, for the sake of the security of Israeli settlers in the West Bank, are off-limits to Palestinian vehicles—only one road connecting the north and south West Bank, for instance, is open to them—and these restrictions change frequently. So do the rules on who can pass the checkpoints that in effect divide the West Bank into a number of semi-connected regions (see map).

A new order due to come into force this week would have banned most West Bankers from riding in cars with Israeli licence plates, and thus from getting lifts from friends and relatives among the 1.6m Palestinians who live as citizens in Israel, as well as from aid workers, journalists and other foreigners. The army decided to suspend the order after protests from human-rights groups that it would give soldiers enormous arbitrary powers—but it has not revoked it.

Large parts of the population of the northern West Bank, and of individual cities like Nablus and Jericho, simply cannot leave their home areas without special permits, which are not always forthcoming. If they can travel, how long they spend waiting at checkpoints, from minutes to hours, depends on the time of day and the humour of the soldiers. Several checkpoints may punctuate a journey between cities that would otherwise be less than an hour's drive apart. These checkpoints move and shift every day, and army jeeps add to the unpredictability and annoyance by stopping and creating ad hoc mobile checkpoints at various spots.

According to the UN's Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the number of such obstacles had increased to 534 by mid-December from 376 in August 2005, when OCHA and the Israeli army completed a joint count. When Ehud Olmert, the Israeli prime minister, agreed last month to ease restrictions at a few of these checkpoints as a concession to Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, human-rights people reported that not only did many of the checkpoints go on working as before; near the ones that had eased up, mobile ones were now operating instead, causing worse disruption and pain.

It is sometimes hard to fathom the logic of the checkpoint regime. One route from Ramallah, the Palestinian administrative capital, to Jerusalem, involves a careful inspection of documents, while on another the soldiers—if they are at their posts—just glance at cars' occupants to see if they look Arab. Israeli law strictly forbids Israeli citizens from visiting the main Palestinian cities, but they can drive straight into Ramallah and Hebron without being challenged, while other cities, such as Jericho and Nablus, remain impermeable. In many places the barrier that Israel is building through the West Bank for security purposes (though in Palestinian eyes to grab more land) is monitored with all the care of an international border, while around Jerusalem the army turns a blind eye to hundreds of people who slip through cracks in the wall as part of their daily commute.

Because of the internal travel restrictions, people who want to move from one Palestinian city to another for work or study must register a change of address to make sure they can stay there. But they cannot. Israel's population registry, which issues Palestinian identity cards as well as Israeli ones, has issued almost no new Palestinian cards since the start of the second *intifada* in 2000. And that means no address changes either. This also makes it virtually impossible for Palestinians from abroad to get residency in the occupied territories, which are supposed to be their future state, never mind in Israel.

No-through-roads galore

On top of that, in the past year several thousand Palestinians who had applied for residency in the West Bank and were living there on renewable six-month visitor permits have become illegal residents too, liable to be stopped and deported at any checkpoint, not because of anything they have done but because Israel has stopped renewing permits since Hamas, the Islamist movement, took control of the Palestinian Authority (PA) a year ago. (Israel says it is because the PA isn't handing over the requests.)

Like Israelis, Palestinians who commit a traffic offence on the West Bank's highways have to pay the fine at an Israeli post office or a police station. But in the West Bank the only post offices and police stations are on Israeli settlements that most West Bank Palestinians cannot visit without a rare permit. If they do not pay, however, they lose their driving licences the next time the police stop them. They also get a criminal record

—which then makes an Israeli entry permit quite impossible.

Some of the regulations stray into the realm of the absurd. A year ago a military order, for no obvious reason, expanded the list of protected wild plants in the West Bank to include *za'atar* (hyssop), an abundant herb and Palestinian staple. For a while, soldiers at checkpoints confiscated bunches of it from bewildered Palestinians who had merely wanted something to liven up their salads. Lately there have been no reports of *za'atar* confiscation, but, says Michael Sfard, the legal adviser for Yesh Din, another Israeli human-rights body, the order is still in force. As he tells the story, he cannot help laughing. There is not much else to do.

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