

Another small indignity at an Israeli checkpoint: Apartheid looks like this

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The scene: a military checkpoint deep in Palestinian territory in the West Bank. A tall, thin elderly man, walking stick in hand, makes a detour past the line of Palestinians, many of them young men, waiting obediently behind concrete barriers for permission from an Israeli soldier to leave one Palestinian area, the city of Nablus, to enter another Palestinian area, the neighbouring village of Huwara. The long queue is moving slowly, the soldier taking his time to check each person's papers.

The old man heads off purposefully down a parallel but empty lane reserved for vehicle inspections. A young soldier controlling the human traffic spots him and orders him back in line. The old man stops, fixes the soldier with a stare and refuses. The soldier looks startled, and uncomfortable at the unexpected show of defiance. He tells the old man more gently to go back to the queue. The old man stands his ground. After a few tense moments, the soldier relents and the old man passes.

Is the confrontation revealing of the soldier's humanity? That is not the way it looks — or feels — to the young Palestinians penned in behind the concrete barriers. They can only watch the scene in silence. None would dare to address the soldier in the manner the old man did — or take his side had the Israeli been of a different disposition. An old man is unlikely to be detained or beaten at a checkpoint. Who, after all, would believe he attacked or threatened a soldier, or resisted arrest, or was carrying a weapon? But the young men know their own injuries or arrests would barely merit a line in Israel's newspapers, let alone an investigation.

And so, the checkpoints have made potential warriors of Palestine's grandfathers at the price of emasculating their sons and grandsons.

I observed this small indignity — such humiliations are now a staple of life for any Palestinian who needs to move around the West Bank — during a shift with Machsom Watch. The grass-roots organisation founded by Israeli women in 2001 monitors the behaviour of soldiers at a few dozen of the more accessible checkpoints ("machsom" in Hebrew).

The checkpoints came to dominate Palestinian life in the West Bank (and, before the disengagement, in Gaza too) long before the outbreak of the second intifada in late 2000, and even before the first Palestinian suicide bombings. They were Israel's response to the Oslo accords, which created a Palestinian Authority to govern limited areas of the occupied territories. Israel began restricting Palestinians allowed to work in Israel to those issued with exit permits; a system enforced through a growing network of military roadblocks. Soon the

checkpoints were also restricting movement inside the occupied territories, ostensibly to protect the Jewish settlements built in occupied territory.

By late last year, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 528 checkpoints and roadblocks were recorded in the West Bank, choking its roads every few miles. Israel's daily Haaretz newspaper puts the figure even higher: in January there were 75 permanently manned checkpoints, some 150 mobile checkpoints, and more than 400 places where roads have been blocked by obstacles. All these restrictions on movement for a place that is, according to the CIA's World Factbook, no larger than the small US state of Colorado.

As a result, moving goods and people from one place to the next in the West Bank has become a nightmare of logistics and costly delays. At the checkpoints, food spoils, patients die, and children are prevented from reaching their schools. The World Bank blames the checkpoints and roadblocks for strangling the Palestinian economy.

Embarrassed by recent publicity about the burgeoning number of checkpoints, the Israeli prime minister, Ehud Olmert, promised the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, in December that there would be an easing of travel restrictions in the West Bank — to little effect, according to reports in the Israeli media. Although the army announced last month that 44 earth barriers had been removed in fulfilment of Olmert's pledge, it later emerged that none of the roadblocks had actually been there in the first place.

Contrary to the impression of most observers, the great majority of the checkpoints are not even near the Green Line, Israel's internationally recognised border until it occupied the West Bank and Gaza in 1967. Some are so deep inside Palestinian territory that the army refuses to allow Machsom Watch to visit them. There, the women say, no one knows what abuses are being perpetrated unseen on Palestinians.

But at Huwara checkpoint, where the old man refused to submit, the soldiers know that most of the time they are being watched by fellow Israelis and that their behaviour is being recorded in monthly logs. Machsom Watch has a history of publishing embarrassing photographs and videos of the soldiers' actions. It showed, for example, a videotape in 2004 of a young Palestinian man being forced to play his violin at Beit Iba checkpoint, a story that gained worldwide attention because it echoed the indignities suffered by Jews at the hands of the Nazis.

Machsom Watch has about 500 members, reportedly including Olmert's leftwing daughter, Dana. But only about 200 actively take part in checkpoint duties, an experience that has left many outspoken in denouncing the occupation. The organisation is widely seen by the Israeli public as extremist, with pro-Israel groups accusing the women of "demonising" Israel.

It is the kind of criticism painfully familiar to Nomi Lalo, from Kfar Sava. A veteran of Machsom Watch, she is the mother of three children, two of whom have already served in the army while the youngest, aged 17, is due to join up later this year. "He has been more exposed to my experiences in Machsom Watch and has some sympathy with my point of view," she says. "But my oldest son has been very hostile about my activities. It has caused a lot of tension in the family."

Most of the women do shifts at a single checkpoint, but I join Nomi on "mobile" duty in the

central region, moving between the dozens of checkpoints west of Nablus.

She wants to start by showing me the separate road system in the West Bank, with unrestricted and high-quality roads set aside for Jewish settlers living illegally in occupied territory while Palestinians are forced to make difficult and lengthy journeys over hills and through valleys on what are often little more than dirt tracks.

Machsom Watch calls this “apartheid”, a judgment shared by the liberal daily Haaretz newspaper, which recently wrote an editorial that Israeli parents ought to “be very worried about their country sending their sons and daughters on an apartheid mission: to restrict Palestinian mobility within the occupied territory ... in order to enable Jews to move freely.”

We leave the small Palestinian town of Azzoun, close by the city of Qalqilya, and head directly north towards another city, Tulkarm. A trip that should take little more than a quarter of an hour is now all but impossible for most Palestinians.

“This road is virtually empty, even though it is the main route between two of the West Bank’s largest cities,” Nomi points out. “That is because most Palestinians cannot get the permits they need to use these roads. Without a permit they can’t get through the checkpoints, so either they stay in their villages or they have to seek circuitous and dangerous routes off the main roads.”

We soon reach one of the checkpoints Nomi is talking about. At Aras, two soldiers sit in a small concrete bunker in the centre of the main junction between Tulkarm and Nablus. The bored soldiers are killing time waiting for the next car and the driver whose papers they will need to inspect.

A young Palestinian man, in woollen cap to protect him from the cold, stands by a telegraph post close by the junction. Bilal, aged 26, has been “detained” at the same spot for three hours by the soldiers. Nervously he tells us that he is trying to reach his ill father in hospital in Tulkarm. Nomi looks unconvinced and, after a talk with the soldiers and calls on her mobile phone to their commanders, she has a clearer picture.

“He has been working illegally in Israel and they have caught him trying to get back to his home in the West Bank. The soldiers are holding him here to punish him. They could imprison him but, given the dire state of the Palestinian economy, the Israeli prisons would soon be overflowing with jobseekers. So holding him here all day is a way of making him suffer. It’s illegal but, unless someone from Machsom Watch turns up, who will ever know?”

Is it not good that the military commanders are willing to talk to her? “They know we can present their activities in the West Bank in a very harsh light and so they cooperate. They don’t want bad publicity. I never forget that when I am speaking to them. When they are being helpful, I remind myself their primary motive is to protect the occupation’s image.”

Nomi sees proof in cases like Bilal’s that the checkpoints and Israel’s steel and concrete barrier in the West Bank — or fence, as she calls it — are not working in the way Israel claims. “First, the fence is built on Palestinian land, not on the Green Line, and it cuts Palestinians off from their farmland and their chances of employment. It forces them to try to get into Israel to work. It is self-defeating.

“And second, thousands of Palestinians like Bilal reach Israel from the West Bank each day

in search of work. Any one of them could be a suicide bomber. The fence simply isn't effective in terms of stopping them. If Palestinians who are determined enough to work in Israel can avoid the checkpoints, those who want to attack Israel can certainly avoid them. No one straps a bomb on and marches up to a checkpoint. It is ordinary Palestinians who suffer instead."

The other day, says Nomi, she found a professor of English from Bir Zeit University held at this checkpoint, just like Bilal. He had tried to sneak out of Tulkarm during a curfew to teach a class at the university near the city of Ramallah, some 40km south of here. Nomi's intervention eventually got him released. "He was sent back to Tulkarm. He thanked me profusely, but really what did we do for him or his students? We certainly didn't get him to the university."

After Nomi's round of calls, Bilal is called over by one of the soldiers. Wagging his finger reprovingly, the soldier lectures Bilal for several minutes before sending him on his way with a dismissive wave of the hand. Another small indignity.

As we leave, Nomi receives a call from a Machsom Watch group at Jitt checkpoint, a few miles away. The team of women say that, when they turned up to begin their shift, the soldiers punished the Palestinians by shutting the checkpoint. The women are panicking because a tailback of cars — mainly taxis and trucks driven by Palestinians with special permits — is building. After some discussion with Nomi, it is decided that the women should leave.

We head uphill to another checkpoint, some 500 metres from Aras, guarding the entrance to Jabara, a village whose educated population include many teachers and school inspectors. Today, however, the villagers are among several thousand Palestinians living in a legal twilight zone, trapped on the Israeli side of the wall. Cut off from the rest of the West Bank, the villagers are not allowed to receive guests and need special permits to reach the schools where they work. (An additional quarter of a million Palestinians are sealed off from both Israel and the West Bank in their own ghettos.)

"Children who have married out of Jabara are not even allowed to visit their parents here," says Nomi. "Family life has been torn apart, with people unable to attend funerals and weddings. I cannot imagine what it is like for them. The Supreme Court has demanded the fence be moved but the state says it does not have the money for the time being to make the changes."

Jabara's children have a checkpoint named after them which they have to pass through each day to reach their schools nearby in the West Bank.

At the far end of Jabara we have to pass through a locked gate to leave the village. There we are greeted by yet another checkpoint, this one closer to the Green Line on a road the settlers use to reach Israel. It is one of a growing number that look suspiciously like border crossings, even though they are not on the Green Line, with special booths and lanes for the soldiers to inspect vehicles.

The soldiers see our yellow number plate, distinguishing us from the green plates of the Palestinians, and wave us through. Nomi is using a settlers' map she bought from a petrol station inside Israel to navigate our way to the next checkpoint, Anabta, close by an isolated settlement called Enav.

Although this was once a busy main road, the checkpoint is empty and the soldiers mill around with nothing to do. An old Palestinian man wearing the black and white keffiyah (head scarf) popularised by Yasser Arafat approaches them selling socks. There are no detained Palestinians, so we move on.

Nomi is as sceptical of claims she hears in the Israeli media about the checkpoints foiling suicide attacks as she is about the army's claims that they have been removing the roadblocks. "I spend all day monitoring a checkpoint and come home in the evening, turn on the TV and hear that four suicide bombers were caught at the checkpoint where I have been working. It happens just too often. I stopped believing the army a long time ago."

We arrive at another settlement, comprising a couple of dozen Jewish families, called Shavei Shomron. It is located next to Road 60, once the main route between Nablus and the most northerly Palestinian city, Jenin. Today the road is empty as it leads nowhere; it has been blocked by the army, supposedly to protect Shomron.

"Palestinians have to drive for hours across country to reach Jenin just because a handful of settlers want to live here by the main road," observes Nomi.

A short distance away, also on Road 60, is one of the larger and busier checkpoints: Beit Iba, the site where the Palestinian was forced to play his violin. A few kilometres west of Nablus, the checkpoint has been built in the most unlikely of places, a working quarry that has covered the area in a fine white dust. "I look at this place and think the army at least has a sense of humour," Nomi says.

Yellow Palestinian taxis are waiting at one end of the quarry to pick up Palestinians allowed to leave Nablus on foot through the checkpoint. At the vehicle inspection point, a donkey and cart stacked so high with boxes of medicines that they look permanently on the verge of tipping over is being checked alongside ambulances and trucks.

Close by is the familiar corridor of metal gates, turnstiles and concrete barriers through which Palestinians must pass one at a time to be inspected. On a battered table, a young man is emptying the contents of his small suitcase, presumably after a stay in Nablus. He is made to hold up his packed underwear in front of the soldiers and the Palestinian onlookers. Another small indignity.

Here at least the Palestinians wait under a metal awning that protects from the sun and rain. "The roof and the table are our doing," says Nomi. "Before the Palestinians had to empty their bags on to the ground."

Machsom Watch is also responsible for a small Portakabin office nearby, up a narrow flight of concrete steps, with the ostentatious sign "Humanitarian Post" by the door. "After we complained about women with babies being made to wait for hours in line, the army put up this cabin with baby changing facilities, diapers and formula milk. Then they invited the media to come and film it."

The experiment was short-lived apparently. After two weeks the army claimed the Palestinians were not using the post and removed the facilities. I go up and take a look. It's entirely bare: just four walls and a very dusty basin.

How effective does she feel Machsom Watch is? Does it really help the Palestinians or merely add a veneer of legitimacy to the checkpoints by suggesting, like the humanitarian

post, that Israel cares about its occupied subjects? It is, Nomi admits, a question that troubles her a great deal.

“It’s a dilemma. The Palestinians here used to have to queue under the sun without shelter or water. Now that we have got them a roof, maybe we have made the occupation look a little more humane, a little more acceptable. There are some women who argue we should only watch, and not interfere, even if we see Palestinians being abused or beaten.”

Which happens, as Machsom Watch’s monthly reports document in detail. Even the Israeli media is starting to report uncomfortably about the soldier’s behaviour, from assaults to soldiers urinating in front of religious women.

At Beit Iba in October, says Nomi, a Palestinian youngster was badly beaten by Israeli soldiers after he panicked in the queue and shinned up a pole shouting that he couldn’t breathe. Haaretz later reported that the soldiers beat him with their rifle butts and smashed his glasses. He was then thrown in a detention cell at the checkpoint.

And in November, Haitem Yassin, aged 25, made the mistake of arguing with a soldier at a small checkpoint near Beit Iba called Asira al-Shamalia. He was upset when the soldiers forced the religious women he was sharing a taxi with to pat their bodies as a security measure. According to Amira Hass, a veteran Israeli reporter, Yassin was then shoved by one of the soldiers and pushed back. In the ensuing scuffle, Yassin was shot in the stomach. He was then handcuffed and beaten with rifle butts while other soldiers blocked an ambulance from coming to his aid. Yassin remained unconscious for several days.

We leave Beit Iba and within a few minutes we are at another roadblock, at Jitt. This is where the soldiers shut the checkpoint to traffic when the Machsom Watch team showed up earlier. Nomi wants to talk to them. We park some distance away, behind the queue of Palestinian cars, and she walks towards them.

There is a brief discussion and she is back. Meanwhile, one of the soldiers takes out a megaphone and calls to the taxi driver at the front of the queue. He is told to leave his car at the wait sign and approach the checkpoint 100 metres away on foot. “They are not happy. Now they are punishing the drivers because I have turned up. It’s exactly the same response as this morning.” Nomi decides Machsom Watch should retreat again. We leave as the queue of cars starts to build up.

The notorious Huwara checkpoint, guarding the main road to Nablus from the south, is our next destination. Early in the intifada, there were regular stories of soldiers abusing Palestinians here. Today, Machsom Watch has an almost permanent presence here, as do army officers concerned about bad publicity.

It is a surreal scene. We are deep in the West Bank, with Palestinians everywhere, but two young Jews — sporting a hippy look fashionable among the more extreme religious settlers — are lounging by the side of the road waiting for a lift to take them to one of the more militant settlements that encircle Nablus. A soldier, there to protect them, stands chatting.

“There used to be a taxi rank here waiting for Palestinians as they came through the checkpoint,” says Nomi, “but it has been moved much further away so the settlers have a safer pickup point. The convenience of the settlers means that each day thousands of Palestinians, including pregnant women and the disabled, must walk more than an extra

hundred yards to reach the taxis.”

As I am photographing the checkpoint, a soldier wearing red-brown boots — the sign of a paratrooper, according to Nomi — confronts me, warning that he will confiscate my camera. Nomi knows her, and my, rights and asks him by what authority he is making such a threat. They argue in Hebrew for a few minutes before he apologises, saying he mistook me for a Palestinian. “Are only Palestinians not allowed to photograph the checkpoints?” Nomi scolds him, adding as an afterthought: “Didn’t you hear that modern mobile phones have cameras? How can you stop a checkpoint being photographed?”

The pleasant face of Huwara is Micha, an officer from the District Coordination Office who oversees the soldiers. When he shows up in his car, Nomi engages him in conversation. Micha tells us that yesterday a teenager was stopped at the checkpoint carrying a knife and bomb-making equipment. Nomi scoffs, much to Micha’s annoyance.

“Why is it always teenagers being stopped at the checkpoints?” she asks him. “You know as well as I do that the Shin Bet [Israel’s domestic security service] puts these youngsters up to it to justify the checkpoints’ existence. Why would anyone leave Nablus with a knife and bring it to Huwara checkpoint? For God’s sake, you can buy swords on the other side of the checkpoint, in Huwara village.”

We leave Huwara and go deeper into the West Bank, along a “sterile road” — army parlance for one the Palestinians cannot use — that today services settlers reaching Elon Moreh and Itimar. Once Palestinians travelled the road to the village of Beit Furik but not anymore. “Israel does not put up signs telling you that two road systems exist here. Instead it is the responsibility of Palestinians to know that they cannot drive on this road. Any that make a mistake are arrested.”

South-east of Nablus we pass the village of Beit Furik itself, the entrance to which has a large metal gate that can be lock by the army at will. A short distance on and we reach Beit Furik checkpoint and beyond it, tantalisingly in view, the grey cinderblock homes of the city of Nablus.

Again, when I try to take a photo, a soldier storms towards me barely concealing his anger. Nomi remonstrates with him, but he is in a foul mood. Away from him, she confides: “They know that these checkpoints violate international law and that they are complicit in war crimes. Many of the soldiers are scared of being photographed.”

Faced with the hostile soldier, we soon abandon Beit Furik and head back to Huwara. Less than a minute on from Huwara (Nomi makes me check my watch), we have hit another checkpoint: Yitzhar. A snarl-up of taxis, trucks and a few private cars is blocking the Palestinian inspection lane. We overtake the queue in a separate lane reserved for cars with yellow plates (settlers) and reach the other side of the checkpoint.

There we find a taxi driver waiting by the side of the road next to his yellow cab. Faek has been there for 90 minutes after an Israeli policeman confiscated both his ID and his driving licence, and then disappeared with them. Did Faek get the name of the policeman? No, he replies. “Of course not,” admits Nomi. “What Palestinian would risk asking an Israeli official for his name?”

Nomi makes some more calls and is told that Faek can come to the police station in the

nearby settlement of Ariel to collect his papers. But, in truth, Faek is trapped. He cannot get through the checkpoints separating him from Ariel without his ID card. And even if he could find a tortuous route around the checkpoints, he could still be arrested for not having a licence and issued a fine of a few hundred shekels, a small sum for Israelis but one he would struggle to pay. So quietly he carries on waiting in the hope that the policeman will return.

Nomi is not hopeful. "It is illegal to take his papers without giving him a receipt but this kind of thing happens all the time. What can the Palestinians do? They dare not argue. It's the Wild West out here."

Some time later, as the sun lowers in the sky and a chill wind picks up, Faek is still waiting. Nomi's shift is coming to an end and we must head back to Israel. She promises to continue putting pressure by phone on the police to return his documents. Nearly two hours later, as I arrive home, Faek unexpectedly calls, saying he has finally got his papers back. But he is still not happy: he has been issued with a fine of 500 shekels (\$115) by the police. Nomi's phone is busy, he says. Can I help get the fine reduced?

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