

Negotiating checkpoints in Palestine

by Sheerin Al Araj

In Palestine I can never drive for more than half an hour without being stopped at checkpoints. Soldiers irritate me with the same questions, the same procedures, time and time again. No value is put on the time of a Palestinian.

Landing at Heathrow was for me like landing at any other airport in the world – lots of questions and answers, for my head scarf makes me suspect wherever I go. It is always me who is ‘randomly’ chosen to be questioned. On the day of my arrival my family called me. I told them of my amazement. I had driven for four hours without once being stopped or asked any questions!

I used to be co-director of a project where youth from the Middle East, including Palestine and Israel, were brought together to talk about what they had in common and their differences.

There are two semi-independent road networks in the West Bank: the elaborate, well-paved, well-signed, well-marked, well-lit one reserved for Israelis and the broken, potholed, blockaded one we have to use. Each morning I would leave home 90 minutes earlier than I would have had to if there had been no obstacles between my home and my office eight miles away. It was an endless process of humiliation. Every day a new rule, regulation or military order. Even an extensive knowledge of all the tricks one needs to deal with hostile soldiers, who believe they have power to do whatever they want, did not help. I knew that I should try to relax, for it would not help to play their game and get wound up. Giving the ‘wrong’ answer could cause a huge problem, not only for me but also for all the people waiting at the checkpoint behind me and those who would come along later in the day.

I saw many sent back because they did not have the ‘correct’ papers or had presented themselves at the wrong checkpoint. Frequently people were turned back simply because a soldier could not read their documents. Many were cuffed or beaten for arguing with the soldiers or for trying to understand, or explain, something. Men with long beards were cursed as soldiers tugged



Esti Tshbi/Machsomwatch

at their beards. Some were asked to take off clothing and submit to the humiliation of being sniffed by a dog. I saw many young men sent to the *jora* (pit), a West Bank purgatory, a holding pen where Palestinians can languish for hours until cleared by Israel’s internal security, the Shin Bet. Once I came across a man pleading in vain with soldiers to allow him to pass in order to collect his son’s corpse from the hospital where he had died. Every day, as we Palestinians waited in the searing heat, Israeli settlers in their air-conditioned vehicles would bypass the checkpoints in their special lanes. Many checkpoints have developed their own economies on the Palestinian side as vendors sell water and snacks.

I am one of the lucky people because I hold a blue Jerusalem ID card. I am a permanent resident – but not a citizen – of Israel. My Jerusalem ID often allowed me to pass through checkpoints when others in the queues were turned back.

At home and in my community people looked at me, for I stood out – a peace activist Muslim woman driving away each day to work on building a peace which seemed ever more elusive and a waste of time. The worst nightmare was a sudden closure when I was coming home.

I had nowhere else to go so had to wait in my car at the checkpoint, hoping for a miracle. This added to the pressures in my life. I live in a traditional, conservative society. I could see the silent rebuke in people’s eyes for having stayed out for very long hours and having been with strangers in a volatile environment in which anything can happen.

Studying here in the UK – getting to understand the human rights regime, its mechanisms, successes and failures – is frustrating. It has become clearer to me that in Palestine, or rather the little that is left of it, our situation is unique. Resolutions of the General Assembly and decisions of the International Court of Justice count for nothing. Refugees are not refugees when they are Palestinians. We are foreigners in our own land.

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The turnstiles at Beit Iba checkpoint.