

# Territorial fragmentation of the West Bank

by David Shearer

**A combination of checkpoints, physical obstacles and a permit system has cut the West Bank into three distinct areas – in addition to East Jerusalem. Within these areas, sub-enclaves have been created, isolating many Palestinian communities, restricting their access to services and stifling commerce.**

The closure system in the West Bank refers to a series of restrictions placed by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) to control the movement of more than 2.3 million Palestinians living there. The Israeli government states that these closure measures are required to prevent Palestinian militant attacks on Israeli civilians.

The closure system has become steadily more sophisticated and has increasingly channelled Palestinian traffic onto smaller, local roads, leaving main – often recently purpose-built – routes reserved exclusively for

Israeli settlers to travel to settlements inside the West Bank. There are now approximately 430,000 settlers living in the West Bank.

Restrictions on movement are at the heart of the Palestinian economic decline. Poverty rates for

Palestinians have soared to 56% and are predicted to rise to 74% by the end of 2006. Commerce and trade depends on the free movement of goods and services. But in the West Bank economic activities have become severely restricted due to the closure system.

Closure is imposed by one or a combination of methods:

- Manned checkpoints and a series of physical obstacles such as road blocks, road gates, earth mounds

and trenches. The total number of these has steadily risen since last year, from 376 in August 2005 to 535 in June 2006 – a 25% increase.

- The Barrier that Israel has constructed loops inside the West Bank and has created a number of enclaves between the Barrier and the Green Line that are difficult to access.
- There are increasing numbers of ‘flying’ or random checkpoints – averaging more than 160 a week – throughout the West



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Bank that create unpredictable closure and often extensive delays for Palestinian movement.

- The IDF have implemented a range of different permits to restrict the use of many routes within the West Bank. Getting into the enclave areas, for example, is increasingly difficult for Palestinians as Israel is narrowing the eligibility criteria for permits that are needed to pass through the Barrier to land on the other side.

One key impact of the closure system is the way it has isolated residents of the West Bank from East Jerusalem, the traditional centre of Palestinian religious and cultural life and where important health and education services are located. Reaching the Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, one of the most holy sites for Muslims, for example, is no longer possible for most West Bank Palestinians.

The construction of the Barrier has meant that Palestinians can no longer travel through Jerusalem but instead have to take a winding road around the city. Once the Barrier is completed this road will pass under the Barrier through specially constructed tunnels thereby preventing Palestinians from using Israeli roads that go to settlements.

The urban and manufacturing hub of the main towns of Nablus, Ramallah, Hebron and Jericho, that are critical for Palestinian jobs and the economy, are also difficult to access because of tight restrictions. Jericho, for example, is encircled by a ditch on three sides and all traffic is funnelled through two checkpoints that frequently close.

Prior to the start of the second *intifada* in September 2000 more than 150,000

Palestinians worked in Israel. Nearly 90% of those people have now lost their jobs. Many have turned to farming as one of the few economic alternatives for the increasing number of unemployed. But movement restrictions prevent good returns. Increasingly, vendors of perishable products such as vegetables and fruit have no access to markets.

The Jordan Valley has long been an important Palestinian agricultural area. Today, no Palestinian who is not originally from that area can

go there unless they have a permit to work in an Israeli settlement. Jordan Valley farmers cannot rely on moving their goods to markets and often spend hours at checkpoints resulting in substantial losses of highly perishable agricultural crops.

As the closure system becomes more institutionalised it has a myriad of other impacts. Many communities depend on water tankers for domestic water supplies during the summer but the closures can make it impossible for water trucks to reach their destination and meet community needs. Families often find themselves separated by a checkpoint, earth wall or the Barrier from relatives and friends who live close by or from their regular schools or health clinics.

**Economy spiralling downwards**

The economy is predicted to contract by a further 25% in the coming months if Palestinian Authority (PA) employees continue not to receive salaries. Following the Hamas victory in the January elections, PA revenues dried up. Half of the PA's income came from taxes on Palestinian goods that entered through Israeli ports. Israel has suspended passing on those revenues, as it is obligated to under the Protocol on Economic Relations between the Government of Israel and the PLO it signed in 1994.<sup>1</sup> Donors have also halted payments to the PA. Instead their attention has focused on the private sector as an alternative to maintain services and economic opportunities for

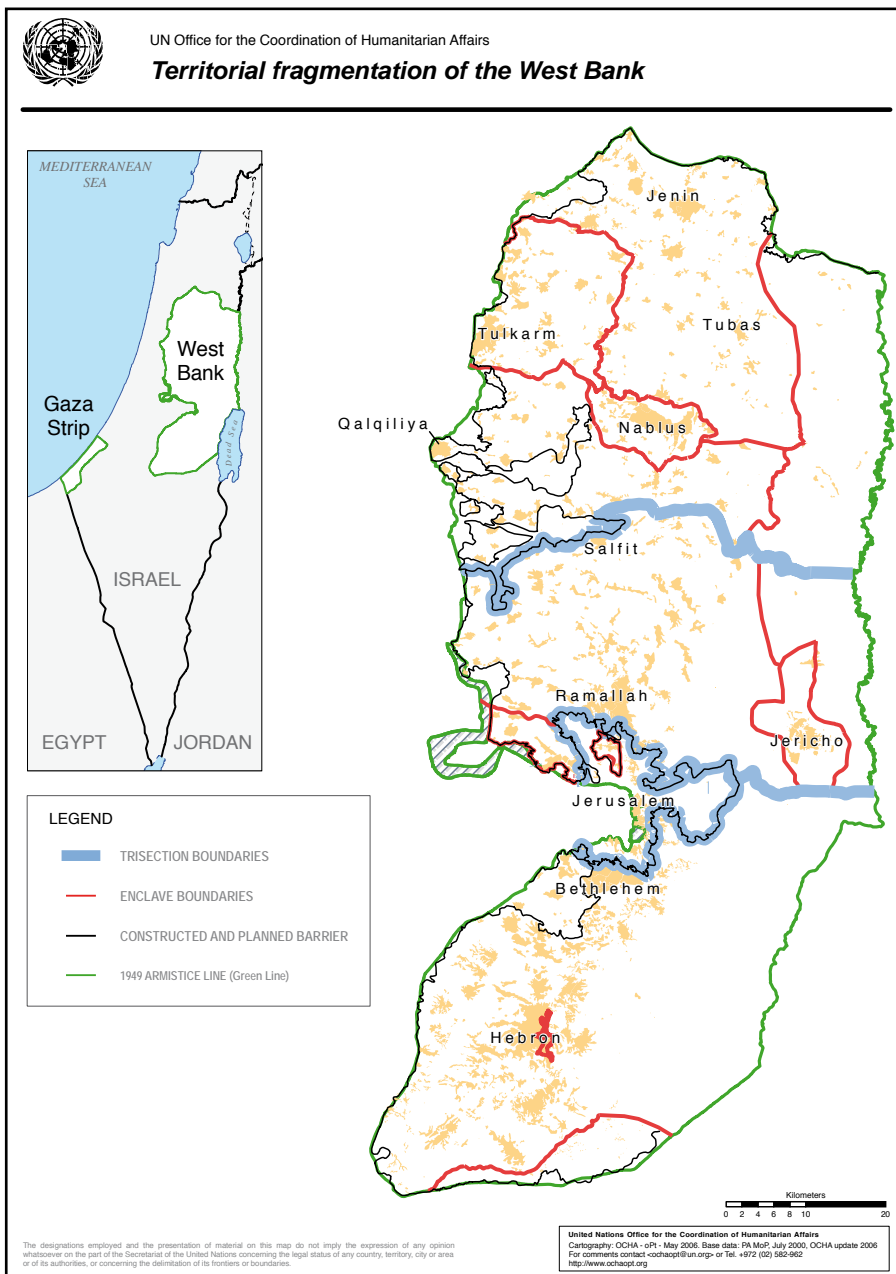
Palestinians. But the private sector relies on the free movement of goods and labour – and both are severely curtailed by the closure system.

As the economic crisis deepens, humanitarian aid is increasingly being looked upon as a primary support mechanism for Palestinians. But it is insufficient and aid alone is not capable of maintaining PA institutions. Furthermore, vital access by humanitarian agencies is becoming increasingly difficult. International humanitarian organisations report increased access incidents in the form of delays and denials of access at IDF checkpoints throughout the West Bank. UN staff can no longer be guaranteed to get to their places of work and are being asked to adhere to a variety of unpredictable checking procedures, despite previous agreements with the Israeli authorities.

The Government of Israel states that the closure regime is to protect its citizens from terrorist attacks. But the regime has separated off sections of the West Bank from each other and created tiny enclaves where people struggle to pass through an increasing array of obstacles just to move around their communities.

As the Israeli settlements in the West Bank expand, so too does the sophistication of the restrictions to protect them, all at a cost to Palestinian livelihoods. Increasingly, affluent settlements protected behind walls, fences and an array of obstacles sit side-by-side with impoverished and increasingly embittered Palestinian communities. Just that reality alone is fuel for an ongoing conflict.

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1. [www.palestinecenter.org/cpap/documents/economic.html](http://www.palestinecenter.org/cpap/documents/economic.html)