



Photo: Sonja Karkar - Watchtower

journey of 5 minutes can now take up to an hour and may possibly require changing vehicles to continue the journey on the other side of the checkpoint. Palestinians have to take secondary roads that are long, circuitous, and often full of potholes and steep inclines, while some 430,000 Jewish settlers come and go without restriction. These settlers live in their fortified housing estates built illegally on prime hilltop locations on Palestinian land and Israel has provided exclusive high-ways to connect these settlements to Israel.

Queues of taxis line up for people needing transport after they leave their cars behind and people find themselves sharing the trip with others. The silence on these trips is pervasive as people try as best they can to act normal when everything is not. There is simply no point in worrying about meeting work schedules or getting to appointments because anything can happen. It could be another flying checkpoint or two set up to slow everything down even more, or the soldiers at a checkpoint might decide to have their lunch and make everyone wait at their convenience. A not very subtle message of just who has power over whom.

Waiting has become just part and parcel of getting on with life for the Palestinians. There is more waiting than movement in a day and so it is not unusual to find young boys making a meagre living by offering tea to the crowds of people for almost nothing. Everybody has an experience to relate during these periods of waiting, but while the Palestinians are enormously patient in the face of such humiliating

conditions, anxiety lurks not far away. Perhaps this day the checkpoint might close before they can get through; perhaps the pregnant woman will be forced to give birth in this public place; perhaps a soldier will punish a young man for saying too much or not enough and make him squat with his hands bound and eyes blindfolded for hours on end; perhaps someone will have to tip out all their shopping so the soldiers can check it and then have to pack it all up again; perhaps the grey-faced woman or breathless man who needs to get to hospital will die because the soldiers refuse to let the ambulance through; perhaps the impatient young man will be shot because the soldier thought him threatening. Best to be quiet and wait.

And in the Gaza Strip it is worse. No Palestinians are allowed in or out. All border crossings are closed and are only opened arbitrarily to allow some limited goods passage or aid to come in. It also means that the Palestinians are not able to flee Israel's aerial bombardments and military invasions. Seriously ill patients have not been able to seek treatment in hospitals outside Gaza, and since March last year, Palestinians have been refused permits to work in Israel when 40 per cent of the population able to work is unemployed. No one can make plans: the unpredictability of everything affects every aspect of Palestinian lives. The only thing that gives them any security is the green card that is their momentary pass out of just waiting.

Permission To Move

Palestinians need permits for everything. In the West Bank and Gaza Strip, they are issued with *green* IDs with an identity number that allows them to reside there and to get through the checkpoints in their own country. They cannot get anywhere without them. If they want to travel abroad, they must obtain a travelling document known as the *laissez passez* which notes the holder is of undefined nationality or more bluntly, stateless: it is valid for one year only.

The Jordan Valley, which represents 30 per cent of the Occupied West Bank has been the latest target for permit restrictions. Only Palestinians who hold Jordan Valley residency IDs can move freely in and out of the area. The rest of the 2 million Palestinian West Bank residents are being prevented from visiting their families, doing business or

farming their land. There is strong reason to believe that Israel plans to annex this area unilaterally because it has rich agricultural land and precious water resources.

Jerusalem too has become a "no-go" zone for Palestinians. Those with green cards living in the Occupied Territories have not been able to enter Jerusalem for years, but even those with residency rights in Jerusalem are at risk of having their *blue* IDs revoked if Israeli bureaucrats can prove that they no longer maintain Jerusalem as their "centre of life". And the Wall has made sure that Jerusalem will become increasingly inaccessible to them. Israel has already de facto annexed 320 sq km and isolated more than 120,000 Palestinians from Jerusalem which is about half of the city's Palestinian population and now Israeli urban planners are seeking to use Israel's absentee laws to appropriate more Palestinian houses and property.

And, it is not only Palestinians under occupation who need permits. New rules on IDs are affecting foreign nationals who wish to visit family, conduct business or take part in academic exchanges. If they do not hold an Israeli-issued Palestinian ID, they will no longer be allowed into the country. And Israel completely controls the granting of permits. Now, foreign nationals have found themselves refused re-entry visas. That means that foreign nationals cannot get back home where they may have lived for most of their lives and this has resulted in agonising decisions for spouses and families about whether to stay or leave and has even meant the closing of businesses. No one knows if they can come or go or how long they can stay at all. In one way or another, everybody loses.

Breaking Up Families

This assault on family life is undermining Palestinian society and nowhere more so than in Jerusalem. So determined was Israel to obtain exclusive rights to all of Jerusalem, that it declared the city the capital of Israel after the 1948 war, illegally annexed East Jerusalem in 1967, and declared all of Jerusalem "complete and united" as Israel's capital in 1980. In doing so, Israel ignored Jerusalem's internationally recognised status as a *corpus separatum* or separate body from Israel and the proposed Palestinian state. No doubt it wanted to head off any Palestinian move to consolidate East Jerusalem as the capital