New Palestinian centers
An ethnography of the ‘checkpoint economy’

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ABSTRACT Based on an ethnography of Palestinian checkpoint workers, the author suggests that new and emerging ‘checkpoint economies’ are transforming politically contested boundaries into important economic centers. Focusing on taxi drivers, porters, merchants and peddlers at the West Bank’s Qalandia checkpoint, halfway between Jerusalem and Ramallah, the article tracks the growth of checkpoints and their ad hoc economy, and of Qalandia specifically, and argues that although checkpoints are technologies of Israeli military control, they are also renegotiated spaces of resistance.

KEYWORDS checkpoint economy • checkpoints • Israel • occupation • Palestinian Territories • Qalandia • taxi drivers • West Bank

Qalandia duty free

On a hot June 2005 morning, along the path where commuters pass before/after having their IDs checked, 30 collapsible tables belonging to different merchants were opened exhibiting a variety of goods for sale: books, calendars, nightgowns, perfume, plastic gadgets made in China, cookies, cigarettes. One young boy, wedged between two tables, was selling ice-cream from a refrigerated push-cart; a man further down the open-air aisle displayed live chicks over-stuffed in milk crates. On a plastic sheet on the ground, another merchant arranged noise-making toys: dolls, soldiers, puppies and kittens. It was chaotic, dusty, dirty and noisy. Many merchants, standing below brightly multi-colored umbrellas, were advertising their wares...
at the top of their lungs: ‘Fresh mountain cheese!’ ‘Cell phones!’ Fifteen meters further on, the decibel level increased. Queues of taxis (the majority Ford vans) were waiting; shepherding the would-be passengers was often another driver – his still-empty cab further back in the queue – shouting out destinations over the hum of the engines: ‘Ramallah, Ramallah, Ramallah!’ ‘Birzeit, Birzeit, Birzeit!’ No more than 10 meters separated the cabs and the paved street where those patient enough to drive through waited. Between the ‘street’ and the ‘taxi stand’, food merchants were selling sandwiches, coffee, lamb and beef kebabs, and grilled chicken livers.

The last time I had been at Qalandia was 24 months before; and in two years, what was affectionately called the ‘Qalandia Duty Free’ had visibly expanded. In June 2003, Qalandia was already one of the largest West Bank checkpoints; but the taxi queues were not so orderly, and there were no umbrellas, tables or live animals. Two years later it was a different place. An adjacent hill had been razed by the Israeli military, where it was erecting a building (no one knew for what). Butting up against the paved road on the west was the ‘security fence’ (here 8-meter-high concrete slabs) and a new control-sniper tower. The taxi stand was a few meters further north. It was clear that Qalandia was on its way to becoming the West Bank version of Erez, albeit much more chaotic and lively. Upon my next return in early 2006, I could barely see traces of the Qalandia I was familiar with: a hi-tech terminal made up of bullet-proof stalls housing the Civil Administration Office lay on the east, out of which six pedestrian lanes and four vehicle lanes merged onto a new road towards Ramallah. The entire checkpoint area had moved, and, from the little of the ‘original’ landscape that remained, I guessed it was further west. The Qalandia terminal would soon become the only link between northern and southern areas of the West Bank; one of ten such terminals under construction serving as ‘official’ crossing points for more than 2 million Palestinians (Levy, 2005). The taxis had lost some space and seemed more disorganized. But business was good. There was an even larger variety of goods for purchase.

Checkpoints symbolize the unequal power between Israel and Palestinians – whether one sees them as necessary structures keeping Palestinians out of Israel, or as measures of dispossession. Technologies of control, these spatial structures are one domain within which, and through which, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is constituted. My aim here is not to disagree with journalists (Hass, 2002; Levy, 2005), politicians (Benevisti, 2002), activists (MachsomWatch, 2004), non-governmental organizations (B’tselem, 2006; OCHA, 2007a) and scholars (Roy, 2001; Segal and Weizman, 2003; Zureik, 2001) who critique checkpoints as spaces of control, but to complicate that view. By focusing on the emergence of checkpoints as places of economic activity, I suggest that checkpoints are contradictory spaces: barriers that asphyxiate the individual and the collective on the one hand, and burgeoning centers of social and economic relations, on the other.

In what follows, I offer a thick description of the ‘checkpoint economy’ – the business conducted in and immediately around a checkpoint – by focusing
on taxi drivers, porters, merchants, peddlers and, to a lesser extent, their customers – the passers-by – around the Qalandia checkpoint. I argue that albeit checkpoints have fragmented and harmed Palestinian society, their growth as economic sites represents a form of Palestinian resistance: organic, chaotic, contradictory, under constant Israeli military surveillance, but only in existence because of Israeli policies that allowed them to emerge as such. Ultimately, I suggest that checkpoints – charged with economic, social, and political significance – are spaces that are increasingly central in contemporary Palestinian life.

Checkpoints dotted land

Checkpoints emerged around the time of the 1993 peace process, and are just one material manifestation of Israeli policy of closures. Closures, which deprive Palestinians of their right to free movement and are posited by the Israeli military as a means of safeguarding Israel from terror attacks, stem from a ‘pass system’ first introduced in 1991 (Hass, 2002), itself part of a strategy of population control (Brown, 2004; Zureik, 2001) whereby every Palestinian had to obtain a permit to move between and within Palestinian areas and Israel proper (Hass, 2002; Roy, 2001). During the formal years of Israeli Occupation, between 1967 and 1993, restrictions on Palestinian movement were relatively light. After the beginning of the first Intifada in December 1987, travel between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank became forbidden and a permit system within each slowly emerged. But it was fear of Palestinian reaction to the 1991 Gulf War that provided the occasion to limit movement of the population (Hass, 2002), through policies of closures and checkpoints, the latter initially established along the 1949 Armistice Line and between the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and eventually between cities inside the West Bank. The pass and closure system was institutionalized through the 1993 Oslo Accords. What had been originally an ad hoc military-bureaucratic measure crystallized into a fully conscious strategy of ‘separation between the two peoples’ (Hass, 2002: 18), part of a larger Israeli expansionary spatial movement, in which Israeli political and ideological decisions shape the physical environment of the Palestinians (Biesenbach, 2003; Segal and Weizman, 2003). The system turned a basic right into a coveted privilege, stratifying an entire society on the basis of whether one had access, and to what degree, to freedom of movement. Throughout the ‘peace years’ (from 1993 until the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada in September 2000), more stringent spatial controls emerged: Oslo’s territorial segmentation of the West Bank into Areas A, B and C denoting the extent of Palestinian and Israeli control; expansion of settlements and by-pass roads; differing forms of closures (curfews being the most severe); physical barricades including checkpoints, roadblocks and the security fence/wall – all of which have generated an almost complete fragmentation of Palestinian terrain (Hass, 2002; OCHA, 2006, 2007a; Segal
and Weizman, 2003; Shearer, 2006; World Bank, 2007). Checkpoints were just one embodiment of the matrix of forces manifested across the landscape, becoming ubiquitous after the Al-Aqsa Intifada, when restrictions on Palestinians tightened substantially.

It is difficult to state how many checkpoints exist at any moment in time, primarily because the military does not publicly share such information thus leaving it up to others to count. Unquestionably, they have increased from a handful before 2000 to hundreds a few years later. According to the World Bank, in December 2002 there were ‘some 140 checkpoints in the West Bank and 25 to 30 in Gaza and another 200 or so unmanned roadblocks’ (2004: 2). For January 2004, the UN Office for the Coordination of Human Affairs (OCHA) reported 59 checkpoints, 10 partial checkpoints, 479 earthmounds, 75 trenches, 100 roadblocks and 40 road gates in the West Bank; by March 2004, a new form of barricade was added to the count: 17 walls (World Bank, 2004: 2). Contradictory tallies are common: a PLO Unit reported 160 manned checkpoints and 398 roadblocks across the West Bank in 2004 (Lagerquist, 2004: 31); according to MachsomWatch (2004), a group of Israeli women who observe and record human rights abuses at some checkpoints, there were 719; yet another group counted 376 in August 2005, plus an average of 160 ‘flying checkpoints’ a week (Shearer, 2006: 22). According to the OCHA, flying checkpoints increased from 197 to 758 between July 2005 and April 2006 (OCHA, 2006: 4), and the organization counted 546 permanent checkpoints in the West Bank in March 2007 (OCHA, 2007a; see OCHA, 2007b for comprehensive maps). Checkpoints are also hard to count because categorizing them is no straightforward matter.

Checkpoints are diverse in their material formations, size, placement and function. Some are ‘external’: border zones/crossings along the Armistice Line, such as Erez on the Israel–Gaza border, al-Walaja outside Bethlehem, and Jubara in the Tulkarem region. Jubara, however, is made up of three crossing points: one entrance into Israel, one ‘internal checkpoint’, and a gate into the village of Jubara that is considered an entrance into the ‘seam area’ (a buffer zone demarcated by the Israeli military along the ‘security fence’). Qalandia and Surda are both ‘internal’ checkpoints but differ in other ways: soldiers are not always present at Surda, which is ‘built’ out of earth-mounds (or sometimes concrete blocks) on a road at 2 km intervals, preventing vehicles from passing between Ramallah and Birzeit and villages further north; it is thus often classified as an ‘internal road block’ (in contrast, Qalandia was manned full time by early 2001). Huwwara, outside Nablus, is another internal checkpoint – which in one of its renditions was two checkpoints 500 meters apart. Internal checkpoints do not border Israel, the ‘seam area’, settlements, military installations or by-pass roads – they’re erected to segregate Palestinians. Some internal checkpoints are located in ‘sensitive’ areas; for example Wadi-Nar checkpoint exists on an unmarked road in Area B, on the border with Area C and the Ma’ale Adumim settlement, close to the village of Al-Ubeidiya in Area A. Wadi-Nar checkpoint is not to be confused with a ‘flying checkpoint’,
which exists when a moving tank or Jeep stops traffic (whether on a paved road or a ‘path’ used to evade checkpoints). Nor is Wadi-Nar checkpoint to be confused with a ‘temporary checkpoint’, such as the one next to the Shavei Shamron settlement, which irregularly ‘appeared’ in same location – and irregularly instituted a policy only allowing humanitarian vehicles through, before the checkpoint became permanently closed to Palestinians in 2006, closing off access routes between Nablus and Tulkarem. A’Zaim and Ram checkpoints are considered part of the greater Jerusalem area, and are thus only open for Israelis, foreigners and Palestinian residents of Jerusalem.

Checkpoints are not only built of different materials (barbed wire, concrete blocks, sandbags, plastic or steel barricades), but also impose different requirements to pass. At some, commuters are separated then scanned electronically (e.g. Hebron’s Casbah); at others, Palestinians are communicated with through the control-tower’s peep-holes (e.g. Gaza’s Gush Qatif); at Erez, where Palestinians and foreigners have separate terminals, Palestinians must squeeze through metal turnstiles operated by remote-control (which appeared at Qalandia by late 2005). Some checkpoints are for pedestrians, others for vehicles. Beitunia is for commercial vehicles, where goods must pass through the ‘back-to-back’ system: unloaded from a truck on one side of the checkpoint and carried across to another truck on the other side (also used for transporting patients between ambulances). Some checkpoints operate for 12 hours, others for 24 – which is not to say that they are open – or change schedule without warning or explanation. As MachsomWatch explain: ‘the checkpoint regime is arbitrary and random, and the regulations governing them change constantly’ (2004: 8).

No matter what their semantic or physical form, checkpoints are ubiquitous and inevitable. And, even if a person possesses all necessary paperwork, there is no guarantee that she will pass, since:

… it is never clear who will [pass …] and who will not…. The reasons [for prohibiting people from passing] are so numerous, and the use made of them changes so much, that uncertainty becomes the ultimate system of control within the framework of the certainty of the occupation.
(MachsomWatch and Physicians for Human Rights–Israel, 2004: 5)

Checkpoints are not Palestinian spaces since they are erected, controlled and are under the surveillance of the Israeli military; nor do they mark accepted boundaries between the two ‘states’, especially since the majority are inside Palestinian areas: not including Gaza, East Jerusalem and Hebron, of the 588 physical closures in December 2007, only eight were for entering Israel (OCHA, 2007b). The majority function to separate Palestinian areas, segregate and fragment the nation, isolate individuals and communities imprisoned behind and between them. In that sense, checkpoints are part of the ongoing panoptic Israeli dominance over Palestinian topography that symbolizes the extent to which ‘Palestine’ (historically and in the future) has been pulled from under Palestinians’ feet. This is apparent in the resulting loss of ‘economic space’.
Checkpoints slow, alter or outright prevent the flow of people and goods necessary for economic relations. Within the Palestinian Territories, internal checkpoints, combined with other forms of closures, have been detrimental to social and economic life, within villages, towns, cities and their hinterlands, and between them by severing trade routes (Hammami, 2004; OCHA, 2006, 2007a; World Bank, 2004, 2007). As Rema Hammami, an anthropologist who has studied the Surda checkpoint, states:

... when a checkpoint is imposed, it is not simply that goods cannot reach market, or students their schools, but that the circuits through which the host of social relations flow, that make commerce and education possible, are disrupted and ultimately shattered. (2006: 15)

The urban hubs of Nablus, Jenin, Ramallah, Hebron, Jericho and East Jerusalem have become amputated from each other and extremely difficult to access. Since the Second Intifada, farmers and vendors have gradually lost access to their markets; it is not uncommon to meet Palestinians who have not been out of their ‘enclaves’ since 2002. External checkpoints are also harmful since the Palestinian economy is over-dependent on Israel’s for labor, goods, and services (Farsakh, 2000; Roy, 2001; World Bank, 2007). The economic impact of checkpoints is huge, though difficult to gauge separately since they are part of the wider system of closures. Closures were a major cause for the Palestinian economy’s rapid deterioration after 2000 (OCHA, 2007a; Roy, 2001; World Bank, 2004, 2007). According to one estimate, each day of closure results in a loss of $8.45 million, equivalent to a 50 percent reduction in economic activity (Farsakh, 2000: 22). In 2004 the World Bank stated that:

... the economic space of the West Bank and Gaza remains highly fragmented; economic activity has significantly declined. Closures and curfews continue to disrupt business, commerce and routine social exchange; they have raised transport and production costs and severed vital economic links. (2004: xiv–xv)

In no uncertain terms it further stated that: ‘the precipitator of today’s economic crisis ... has been “closure” ... a multi-faceted system of restrictions on the movement of Palestinian goods and people’ (2004: 1). In 2007, closures were still the principal reason for Palestinian economic destitution: ‘the restrictions arising from closure have ... led to a level of uncertainty and inefficiency which has made the conduct of business difficult and therefore has stymied the growth and investment which is necessary to fuel economic revival’ (World Bank, 2007: 12). Checkpoints have a devastating effect on the Palestinian economy (and society and politics). One researcher’s enumeration of the commodities that passed Surda in one day speaks to its trade and economic impact:

... meat from the slaughterhouse in Birzeit, fresh mulberries, packaged foods for a supermarket, glasses and plates for a houseware shop, fabric for a clothier, luggage, wood, cans of white paint, a glass showcase, a
stone-cutting machine, a car engine – not to mention the day’s edition of
*al-Quds* newspaper. (Hammami, 2004: 31)

Detrimental, unpredictable and all-inclusive (everyone who needs to get
somewhere must cross them), they have become standard in Palestinian life.

**Observing checkpoints**

This research was carried out by means of a ‘spatial ethnography,’ relying on
observation, participation and interviews. A diasporic Palestinian, I arrived in
the West Bank in January 2003 to conduct my PhD dissertation fieldwork on
Palestinian media development. I had made arrangements to live with a
Palestinian woman in Ram. When I arrived at her office, she wasn’t there; one
of her colleagues simply said that she was ‘stuck at Huwwara’ (as if I was sup-
pposed to know what that meant), and invited me to stay at his house – in
Ramallah – until she returned. A few minutes into the taxi ride to his house,
we hit what I assumed was rush-hour traffic, until all the passengers and my
host stepped out (everyone pays upon entering the cab). Walking through
idling trucks and cars, honking cabs, among people standing, walking and
chatting, amid the hovering plastic bags and garbage, I spotted a big Israeli
flag atop a control tower. Then I noticed barbed wire, sandbags, concrete
blocks marked in Hebrew, two military Jeeps, dozens of soldiers…. It was the
Qalandia checkpoint. I followed my host through a muddy zigzag between
cement blocks. No soldiers stopped us as we hurried towards a Ford van on
the other side. After two days, I was to meet my room-mate at Qalandia
checkpoint on the (correct) assumption that it would be easier for me – with
an American passport – to cross. (Meanwhile, I had learned that Huwwara
was a checkpoint, where she had been stuck for over 40 hours.) My first trip
‘out’ of Qalandia is mired in a naive, nervous haze, but the disbelief I felt at
its existence stayed with me.

Living in Ram and conducting my research in Ramallah and Jerusalem
meant that I was passing checkpoints – Qalandia and Ram – as frequently as
two or four times a day, and was often stuck because of closures. On one such
day at Qalandia, as I whipped out my videocamera, a man in his forties came
up to me: ‘I’ve seen you around. What station do you work for?’ I explained
that I was a student making a documentary film. Walid was the ‘traffic con-
troller’: ‘If you need help with anything, let me know,’ he offered. A few days
later, while filming an exchange of rocks and bullets that erupted between
Palestinian boys and Israeli soldiers, Walid ran up to me, screaming: ‘Put that
down! You’ll get shot if [the Israeli soldiers] see you filming!’ That afternoon
I accepted Walid’s invitation to meet his family; we went to the Qalandia
refugee camp, where he lives, with a taxi driver nicknamed Abu-Maysa. Abu-
Maysa became my closest friend in Palestine. Whenever I wasn’t conducting
research on my dissertation, I was at a checkpoint, most often Qalandia hang-
ing out with Abu-Maysa or accompanying him on his rounds. There were
times when I was filming, other times socializing, but always learning. My
days and evenings at checkpoints were spent in the company of merchants, sit-
ing in empty cabs in the back of the queue drinking coffee and sharing food,
going on rounds with drivers, sometimes goaded to drive a taxi myself – which
always brought bouts of jokes that I ought to become the first female cabbie.
When ‘new’ merchants questioned who I was (whether they were new/old at
the checkpoint or simply to me), I would be introduced by the ‘older’ mer-
chants as ‘one of them.’ Over time, my friendships with Abu-Maysa, Walid,
cabbies and merchants became invaluable; and, it would be through them that
I would see the checkpoint – Qalandia, but also the checkpoint sui generis – as
a site more complex than merely a manifestation of Israeli power.

Over the course of three visits totalling 11 months between 2003 and 2006,
I spent many days at checkpoints, by far the majority at Qalandia. But I also
spent lots of time at Surda, Ram and Huwwara. Every time I went further into
the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, I would be met with a checkpoint.
Sometimes I purposefully sought them out; and at many of them, the same phe-
nomenon was apparent: merchants, thieves, school-children, ambulances, taxis,
coffee sellers, contraband-cigarette peddlers, delivery trucks, politicians, foreign
journalists, Israeli activists – all kinds of people converged at them, often con-
ducting various forms of business. While I am not suggesting that all check-
points are identical, I am claiming that the way in which Qalandia has become
central to Palestinian economic life is repeated at many other checkpoints.

Since my first days at Qalandia, I have been intrigued by checkpoints. I
was, and still am, convinced that they symbolize main features of Palestinian
experience that have to do with geography: dispossession, dispersion, dias-
pora. But I also began to recognize that checkpoints are active spaces, much
like the urban centers they were slowly superseding. It was the desire to
unravel these contradictory meanings that led me to this point.

The checkpoint economy

Checkpoints are not free-standing and discrete places, and must be under-
stood in the context of relations that stretch beyond them and the intersection
of relations that function within them. A mix of economic, political and sym-
boric resources, all of which influence the organization of checkpoints, are
continually produced and challenged; and it is this constant (re)negotiation
that gives them meaning.

Checkpoints are becoming the new ‘centers’ on politically contested
boundaries: spaces filled with social and economic relations. In paradoxical
ways, Qalandia has become part of Palestinian routine – not just for the
20,000 daily commuters, hundreds of taxi drivers, merchants and peddlers
I saw there in 2006, but innumerable others who occasionally end up at
Qalandia. Since it severs major North–South and East–West arteries, and
hundreds of drivers are based there, Qalandia is the de facto transportation
hub for destinations across the West Bank, and thus a nexus not just for those in its vicinity but countless others as well.

As the materiality of Qalandia became a work in progress – expanding from sandbags and concrete blocks with soldiers sporadically stopping people to more stringent controls and permanent barricades – so has the checkpoint economy evolved, initiated ad hoc by taxi drivers. Throughout the Territories privately owned Ford vans were licensed to work on determined routes under local taxi offices. Checkpoints changed that. Within a few days of Qalandia’s appearance in 2000, massive traffic jams ensued as cabs waited to cross, leading many commuters to walk across instead. It wasn’t long before hubs appeared on each side of the checkpoint servicing over 30 destinations, creating a jam where drivers dropped-off/picked-up passengers. At first, drivers would ‘steal a turn’: i.e. drop off, make a u-turn, and pick-up as quickly as possible, causing chaotic gridlock as drivers waited for others to get out of the way. By early 2001, men from surrounding areas had recognized the profitability of the taxi-business: a used van costs NIS14,000, and, with increasing numbers of people needing rides, returns on investment were relatively quick. All kinds of new taxi drivers emerged, worsening congestion: official yellow stretch-Mercedes or private-cars-turned-taxis, what Hammami termed ‘independent cowboys’ (2004: 28). On the Ramallah side, the municipality recognized the need to institute order; but the Intifada also meant that the Palestinian government was becoming more and more impotent. It was at this point that Walid, having lost his job as a day-laborer inside Israel, organized a subcommittee, asked Fateh representatives in Qalandia camp to grant him legitimacy, and became the ‘official’ traffic controller. Each driver would pay NIS10 per day to be part of the new system: Walid would keep track of turns and enforce quotas on drivers (vans to private cars ratio, drivers from Ramallah, Qalandia camp and elsewhere ratio, etc.). Walid was now the law: if a driver cheated his turn, ‘took too long to make a u-turn’ (so as to forcibly fill-up with passengers), or ‘if he annoyed the girls’ walking by, the driver would not be allowed to queue the next day, and sometimes would be beaten-up. By mid-2002, Walid’s ‘job’ was financially supporting his seven-member family; at countless other checkpoints, people like Walid took on similar roles.

When soldiers turned people back, or closed the crossing altogether, enterprising drivers devised the ‘Tora Bora’ route, driving through the hills to circumvent the checkpoint, charging much higher fees. The nickname originated at Qalandia but is familiar across the West Bank. Drivers knew they were risking a great deal (passengers too) as soldiers who caught them would smash their cars, beat them up, confiscate their IDs, keys or cabs, or arrest them (one could see the line of confiscated cabs parked inside the Atarot airport) – there weren’t established routes since drivers devised spontaneous ‘paths’ every time new barriers or soldiers emerged. Out of the hundreds of times between December 2000 and May 2003 that Abu-Maysa had ‘done Tora Bora’ he was caught eight times, and each time was lucky only to have his cab confiscated (usually for a day, once for over two weeks). Other drivers were not so lucky:
Tawfiq, a 20-year-old ‘illegal’ driver from Qalandia camp had been caught and incarcerated three times in one month.

Back at the checkpoint, there was a different version of cat-and-mouse played between drivers and soldiers: the issue of how far from the crossing point drivers were to park. Here too an improvised system emerged. The neighboring quarry owner, supposedly at the request of Walid, donated gravel and his bulldozer to establish a parking area and a ‘stand’ placed 20 meters from where the soldiers stood, later it was 60 meters away, then 150 meters (whenever the checkpoint expanded, the taxi stand moved).

The increasing distance between one side of the checkpoint and the other meant that commuters were faced with longer stretches over which they would have to carry their goods. Young boys from Qalandia camp would drag travelers’ goods across for whatever money one could afford. But the boys could not handle big loads and were increasingly not allowed to pass the checkpoint. By November 2000, porters from the Ramallah vegetable market descended on Qalandia with their wheeled push-carts: they could carry commuters’ goods across, and eventually also those commuters who were too young, too old or too frail to walk. One of the first porters to work at Qalandia, Abu Ammar, became the self-appointed leader. Unlike taxi drivers, however, porters required soldiers’ permission to pass the checkpoint if their business was to be viable. After negotiations and security checks, nine men had their carts numbered for surveillance purposes and became ‘official’ porters. Porters’ livelihoods are indebted to the Israeli army, and many taxi drivers and ‘aspiring porters’ criticized them for collaborating and for establishing a monopoly. In response, they subcontracted the long-distance portions. (Similar services existed at other checkpoints: at Netzarim in Gaza, horse-drawn carriages hauled goods and people across; at Jaljulia, near Qalqilya, donkeys did.) In the absence of the state, impromptu forms of civic organizations arose to set numbers, quotas and prices for drivers, donkeys, horses and push-carts. By spring 2003, there were over 400 taxi drivers and 35 to 40 porters at Qalandia (both sides). Concomitant with the rise of drivers and porters was the gathering of approximately 300 peddlers and merchants.

On the Ramallah side there is little municipal oversight, consequently there are no laws and no fees involved in ‘setting-up shop’. The Ram side was Israeli military territory, thus the Israeli municipal authorities for Jerusalem would conduct surprise raids, imposing fines, confiscating goods and IDs, and dismantling stands. But what both sides of Qalandia share in common is a big sea of people. Sometimes people have to wait for hours; sometimes they’re stuck indefinitely – in other words, they are, literally, a captive market. And, while stuck at a checkpoint, a passer-by may very well appreciate some coffee. Within days merchants tapped into this potential. A taxi driver at Qalandia, Tarek, elaborated:

… when the checkpoint first started … one man realized that he could make money selling coffee to people waiting in line. It didn’t take long for another
man to figure out that, on hot days, he could sell ice-cream.… And, in time, everyone realized that this is the place to come and sell. You see them now, it’s a bazaar! The women selling herbs and peaches, the young men selling [telephone] cards … (Personal interview, 27 March 2003)

Perhaps merchants’ enterprise is what turned checkpoints into teeming, bustling markets. But it’s equally important to note that if people weren’t stuck at checkpoints (let alone if there were no checkpoints), the merchants would be elsewhere, most likely back in the city centers. A number of merchants explained that business is better at checkpoints than downtown because of the more constant flow of people. Mohammad B., a telephone-merchant at Huwwara, commented:

I used to work at a [telephone] store in downtown.… And one day I was stuck [at Huwwara] for more than 10 hours. People kept asking me if they could use my phone to call home or work; and I thought that I should quit my job and come and sell telephones here.… I bought as many phones as I could, I borrowed some [money] from family, I bought bundled telephone cards at a discount, and came the next day and was able to sell everything! That was four years ago. I have been here almost every day since and business has been good.… Let me tell you, business is better here than downtown. Of course it’s because there’s more people here than in downtown. (Personal interview, 3 July 2005)

Qais who sells baked goods at the Surda checkpoint, stated, ‘not only is business better here [compared to downtown], but people are stuck here for many, many hours. Eventually they’re going to want something to drink or eat’ (Personal interview, 14 April 2003). And while it was young boys from the neighboring camp, followed by men selling coffee, then selling juice and sodas, who may have been the first peddlers at Qalandia in 2000, by the following year and increasingly thereafter, almost every imaginable item was available for purchase, whether for immediate consumption or not, from batteries and sunglasses to live roosters and bras. Checkpoints became open-air shopping malls. Abdulrahman, a cigarette seller at Qalandia, explains the business scene as having been the brainchild of entrepreneurs like himself:

… those of us who have been here since the beginning [October 2000], we knew how much business sense it made to have our shops here … and move away from downtown. At first, competition was a lot less. Now of course there’s everything here and there’s, look [pointing around] too much business. Look at this place, it’s like an airport duty-free zone! I don’t think it would have happened without us who saw the business opportunity early, if we wouldn’t have started. We’ve made Qalandia what it is today! [sic] (Personal interview, 24 June 2005)

While Palestinians didn’t travel to checkpoints exclusively to shop, as one would to a mall, they would hold off on purchasing items that they knew would be available, and often cheaper, at checkpoints.
The captive market is not simply made up of commuters, but also the people who have made the checkpoint the source of their own business. As the example of Walid shows, checkpoints were spaces where new forms of commerce were being conceived. In city centers, there are taxi dispatchers, traffic lights and stop signs. At Qalandia, there is Walid. But Walid was by no means the only person making money off cab drivers. In fact, many checkpoint merchants cater to drivers, for the latter spend inordinate amounts of time there. Between rush hours, cabbies hang out, chat, smoke, eat and drink. To target them as consumers made just as much, if not more, business sense. Mohammad, one of the longest-lasting food-stand owners at Qalandia, explained:

... in [December] 2000 my brother and I came here and sold sandwiches to the taxi drivers. We would make sandwiches in the morning and carry them around with us.... A few months later we had enough money to buy a van and set it up as a kitchen. We made fresh sandwiches, brewed coffee and tea. Then, we bought a fridge and a generator to sell cold drinks. The business kept growing.... And it's not the people [passing through] who buy from us, but the drivers. They're here all day. (Personal interview, 28 June 2005)

Drivers do not like to waste their time stopping for lunch, dinner or bathroom breaks en route, and prefer to rush back to queue. Once they've made it into 'Walid's line' they take a break for a smoke, a bite, a prayer. Drivers are an integral component of the checkpoint economy as both consumers and producers – as are porters, merchants and peddlers, although generally the former are one socio-economic level higher and have larger disposable incomes. At Qalandia, many merchants are there to serve each others' needs, creating a whole new set of economic relations. Mohammad stated:

... taxi drivers, and the other guys [who are selling] are our biggest business.... We live on those who live on the checkpoint. Without them, business would be bad.... Look at Radwan, he set up his stand all the way at the back of the checkpoint! It's not there for the travelers, is it? It's there for the workers' (Personal interview, 28 June 2005)

Radwan, another food-stand owner at Qalandia, had been in business since May 2003. While Mohammad sold coffee, tea, cold drinks and cold sandwiches, Radwan – whose stand was hidden from commuters – specialized in grilled food. In April 2005 Radwan built a concrete expansion providing lounging and praying space – free of charge. Later that month a new merchant began to sell prayer rugs.

It is hard to say how many merchants and peddlers 'work' at Qalandia, or how much money changes hands (with drivers and porters, there is an organized system, and Walid and Abu Ammar know the approximate numbers; but there is no body organizing merchants). Moreover, some merchants surface only on Fridays, or once a month, or for a few days. Maher comes to Qalandia from Mazra’a whenever he can to sell herbs and cheese; in his words
he isn’t a ‘permanent’ salesman because ‘I don’t always have [herbs]… And I only make cheese every few months…. I come here when I have a lot to sell’ (Personal interview, 11 July 2005). Maher was a seasonal merchant, and one of the few who traveled a distance and through other checkpoints to get to Qalandia. The majority of the merchants on the Ramallah side were from Qalandia camp, the rest from Ramallah, neighboring villages and Amari refugee camp. Merchants like Mohammad and Radwan, whose core clients were checkpoint workers, were permanent fixtures: they were there every day. Merchants who catered to commuters seemed more transient, especially peddlers (like the ubiquitous phone-card men) selling stolen merchandise. In April 2003 there were around 150 merchants on the Ramallah side. In summer 2005 that number easily surpassed 250 and, according to the merchants themselves, ‘explodes to twice the size at Ramadan’. Taking into account the drivers, porters and merchants, by summer 2005, there were approximately 1000 people directly making a living off the Ramallah side of Qalandia – and easily a few hundred others on the Ram side.

Squeezed out of their cities, villages and camps, Palestinians were (re)creating markets and rendezvous places at checkpoints. Ironically, checkpoints were becoming the new downtowns, the last public spheres available under occupation where one could still physically share an experience with others. Qalandia and the hundreds of other checkpoints became ‘anthropological spaces’, rich with scenes of an experience of relations with the world, and, as open-air bazaars and transportation hubs, ‘economic spaces’ that host a variety of forms of commercial transactions.

**Palestinian spatial resistance**

Checkpoints were created by the Israeli military with specific objectives in mind: controlling the population, minimizing the flow of Palestinians between different areas, separating and segregating Palestinians from Israelis and each other, fragmenting Palestinian land. From that perspective, checkpoints function as a means of fragmenting national unity. But that is only half the story.

Checkpoints have been actively re-produced as economic zones; thus they are an example of how, in the words of Henri Lefebvre, spaces are ‘the outcomes of a process with many aspects and many contributing currents’ (1991: 110). Lefebvre was suggesting that social struggle in the contemporary world, urban or otherwise, was a struggle over the social production of space. Palestinian co-optation of checkpoints as transportation hubs and ‘shopping malls’ is a manifestation of how space is simultaneously constrained and constraining in an evolving dialectic. Palestinian taxi drivers, porters, merchants and commuters, their praxis and their relations, have transformed checkpoints into hubs and bazaars – certainly functions beyond what the Israeli military intended. In reshaping Qalandia and in being active subjects – despite physical limitations, constant surveillance, or requiring soldiers’ consent – they
have turned the Israeli-created landscape into a battlefield for subversive and
direct resistance.

It is at checkpoints like Qalandia where more and more Palestinians have
direct and recurrent confrontation with the occupation. It is at, and in relation
to, checkpoints that Palestinians create new meanings of resistance:
physical, psychological, obvious, obscure. While checkpoints are a form of
‘collective punishment’ (B’tselem, 2006; Hass, 2002; Levy, 2005), they are
also places where Palestinians can collectively and individually fight back.

Of course, the presence of checkpoints changes the nature of resistance.
One cab driver at Hamra checkpoint (for vehicles only) in the Jordan Valley
said it most eloquently as he stared at the queue of full taxis waiting to pass:

If the day will come when we will be able to pass through unobstructed,
that will be the day we think we will have gained our national indepen-
dence. Our struggle with Israel has shifted; now we are fighting only for the
freedom to move. Not for the checkpoint to be taken down, but for being
allowed to go through [sic]. (Personal interview, 8 February 2003)

With hundreds of checkpoints across the land, simply getting through one
was increasingly a tremendous achievement – individual and collective. As
Hammami explains:

… there is a collective understanding that the checkpoints are there to stop
life, to destroy livelihoods and education and ultimately defeat the will of a
nation. Thus, simply continuing to cross them becomes encoded not as an
individual experience of victimization but as part of a collective act of defi-
ance and ultimately national resistance. (2006: 24)

Many checkpoint merchants and drivers suggested that resistance was in
the minutiae of everyday life. One driver explained:

Every day that we continue living and breathing in this godforsaken place
is an example of resistance. The fact that I get up in the morning, that I
shave, that I get down here to work, that I have not yet blown myself up,
is an example of resistance…. That’s the true resistance, not killing myself,
but staying alive. (Personal interview, 24 June 2005)

The next day he smiled: ‘Here I am, I’m steadfast.’

Circumventing a checkpoint through the Tora Bora method can be inter-
preted as yet a stronger form of resistance: Palestinians refusing to be impris-
ioned behind physical barricades, hiking and driving through anything to ‘get
there’. Movement becomes central in the resistance against the spatial mani-
festation of Israeli domination. Abu-Maysa reasoned:

You can call it resistance. But you can also call it the will, and the reality,
of Palestinians. We’ve always had to respond to whatever conditions Israel
sets on us. Checkpoints are just one. When you come back in two years and
they would have finished the wall, I’m sure we would have thought of a
way to deal with it’ (Personal interview, 1 July 2005)
Some resistance is physical or palpable: in the fights that ensue between drivers and soldiers, or when checkpoint workers surreptitiously move sandbags and concrete blocks a few inches to make more space for themselves or passers-by. In working at the checkpoint, or driving people through Tora Bora, despite being slapped with fines, despite having ID cards, keys, cabs or stands confiscated, despite being beaten up, imprisoned or in a few cases maimed, checkpoint workers were resisting – albeit paradoxically. Cabbies and merchants are at Qalandia out of economic destitution, and some Palestinians criticize them for economically benefiting from the system that harms Palestinian society. They occupy a difficult position, illustrated by the following anecdote. On a Tora Bora ride with Abu-Maysa, he spotted a military Jeep in the distance and gave his passengers a choice to turn back. They all decided to risk walking through the hills.

I do this [Tora Bora] because it’s great money [six passengers paid NIS 20 each, compared to NIS 2 to Ramallah, his usual route], but I also do it because it’s our way of saying ‘Screw your mother’ to the Israelis … we, all of us, the passengers and me…. They get where they need to go, so it says ‘Screw your mother’ to the checkpoint, to the occupation…. For me it’s a big risk. It kills business if I get caught, or look at Ahmed! [his cab confiscated, a fine of NIS 8000, imprisoned for five weeks and beaten up]…. People curse us that we take advantage of them, but they know we help them. Look at them [the passengers that had stepped off], without me they can’t get home! (Personal interview, 16 February 2003)

While certainly benefiting from the checkpoint, Abu-Maysa believed he was helping others resist, as well as doing so himself, for as he once said ‘I didn’t build the checkpoint!’ (or wall).

Some of the resistance was individual: one Qalandia coffee-merchant continuously chose to have his stand destroyed rather than give soldiers free coffee; Ziad, one of the telephone-cards peddlers, refused to sell to soldiers although he desperately needed the money.

The renegotiation of the checkpoint as a space with different meaning and function than what was intended is itself an important, though less palpable, form of struggle. The peddlers were not simply resisting by sustaining their livelihoods despite (or thanks to) the checkpoint (which in many cases had taken away their livelihoods as laborers inside Israel), but in creating these ‘duty-free zones’, they provided the diversion of shopping and interaction concomitant with commerce. Qalandia is a lively bazaar in the midst of an oppressive aesthetic of concrete, barbed wire, bullets and tear gas. If one looked beyond the soldiers, kept one’s eyes down so as to avoid the wall or Israeli flags, one might think one was in a normal Arab bazaar with merchants competing for attention, with the amusement of haggling and getting a good deal. If one forgot that one had just been turned away at gunpoint, one could get distracted flipping through magazines and books, licking a pistachio ice-cream. The fact that Palestinian peddlers, taxi drivers and ‘consumers’ have
renegotiated checkpoints as social and economic spaces of existence, is a commitment to refuse the top-down policies of the Israeli government and military, even if it is the latter who forced these experiences into new spaces. Thus, while checkpoints harm the Palestinian economy, they have also been renegotiated into ‘micro-economic-zones’, sustaining the livelihoods of thousands of people (especially if one considers the wider economic needs of checkpoint workers: blacksmiths to shoe the horses, garages for car maintenance, etc.)

The ad hoc organization needed to maintain ‘order’ at checkpoints is also a form of defiance towards both military power and Oslo’s paralyzing impact on the Palestinian government. Walid’s emergence as the traffic controller is exemplary of new forms of civic organization that emerged during the Second Intifada. Checkpoints have not only shifted where and how resistance happens, but also who is now at the forefront of struggle. Cab drivers, pushcart owners, peddlers: men previously marginal now play a crucial and public role that is increasingly central to the survival of Palestinian society. What Hammami has termed ‘the sub-proletariat of Ford van drivers … once derided as a menace on the roads’ now exemplifies the ‘new uprising’s ethic of getting through anything, by any means, to anywhere’ (2004: 27).

I am not suggesting that these struggles are completely liberatory, as they have serious political limitations. There is a deep irony in calling the checkpoint economy a form of opposition, since checkpoint workers are constrained by the conflict to resort to alternative forms of making an income, and in cases like Abu Ammar’s, require military permission. Peddlers are not breaking the shackles of Israeli oppression by transforming checkpoints into bazaars; cabbies aren’t dismantling the wall by circumventing it. In the words of Hammami, checkpoint workers are ‘poach[ing]’ [the checkpoint] back from being a space of pure brutality and oppression to one in which their own dispossessio[n] can be redressed while creating a means to sustain the entire community’ (2006: 23). Unmistakably, checkpoint workers have not overthrown the checkpoint, but they are contesting it and recreating it as a center rather than ‘boundary’.

The praxis that has resulted from Palestinian renegotiation of checkpoints has internalized within it the contradictions of commercial activity and economic relations under the conditions of Israeli occupation. On the one hand, checkpoints – taken together with spatial measures like curfews, closures, fences and settlements – have contributed to the detriment and demise of the Palestinian economy by preventing, or at best limiting, the flow of people, labor, goods and trade, consequently impoverishing of the nation (Hass, 2002; OCHA, 2007a; Roy, 2001; World Bank, 2007). On the other hand, checkpoints have provided new spaces for, and forms of, Palestinian commerce to flourish − albeit under the gaze of the Israeli military. Qalandia is bustling with merchants selling everything from fresh-picked thyme to pencil sharpeners, from sandals to their labor. Like Qalandia, almost every one of the hundreds of checkpoints has become a ‘central’ enclave: for checkpoint workers, commuters, businessmen, students, rock-throwers, politicians, journalists and friends − although each developed its own economic attributes and makeshift
system. As anthropological spaces, checkpoints are microcosms of contemporary Palestinian society: they express and implement the power relationship of Israel, and the shifting roles of Palestinian workers marginalized by them, who have responded by restructuring space with new functions and new forms.

In response to their shrinking territory (OCHA, 2007a, 2007b; Segal and Weizman, 2003), Palestinians have created new centers of economic and social life. This transformation of checkpoints is nothing short of what Edward Said has called, in reference to literary texts, the Palestinian genius, that ‘expresses itself in crossings-over, in clearing hurdles, activities that do not lessen the alienation, discontinuity, and dispossession, but that dramatize and clarify them instead’ (1985: 41).

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Notes

1 Qalandia is approximately 10 km inside the West Bank, north of Jerusalem. To its north is the Qalandia refugee camp and Ramallah; to its west the Atarot airport and Israeli military zone – originally Qalandia airport, named after a no-longer existing nearby village, the only functioning airport in the West Bank under Jordanian rule. To its east is a stone quarry. To its south is the ‘Greater Jerusalem Area Annexed to Israel’: Ram, a neighborhood that emerged after families were displaced from Jerusalem’s Old City in 1967, and East Jerusalem. The checkpoint was originally established to differentiate Palestinians from Jerusalem and Palestinians from the West Bank, and between Palestinians with permit to enter the ‘Jerusalem Area’ and those without such a permit.

2 Erez is the only crossing point between Israel and the Gaza Strip open to pedestrians and non-commercial vehicles. Established in 1994, it is notorious for its hi-tech dehumanizing aspects. By mid-2006, control of Erez checkpoint was handed over to private security firms, as was At-Tayba in Tulkarem. The IDF is also relinquishing control of checkpoints to the Israeli Border Police, who enforce stricter policies. In February 2006, Givat Havot checkpoint in Hebron was the first to be relinquished to settlers.

3 Terror attacks by Palestinians within Israel only became commonplace after 2000, thus closures throughout the 1990s are criticized by Palestinians as primarily making their land inaccessible and segregating the population.

4 Checkpoint turnstiles are 55 cm wide, compared to the 75–90 cm turnstiles used throughout Israel; parents holding their infants or heavier people cannot pass through them (MachsomWatch, 2004).
5 Behind the checkpoint is a daunting and complicated bureaucracy of permissions required of all Palestinians. A very small minority of West Bankers obtain permits, even fewer Gazans (see Brown, 2004; Hass, 2002; MachsomWatch and Physicians for Human Rights–Israel, 2004; Zureik, 2001).
6 In order to delineate in which direction travel is occurring, I use ‘in’ to refer to inside the West Bank/Gaza Strip, and ‘out’ to refer to towards or in Israel. In 2003, most of the difficulty in passing Qalandia was on the way ‘out’; often soldiers didn’t stop people on the way ‘in’.

References


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