



On the Importance of Thugs

The Moral Economy of a Checkpoint

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For almost three years, the final leg of the commute between Birzeit University and Ramallah meant a one- to two-kilometre walk through the obstacle course of rubble mounds and concrete blocks of the no-drive zone known as the Surda checkpoint. On either side, knots of transit vans jammed into the narrow road waiting to carry passengers off to their final destination (for many travellers, this was simply another checkpoint). The worst days were those when trigger-happy Israeli soldiers suddenly prohibited the stream of travellers from this daily hike, and literally thousands of students on one side and as many villagers on the other were stuck. More usually, soldiers set up shop a few hours a day and toyed with the droves of walking commuters - stopping all or a select few for interminable searches of bags or identity cards, or trying to 'organize' the transit vans and checkpoint peddlers by ramming into their stands or vehicles with their jeeps. At the checkpoint three people were shot to death by the Israeli military, another two died in traffic accidents among the crush of transit vans, at least one man died of a heart attack as he was wheeled across on a metal stretcher, two babies were

Palestinian students cross the Surda checkpoint no-drive zone in the rain.

Source: *Palestine Monitor*

born behind a rubble mound, untold numbers of young men were beaten by soldiers - often in full view of everyone - and no one can count the numbers of injured at the demonstrations that were staged in a futile attempt to get rid of the thing.

On an early morning in December 2003, I arrived for my walk and realized something was up: there were hardly any vans, no taxis, no peddlers and down at the bottom of the hill, in the dip of the road, a large group of people stood in front of a military bulldozer. I went over to Abu Abed, the organizer of the Ford vans on the Ramallah side of the checkpoint, and asked if it was a demonstration.

“No, they want to clear the checkpoint away,” he answered, “but all those people got stuck coming from the other side and now they want to be heroes - for nothing. The bulldozers been trying to remove the concrete blocks, but they won’t get out of its way.”

So another day of clearing away the checkpoint had come. I went over to the rainbow-coloured coffee van/stand that had been servicing the drivers for almost two years, and asked them what they thought. They gave me the national anthem: “Al-humdulillah. We’re happy that the people don’t have to suffer anymore.” A camera crew made its way down to the bottom of the hill - this was the only type of checkpoint event they came out for.

Then I saw Iyad and Ibrahim, two of the porters, pushing their empty carts up the hill. Iyad was glum. “*Ayadat*. It’s gone on holiday. They want to open it up.” So what do you think? I asked. “I’m not worried,” he said. “It will be back.”

It wasn’t long before Abu Abed came over to let off some steam. “Look, here I had 150 vans working this side. Count them. Each one is probably looking after ten others. That’s 1,500 people who aren’t going to eat in a few days. See these two boys from Jenin,” he gestured. “This one’s family put all of their money into his van two weeks ago. Now what are they going to do?”

Getting There

In this uprising, the grassroots organizations of the first Intifada that provided frameworks for civil resistance and the continuation of civilian life evaporated and were replaced by loose structures whose thrust was overwhelmingly military. The vast majority of the society was left with no organized frameworks nor given any operational roles in resisting the occupation. As a number of critics noted early on, the militarization of resistance condemned most of the society to the role of audience.

At the same time, the degree and scale of collective punishment in this Intifada has been more savage. Individuals and their communities have been thrown into a promethean struggle to achieve the basic minimum of social and economic life. The

world sees the dramatic moments, the military invasions of communities, but less so the relentless everyday of collective punishment characterized by a web of military sieges resulting in a crushing regime of physical sanctions. But collective punishment simultaneously creates collective experience, activity and meaning. Checkpoints, ironically, have become the 'public' of the Intifada; they are the sites and spaces where most of the population has a direct everyday confrontation with the occupation as an individual member of the collective. Therefore, it is at the checkpoints, and in relation to them, that the society has developed new meanings for resistance and ad hoc forms of organization, thus acquiring both voice and strategy for their role in the Intifada.

In the everyday, the old nationalist ideology of *sumud* or steadfastness has re-emerged bearing new meaning. While in the 1970s, its meaning emphasized staying on the land and refusing to leave despite the hardships of the occupation, now it has a much more active connotation. In its new form it is about continuing with daily life and movement; the common refrain: "*al hayaat lazim yistamir*" - "life must go on". Thus, *sumud* has become about resisting immobility, the locking down of one's community, and refusing the impossibility of reaching one's school or job. The pivotal backdrop for this commitment to continuing daily life has been the collective memory of how the years of general strikes of the first Intifada backfired, helping destroy businesses and stunting the education of a whole generation of school children. This time, schools, universities and workplaces have all made staying open their rallying cry. In so doing, they helped set the framework for much of the society to follow in the collectively-understood, but individually-achieved daily resistance of simply getting there.

But checkpoints don't just thwart mobility, they create immense chaos. The visible effect is the difficulty people, goods and services have in reaching a destination. Less visible is how checkpoints break the myriad circuits through which a host of social and economic relations flow in order to make life possible. It is not simply that goods cannot reach the market, or a student his or her school, but that the entire web of relations that make education achievable or commerce possible are suddenly shattered - with each broken line sending out ripple effects. To survive means reconstructing these circuits. Initially, this is done by individuals haphazardly trying to find a way to get there. But over time, there is a need to create a new line of movement and informal systems begin to emerge. In the absence of grassroots organizations, networks of informal sector workers with the skills and motivation have been able to step in. Thus, the unlikely symbols of the new steadfastness are not the 'national institutions' such as the schools, but rather the sub-proletariat of Ford transit van drivers. Considered a menace on the roads and lawbreakers during normal times, now their anarchic, semi-criminal bravado subculture (exemplified by the ubiquitous Nike "No Fear" stickers they place on their back windshields) are a testament to the ethic of getting through anything, by anything, and to anywhere despite all obstacles. It is the same masculine lumpen proletariat subculture of the van drivers that has been in many ways the backbone of the informal organizing systems developed to make it possible for individuals to 'get there'.

Aza'r, or thuggishness, is perhaps the most constant force of resistance and means of practical organization at checkpoints themselves – a necessary trait when dealing with the level of chaos created by traffic and people jams, as well as when dealing with the thuggishness of soldiers given immense local power and operational leeway in dealing with the population.

Thugs Against Chaos

A checkpoint creates its first chaos in the regularized systems and routes of transportation. Surda appeared as a roadblock in March 2001 and within the same week the two possible detour routes between Birzeit and Ramallah (what became known as 'al-Jawwal' and 'al-Mahkama') were also blocked. Everywhere within the nexus of blockage, new and often impossible paths were forged by drivers across agricultural land. Due to the terrain, however, no final bypass route could be established for the final leg into Ramallah. The mass transport system that the vast majority of the population depends on is predominantly privately-owned Ford transit vans that can legally hold seven passengers and are licensed to work a given route under the auspices of a local taxi office. The total severing of the road forced Ford drivers to drop off and pick up passengers at whatever side of the checkpoint they had reached, instead of completing the route to the official stop. For months, however, regularizing a new pick-up, drop-off system was impossible, because the road was often 'half open', with soldiers allowing one narrow lane of traffic for vehicles running both directions. The massive traffic jams that ensued ultimately led many commuters to walk through the checkpoint, rather than spend senseless hours waiting to pass through on wheels.

The chaos in the mass transport system was total. While registered Fords continued to try and group at their official stands at the end of each route, independent cowboys were showing up to the checkpoint and carrying away their passengers and livelihoods. At some point the Birzeit drivers put down at the checkpoint, with their old organizer Abu Ahmad at the helm. But the checkpoint was now a lawless frontier, and neither Abu Ahmad nor the drivers were capable of handling the new situation. And so, as Ziad tells it, "The drivers came and asked me to deal with the thugs, because I'm the biggest thug of all." Ziad, in his late 30s, is from Birzeit village, and like most men his age worked as a builder in Israel until the permit system established after the 1993 Oslo Accords forced him to look for work closer to home. With the compensation pay received from his former Israeli boss, he bought a second-hand eight-seater Mercedes and worked as a driver on the Birzeit village - Birzeit university line. When the Intifada started, he grasped the new opportunities and began to work the off-road tracks and wadis, which were more dangerous and hard on the car, but offered much better compensation.

"The drivers came to me and said, Ziad, we need you to organize the line for us at the checkpoint, there are guys from Jalazoun and the villages coming and stealing passengers. They tried two or three times to deal with them, but [the infiltrators]

weren't scared. They came a couple of times, and I refused in the beginning. I thought, do I want to go to a confrontation, a war? What do I need with this mess? But life is made of opportunities and when someone needs you, you can exploit it and benefit. So I told them I'd do it - but not for three shekels a car but five, and that I'd bring with me someone else to help me. They came back and said, take six shekels, just fix the line for us." Ziad's first move was to go to Jalazoun refugee camp, just over the hill from the checkpoint, and talk to men from the local Fateh organization (the *tanzeem*), telling them that a couple of illegal drivers were creating a lot of trouble at the checkpoint. "The tanzeem guys told me to deal with them [the troublemakers] and that they'd back me up, "Ziad says. "Once, twice, three times I'd warn them and then I'd be forced to use my stick. I didn't let the drivers down and the guys in Jalazoun backed me up and the line was organized."

The Ramallah side of the checkpoint posed different problems. With the original route cut in two, there was a need for nearly double the number of vans to carry people to the checkpoint itself and back into Ramallah. The additional transport was provided ad hoc by drivers from outlying villages whose original routes had also been severed; they spied a new need and thus a new opportunity.

What was also different on the Ramallah side of the checkpoint was the presence of the Palestinian Authority, with the military governor and the municipality able to wield some clout and appoint two organizers, one for the vans and another for private taxis. The major chaos on the Ramallah side developed later when another nearby checkpoint that had employed transport vans ('al-Jawwal', as it was dubbed after the nearby telecommunications offices) was finally sealed by the Israeli military. All of these out-of-work drivers then descended on the Ramallah side of the Surda checkpoint, the majority of them hailing from Jalazoun camp.

Abu Abed, in his early 30s and from Jalazoun, had been an organizer of the Jalazoun vehicles at al-Jawwal, "They closed [sic] Jawwal, so we all went to Surda-Ramallah. But when we got there it was controlled by these drivers from al-Mazra'a, and they wouldn't let us work and the place was a mess, full of traffic jams and people stealing turns. We got into a fight, and, you know, we from Jalazoun...well, we have our way of dealing with things." A battle ensued which finally came to the attention of the *Muqata'a* [Yasser Arafat's Ramallah headquarters]. Abu Firas, the Ramallah governor, hammered out a deal with the warring drivers, setting a quota from each village but giving the highest quota to Jalazoun, and making Abu Abed the organizer.

Organizers Ziad and Abu Abed were able to take control not only because they had tough reputations but because they had local cache. The military governor's decision to install Abu Abed as organizer on the Ramallah side was based on calculations of who could bring the required muscle to bear and keep the checkpoint organized. Jalazoun camp was definitely more powerful than any of the nearby villages. On the Birzeit side of the checkpoint, the Birzeit village drivers are the largest group of drivers in the area, and therefore had priority. But, even then, Ziad knew that without

the backing of the right people in Jalazoun camp he wouldn't be able to take control.

Both of the organizers used similar means of creating relative order - as well as justice. 'Organizing' the transport lines meant managing three main problems: controlling who could work; controlling the ongoing competition among sanctioned drivers; and managing the Israeli soldiers as well as the random destruction they wrought. While checkpoints have caused crushing joblessness, they have simultaneously created one of the few growth areas of the economy - public transport. For NIS 15,000 (about \$3,500) an unemployed young man can buy a second- or third-hand Ford van and simply start working the roads. As long as the Palestinian Authority was unable to regulate beyond the cities, a condition rooted in the Oslo agreements and then cemented by the Intifada, hundreds of young men could go into business without paying the complex array of licensing fees and permits that cost almost as much as the vans themselves. 'Mashtub' or 'written-off' permit-less vans began to compete with those that were fully-licensed, eating away the latter's livelihood at little expense. One of the roles of the organizers was to keep these freelancers away or, as time went on, allow them a small quota during the commuter rush hour.

Controlling the 'permitted' drivers was often more complex. The checkpoint divided the road at a narrow passageway, bordered on one side by a steep hill and on the other by a sharp drop to the valley. Squeezing in enough vehicles on both sides to handle literally thousands of commuters, and creating a system where drivers could pick-up passengers, turn around, and move out without jams or accidents was an immense challenge, particularly at peak hours. Making things more difficult, drivers had a huge interest in jumping the queue of as many as 150 vans in order to get an earlier turn and thus make more runs. The accusation of "stealing a turn" linguistically expresses the degree to which taking a turn and making money are one and the same. Drivers frequently talked about their economic fortunes in terms of how long it took them to get a turn; often it took hours.

"You know what a disaster is," bemoaned Ziad, "if the driver takes five to ten minutes to make a pick-up and turn his car around. Behind him are six or seven [drivers] waiting, so two or three of them start taking passengers, jumping a turn. You get a jam as they get stuck, and then a clever one comes in from the side and steals a turn. I have to keep them moving, a minute or a minute and a half to get in and get out.[...] The one who drives in and steals a turn, I have to get him out too, otherwise they will all be stuck, but when I see him next, that's it - I send him out of the line early or catch him at the top [of the queue] and make the passengers get out. There is no 'respect' here, either. You can't. [If] an old driver comes and he takes his time, it makes a mess [... H]e's older than me, I have to respect him, but no, I have to treat all of the drivers the same way. If I wanted to keep things moving, I had to be stubborn."

If controlling the vans was a balancing act between being tough on the drivers, but keeping them happy by keeping the queues moving, dealing with Israeli soldiers was more ambiguous. Vans and taxis were a constant target of soldier patrols. On the

one hand, vans periodically for various reasons took the risk of driving through the checkpoint. When no patrol was there, they would drive at breakneck speed through the rock-strewn paths that remained exclusively for military use. If caught, the punishment depended on the whim of the Israeli patrol: the vehicle might be rammed by a jeep or humvee, the driver might be beaten or, if lucky, only have his keys and identity card taken away.

But soldiers were also obsessed with keeping drivers a certain distance from the rubble mounds that marked the no-drive zone. The drivers, on the other hand, inevitably sought to get as close to the mounds as possible in order to pick up exhausted pedestrians, or simply for lack of manoeuvring room. Over time, soldiers learned that Ziad and Abu Abed were the organizers, and at the end of the day would hand them the keys and identity cards of punished drivers. “The soldiers took the position that this one was responsible for the line,” says Ziad, “so when they had taken keys and IDs and left the drivers without work, they couldn’t be bothered to look for the owner; they’d come and throw them on me, because I know all the drivers.”

More problematic was when soldiers would try and implicate the organizers in their constant battle to push the vehicles back from the no-drive zone. “The soldiers would come and tell me that all of the cars had to move back up the hill, all the way to the top,” recalls Abu Abed. The soldier said “that when they came back if they [the cars] weren’t up there, he’d hold me personally responsible. I told the drivers he wanted them back and kept walking. It was impossible. He came back, they were still there, and so he says, ‘Where is Abu Abed?’ They answer, ‘He’s not here; he’s gone for a walk to the *manara*’ [Ramallah’s distant downtown].”

Ziad also balked at playing the middle man. “In the beginning, the soldiers would come and ask that I tell the drivers to back off from the rubble mound five meters, or tell me they should be as far back as the electrical pole. I’d tell the drivers, ‘The soldiers are demanding one, two, three and you have to move back as far as the pole.’ Whoever pulled back, pulled back and whoever didn’t had their keys and IDs taken. But then I got sick of it, agitated. A soldier called me over and said, ‘Tell the drivers to move up.’ I said to him, ‘Listen, do I work for you as an employee? Every day, you call me over. Come here. Go there. [...] I’m just the organizer of the Birzeit cars.’ He took my identity card and made me sit. It was winter, and I sat for three hours in the rain. He said, ‘That’s so you’re taught a lesson and learn.’ I told him, ‘Nevertheless, you call me over again and I’m not going to answer. It’s not my job.’” Both Ziad and Abu Abed preferred when the soldiers just went about their business directly. “There was a patrol, its officer was Druze; he was as good as he was stubborn. He’d come over saying, ‘Good morning guys’ and that he didn’t want anyone bothering him today. ‘I ask that you move the cars back up to wherever[’, he would say, ’]but don’t get angry with me if I come back and find the cars here. I won’t speak, I’ll just hit them with the jeep.’ And that’s exactly what he’d do.”

The Arrival of the Wheel

Transporting to and from the checkpoint was the work of the vans, but transportation across the no-drive zone was also required for goods and for those who couldn't walk. During the period when the road was 'half-closed', trucks carrying Israeli goods to Palestinian markets could get permits to drive through. But even before the road was fully closed in the summer of 2002, myriad small businesses, farmers, schools, builders, travellers with luggage and students coming back from the holidays all demanded a viable solution for transporting small goods. It came in the form of porters with three-wheel wooden carts.

Reconstructing the history of the porters at Surda is difficult because of their high turnover, as well as competing mythologies about their origin. For the lads from Jalazoun, it all started with a banana hawker from the camp who peddled from a cart at al-Jawwal checkpoint. Escaping from soldiers one day, he ran his cart down the adjoining settler bypass road and arrived at Surda checkpoint, having lost most of his stock along the way. An old man needed to carry some baggage across to the Birzeit side and Ma'mun, the banana peddler, suddenly found himself in an entirely new business.

The contending story is told by the porters who originated from Ramallah's wholesale vegetable market. They say that the governor put the word out around the market that porters were needed at the checkpoint, so a group of four of them went and tried their luck. Among labourers, porters are the lowest rung of the ladder; the majority of the Ramallah market porters are from the poorest area of the West Bank, Hebron-area villages, and sleep through the week in the market itself. Surda, by comparison, turned out to be a small step up.

That is, until the closure of al-Jawwal and the influx of new guys from Jalazoun. Another turf war commenced. "We'd been working at Jawwal and then *khalas*, it was closed," says Mustapha. "The soldiers were always firing on people so everyone started to come through Surda. [...] My brother Nidal had a cart, so I thought I'd work it at Surda, but the Hebronites acted like it was theirs and told us to go away. But what could they do? So we started working. Ali [another brother] started working with a shopping cart, and then the rest came." Although the original handful of Hebronites were unable to defend their territory against the newer group of some five guys from Jalazoun, with the closure of al-Jawwal and the greater pressure on Surda, there was work enough to go around. Porters from Jalazoun and Hebron stayed working together in a mutual alliance against outsiders and, ultimately in friendship, until the checkpoint was removed. "The best thing about working here is that I met these guys," says Mustapha's brother from Jalazoun. "We are like a single hand, like Jamil and Jamal."

A sample of what three porters carried across the checkpoint by one mid-morning suggests the porters' significance: meat from the slaughterhouse in Birzeit, wood, cans of white paint, glasses and plates for a domestic wares shop, packaged foods for

a supermarket, a glass showcase, that day's edition of *al-Quds* newspaper, a stone-cutting machine, luggage, student bags, a car engine, fresh mulberries, and fabric for a small clothes manufacturer. A week's list would equal a river of the myriad commodities that allowed the village communities and Ramallah to continue daily life. The flow of meat, wood and vegetables to the city crossed the stream of industrial and consumer goods going to the villages, as only a hint of the interdependence between the two populations that the checkpoint attempted to destroy.

Porters also regularly carried people across. Children too small to walk and too large to be carried the distance of two kilometres were a constant source of porter revenue. For long intermittent periods when wheelchairs were incapable of making it across the rubble, it was porters who carried the sick and elderly across, including six dialysis patients from the villages and - on a number of occasions - those wounded at the checkpoint. The fact that porters were allowed to operate at a number of checkpoints suggests something about the Israeli military's sordid logic regarding permissible forms of mobility: wheels were okay, just as long as they weren't motorized.

The small, tight-knit nature of the porter group meant that through informal agreement they could create their own rules, including determining who would be allowed to work with them (anyone from Jalazoun and anyone who was a friend or relative of the Hebronites). Within a few months, their numbers had grown and they needed an organizer. But unlike the vans, there was no need for an iron fist, just someone to jot down whose turn it was. As a group they could repel 'outsiders' like the bunch of out-of-work porters who showed up one day from Hawara checkpoint near Nablus. Thus, Mustapha brought in his unemployed cousin Bilal, who was suffering from the after-effects of a stroke and was treated more like a mascot than a supervisor. Eventually, however, the moral economy of allowing in newcomers started to take its toll. At one point, the number of porters had risen to 35. In order to compensate for declining income, they first doubled the price from five to ten shekels, and then, when the no-drive zone doubled in length, they doubled the rate again. The public started to grumble and the governor came to the Ramallah side for a meeting and negotiated the price back down.

The problem of falling income most heavily hit the porters who were married with families; a porter cart was a small investment of NIS 600 (about \$130) and too many people that couldn't be turned away were getting into the business. Thus, three of the older married porters from Jalazoun decided to take a chance on the Israeli's logic of permissible mobility and invested in a horse and cart. "I, Ma'mun and Jihad made a partnership and went to Um al-Sharayit and bought a horse and carriage," reports Mustapha. "It cost us 8,000 shekels [some \$1,700], but we shared it between the three of us."

Horse carriages had been tried before at the Mahkame checkpoint, but were turned back by the soldiers. In the beginning, the same thing happened at Surda. "When we first went down to the checkpoint, the soldiers kicked us out. We tried again and they

threatened to take the horse. So we waited, and then the platoon changed a few days later and we tried again and they thought it was normal. They didn't know. I would go down from five in the morning until eleven and then Jihad would come and take his turn. The next day we'd switch and so on." Mustapha and his partners knew that the carriage allowed them to corner the market on transporting sheep carcasses from the Birzeit slaughterhouse that arrived every morning destined for butcher shops in Ramallah. "The meat needed seven pushcarts; that's 70 shekels. With the horse we could carry it in one load for 20 shekels."

With a horse-drawn carriage able to net at least twice as much money as a cart, within a month there were two other carriages, and by the end of the second month most of the older, married porters were working carriages. A number of farmers from the villages had also moved in. The first team had originally taken over the transport of heavy, unmanageable loads such as building materials and large machinery, and thus not cut too heavily into the demand for porters. But once again, the increase in numbers meant declining income. At this point, horse-driven carriages had also replaced carts in carrying the sick and elderly who could afford them, but they were not regularly used to transport ordinary people. "It was the 'whale' that started," says Mustapha, referring to one of the carriage drivers having trouble in the widening market. "He starts carrying people with their bags and baggage for ten shekels, so we all started doing it. What could we do? One does it and destroys everyone else, we had no choice." The 'whale' was an energetic porter from Jalazoun who was universally condemned as greedy, and worse yet, stingy. Competition between the carriage drivers drove the prices even further down; soon you could carry your bags and ride in a carriage with other people for first five shekels, and then only two.

Under these new circumstances, by the summer of 2002, the remaining porters and their carts were close to going out of business; those who remained were young boys who didn't have the capital to get into the horse-and-carriage business. Then, in July, all of these entrepreneurs were swept out of business in the lone achievement of the great American roadmap - the dissolution of the Surda and Ein Arik checkpoints. Five weeks later when the checkpoint was abruptly reinstated, the carriage drivers and porters hammered out an agreement, aided by a new configuration of barrier dirt mounds at both ends of the re-established checkpoint. So that the younger boys could keep working, it was agreed that a customer would be given the choice of going in a horse cart with other riders for six shekels which only went the short distance between the two mounds that marked the no-drive zone. A porter cart, on the other hand, would take riders for ten shekels around the mounds all the way from one transport van on one side to another transport van on the other. In comparison to the manner of resolution of other internal conflicts at the checkpoint, the porters had no leverage to force such equanimity from the carriage drivers. Instead, the motivation for the carriage drivers' largesse was that most of the remaining porters were either relatives, friends or from their own communities.

The Liminal Zone

Ironically, the checkpoint took men from the margins and allowed them a role that was fundamentally and publicly important for the entire society's survival. The checkpoint workers, victims of the same regime of sanctions that affected the people they provided services for, had found a way to turn that same source of dispossession into a living. In addition, their ability to work at the checkpoint was dependent, if not on soldiers' permission, at least on their indifference. As such, these workers ultimately inhabited a liminal position on the sharp line between oppressor and oppressed, exploiter and exploited that was so clearly embodied at the checkpoint.

By the time the concrete blocks were for the third and likely final time swept away by Israeli military bulldozers in December 2003, there were roughly 25 porters, 18 horse carriage drivers, as much as 400 transit vans, as well as another 30 small taxis working at Surda. Added to this were the peddlers, whose numbers averaged about 30 in good weather, and rose to as many as 70 during the last Ramadan season. In sum, that meant that as many as 540 people made a living from this checkpoint on any given day. This count does not include the service sector that sprang up to feed and quench the thirst of the checkpoint workers: the coffee vans, cigarette hawkers, drink peddlers, kebab stands and blacksmiths for the horses.

For almost three years the United Nations Office of the Commissioner for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has documented a nearly-constant total of more than 600 Israeli checkpoints and roadblocks strangling communities throughout the West Bank. But in its last 18 months of its existence, Surda became exceptional by virtue of its strategic location within this larger web of closure. With the sealing of al-Jawwal checkpoint, Surda became the sole passageway for northern West Bankers to enter and leave Ramallah. Then, after the checkpoint's reinstatement in October 2003, it became the main hub for anyone wanting to move between the northern and southern West Bank. As such, it became a magnet for dispossessed workers from all over the West Bank, coming to make money off the thousands of commuters that passed here every day.

And there was good money to be made. Van drivers and taxi drivers were making twice as much as they could driving under normal circumstances along their regular routes. Porters and horse carriage drivers were making the best money of their lives, especially during the heavy commute days of Thursdays and Saturdays when students and workers were going or returning from the Friday weekend. In addition, the high demand and lack of social connection between checkpoint workers and strangers from all over the West Bank meant that pure market logic grew to define the relationship, if not among the workers themselves, at least vis-a-vis customers. Especially on high commute days, standard and 'fair' rates began to dissolve for those who came from beyond the original communities affected by the checkpoint; their fare was based on on-the-spot assessments of what they could pay.

“I saw this guy in a nice suit, with his wife all powdered and made up and all these suitcases,” related Ali, a young porter. “It was clear they’d just gotten married, so I wink at the guys and go over and say ‘Congratulations’, and it gets even better. He’s from Deir Dibwan (a village known for its residents’ migration to the US), so he asks me how much the ride costs and I tell him ‘Let it be on me.’ I got the cases to the other side, and then just like that he slaps a \$100 bill in my hand. I pretend to refuse, but all the time I’m signalling to my Dad who has the van. He picks them up and makes another I-don’t-know-how-many dollars off of them.” The new greed was not lost on the communities originally affected by the checkpoint. The October re-instatement had hit them terribly hard, but they saw it was a great boon for the checkpoint workers.

Remembers Mustapha, “I got sick of it. The work was going well, but [...] I was ready to drop it, because there wasn’t a single person passing who didn’t say, ‘Exploiter’ or ‘You’re the ones that are keeping the checkpoint [i.e., the road] closed’. The girls from the university would pass by and say, ‘You’re the cause of the checkpoint.’ I got sick, ill, [from] people calling us collaborators. One day I was carrying a man, young, a clerk, in the carriage and he starts saying to me, ‘You guys don’t want the checkpoint to open, do you? You’re the ones that want to close it. You’re the cause of the closure.’ And he’s riding back there! I pulled the bridle of the horse and grabbed him by the shirt and told him to get out. He’d given me five shekels and I said to him ‘Here’s your five shekels, I’m throwing it in the valley, and here’s five shekels from my pocket, and don’t you dare try and ride with me again. I’ll slaughter you.’”

Abu Abed sums up the dilemma simply. “The checkpoint brought suffering for everyone, but you had ten percent benefiting and 90 percent losing.”

Thus the checkpoint ultimately produced a profound contradiction in the economic interests of the workers versus the majority of the population passing through. But this contradiction was not only expressed in relation to the checkpoint’s presence or removal, it also arose around the issue of resistance. As Ziad and Abu Abed’s earlier comments suggest, workers tried to walk a fine line with the soldiers. They did not want to actually participate in or be viewed as cooperating with the soldiers’ dirty work. At the same time, they could not afford to get into open confrontations and thereby lose their livelihood. In the first 18 months of the checkpoint’s existence, before the initial labour infrastructure developed, there were three mass demonstrations organized by Birzeit university to try and get rid of the blockade. The outcome of each demonstration was simply the army’s hardening of the checkpoint regime, and the implicit lesson, lived over and over again when anyone tried to intervene on behalf of students being interrogated or abused by the military, was that any resistance would simply make matters worse.

But spontaneous demonstrations did happen, initiated by students and young men for whom the constant harassment periodically became too much. Those moments of collective resistance created profound dilemmas for checkpoint workers. Thrown stones and rampaging soldiers not only hurt bodies, but destroyed vans, damaged

peddler stands and endangered goods, as well as resulting in the complete sealing of the checkpoint for an afternoon or even a few days. In these cases, workers always talked about the larger collective interest, i.e., the damage done by young kids blowing off steam.

“Particularly at the checkpoint, as much as you attempted to resist the soldiers, you couldn’t,” said Ziad. “Because if you started to resist and tried to hurt them, *we* were the ones who got hurt, and not the soldiers. A stone gets thrown at them - fine. But in the end, the stone that’s thrown breaks the windshields of the cars. Nothing is going to happen to the jeep, it’s protected. And next thing you know, their [the soldiers’] gunfire is breaking more windshields.” The clear class difference between demonstrating students from the university and the sub-proletariat of van drivers and porters only served to accentuate the latter’s contention that middle-class kids (who “didn’t know how to fight properly” anyway) were simply creating a mess for those needing to pass or the poor trying to make a living.

But as attested by Ziad’s willingness to sit in the rain for three hours rather than allow a soldier to feel he had rights over him, there were acts of everyday resistance by the workers in the face of the soldiers. These were often open, individual confrontations when soldiers stepped across an invisible line of what workers saw as permissible within the rules of dominator and dominated. Examples include the heroic story of the coffee peddler who repeatedly chose to let soldiers smash his stand with a jeep, rather than provide them with free coffee, or the young van driver who, on behalf of the others, slapped a soldier who had cursed their mothers. But the more significant resistance could be found in the less dramatic but tenacious everyday subversion of the checkpoint regime itself. Checkpoint workers constantly subverted physical boundaries: at night they stealthily pushed concrete blocks a few more inches apart to make way for horse carriages, or trampled the edges of newly-made dirt barriers so that porter carts could get to the other side. And through both necessity and ingenuity, they reclaimed the space of the checkpoint from being purely a site of oppression and brutality into one where livelihood, social life and even sociability could be recovered.

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