

Between games and propaganda: the removal of checkpoints and roadblocks in the West Bank

By [Global Research](#)

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At the beginning of April, Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak announced to US Secretary of state Condoleezza Rice the removal of 61 roadblocks throughout the West Bank. This was supposed to “make life easier for Palestinians” and to show that Israel is doing its best to prepare for peace talks later this year.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has examined the Israeli claim carefully and has found that only 44 roadblocks had been removed, well short of the promised 61. According to OCHA, 6 more of the roadblocks on Barak’s list have been left in place. The remaining 11 simply never existed.

A close examination of the 44 roadblocks which existed and were removed reveals that most of them had no implications whatsoever for Palestinians’ freedom of movement. Only 5 of these 44 obstacles were classified by the U.N. as “significant” for Palestinians living in the area. The remaining obstacles were classified as of “little”, “no”, or “questionable” significance, often noting that there were other major roadblocks nearby, that they were located in insignificant areas (such as open fields) or even that some had been built and removed on the same day.



Tulkarm and villages around
OCHA map (detail)

Building roadblocks in the morning, removing them in the afternoon

This is what happened in the area of Tulkarm, more specifically on the roads connecting the villages of Bal’a to Anabta and Dhinnaba to Izbet Abu Khmeish.

On 31 March, Israeli soldiers went to this area and closed both roads by blocking them with stones and sand, preventing anyone from getting through. The main roads in between the villages were closed as well as the smaller alternative dirt roads, leaving would-be travellers no option but to return from where they came.

Later that day, soldiers returned to the area and removed a few of these roadblocks. The Israeli army then published an official statement explaining that they had removed the promised number of roadblocks. Their list included the roadblocks near Tulkarm established in the morning and removed in the afternoon.

The Israeli statement obviously did not mention the absurd character of these roadblock removals, neither did it mention that several roadblocks on the road between Dhinnaba and

Izbat Abu Khmeish were also established on the same day, but were not removed.



Erected in the morning, removed in the afternoon...

Photo: Palestine Monitor

The soldiers' game

These sand or earth mounds are but one technique often used by the Israeli military throughout the West bank to restrict the Palestinians' ability to move. There are now 580 permanent "points of closure" throughout the West bank, from trenches and other obstacles to manned checkpoints.

In the Tulkarm district, new Israeli roadblocks and checkpoints suddenly established on unexpected roads have become a daily reality for Palestinians. A local explains that there is almost never any specific reason for these checkpoints or roadblocks, "it just depends on the mood of the soldiers". People in Tulkarm cynically refer to it as "the soldiers' game".

Around the villages of Deir Al Ghusun and Al Jarushiya, north of Tulkarm, there seems to be a lot of these 'games' going on. Israeli soldiers regularly decide to place their jeeps or tanks in the middle of the roads, forbidding any vehicle to cross. There is almost never a reason for these actions.

A student at the Arab American University of Jenin explains the difficulties he has faced in the past: "sometimes the soldiers put a heap of sand and stones in the middle of the only passable road, obliging everybody to get out of the bus and to carry on by foot, searching for other alternative routes". The people here are forced to be creative, because every day a new obstacle can be erected on the road to their jobs, schools, families or friends. Whether it is an earth mound, a manned checkpoint or just an Israeli jeep or tank stationed in the middle of the road, each time the Palestinians have to find new ways to get around.



Erected the same morning, not removed...

Photo: Palestine Monitor

One story among tens of thousands

For a Palestinian born and raised in a refugee camp, finding a decent, well-paid job in a financial institution in Ramallah – Palestine's business-capital – sounds like the perfect solution to get one's family out of the misery and despair of the camp. But the reality proves to be different.

Although the distance between the Tulkarm refugee camp and Ramallah is only about 50 km, the journey takes between one and a half to four hours, or more. The roads that are 'allowed for Palestinian use' are in bad condition but one has also to take into account unpredictable waiting times at checkpoints and the daily possibility of newly erected checkpoints or roadblocks on the way.

T., a young, well educated and motivated Palestinian man is employed in Ramallah, and thus able to contribute financially to help his family. But he was born in Tulkarm Refugee Camp. "When I arrive at a checkpoint", T. explains, "the soldiers will ask me why a guy from the refugee camp wants to go to Ramallah".

Explaining about his job or even showing his official employee's card has often proved insufficient for the soldiers, who refused him passage many times. Once again, T. says, "it just depends on the mood of the soldiers, for them it's all just a game".

Trying to avoid these difficulties, T. decided to rent a flat in Ramallah, near his work. "At this moment I'm living in Ramallah, making a living for myself and supporting the rest of my family in the camp."

Every other week T. returns to Tulkarm to spend the weekend with his family. But his problems are not solved. Reaching one of the several checkpoints on his road, and showing his official new address in Ramallah, the soldiers now ask him for what reason a young man from Ramallah would want to go the Refugee camp in Tulkarm. And they often deny him access.

Misleading propaganda

The Israeli military or the Defence Ministry regularly announce the removal of roadblocks or checkpoints to "make life easier for Palestinians", or as a "gesture of goodwill towards the Palestinians". These announcements are always well covered in international media, serving as a perfect propaganda tool for Israel.

Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak has become a specialist in proudly announcing these removals. But careful research on the ground reveals that the Israeli claims are consistently misleading or even downright lies. Each time the same techniques are used: removing checkpoints that had been abandoned years ago or that had been replaced by other checkpoints nearby, erecting new roadblocks and removing them on the same day, removing roadblocks in the middle of open fields or just claiming to have removed certain roadblocks that did not actually exist in the first place.

At Annapolis, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert had promised Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas that the number of roadblocks would be reduced. However data from OCHA, B'Tselem and Machsom Watch proves that the numbers have increased, from 563 to 580.

Checkpoints, roadblocks and segregated roads, have all become a grim part of daily life for Palestinians living in the West Bank, where the Israeli occupation has evolved into a fully fledged Apartheid system. Soldiers play their games with impunity while everybody knows who will be the winners and the losers.

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