



## A COUNTERVIEW CHECKPOINTS 2004



**MachsomWatch** is an organization of Israeli women, founded in February 2001. Its main activity is observations at the checkpoints in the West Bank and Jerusalem that are operated by the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) and the Border Police, reporting and documenting events there. In cases of gross violations of human rights, severe intimidation and restrictions on movement, we try to intervene and, where possible, to prevent them.

Our cumulative experience and everyday contacts with IDF soldiers and the Palestinians crossing the checkpoints, have brought us all to an unequivocal demand – 'end the Occupation and checkpoints'. We are working to change the policy that denies the Palestinians freedom of movement within their own territories, and to terminate the occupation that is destroying Palestinian society and has a far-reaching corrosive impact on Israeli society, too.

Close to 500 women are members of MachsomWatch. They are drawn from different backgrounds and have a broad range of personal and social characteristics. All our activities are voluntary. Most women are spurred to join the organization by their opposition to the oppression of people in the occupied territories, where the overwhelming majority long for peace and are innocent of any crime. Some women are also concerned about the future of Israeli society, throughout which the occupation has left its destructive mark. All of us are deeply ashamed that those breaches of human rights are performed in our names, as citizens of the Israeli state.

Members of MachsomWatch set out in small groups, seven days a week, and observe dozens of checkpoints and barriers throughout the West Bank, from north of Jenin to the south Hebron Hills. At most checkpoints, shifts are dispatched twice a day, complying with the peak hours when people pass through them. At the end of each shift, reports in both Hebrew and English are posted on the MachsomWatch website. Each month, a summary of the previous month's reports is distributed, containing the main findings from the observations. In addition, a weekly digest in English is sent out to an electronic mailing list of several

hundred individuals and institutions, mostly abroad. During 2004, we conducted around 3,000 shifts at the various checkpoints.<sup>2</sup>

In this report, we address mainly the **internal** checkpoints and barriers which impede movement from village to village, from villages to towns, and from one governorate to another inside Palestinian territory. They are not checkpoints controlling entry to Israel, and their sole purpose is to dissect the West Bank into separate enclaves, isolated from each other and encircled by ever-growing blocs of settlements. The checkpoint regime is arbitrary and random, and the regulations governing them change constantly, often dependent on the whim of a soldier on duty at the checkpoint. All of this goes on although it is feasible to protect Israeli citizens without humiliating and intimidating other people, and without harming the sick, women about to give birth, children and the old.

The policy of oppression and dehumanization is inherent in the very quality of the control over another people. It seeps into the consciousness and behaviour of the soldiers serving at checkpoints and in the occupied territories. The situation gnaws at the capacity to uphold one of Israel's Basic Laws – Human Dignity and Liberty – which speaks of moral and human values towards others. Of necessity, the implications of this situation diverge from conditions at the checkpoints, and they do not halt at the border with Israel. Young people who receive legitimization for assailing human dignity find it hard to internalize the culture grounded on human rights that Israeli society, as a democratic society, aims to impart.

Behind the scenes of the checkpoints is a suffocating bureaucracy of restrictions on movement, orchestrated by the Civil Administration. Every movement by Palestinians from place to place, for whatever purpose, is contingent on receiving a magnetic card, a prerequisite for receiving a crossing permit (the *tasrich*). They can only obtain the various permits at the regional District Coordination Office (DCO). In itself, this is not a simple action for people whose freedom of movement is restricted, and it entails prolonged waiting, at the expense of work-days. At the end of this tortuous obstacle race, there is no certainty that the person will actually receive the permits they require, because many citizens of the occupied territories are classified as **denied entry** by the General Security Services (GSS) or the police: in this case, they are refused magnetic cards.

At the checkpoints and the DCOs we witness the methodical embittering of the Palestinians' lives – let them stay at home, let them move to the Bantustans<sup>3</sup> Israel has allocated them within their territories, and most wished-for – let them emigrate to other countries. The one word that mustn't be voiced but which hovers over all this is 'transfer'. Those who remain should be exhausted by the daily war to survive, until political resistance becomes beyond their capacities. The incessant humiliations, the difficulties and suffering and most of all the hopelessness, are instrumental in terror of the worst kind – perpetrated by suicide bombers who have nothing more to lose.

"...living for four years from checkpoint to checkpoint. You leave in the morning never knowing when they'll arrive, when return. If at all. How many humiliations they'll suffer in silence. If they say a word, or take a little step beyond the instructions (which are written in air, cancelled and changed over the communications systems) they will have to pay the price. The IDF charges a high tariff, they can shoot at them, according to the directives. Soldiers are programmed, bullying with their shouted instructions. Maybe the soldier will be almost courteous. But next time it's an obnoxious one. The soldier is doing his duty, stands at the checkpoint and screens Palestinians who are stained with terror, those who aren't...and at the instructions of the 'world's most moral army', as a gesture, he allows the last ones to go through (Huwwara checkpoint, 13 December).

This report presents the 'hard facts' that we witness daily at the checkpoints. The storehouse of testimonies that we've collected is not found in the official reports of any other agency. It reflects only the tip of the iceberg of what is really happening in the occupied territories. Our reports provide people in Israel and around the world with a glimpse of local reality. But while the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) has trouble coping with news items about less than moral behaviour by its soldiers, the Israel public tries to downplay the accounts, claiming they are atypical incidents. Most of the soldiers keep silent, the testimonies by the Palestinians – the victims themselves – are unacceptable to Israeli society, and so we believe our evidence to be vital.

Not only is it important to reveal events to the public eye. We also document and strip bare the everyday routine of occupation, where there are few cases of aggravated physical violence and not many dramatic incidents, but instead considerable sadness, despair and no way out. Anyone who has seen the anxious smile on a man's face as he extends his ID to be checked by an indifferent woman-soldier in the checking-position, cannot forget or disregard the injustice. We document the little humiliations and detentions, day after day, the ignoring of the Palestinian Other's humanity, as well as the expression of the overflowing rage of an occupied people.

In addition to our work at the checkpoints, we file written complaints on intolerable cases. In 2004, we sent around 100 complaints to administration figures, military authorities, the Border Police, the Israel Police, and other agencies. Response to our complaints is minimal and generally insufficient.<sup>4</sup> Last year, we appeared several times before the Knesset's Constitution, Law & Justice Committee and the Committee for the Advancement of the Status of the Child. We also met with high echelons of the army, the Civil Administration, the Israel Police and Knesset members. There is a dual goal to the meetings – to present the unique information we have gathered, so it will be impossible to say in future "we knew nothing about it"... , and also to protest insistently the very existence of the occupation and the checkpoints.

After four years at the checkpoints, day after day, we can state with a certainty we did not have at the start, that there are two separate groups at the checkpoints. One group, holding the gun, has all the power and is corrupted by it. The other group is oppressed and humiliated but definitely not defeated. Each functions alongside the other, linked by lunatic and tragic ties of humiliators and humiliated, controllers and controlled – soldiers and Palestinians, Palestinians and soldiers. When we watch the soldiers, as women peace-activists, we consider them as agents of the occupation. When we watch them as if they were our sons – flesh of our flesh, bone of our bones, the next generation of our shared society – we are appalled by the intolerable experiences they undergo and the moral values they crush underfoot. Those ties must be unravelled – the checkpoints dismantled, the Occupation terminated. We must reconstruct Israel's moral robustness.

Notes

2 See Appendix: Maps.

3 Bantustan – the state of the Bantu. The Bantu peoples was the name given by the whites in South Africa to the indigenous people. The programme (The Great Apartheid) was to set up several 'autonomous states' of this kind. Each state would be allocated to land that was unsuited to agriculture, without resources, cities, a coastline, airport, border with any other nation apart from South Africa. Thirteen percent of the area of South Africa was allotted to the Bantustans. All blacks (not Cape Coloureds or Asians) were declared citizens of one of those 'states', and thus became 'foreign workers' in South Africa.

4 See Appendix: Complaints.



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