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Siege Warfare Israel in the West Bank and Gaza Strip
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Middle East

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Media coverage of the current Israeli-Palestinian confrontation has tended to emphasize its most violent and spectacular aspects. While these are hardly to be discounted and have devastated numerous lives, it is noteworthy that during almost two years of conflict the cumulative death toll on both sides stands at approximately 2,000, a figure which compares rather favourably with the horrific statistics produced in Beirut or more recently the Balkans.

This apparent discrepancy is in large measure accounted for by the nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The media's concentration on its most visible and visual aspects, and natural predilection for the more belligerent and bellicose statements produced by the various parties involved, has tended to obscure the reality that this is not a war between Israel and Palestine.

Formally, in fact, Palestine does not even exist, but is rather an occupied territory. Most of it – some 40% of the Gaza Strip and more than 80% of the much larger West Bank – remained under full or partial Israeli rule on the eve of the current confrontation in September 2000. The remaining areas, consisting of disjointed enclaves, each of which is fully encircled by territory controlled by Israel, are administered by the Palestinian Authority (PA), which is neither a state nor a government and which exercises limited jurisdiction rather than sovereignty. Pursuant to the bilateral Israeli-Palestinian agreements which established the PA, the latter does not control its own internal or external borders, airspace, or subterranean resources, and does not even possess the right of safe passage between the fragmented territories it administers – whether between the West Bank and Gaza Strip or between Ramallah and Nablus within the West Bank.

The only army in the putative Palestinian state is in fact that of Israel. The Oslo agreements sanctioned its continued presence within the West Bank and Gaza Strip, in part to protect the numerous Jewish colonies, which have continued to expand at a furious pace since 1993 and in so doing have served to further fragment Palestinian territorial-demographic continuity. For its part the PA was explicitly prevented from establishing a standing army, and possesses only a lightly-armed if oversized police force.

If the above helps explain the origins of the current Palestinian uprising, it similarly helps us understand why armed force is

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only one of the instruments deployed by Israel in its attempt to crush it, and perhaps not even the most important one. Largely hidden from the television cameras and reporters' notebooks, Israel has by virtue of its continued rule over most of the occupied territories and overwhelming military advantage imposed a prolonged and increasingly strict siege upon West Bank and Gaza Strip population centres, which has devastated Palestinian society, destroyed the economy, and paralysed normal life.

A central characteristic of the Israeli siege (commonly known as 'closure') is its comprehensive nature. Rather than subjecting specific individuals, categories of persons, or particular localities to the various restrictions involved, these are applied wholesale to all Palestinians, their goods and vehicles included. Exemptions may be granted on an individual and selective basis, but this is an increasingly rare phenomenon.

The scope and effects of the siege can most clearly be observed in the Gaza Strip. Some 45 kilometres long and between 5 and 8 kilometres wide, this miniscule territory which is among the most densely populated on earth (pop. 1,000,000) is surrounded by Israel on three sides with the sea accounting for the fourth. Effectively hemmed in by multiple layers of razor wire and with its flat-surfaced perimeters constantly patrolled, it is impossible to exit without first obtaining a plethora of permits and passes from the Israeli authorities and subsequently undergoing an array of humiliating security procedures in facilities which look like they have been designed to process cattle. Within the Gaza Strip, Israel controls a number of 'choking points' – i.e. key intersections – which gives it the power to regulate or prevent altogether passage from one region of the Gaza Strip to the other. On several occasions, thousands of Palestinians have been left with no alternative but to walk (and in some cases swim) several kilometres along the beach in their daily effort to get from one town to the

other. On others, Israeli forces have used the power of armed persuasion to close even this route, killing several people in the process.

Permanent siege

In a region which suffered from planned neglect during the decades after 1967 and became highly dependent upon the Israeli labour market for economic survival as a matter of design, the most obvious effect has been the visible disintegration of the local economy. Consistent Israeli prevention of the export of goods from the Gaza Strip to Israel, the West Bank, and regional and international markets (but not of the import of Israeli goods) have only heightened the crisis, to the point where the World Bank reports that more than half of Gaza Strip families are now surviving – or not – on less than two dollars a day.

The workings of 'internal closure' are by contrast more easily observed in the West Bank. In recent months, Israel has resorted to a permanent siege upon each individual Palestinian population centre, and on the towns and cities which function as regional hubs in particular. Travel between Ramallah and Nablus, which during heavy traffic could take approximately an hour, currently consumes the better part of a day. With the West Bank fragmented into dozens of sealed military districts maintained through the agency of many more permanent and temporary military checkpoints, such a trip would involve a passenger's repeated transfer from one taxi to another, crossing – or rather walking around – each checkpoint by foot. At times soldiers take satisfaction in observing Palestinians being forced to trudge along broken paths for several kilometres at a time, other times they shoot to intimidate, or injure, or kill.

Such practices – which have also on repeated occasions included the closure of the land crossings between the West Bank and Jordan and the Gaza Strip and Egypt – have, needless to say, had a severe impact not only on economic life, but also social and family relations. With commuting rendered all but impossible, some Palestinians have lost or left their jobs, while others have opted to move to the cities in which they work, away from their families and despite the raging conflict. Civil administration and services – and not less the ability of the Palestinian security forces to impose their authority in more isolated areas – have also been negatively affected.

Sequestering basic services

It is particularly noteworthy that humanitarian and other services which are normally exempt from collective punishment in times of conflict are largely subject to the same regulations and restrictions as the rest of Palestinian society. Villagers, who are typically dependent upon regional hubs for proper medical care, legal matters, and other such services, have been particularly hard hit. In a number of documented cases, for example, village women were forced to give birth at checkpoints because soldiers would not let them pass to reach maternity hospitals located in nearby towns. In several

cases, the woman and/or newborn infant died as a result.

During its recent full-scale invasions of Palestinian cities beginning in February 2002, the Israeli military went so far as to systematically prevent local and foreign medical services from evacuating the wounded and ill to hospital. While no precise statistics are available, it is beyond doubt that not a few Palestinians died from otherwise treatable wounds and medical conditions as a result.

Academic life has also been a casualty of the Israeli siege. Throughout the occupied territories, pupils and students, teachers, lecturers and staff, have been unable to travel to places of learning. University life has been particularly hard hit, because such a high proportion of students and staff do not live on or within the vicinity of the campus. Research – whether conducted in libraries or in the field, and also that which depends on exchange with colleagues within or outside the region – has in many respects and instances been paralysed as well.

Until recently the siege operated at various levels; with the boundaries between the occupied territories and Israel permanently sealed off long before the first suicide attack, the 'internal closure' was at times more strict than at others, or concentrated in specific regions while relaxed elsewhere. In May 2002, Israel announced that it would introduce a new permit system whereby the internal closure would become permanent and institutionalized as well; travel between West Bank enclaves (i.e. from Hebron to Bethlehem) would henceforth require a special permit, valid for only a specified period of time. The severity of this measure suggests that Israel announced it – as opposed to quietly proceeding to implementation – primarily in order to observe how the world would react to the news and to calibrate its position accordingly. The results so far are in this respect hardly encouraging. Coupled with the increasingly violent and systematic onslaught against Palestinian institutions, this additional strangulation of Palestinians' ability to lead normal lives is likely to precipitate yet another escalation in the conflict.

Palestinian workers wait to go to their jobs in Israel.



PHOTO: AHMED JADALLAH, © PALESTINIAN REUTERS, 2001

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