

# Travelling and Driving with Palestinians



By Mashhour Abudaka

**T**he saying “If you want to know a people’s manners, drive among them” may not be true in the Palestinian case. Average Palestinian drivers can enter three different security zones while driving only a very short distance. They may have to travel 20 miles to reach their final destination only one or two miles away – because they have to go around a roadblock set up by the Israeli army. Palestinians often wait for hours in their cars or on a bus because an Israeli army checkpoint is hindering their passage or because of a traffic jam caused by Israeli obstruction of minor roads in order to clear the way for a handful of Jewish settlers who are using a major road.

According to the Oslo Agreement, the West Bank (excluding Jerusalem) is divided into three categories of civilian control: Area A, where the Palestinian Authority (PA) carries responsibility for civil affairs and for maintaining security; Area B, where the PA is responsible for civil affairs but where both the PA and the Israeli army are supposed to share responsibility for maintaining security; and Area C, where the PA has the responsibility for civil affairs but the task of maintaining security is fully in the hands of Israeli Occupation army. After the year 2000, during the second Intifada, the Israeli army began to enter Area A and in effect made Area A the same as Area B. Since the mid-1990s, the Israeli occupation has imposed a closure regime on the West Bank and Gaza (WBG) that has increased its restrictiveness, limiting the movement of people and goods and, ultimately, affecting the welfare of Palestinians. The regime restricts movement from the WBG into Israel, and from the West Bank into Gaza and vice versa, with devastating effects on the Palestinian society and economy.

Palestinians who drive outside Area A are subjected to Israeli traffic regulations, which are unknown to Palestinian drivers (for example, vehicle headlights are required to be switched on during daylight hours

between November 1 and March 31). The Israeli traffic police impose heavy fines on Palestinian drivers for any traffic violations.

Palestinian cars are easily identified by the color of their license plates – green numbers on a white background – whereas all Israeli ID holders, including Jewish settlers and East Jerusalem Palestinians, have yellow license plates with black numbers. This situation creates additional animosity and frustration between the two sides of the conflict and even between Palestinians holding Palestinian IDs and East Jerusalemites holding Israeli IDs. Thus a car with yellow plates driven by Jerusalemites can be mistaken for a settler car by Palestinians on roads outside West Bank cities and towns. Within West Bank cities and towns, Jerusalemites are accused of violating the Palestinian traffic regulations by jumping traffic signs and parking on pavements etc. because the Palestinian traffic police are not allowed to subject them to the same regulations as Palestinian drivers. The Oslo Accords

exempt all Israeli ID holders from Palestinian jurisdictions, which renders them immune to any fines imposed by Palestinian courts.

The Palestinian police cannot operate in most of Area B due to restrictions imposed by the one-sided Oslo Agreement. Even when the most serious traffic violations are committed in areas B or C, the Israeli police will only be concerned if the traffic offence is against Israeli settlers. In those two areas one can find unlicensed and uninsured, even stolen cars, and serious accidents are committed daily at the expense of Palestinian public and private property.

Of the 277,300 Palestinian vehicles in the West Bank, about 7,000 of them are registered as owned by the government. Due to the chaotic situation created by the Oslo Accords, 27,500 of them are unlicensed and uninsured. This results in a huge direct financial loss to the Palestinian public finance which is estimated to amount to around 25 million shekels a year.



*Cars with yellow license plates illegally parked on a curve are obstructing the view but may not be fined by Palestinian police. Photo courtesy of the author.*



Photo by Muhammad Awad.

The Oslo Agreement created a custom union with the Palestinian National Authority; this in effect allows Israel to dump vehicles into the Palestinian side. To protect its interests, the PNA does not allow any Palestinian to buy or license



This truck with yellow license plates cannot be fined by Palestinian police in a Palestinian city. Photo courtesy of the author.

an Israeli vehicle that is taxed by Israel (double taxation is not allowed according to the Oslo Agreement). This means that Palestinians who seek to buy cheap second-hand cars, buses, or trucks must go to the Israeli market to look for second-hand vehicles. The untaxed vehicles in Israel, such as public buses, taxis, farm tractors, and haulage trucks, are not owned privately. Well-maintained, privately owned vehicles are taxed. The former tend to need much more maintenance and require spare parts that are smuggled in through areas B and C, outside the control of the Palestinian Authority, and avoid taxation. These vehicles normally do not have local Palestinian manufacturer support. All new cars in the Palestinian market are bought from recognized dealers and subjected to Palestinian taxes.

Numerous traffic bottlenecks are created by the notorious Israeli checkpoints, such

as Qalandiya, between Ramallah and Jerusalem, or the "Container" checkpoint, which separates the southern West Bank from Ramallah and the northern West Bank, or Za'atara, which separates the northern West Bank from Ramallah and the south. Here, cars queue for hours and the drivers in their frustration approach the checkpoint through all lanes, the ones leading in and the ones leading out, causing a traffic jam on both sides of the checkpoint. Israeli soldiers watch with little concern.

At the Erez crossing between Gaza and Israel, as if it were not enough to go through the thorough Israeli search and inspection procedures, those who enter will also be searched, examined, and registered once more by the Palestinian side – controlled by Hamas – which applies a different standard as to the nature of restricted goods.

Palestinians travelling from the West Bank to Jordan or from Jordan to the West Bank must travel across the so-called Allenby Bridge. Here, they face a number of procedures that in many cases cause delays for hours: getting in and out of cars and buses for checks, examinations, and thorough searches by Israeli secret service personnel for questioning that at times results in the refusal to issue a travel permit. For a Palestinian, this journey may take a whole day – to cross a mere couple of miles.

As for Gazans, they are under siege. Gazans generally cannot cross into the West Bank; only a few, under exceptional circumstances, are allowed to pass through. When and if the Rafah crossing point to Egypt is opened, it becomes, as you can imagine, hell on earth. It has been reported that people have died in the mayhem that is caused when crowds of people try to cross into Egypt. The violations here are so grave that the Israeli human rights organizations BTSELEM ([www.btselem.org/gaza\\_strip/rafah\\_crossing](http://www.btselem.org/gaza_strip/rafah_crossing)) and GISHA ([www.gisha.org](http://www.gisha.org)) have documented the lack of freedom of movement of Gazans through crossing-points to Israel and Egypt. Alternatively, you can visit the international website [www.rafahtoday.org](http://www.rafahtoday.org).

To return to my opening statement, it would be unfair to judge the manners of the Palestinian people if you drive among them or travel with them. In fact, you might be in need of a serious rehabilitation program after we have finally reached our destination.

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