

Witness in Palestine
Held at Einab Junction: Inside Israel's
New Terminals

Friday, March 23, 2007

One new development of the Occupation since my last stint with IWPS in 2005 is the presence of Israeli terminal-style buildings, which have replaced several military checkpoints. I first encountered one of these terminals in January of 2006, after visiting a women's cooperative in Tulkarem to purchase several bags of embroidery for friends in the US. Because there are no reliable postal services in the West Bank, and because I did not want to risk the products being damaged or confiscated by Israeli airport security if I transported them in my luggage, I knew I would have to send them to the US from a post office in Israel. I had traveled from Tulkarem to Tel Aviv once in the past by taking a shared taxi to the nearby Einab junction, where I had walked from the Palestinian road to the Israeli one and caught transport into Israel.

This second time, I was traveling with my backpack and six plastic bags full of embroidery, and I assumed the trip would be as straightforward as it had been in the past. When I arrived at Einab junction, I found a large new building, fortified by several layers of metal fences, walls, and gates. The first layer reminded me of rural parts of the Wall—wire fence reinforced with electric sensory wire and razor wire with a heavy iron gate. The gate was open but there was nobody to be seen on the other side. I walked through and came



Israel has replaced many checkpoints inside the West Bank with terminal buildings.



The second gate of pre-screening before entering the terminal building at Einab

to two large iron turnstiles surrounded by a wall of iron bars. The turnstiles were locked. Frustrated, I put down my six bags to rest for a moment. Maybe someone would come back? I waited, but still there was nobody.

I called out. "Hello? Anybody out there?"

"Please wait a moment," a staticky voice above me blared, and I looked up to find a speaker attached to the turnstile. I didn't have much choice but to wait. Whoever was operating the turnstiles didn't seem to be in much of a hurry, so I took out my camera.

"Excuse me!" the voice snapped.

"Yes," I answered as I took my first photo.

"Please put your camera away immediately!"

"Please let me in immediately," I answered, as I framed a second shot.

"I said to wait," said the voice, and I answered, "And I am waiting."

The light above the turnstile turned from red to green and I put away my camera and picked up my bags to walk through. It was difficult squeezing into the tight rotating cage with all my bags, and by the time I'd made it to the other side, I was hot and cranky. I had yet to see a human face.

In front of me was a metal detector, surrounded by iron bars. I began to walk through but the voice called out from another speaker above, "Stop!"



The third phase of pre-screening before entering the terminal building at Einab

I continued through the metal detector and yelled, “What?!” into the air, wondering where he was watching me from.

“Go back and put down your bags.”

I sighed and went back through the metal detector and set down my six bags, which were feeling heavier by the minute. I took the opportunity to take another picture. The soldier didn’t bother protesting this time, but ordered me to walk through the metal detector again.

I tried to pick up my bags again but he ordered, “No, without your bags.” I walked through. Nothing happened.

“Now, go back.”

I closed my eyes with a sigh, walked back, picked up my six bags, and walked through again before he could give me the order to do so. Somehow this seemed so much worse than the turnstiles and metal detectors I had seen at Huwwara checkpoint. At least there you could see the people humiliating you. Or maybe it was more upsetting because I wasn’t used to being the one humiliated.

Beyond the metal detector was another set of turnstiles, locked again. I took a deep breath and stared at the red light, hoping to see it turn green rather than let the guard hear my voice crack if I spoke. Thankfully, the turnstile buzzed and I squeezed through to reach the building itself. That was the end of the pre-screening. Now it was time for the *real* screening.

The inside of the building reminded me of an airport terminal—high ceilings and multiple floors, and multilingual signs for travelers. The ones here read, “Prepare documents for inspection” in Hebrew, Arabic, and English. The signs didn’t clarify where one was supposed to go, however. There were a series of five doors with red lights on top, and I called out, “OK, my documents are ready... Now what?”

This time nobody answered, so I asked again. Again, nothing. I set my bags down, pissed off. My back was hurting, I was sweating, and I didn’t know where I was or what was going to happen to me. Instead of taking a deep breath, I screamed at the top of my lungs, “Is anybody there?! Hellooooooo!”

Eventually a second staticky voice came through from a speaker on the wall. “Please proceed to the door.”

“Which door?”

“The one on the left.”

“Left of what? Where are you?”

“I can see you,” the voice said. “Walk backwards and go left.”

I saw a door behind me on the left and carried my bags over to it. Above the door was a red light, which I stared at. Nothing happened. I was ready to cry. “Now what?” I yelled. Silence. I yelled again, even louder.

“What am I supposed to do?!”

“Calm down!” yelled a cheerful soldier walking by on an upper level above me. He was finishing a conversation on his walkie-talkie, and put up his hand for me to wait. I glared at him. “Go there,” he pointed to another door near the one I was standing at, and began to walk away.

“No, please!” I blurted out, forgetting our policy of not pleading with soldiers. “You’re the first human face I’ve seen and I’m starting to lose it.”

He motioned towards the door and promised that if I stood there, the light would eventually turn green. I picked up my bags, approached the door, set them down, and waited. Eventually, the light turned green, this time accompanied by a little buzz that unlatched the full iron door. I expected to find a soldier on the other side, but as the heavy door slammed behind me I found myself in a tiny room with white walls, no windows, and a second iron door. That door eventually buzzed as well, and I struggled to open it as I held my bags, settling to kick one in front of me instead.

The next room had three walls and a double-paned window with a soldier on the other side. The soldier asked for my ID and I slipped it under the glass. He tried to make small talk and asked me what part of the United States I was from. I told him flatly, “For the first time in my life, I want to blow someone up.”

He must not have heard me because he let me through to the next tiny windowless room. The next buzzing heavy door led out into the other open-spaced side of the terminal, where I picked up the pace, hoping to get out finally, an hour after I’d arrived. No such luck.

One more soldier behind a window beckoned for my passport again. “Where’s your visa?” he asked, not finding the stamped slip of paper issued by Israel when the passport itself is not stamped. I answered truthfully, “They told me at the airport that there were

none left and that it would be OK.” As the words came out, I realized how absurd this sounded, and I kicked myself for falling for it when I’d flown in the week before. How could the airport run out of visa sheets? Wasn’t it more likely that they were deliberately trying to inhibit my travel in Palestinian areas?

It was hard to blame the soldier, since, for all he knew, I’d snuck in over the hills of Jordan. “Whatever,” I sighed. “Call airport security—I promise I’m in the system.”

I knew it would be a while, so I sat down again. I thought I was past the point of anger until I noticed a line of 25 or so Palestinians waiting outside to come in from the other direction, heading back to Tulkarem. Had they been waiting there all this time? Why weren’t they being processed? I asked the guard holding my passport and he said he’d tend to them after I left.

It was one thing to feel frustrated and humiliated, but another to know that my ordeal had held up dozens of Palestinians from getting back to their homes and families. “No,” I said. “Are you telling me that in your fancy new facility you can’t process people coming in two directions? Don’t let the problem with me delay these people any longer.”



Dozens of Palestinians wait to be screened in the terminal at Einab junction inside the West Bank on their way home from work.



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He told me not to worry, that the Palestinians were used to waiting. This made me even more upset. I insisted that I would rather wait longer myself, and eventually he beckoned the group forward. I marveled as they waited patiently and yet somehow not submissively, beacons of dignity next to my defeated and angry presence. I took out my camera and took a few photos. Within seconds, a guard appeared next to me—in person, nothing but air between us!—and said sternly, “Come with me.”

I told the guard I wasn’t carrying my bags another step unless it was out the door; he agreed to carry them. I followed the guard back towards the section of the terminal from which I had just come. We passed through the windowless rooms and into a new room with crates on the floor. From there, the guard opened another, even heavier iron door, and motioned for me to pass ahead of him. Expecting the guard to follow me in, I turned and instead found him placing my bags into the crates. Realizing that soldiers were going to go through my bags, I demanded to be present during the search to ensure that nothing would be damaged or stolen. “That’s not possible,” the guard said flatly, and the door slammed shut between me and my belongings.

I kicked the door with frustration, realizing that all my contact information for Palestinian organizers and friends was still on my computer. I realized that I still had my phone in my pocket and quickly called my friend Kobi, an Israeli activist. I told him where

I was and asked if he might call Machsom Watch on my behalf. He said he'd do what he could and we hung up.

I looked around the room. It was empty except for a chair and an empty crate on the floor. There were no other doors, but there was a two-paned window with a soldier watching me from the other side of it. "What are you looking at?" I snapped at the soldier, and he walked out of view. Another soldier appeared, a young woman. She spoke into an intercom so that I could hear her through the window. "Please take off your clothes and put them in the container on the floor."

It took a moment for the words to sink in. Once they had, I looked the soldier straight in the eyes, and I began to undress. I removed each piece of clothing slowly, not once taking my eyes off hers. I watched her with a look of hurt, not anger. I wanted her to see that she was not just searching me—she was humiliating me. Several times she looked away. When I was down to my underwear, the soldier stopped me; she said that was enough. A part of me wished that she hadn't. Perhaps if I were completely naked, she would more likely recognize the extent of my humiliation and her role in it.

The iron door behind me buzzed and the soldier told me to place the crate containing my clothes and phone into the room where I had last seen the guard. My other belongings were long since gone, and I could hear soldiers in the next room going through them. When I got back to the room, the soldier in the window was gone. I sat down on the chair and waited. The soldiers next door were chatting and laughing. I imagined them examining my personal photographs and letters. I was too upset to sit still. I stood up and started pacing back and forth in the small room. I had to do something—anything—to express my emotions. If I could hear them, then they could hear me. I began to sing.

I sang an old song that I'd learned at summer camp as a child. Its words were meaningless, but I sang it at the top of my lungs. Within seconds, the female soldier was at the window, looking very alarmed. I waved. I sang that stupid song until my voice hurt. It felt good to sing—I felt empowered. It was easier to act like a crazy person than a prisoner. If I was unpredictable, then they had lost the power to control me.



The booth in which Palestinian women may be strip-searched, at a checkpoint in the West Bank

Half an hour passed. Or was it an hour? My energy had worn off and I sat down miserably on the chair. I was so tired. The soldiers were gone from the next room now. What was taking them so long? It was cold in the room, and I had nothing to cover myself with. I began to shiver and rock back and forth on the chair. I had no more energy to yell. I began to cry. I cried for a long time. Eventually, the female soldier appeared in the window. I could tell she felt bad for me. I looked away. The door buzzed and she instructed me to open it. On the other side was a jacket and a cup of water. I put on the jacket and drank the water to soothe my throat, but I was unimpressed. I didn't want a jacket or water. I wanted my freedom to leave. I wanted my dignity back.

Time passed. I stopped looking at the soldiers and talking to them. I stopped thinking of ways to pass the time or express myself. I didn't even feel like myself anymore. I felt empty, defeated. I just sat and waited, with a feeling of profound loneliness.

After what felt like an eternity, the iron door buzzed and I opened it to find all my clothes and bags in a large pile brimming over the tops of the containers. The soldiers had emptied every single item separately into the crates. The papers from my notebook were strewn about loosely. Each piece of embroidery had been removed from its protective wrapper and crumpled into a pile. A can of tuna had been opened and left amidst the hand-sewn garments. Even the boxes of Turkish delight—a soft sticky candy covered with powdered sugar, which I'd brought from Turkey for my Israeli friends in Tel Aviv—had been opened and rummaged through.

The only thing stronger than my anger was my desire to leave. I sat down miserably and folded everything back into my bags. I was crying uncontrollably, but I bit my tongue each time I was tempted to speak. When I was dressed and ready, I stood up, collected myself, and tried to open the door. It was locked.

"The door's still locked," I informed the soldier watching through the window.

"Yes, please wait a little longer."

"Why?" I asked. "You saw everything I have. You know I'm not a security threat, and surely you know by now that I have a visa."

"I'm sorry but you're going to have to wait," she said.

I couldn't hold myself back any longer. I lost it. I opened up my bags and took out what was left of my canned tuna. With my fingers, I began to spread the oily fish all over the window.

"What are you doing?" asked the soldier, alarmed.

"You don't respect my stuff, I don't respect yours," I answered.

Next, I opened a box of Turkish delight. "I'm not going to stop until you let me out," I announced as I began mashing the gummy cubes into the hinges of the iron door. I took out a black marker and began to write "Free Palestine" in large letters on the wall.

"OK, OK," said the soldier's voice over the intercom. "You can go now." The door buzzed.

I gathered my bags and walked out. A soldier was waiting for me on the other side. He gave me my passport and said I was free to leave. I called Kobi as soon as I was outside. He said it was the US Consulate that had helped get me released. The army claimed they

were holding me because of the photographs I had taken inside the terminal. Interestingly, they hadn't bothered to delete the images from my camera when they had searched my bags.

I told Kobi what had happened to me and what I had done. I felt as if I had lost a part of myself inside that terminal as I had slowly lost control. Kobi reminded me that even the option of losing control was a sign of privilege—Palestinians who behaved as I had would not likely have been freed. I tried to imagine what it would be like to endure such an invasive screening every day of my life.

Kobi told me a story about his Palestinian friend, Sara, whom he'd met in Maryland. Sara would frequently travel back and forth between her home in Palestine and the United States, where she was studying. Each time she returned to Palestine, she was able to walk right through the checkpoints. She had enough confidence to just assert her will and go through, simply by the fact that she was used to being treated like a person. And each time, after a few months in Palestine, she would lose that ability.

In just a few hours I had gone from empowerment to craziness to submission to destructiveness. What would I become after months of such treatment? What about a lifetime of the far worse treatment that Palestinians experience?

It was dark outside the terminal as I hung up the phone. I had been held for 3 hours, and there were no more buses running. I could see the lights of a settlement on a nearby hill. I began walking in what seemed like the direction of Tel Aviv. I stuck my thumb out to the occasional passing car, and eventually a settler stopped. He moved his gun out of the front seat so that I could get in. Feeling lousy about it, I accepted a ride to the nearest bus stop from where buses were still running to Tel Aviv. I boarded the first bus out and cried the whole way back to the city.

