

[www.machsomwatch.org/media/TomSegevEng.asp?link=media&lang=eng](http://www.machsomwatch.org/media/TomSegevEng.asp?link=media&lang=eng)

### **Women of the checkpoints**

*Haaretz*, August 10, 2002

By Tom Segev

On Sunday afternoon three Israeli women came to the A-Ram checkpoint, at the northern entrance to Jerusalem: Prof. Maya Bar-Hillel, Yehudit Elkana and Neta Efroni belong to a group of about 75 women who station themselves at checkpoints on a rotating basis, once or twice a week, to monitor events taking place at them. On their letterhead they are described as "Women for Human Rights" and "Women against the Occupation." They call their checkpoint vigils "Machsomwatch" (machsom is the Hebrew word for checkpoint, or barrier). No longer young, most of them academics, some of them are also active in the "Women in Black" organization and in other protest groups. Their activity at the checkpoints is fairly unknown, as though it is drowning in the huge wave of human rights violations, of which the latest peak is the suggestion to strip the citizenship of Israeli Arabs.

The women of the checkpoints sum up what they see in reports that they forward to the authorities as well as to Knesset members and the media. The idea is not for them to intervene in what goes on: they are the eyes of the state. Sometimes, though, they are unable to restrain themselves. One of the reports relates, in English, how they interceded to bring about the release of a few Palestinians who were being detained by soldiers and also gave one of them NIS 100 so he could get home.

On this same Sunday, *Ha'aretz* carried an article by Gideon Levy describing an incident at a different checkpoint: soldiers had held up an ambulance that was trying to get to a woman in labor. The women of the Jerusalem checkpoints have rarely encountered such dramatic events. They document routine bureaucratic hazing in surroundings that recall a border crossing between two hostile countries somewhere in the Third World - something like India and Pakistan, say. The police position is in a wretched shack and the Palestinians are made to wait for long periods in the August sun.

The first policeman who spotted the women insulted them in Hebrew and then fouled his mouth with the usual Arabic words, all in a heavy Russian accent. His protective vest hid the badge he is supposed to wear with his name on it. "Come on, come on, come over here by the side and I'll show ya," he said to one of the women, who by her age could have been his grandmother: "Come on, come on if you want, come on," the policeman reiterated, heatedly, hot for a fight. "It's not starting well," Yehudit Elkana said. The policeman, whose name turned out to be Yonatan, didn't want his picture taken, either. "Who are you people anyway," he snapped and told them all to get out of his face. Another policeman, also very young, was in the meantime examining the papers of Palestinians who wanted to enter Jerusalem. They had a wait of about half an hour. Most of those seeking entry to the city had left it that morning, for work, for studies, to visit relatives or for all kinds of other errands. For a few of those who were waiting, this was the second checkpoint - there is one like it at Qalandiyah, too. The check itself took only a few seconds: the policeman did not really examine the documents, only made sure the ID cards were blue. He is also supposed to check the belongings of those coming through, but did so offhandedly, running his hands over the bags and taking a quick glimpse at the contents. His features sent a message of contempt and boredom and weariness. The women of the checkpoint stayed for about an hour. Three or four of those who wanted to enter Jerusalem were held up for a few minutes but were allowed through. Only one woman was turned back. She tried to cajole the policeman, pointed to the bundle she was carrying, implored him. He raised his voice: "Yallah!" The woman left.

### **Different culture**

The policemen have total and exclusive power to let people through or not; there is no way to appeal. Every cop is a king. Passengers in cars also have to identify themselves and sometimes are told to open the trunk for a check. The tone of voice of the policemen is lordly, vulgar, often almost thuggish. When they spot someone they want to check, they whistle at him to make him stop. Many of the policemen are 18 or 19 years old, doing their mandatory service. The Border Policemen have a heavy responsibility; the checks at the barrier cannot totally stop terrorists from entering the city. There was a shooting incident outside the Damascus Gate in Jerusalem

that day. Little wonder that the women of the checkpoints irritate the policemen. Yehudit Elkana says their presence has a restraining effect on the police.

In the meantime, Chief Inspector Shimon Amor, a hefty 40-year-old, a 13-year veteran in the Border Police, came over. He behaved as though he had just completed a course on how to deal with human rights activists. Grim-faced, as befitted his position and the situation, he was also very polite: No, there is no reason why the women should not observe what was going on from both sides of the checkpoint, if they wished. "We are here for the good of the citizen," Amor stated with a certain solemnity. Many of the papers that the Palestinians show the police are false, he said, and you can buy documents for NIS 2,500. "You have no idea how corrupt they are there, in the Palestinian Authority," he added, and remarked in a philosophical tone that their culture is not our culture.

Yoni, the foul-mouthed policeman, was still cursing away and Chief Inspector Amor was having a hard time calming him down. That's enough, Yoni, enough, he said paternally. He projected a calming authority. A cover against the sun and the rains that will soon come could help, and so could a water tap; Amor said that his men would do a better job if they had an air conditioner in their hut.

The women of the checkpoint are part of a fairly large number of human rights activists, both Israelis and foreigners, who are in the territories in the hope of easing the plight of the residents. There is no better way these days. As long as Palestinian terrorism continues, the media is less and less inclined to report the adversities being experienced by the residents of the territories and the Supreme Court generally refuses to protect their rights - as was shown again this week - and thus would seem to be hastening the need for a higher instance, such as the International Court at The Hague.

The majority of Israelis have yet to internalize the significance of the new court and do not consider that its establishment holds out the prospect of entrenching human rights, but the opposite: those who make use of the court, as the members of the Gush Shalom group plan to do, are considered contemptible "informers," just as those who went to the media with stories of human rights abuses used to be considered.

Against this background, the report of the United Nations secretary-general on the events in the Jenin refugee camp during Operation Defensive Shield seemed a bit surprising. No, there is no confirmation of the report that the number of those killed in the refugee camp totaled 500, as Palestinian spokesmen had claimed, Kofi Annan wrote. In other words, there was no massacre. Now it is official. The hospital in Jenin confirmed the deaths of only 52 people, and it is impossible to know how many of them were combatants and how many were civilians. The secretary-general frequently links Israeli army operations and Palestinian terrorist activity, including the activation of Palestinian fighters in houses populated by civilians. The report, which is available on the Internet, contains very serious information about how the Israeli forces prevented medical and humanitarian aid from reaching the residents, apparently without any security justification. But the Foreign Ministry was delighted: there was no massacre at Jenin, that's the main thing.

The events in Jenin drew the most attention, but what happened in Nablus in the same period was more serious. According to the UN report, about 80 people were killed there, most of them civilians. The secretary-general makes much use of information that his staff received from Israeli human rights organizations. A comparison of the UN report with the daily information sheet that was published jointly by four such Israeli groups does not show substantive contradictions, though the impression is that the UN report is more "balanced" and did not adopt all the information published by the rights organizations. The signatories to the information sheet are B'Tselem, the Center for the Defense of the Individual, Physicians for Human Rights and the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, which is not known as an especially radical organization. The information put out by these groups is horrific. On April 18, for example, they described the situation in Nablus:

"On April 9, after five days of full curfew, rescue and medical crews in the city were allowed to take bodies that were scattered throughout the city to Rafidiyeh Hospital. Thirty-seven bodies arrived at the hospital during the day, but the refrigeration room there had places for only seven of them. The medical crew was compelled to

place the remaining 30 bodies on the floor of the room. Since a good many of the bodies arrived in a state of advanced decomposition, there were fears that diseases would spread, and the hospital decided to make use of a refrigerator that was donated by a cheese factory. One of the bodies was that of Mohammed Abu Hatab, parts of which were eaten by dogs during the days when the IDF would not allow it to be evacuated from the field in which he was killed. Abu Hatab was buried in the hospital yard, along with two women from the Frihat family, whose bodies were removed from the ruins of a house 13 days after they were killed. As the hospital has no means to preserve the bodies in a suitable way, most of them were buried today in a mass grave. In addition, 18 other bodies were buried in the Old City of Nablus in a temporary mass grave."

Readers of the report released by the UN secretary-general will not get the impression that the situation in Nablus was as terrible as that, though Annan has appended to his report a Palestinian document containing appalling descriptions. The secretary himself seems to have regretted mainly the damage that was done to historic buildings in Nablus, some of which had been restored with the aid of UNESCO. The monetary damage is estimated at \$114 million, which is more than a third of all the damage estimated to have been done in all the cities of the West Bank, the secretary-general notes. That estimate is attributed to the World Bank, though it is not clear how, exactly, and on the basis of what criteria, its experts were able to arrive at that calculation in such a short time; the human rights groups would naturally come in for harsh criticism if they published a statistic like that.

[www.motherjones.com/news/dispatch/2004/11/11\\_471.html](http://www.motherjones.com/news/dispatch/2004/11/11_471.html)

### Grandmothers on Guard

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By Joshua Hammer

The Huwwara checkpoint just south of Nablus simmers with routine misery on a sweltering August afternoon. A long line of Palestinians wait to enter the West Bank's largest city as Israeli troops regard them, stone-faced, from behind a barrier of concrete blocks and sandbags. The troops let the women and children through, but send those Palestinians who've not been granted travel permits -- almost all young men -- to a fenced-off detention area topped by a corrugated iron roof. The *jora*, or pit, is a West Bank purgatory: a pen where Palestinians often languish for hours until they have been cleared by Israel's internal security arm, the Shin Bet.

Amid the *jora*'s sea of men, an elderly woman hobbles around. Frail and sweating, her head draped in a gray *hijab*, the woman appeals to the soldiers. Proffering a tattered medical receipt, she explains that her son Mohammed, 25, managed to sneak out of Nablus without a travel permit to accompany her to the doctor in Ramallah. On their way home, he was detained, and she won't leave without him, even though her doctor ordered her to stay out of the heat.

Suddenly, two middle-aged Israeli women walk past the barricade, attracting a mix of curious and hostile glances from the soldiers. Wearing floppy sun hats, khakis, and tennis shoes, Menucha Moravitz, 54, and Roni Klein, 55, look more suited to brunch at a beachfront café in fashionable north Tel Aviv than to this dust-choked bottleneck deep inside the West Bank. Moravitz, a sociology teacher at Open University in Tel Aviv, listens to the woman's complaint. "This is absurd," Moravitz says. "The soldiers have a list of wanted men, but they don't even bother to check it. It's easier to put young men in the holding pen for hours and deal with them when they get around to it." She walks toward a swarthy Israeli soldier at the barricade. "I know this soldier," she mutters. "I met him two weeks ago. He's not nice at all." Moravitz begs the soldier to speed up Mohammed's clearance, but he remains unmoved. "If we're lenient and allow him through, tomorrow all of them will come with their mothers," he says with a shrug.

For nearly two years, Moravitz has periodically commuted from her comfortable Israeli suburb of Ramat Gan across the Green Line to military checkpoints within the West Bank. Visiting these junctions of Israeli suspicion and Palestinian resentment is an activity that most Israelis would find incomprehensible. But as conditions in the occupied territories have deteriorated, more and more women like Moravitz -- middle-aged, with a liberal or leftist background and time on their hands -- are joining the ranks of Machsom (Checkpoint) Watch. Founded in 2001 by three veteran women peace activists, the group's volunteer monitors now number more than 400, and their meticulously detailed reports of checkpoint abuses -- published daily on its website -- have become required reading for both the media and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).

According to B'Tselem, the Israeli human rights watchdog group, there are more than 40 manned checkpoints inside the West Bank -- forbidding barricades designed to regulate the movement of Palestinians between their towns and villages. Israel maintains that such internal barriers are vital to its security, crippling the ability of Palestinian militant networks to communicate, and preventing the smuggling of suicide bombs into Israel. (The completion of Israel's 425-mile-long security wall, due by the end of 2004, should eliminate the need for many checkpoints, military spokespeople say.) But human rights groups charge the checkpoints are a gratuitous form of humiliation, and that Israel's severe restrictions on movement -- such as the routine denial of permits to young Palestinian men -- amount to collective punishment that goes far beyond security concerns. "If they would just check people to make sure they're not carrying bombs, we wouldn't object," says Adi Dagan, a Machsom Watch spokeswoman. "The problem is that the barriers serve as limitations on movement, and have a drastic effect on lives of Palestinians. Palestinians don't get to university, to work, to hospitals -- the checkpoints totally disrupt civil life."

Machsom Watch has exposed a pattern of abuses at the checkpoints that the group says feeds the rage that leads to the terrorism they're supposed to prevent. In late July, for example, a 26-year-old university student

named Muhammad Cana'an was kicked, beaten, and shot in the arm by an Israeli soldier, apparently without provocation, at a checkpoint near Nablus. After Machsom Watch witnesses reported the incident to the media and the IDF, the soldier was taken into custody -- one of the few times since the start of the Al Aqsa Intifada, in September 2000, that the army has taken action against one of its own. Two days later, several Machsom Watch women near Qalandiya checkpoint outside Ramallah reported that troops had stoned and smashed the windows of a Palestinian taxi. The army, under pressure from the group, imprisoned two of the soldiers -- one for 56 days, the other for 42. "I think they're doing a terrific service," said one Israeli reservist officer who asked not to be identified. "We're a bunch of fascist bastards. The only thing that stops us from looking totally criminal is that the other side is even worse than we are."

Even the IDF brass has come to regard Machsom Watch with grudging acceptance. Soldiers are under orders not to interfere with their activities -- the IDF recognizes that there's little to be gained from confronting Israeli grandmothers -- the group's leaders meet with top military officers, and, partly because of Machsom Watch pressure, the IDF recently established a hotline so people can report humanitarian emergencies at checkpoints. "We appreciate what they're doing. They're trying to help," insists Captain Jacob Dallal, an IDF spokesman. "At the same time, they're not completely aware of the constraints, alerts, and procedures that the soldiers have to work under."

Not everyone in Israel speaks of Machsom Watch so evenhandedly. Nadia Metar, cochair of the Women in Green, an extreme right-wing group, says that Machsom Watch is a group of "fifth columnists who collaborate with the Arab enemy." Female Jewish settlers are mounting a campaign of harassment of Machsom Watch volunteers at the checkpoints. Monitors have been slapped, punched, and threatened in recent months. In each case, they say, Israeli police and soldiers have stood by and done nothing. In May 2004, two male settlers beat up the Arab-Israeli driver of the van that shuttles the women to the checkpoints and knocked out his false teeth. Daniella Weiss, the mayor of Kedumim, part of a cluster of ideologically hardline settlements near Nablus, admits organizing attacks and says she will carry out more. "I make a lot of effort to stop their activities," Weiss said. "By their protest, they endanger the lives of people in Israel. There's no doubt that the soldiers, under the pressure of being watched, sometimes let cars go unchecked, they let people go unchecked." Weiss, who says the group's tactics imply the presence of soldiers and settlers in the West Bank "is an occupation, not liberation," says she's determined to put them out of business. Asked if she was advocating more violence against Machsom Watch, Weiss replied, "Yes, indeed."

Nursing her cappuccino in a somewhat seedy Tel Aviv café, Yehudit Keshet, a cofounder of Machsom Watch, vows to stand up to Weiss' threats. "She is trying to frighten us and stop us from doing our work, but she won't succeed," says the 61-year-old, who has the pleasantly tousled look of an NYU professor between classes. "Of course I have a desire to punch them in the mouth, but it's not productive," she says. "It's better just to ignore them, to say, 'You're meaningless. You are nothing to us.'"

Keshet knows something about the religious underpinnings of Weiss' crusade against the checkpoint monitors. She was born into an Orthodox Jewish family in South Wales, made *aliya* -- a migration to Israel -- as a teenager in 1958, and settled there permanently in 1974. She was an observant Jew and a Zionist, but became increasingly radicalized in the wake of the 1995 assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by a right-wing religious zealot. She joined Bat Shalom, a women's group that advocates withdrawal from the territories and that, along with a Palestinian counterpart, runs Jerusalem Link, a cultural series through which both peoples can "share Jerusalem."

Then came the outbreak of the Al Aqsa Intifada. As attitudes hardened on both sides, Keshet recoiled from the militant belief increasingly espoused by many observant Jews that the West Bank -- the biblical lands of Judea and Samaria -- belonged forever to Israel. "Up to three years ago, I defined myself as an Orthodox Jew," she says. "But now I can't abide them. The Jewish sense of chosenness has overridden the notion of how we live in

the land. We've got the land. Now what will we do with it? Drown it in fences, blood? Carve it up to make bypass roads?"

While many of her colleagues on the left despaired and disengaged, Keshet searched for ways to confront what she saw as the brutalization of the Palestinians and the glorification of Israel's military culture. The moment came when her friend Ronnee Jaeger, a Canadian-Israeli activist, attended a moving lecture on military checkpoints. Jaeger, Keshet, and Russian émigré Adi Kuntsman soon gathered 10 more women to go monitor the checkpoint between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. "We were frightened. At that point, for Israelis to challenge the IDF was a big deal," Keshet says. "This soldier said, 'What are you doing here?' Ronnee whispered, 'Don't say anything.' Then I saw the sun rising over Har Homa [settlement], and I said, 'We're here to watch the sunrise.' He said, 'Sunrise? Okay, stand here, but don't move, it's dangerous.'" Keshet and her fellow activists discovered that they could walk freely across the checkpoint, chatting up both soldiers and Palestinians. It was, she says, "an empowering moment."

Following a wave of suicide bombings, the IDF reoccupied the West Bank in 2002. As the checkpoints multiplied and the limitations on Palestinian movement became more severe, Machsom Watch's activities attracted media attention, and volunteers flocked to the group, including a few men. But Keshet quickly found that Israeli males didn't make reliable monitors. "They went to see the soldiers and after a few minutes they started talking about the 1948 war. Their relationship was totally different," she says. "They were horrified by what was going on, but at the same time they bonded with the troops." Men have since been banned from joining Machsom Watch in the field.

Asked if she thinks that Machsom Watch is making a difference, Keshet nods emphatically. "There's a lot of power in little old ladies," she says with a laugh. The discomfort the group causes the soldiers -- one recently told her, "I hope the next terrorist attack gets you" -- and the assaults by settlers are evidence, she says, that the status quo is under threat. But she doesn't underestimate the resolve of the settler fringe, "about 10 percent of the settlers in the West Bank -- the radicals, the ones who are capable of violence," she says. "They have huge stores of weaponry. If the disengagement of Gaza takes place next year, we could see a greater radicalization. So far there hasn't been any live fire [against us], but it could happen."

Back at the Huwwara checkpoint, Moravitz and Klein are nearing the end of their grueling shift. It's been a dispiriting day for Moravitz, who usually walks away with at least one small victory -- an ailing Palestinian rushed through the barrier, a university student allowed to go take his final exams. "Today, nothing," she says with disgust. At four o'clock, the jora has filled to capacity with 50 Palestinian detainees -- including a nattily dressed man from Nablus who's trying to go to his own wedding in the village of Huwwara. The ceremony is set to begin in an hour, but the Israeli troops -- a heavysset Yemeni and an ultra-Orthodox settler whose yarmulke and side curls are in odd juxtaposition to his shiny M-16 -- have told the groom to wait in the jora like everyone else until he is cleared by the Shin Bet. The detainees kick the dirt, smoke, and pace in boredom and growing anger; some have been stuck here since early morning. "It's frustrating," Moravitz says. "They expect I can help them, but there's nothing I can do." She pulls out a Marlboro Light and fires it up. "I'm smoking 30 of them a day now, because I don't know where to put the tension."

At that moment, a gray Peugeot 307 descends from the hills above Huwwara and drops off two Israeli women and a small boy. One woman is small and frail, her pinched face framed by a blue head scarf. The other is swarthy and mannish, with jeans and a pageboy haircut. Both cast baleful glances at the Machsom Watch women as they saunter over to the Israeli troops and hand them orange juice and cookies. "Settlers," Moravitz whispers. "They're here to make trouble."

Minutes later, the settler women approach Moravitz and Klein. As Klein tensely pours Nescafé from a thermos, the husky settler stands beside her scribbling notes, while the other snaps Klein's photo with a digital camera. Settlers and activists glare at each other, the two poles of Israeli society facing off across a great ideological and cultural divide. "These ones are quiet," observes Klein. "But some are aggressive." When Moravitz and Klein finish their coffee and return to the jora, the settlers follow, standing on either side of them and eavesdropping

while they chat with detainees. Finally, Moravitz can take the spying no longer. She turns on the husky settler, who is practically rubbing shoulders with her.

"Where are you from?" Moravitz asks in Hebrew. She has to ask twice.  
"We are from many places," the husky settler finally replies. "Where are you from?"  
"Tel Aviv, Kfar Saba -- we are also from many places."  
"Good for you," the settler says.

On the other side of the checkpoint, a second team of settlers is harassing two more Machsom Watch volunteers. "Arab lovers," they taunt. "You are helping the suicide bombers." A freckle-faced teenager with a red ponytail and a long denim skirt approaches Nura Resh, a teacher from the seaside community of Herzliya, and thrusts a note at her. Resh unfolds the note and begins to read it aloud. "Thank you for selling our blood to the Arabs," she reads. "You told them that we are not okay. You are backing their terrorist activity --" The teenage girl lunges forward, snatches the note from Resh's hands, and, with a gaping grin, tears it furiously into about 10 pieces. Then the girl tosses the fragments onto the ground and stands gloating. Resh shakes her head sadly. "They see us as trying to help the Palestinians," she says. "For them, all of them are suicide bombers."

Settlers and volunteers glower at each other; the soldiers watch from the barricades. Finally, Machsom Watch's Volkswagen van pulls up. "They're nuts," Moravitz says wearily, as she climbs into the vehicle.

Resh corrects her. "They're not nuts," she says. "They're dangerous."

Then the van pulls away and heads back toward the relative peace of Tel Aviv. The women of Machsom Watch sit back and try to unwind -- taking a breather from a battle over Israel's future that, they know, shows every sign of growing uglier.

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**A symptom more than a cause**

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By Yossi Alpher

There can be no doubt that the checkpoints (*mahsomim*, sing. *mahsom* in Hebrew) are one of the ugliest faces of Israeli occupation of the West Bank and, until recently, the Gaza Strip as well. Tens of thousands of innocent Palestinian civilians are delayed in their legitimate travels at the checkpoints, and often emerge humiliated, harassed, and worse. The soldiers charged with manning the checkpoints are usually 18-20 year olds, poorly equipped to deal with the endless challenges presented to them by a hostile population in the course of shifts that can last 12 hours and more. The outcome is that the checkpoints, and the closures and occupation they represent, create a lot of angry Palestinians, a few of whom become terrorists.

A number of efforts have been made over the years by the Israel Defense Forces to add a more human face to the checkpoints: soldiers have undergone sensitivity training; older reservists, many of them Arabic speakers, have volunteered to help out; and the women of MachsomWatch have been welcomed by senior commanders. But at the human level, the situation remains abysmal.

The flip side of the checkpoints is that they really do work to uncover suicide bombers and other terrorists bent on attacking Israeli civilians. Some of the most notorious checkpoints, like Huwwara near Nablus, uncover and arrest the most terrorists. The more shocking cases are often shown on Israeli television: naive young boys and teenagers and mentally challenged individuals recruited by cynical terrorist organizations to carry bombs and wear explosive vests. It is not difficult to understand how IDF soldiers exposed to this reality become increasingly angry and hostile at the checkpoints, thereby helping perpetuate an endless cycle of conflict.

Judging by the status of checkpoints in other occupation situations in the region and the world--the latest example is the American and British occupation in Iraq--Israeli checkpoints are probably no worse, and indeed may be more efficient at their task, than the occupation "norm". In the given situation of conflict, occupation and settlement in the West Bank, Israel cannot do without them. While efforts to improve their efficiency and reduce the hardship they inflict on the civilian population are necessary and welcome, the checkpoints are essentially a symptom and an outcome of the real problem, rather than a cause.

In Gaza there are no longer any settlements, and there is an efficient security fence. Hence there are no longer Israeli checkpoints inside the Gaza Strip, and Gazans are free to move around freely. They complain, understandably, that they remain inside a "big prison". But at least, from their standpoint, the delays and humiliations of the checkpoints are gone. Israel can be protected from terrorist intruders using Gaza as a base without a physical IDF presence inside the Strip.

Checkpoints can be removed from all or most of the West Bank, as well, if the most intrusive settlements are removed and the security fence is completed. This can only be done by dint of a new Palestinian-Israeli political agreement or, more likely in the foreseeable future, through an additional phase of unilateral redeployment and dismantling of settlements. Though this would not constitute a solution to the conflict, it would bespeak additional security, geographic and demographic benefits for both sides.

This is the real way to get rid of the checkpoints. It is where we should concentrate our efforts in the coming months.