

Is Israel severing East Jerusalem from the West Bank?

By Amira Hass

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Blocked roads and asphalt that has been ripped open like a zipper can be seen everywhere in Ramallah these days. And whether or not the municipality bothers posting explanatory signs, people know what is being done - a new road, sewage pipes, a sidewalk.

But seven or ten kilometers away, at the Qalandiyah and Jaba checkpoints, which together form the southern border of the Ramallah enclave, it is not clear what is happening. This area, which is completely under Israeli control, is also the scene of intensive construction. But nothing is known about this work other than rumors about Israel's intentions.

Every night for the past four months or so, bulldozers guarded by army jeeps have been changing the appearance of the Qalandiyah checkpoint. Its area has been expanded, the number of lanes has been increased and another booth and building have been added. Sometimes the checkpoint is closed to vehicular traffic at night to prevent the work from being disrupted.

People complain, just as they complain about the traffic jams in Ramallah. But here, the complaints have another aspect: People are upset over the lack of control, the lack of information and the intuitive feeling that nothing good will come of this. To a Palestinian, every checkpoint drives home the fact that Israel sees him as a subject - someone who need not be consulted and whose welfare is not taken into account.

Israel calls the checkpoint a "terminal" and relates to it as an existing, legal border between the State of Israel and the Palestinian entity. For Palestinians, the Qalandiyah checkpoint is a physical representation of the fact that for most of them, East Jerusalem has become as far away as the moon. Most of the people who pass through Qalandiyah are Palestinian residents of Jerusalem. A minority are West Bank residents who have temporary permits to enter Israel.

Those going to Jerusalem cross the checkpoint from north to south. Those heading for other towns in the West Bank drive three kilometers to the east, to the Jaba junction, which is on the new Route 60 that bypasses Ramallah. During the daytime, Israeli bulldozers are busy expanding this junction. The military checkpoint at Jaba, which controls entry into Ramallah, also contributes to the creation of the long traffic jams that characterize the junction.

Every morning and afternoon, tens of thousands of vehicles flow through the junction. For Palestinians, this is the only north-south axis connecting the southern West Bank with the northern part. For Israelis, this is the road that turns the settlements into luxurious

suburbs of the capital.

It was possible to find an echo of the fears generated by the construction at Qalandiyah in one telegraphic sentence of the statement issued last Monday by Salam Fayyad's government. As usual, it condemned a long list of Israeli activities, including "the attempt to expand the area of the Qalandiyah military checkpoint as part of the plan to separate the West Bank from Jerusalem." Does the government have any concrete information? No, officials replied in answer to my question. They do not know for sure, but they are guessing, and condemning. In other words, the hallmarks of subjugation that characterize individual Palestinians - the passivity, the fear and the lack of influence - are being replicated by their government.

According to the rumors, the real objective behind the expansion of the Qalandiyah checkpoint is to tighten supervision over the Jerusalem residents who pass through it. It is no secret that many Palestinian residents of Jerusalem work in Ramallah. Some of them even live there, due to the difficulty of finding appropriate housing in Jerusalem. And Israel's Interior Ministry is constantly trying to trace people about whom it can assert that "the center of their lives is not in Jerusalem," thus enabling it to revoke their residency status.

The rumor mill claims that all Palestinian residents of Jerusalem will eventually have to pass through Qalandiyah, which will have computerized record-keeping. Public transportation from Jerusalem is already obliged to travel only through Qalandiyah; buses and taxis have been forbidden to drive through the Jaba junction to the Hizmeh (Pisgat Ze'ev) checkpoint, which the settlers use. West Bank residents who have permits to enter Israel are also forbidden to cross at Hizmeh.

The only ones who are allowed to use Hizmeh are Palestinian residents of Jerusalem in private vehicles, which drive bumper to bumper with the vehicles of settlers from Eli and Migron. And in the long run, so the rumors in Ramallah and Jerusalem say, they, too, will be obliged to drive through Qalandiyah. If all Jerusalem residents were ordered to drive only through Qalandiyah, Hizmeh would be totally closed to Palestinians; only settlers and other Israelis would be allowed to cross through it.

Other rumors talk of a special lane that will be built at Qalandiyah for VIPs and diplomats. Machsom Watch activists have heard a guess to this effect from the soldiers and security guards stationed at Qalandiyah. Today, in order not to waste their precious time, diplomats and VIPs drive through a special crossing for the privileged, located east of Ramallah near the Beit El military base. But if a special lane were set up for them at Qalandiyah, the road on which the Beit El checkpoint is located could be permanently blocked.

The rumors might indicate a general belief that VIPs would not shy away from or oppose driving on a special fast lane separate from the one used by ordinary mortals.

But an Israeli security source told Haaretz that the rumors are unfounded. There is no

intention of closing the Beit El crossing, there are no instructions to open a special VIP lane at Qalandiyah, and there is no intention of forcing everyone to drive through Qalandiyah while forbidding Palestinians to use the Hizmeh crossing, he said.

The Israel Defense Forces Spokesman said the work now underway was undertaken "due to a combination of safety considerations and transportation considerations, and the aim is to improve the fabric of life of the Palestinian and Israeli citizens who pass through this site, and to lessen the traffic load." The spokesman added that numerous accidents have occurred at the Jaba junction.

Regarding the issue of Palestinian residents of Jerusalem using the Hizmeh crossing, the spokesman said that "at present, no changes can be expected in the existing traffic arrangements at this site."

Which leaves us with one question: What does "at present" mean?

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