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The Checkpoint Women of Israel

Machsom Watch advocates for fair treatment of Palestinians, drawing both resentment and respect from their countrymen

By [ROBERT HIRSCHFIELD](#)

Daphne Banai, 57, carries many dark tales, like the one she tells of pleading futilely with an Israeli soldier on behalf of a 78-year-old Palestinian man not allowed through to his village, though his papers were in order, because of closure.

“What you see,” says Banai, a leader of Machsom (Checkpoint) Watch, who monitors the treatment of Palestinians at the more than 600 West Bank checkpoints, “you cannot unsee.”

What many of the soldiers see when Machsom women appear at the checkpoints are Israelis of dubious loyalty.

“Most of the soldiers are very angry at us,” says Banai. “They don’t like having ‘those bitches,’ as they call us, looking over their shoulders. It’s much easier to do what you want [if we weren’t there], like being able to slip up and give an old Palestinian a slap.”

Machsom, founded in 2001 by three female human rights activists, does not allow men as checkpoint-watchers. They can be translators, or drivers, or checkpoint-visitors, but checkpoint-watching is the work of women.



Raheli Bar-Or of Machsom Watch keeps an eye on an Israeli soldier as Palestinians pass through the army's Jubara checkpoint near the West Bank town of Tulkarem.

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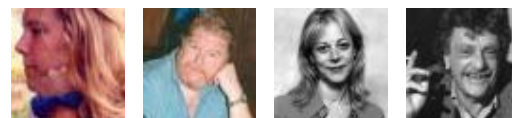
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“There are a couple of reasons for that,” says Banai. “First, almost all Jewish men do compulsory army service, then active reserve duty. As they are always between one period of being soldiers and another, this would complicate things for them, both with the soldiers at the checkpoints and the Palestinians. We, on the other hand, represent the civil society to which the soldiers and the Border Police are accountable. We represent their mothers, their grandmothers [many of the Machsom women are grandmothers], their girlfriends, their wives.”

Eighty-five percent of Israel’s checkpoints, designed to choke off terrorism at its point of origin, are inside the West Bank. Palestinians traveling from towns and villages, whether to find work or give birth or honor the dead, experience aimed guns, hard questions and long waits.

Banai travels to the West Bank in a van from Kfar Saba, near Tel Aviv. Every day, roughly 50 to 100 of Machsom’s 400 women go out in 24 shifts to keep tabs on the remote outposts. According to Banai, Israel’s checkpoints range from fixed stations, like the ones at Hawara and Beit Iba, near Nablus, to the “rolling checkpoints” that can spring up anywhere on the West Bank at any time.

“Our instructions to the women,” says Banai, “are ‘no cookies, no Nazis.’ Don’t befriend the soldiers and don’t offend them.”

The women’s main task is to observe and to write reports on what they observe, in order to make private acts of malice public. The reports are then published weekly on the organization’s website (www.machsomwatch.org) for all to read. Among the most loyal readers are officers and soldiers of the Israeli Army, who often, indignantly or plaintively, give their feedback.

Banai was not always so bold. Her first attempt at checkpoint activism, four years ago, brought her face-to-face with her own paranoia. An equally nervous colleague accompanied her. “We were scared out of our minds,” she says. “In every Palestinian, I saw a Hamas person. They all seemed to have beards. Even the women. Every time someone made a move, I thought he was going to take out a knife and stab me.”

The right attacks Machsom as subverters of Israel’s right to decide where and how it draws the line of defense against terrorism. Banai agrees the government has a duty to defend its people against terrorism. Her own daughter was injured in a terrorist attack in Kfar Saba four years ago. But she cautions: “I see the looks of the young man at the checkpoints when his father is being humiliated, or he himself, or any woman. His eyes say, ‘Give me a bomb and I will blow us all up.’ “

The women forced the military to install water taps and shaded areas at some checkpoints. Their intervention sometimes makes it easier for Palestinians to get where they want to go. “I have seen members of Machsom Watch making a difference,” says Lucy Nusseibeh, director of MEND, an NGO dedicated to nonviolent resistance to the occupation. “They make a difference in terms of the treatment that Palestinians receive, and they are a reminder of a common humanity. Their bravery and commitment to justice, reaching across national boundaries, help too against stereotyping.”

Yet Banai says she sometimes worries “if we are not actually collaborating with the army, making it all appear more human. No improvements can change the nature of the checkpoints. Israeli checkpoints on the West Bank are a violation of human rights. When you prohibit a Palestinian from seeing his dying grandmother, it doesn’t much matter if you say it with a smile, or if you shout at him.

“I don’t want the checkpoints changed,” she says. “I want them gone.”

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Robert Hirschfield is a New York-based writer who covers Israeli and Palestinian peace activists. He has written for *The Progressive*, *The National Catholic Reporter* and *Sojourners*.

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I suspect the checkpoints will end when the Palestinian suicide bombers end their efforts to kill women and children.

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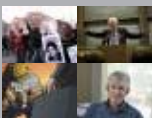
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