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Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute

Round Table Discussion (10)

**Qalandiya Conjunction: The Social and Economic
Consequences of Congestion and Disorder**

2012

Executive summary
Qalandiya Conjunction: The Social and Economic
Consequences of Congestion and Disorder

Date: Nov. 20th 2012

Thousands of Palestinians suffer daily from traffic jams occurring at Qalandiya. This problem is at its zenith during rush hours; in the early morning when school children and employees head to work, as well as evening hours when they head back to their homes. This background paper presents the causes and consequences of the daily congestion at Qalandiya so that recommendations to alleviate the problem and mitigate its economic consequences can emerge.

Keynote Speakers:

Adnan Husseini: Governor of Jerusalem/Minister of Jerusalem

Dr. Ali Sha'th: Deputy Minister of Transportation

Raed Elayyan: General Director of "Call You" Company, and one of the founders of "We are fed up with Qalandiya congestion" campaign

Major Hussam Taha: Representative of the Traffic Police

The main questions for discussion:

Does the responsibility for the congestion fall on the physical limitations and mediocre infrastructure of the road or does it primarily fall on traffic violations and abuses committed by the drivers?

What can we do to mitigate the congestion and disorder, given that the three following conditions apply:

- ✧ The traffic arrangements to pass through the checkpoint to Jerusalem are under the control of the occupation (we are not allowed to influence them).
- ✧ The area surrounding the junction is under the jurisdiction of the Jerusalem municipality (the PA has no formal jurisdiction there).
- ✧ The hands of Palestinian traffic police are tied when it comes to cars registered in Israel (with yellow plates).

Summary of keynote Speakers' presentations:

Dr. Numan Kanafani started the session with an introduction of the Round Table discussions that MAS manages and runs on a regular basis. He explained that the topics chosen usually have a salient economic dimension that influences the lives of most citizens. These discussions are carried out in order to come up with recommendations that will, in turn, be passed to policy-makers. Dr. Kanafani thanked the keynote speakers and the attendees for their presence, and apologized for the absence of Dr. Rami Nasrallah, who could not attend because Qalandiya checkpoint was closed.

Before delving into the core issue, a short video prepared by MAS was presented in order to give a glimpse of the nature of the issue at hand. Dr. Kanafani then started the discussion by mentioning the reasons this topic was chosen. He explained that the significance of the junction is derived from the fact that it is an indispensable corridor connecting Ramallah to southern and eastern governorates in the West Bank on one hand, and to Jerusalem and the industrial area of Atarot on the other. The junction also represents the first image that people see as they enter the Palestinian Territory.

Dr. Kanafani, then, touched on the costs and the consequences of congestion and traffic disorder. He said that there are 3 types of costs: economic, psychosocial, and political. The economic costs can be summarized into the cost of wasting time and fuel loss in idle cars, the depreciation of cars,

and environmental pollution as well as its associated health effects. Initial estimates indicate that 2% of the Palestinian Territory's GDP is lost because of the hours of waiting in traffic at the Qalandiya junction. The psychosocial costs, however, come as a result of citizens spending up to three hours or more in congestion at the junction. This has been shown to negatively influence people's behaviors towards their families and kids. Furthermore, congestion is known to encourage opportunistic behavior and selfishness, and thus weakens the notions of citizenship and solidarity. The third, and last, of costs arising from the congestion at Qalandiya is the political one. It weakens the relationship between Jerusalem and its periphery on the one hand, and with the rest of the West Bank, on the other hand. This is because Palestinians holding Jerusalem IDs will refrain from working in the West Bank and vice versa.

Dr. Kanafani pointed out that the traffic problem caused by those travelling to and from Jerusalem and those travelling to and from southern and eastern governorates is inextricably linked. However, he suggested that the focus of the discussion should be on the congestion which occurs inside the Apartheid Wall and affects travelers going and coming from other West Bank governorates. Narrowing the scope of the discussion increases the possibility of proposing solutions and policies that can be implemented as the area lies inside of the Apartheid Wall.

In framing the main discussion question, Dr. Kanafani asked whether efforts to resolve the congestion at Qalandiya are an implicit recognition of the reality created by the Israeli occupation? In answering this question, he referred to the possibility of crafting and implementing measures that facilitate the lives of citizens without any recognition or acceptance of the status quo imposed by the occupation. Improving the quality of life is, in fact, resilience and a form of resistance as it can be a tool to thwart the malicious plans of the occupier in East Jerusalem.

Finally, Dr. Kanafani presented some quick car enumeration statistics that MAS had prepared. He also used maps to illustrate the sites that MAS enumerators were stationed at. Enumeration took place on Monday, November 5th 2012 from 15:00 to 16:00, and Thursday, November 8th 2012 from 16:00 to 17:00. When taking the average number of cars passing per hour and accounting for both directions, the figure reaches 21,000 vehicles per day. In light of all that has been presented, Dr. Kanafani reiterated the key questions for discussion (previously mentioned).

Mr. Hussein pointed out the importance of discussing the issue at hand and clarified that work on this subject has been conducted by his ministry for more than two years. He pointed out that the main street leading to the junction of Qalandia had four lanes in the 1960s, but only two today- one in each direction. He also stressed the political, economic, and social costs arising from this congestion.

Hussein, while clarifying the core issues, mentioned the new measures the occupation took to alleviate congestion at Qalandiya checkpoint and facilitate the movement of private cars as well as public transportation. This indicates that the congestion problem at Qalandiya, at the end of the day, is in the hand of the Israelis. He then said that they had short-term plans to partially mitigate the problem. Those plans included building a bridge for cars going to and from Jerusalem, as well as a tunnel for cars heading to other West Bank governorates within the Separation Wall. This way, traffic violations are expected to be minimized, thus congestion will be reduced. This plan, however, is only considered a short term solution since the population increase in Kufr Aqab is expected to continuously rise, hence increasing congestion. A longer term plan was presented by Hussein, which included constructing a new eastern road that travelers going to, or coming from, Jerusalem can use without heading towards Qalandiya. As for the behavioral problem (traffic violations and abuses), Hussein said that the responsibility to solve this lies on the traffic departments who can ticket people who are not abiding by traffic rules.

Dr. Ali Sha'th spoke next, and referred to a study that the ministry of transportation carried out in 2009 which said that 28,000 cars pass through the junction daily. He mentioned that many organizations and institutions provided visions to solve the Qalandiya congestion problem, the

most notable of which was the USAID plan. This study states that the traffic capacity of the current road is below what it should be, since the traffic volume requires 6 lanes (3 in each direction) to have a moderate flow.

Dr. Sha'th also said, addressing the traffic violation component of the problem, that the junction and its surrounding area do not fall under the jurisdiction of the PA (Jerusalem Governorate), thus the hands of traffic police and the traffic department are tied. He then suggested that the easiest way to deal with the issue is to put physical barriers in strategic places which would prohibit people from committing violations. An example of these physical barriers would be building the bridge that Mr. Hussein mentioned earlier in the session. This project is still in the planning phase and the implementation has not yet begun.

In term of long term solutions, Dr. Sha'th agreed with Mr. Hussein on the plan to construct an eastern ring road which would reduce traffic pressure on the Qalandiya junction. He also emphasized the importance of opening "Al Ram" gate, which would greatly reduce the congestion and traffic on the junction. As for the behavioral/traffic violations issue, Dr. Sha'th sees that the best solution would be educational and awareness campaigns that would target school children.

Major Hussam Taha pointed out that traffic police is an executive body, and they implement the rules and regulations given to them. He also stressed that the congestion issue of Qalandia has been pursued since 2008, when a ministerial committee was formed to study the issue and take the necessary measures to solve it. An ad hoc committee emerged from this ministerial committee and it visited the site in order to conduct a comprehensive study of the crisis. They came up with proposals and plans that would ease traffic congestion.

The strategy meetings with the Israeli side to solve the traffic issue at Qalandiya, Mr. Taha said, were not productive since the Palestinians were told that they had no jurisdiction in that area; only the Israeli army did. After the meeting, relevant Palestinian authorities were told by the Israeli side that the area has been annexed by Israel as Jerusalem Governorate, so activities organizing traffic could not be performed.

Mr. Taha also clarified that under the agreements signed between the Palestinian and Israeli sides, Palestinian traffic police can fine drivers of cars with yellow license plates (cars belonging to Jerusalem or Israeli ID holders) provided that they submit the papers to the district coordination and liaison office (DCO). The collection of the traffic violation fine would then be done by the Israelis. Policemen usually do not fine cars with yellow license plates, however, as the fines are imposed by Israel and thus very expensive. Policemen prefer not to cause a heavy financial burden on Jerusalemites and Arab holders of Israeli identity cards since the value of the fine could be up to NIS 1,500.

Dr. Kanafani then pointed out the possibility of coming up with a workable solution to mitigate the traffic violations problem. He suggested that the policemen can stop violating vehicles, whether with yellow or regular license plates, at the beginning of area A territories where they have jurisdiction. They would stop the cars for around 15 minutes as a punishment. This way they would not be fined, yet they would be incentivized not to commit traffic violations again. Major Taha answered by saying that this suggested practice can only be executed as "personal efforts" by policemen until senior management adopts such rules and gives orders to the police.

Mr. Raed Elayyan started his speech by introducing himself and his "We are fed up" campaign, whose work and success have been witnessed on the ground. He stressed the need to carry out simple procedures without having to wait for the major projects (bridges and tunnels) to be implemented. He noted that his campaign significantly contributed to easing the congestion. This is because of their efforts, traffic congestion in a lane going in a specific direction has been decoupled from lanes going in other directions. He explained that in the absence of resources, solutions suggested must be practical and simple.

The solution he advocated consisted of an array of interrelated proposals. The first is hiring a policeman (or a couple) in civilian clothes who would be sitting somewhere around the junction to monitor abuses. Those abuses would be immediately reported to a police unit at the entrance to Ramallah, who would stop the vehicle and delay the driver for a period of time. This ensures that drivers will “learn their lesson” and stop violating traffic rules.

The second requires the provision of concrete blocks in Ramallah Municipality Square as well as a bulldozer (for two hours a week) to work on moving those blocks to the site. Those blocks would be used to separate the lanes going to Jerusalem from those going to the southern and eastern governorates. And stakeholders, Jerusalem municipality and the Ministry of public works, are asked to contribute to the implementation of this project, which neither costs a lot nor requires coordination with the Israeli side.

The third proposal asks the Ministry of Transportation to order public transportation drivers to return to the crossing yard as soon as they drop off travelers, and prevent them from loading and unloading of passengers in front of the bakery or Jaffa supermarket. Loading and unloading passengers at these two specific locations exacerbates the congestion problem.

In the street leading to “Al Ram”, Elayyan said, it is possible to expand the street around the roundabout in order to provide more space for cars to maneuver. The space is there, and all that needs to be done is paving it. As for the Kassara Street congestion, work should be done in coordination with concerned authorities to clear the area on the side of the street so that trucks can move more freely when they arrive to the street leading to the junction.

Finally, Elayyan pointed out that run-off water fills the area of the junction every winter. He urged the authorities to unclog the sewerage network there and provide a cover for the drain as it is a health hazard and people can easily fall into the drain.

Summary of comments and suggestions:

Dr. Maher Ghnaim, Minister of Public Works and Housing

He mentioned that the plan that Dr. Sha'th presented was not a final one, since many concerned parties opposed it. They are working on another plan now that they hope would satisfy a wider base of citizens. He also pointed out that the congestion is not only a byproduct of the Apartheid Wall; he expects that a part of the responsibility lies on the disorder and the mediocre road infrastructure. He agreed with Dr. Sha'th though that the traffic violations problem is better addressed with educational and awareness campaigns targeting school children. Dr. Ghneim ended his comment by promising Elayyan to utilize all the resources as the cement blocks that would separate the lanes in order to reduce violations, and thus congestion.

Major Hussam Taha reiterated that the police’s presence in the area is prohibited by the occupation because of so-called “security” reasons. He also mentioned that, in co-ordination with some ministries, they were able to employ 10 men who live in Qalandiya to organize the traffic in the area surrounding the junction, but those employees were later laid-off because they were not doing their job properly (they were negligent).

Mohammed Qirresh, Palestinian Economists Association

He questioned the effectiveness of one of Elayyan’s proposed solutions; namely, the one where violators are instantaneously reported to a police unit stationed on the entrance of Ramallah. He pointed out that there are multiple ways that lead to the city, and drivers could take the roads where no police unit is stationed.

Mr. Elayyan responded by saying that imposing sanctions on a few drivers can be enough to stop the trend of traffic violations; there is no need to stop every violator to stop the trend.

Dr. Jamil Al Taher from the Palestine Investment Fund

He advocated that the factor primarily responsible for congestion, in his view, is the culture of traffic violations. He said that this problem can be solved by placing surveillance cameras in that area that would allow us to identify the cars whose drivers commit violations. This way, those drivers can be issued fines and thus the congestion problem would be reduced without having to coordinate and deal with the Israeli side.

Major Hussam Taha responded to this comment by saying that education and awareness campaigns to limit the culture of traffic violation have been organized periodically not only in schools, but also in summer camps. He said that the traffic police is directly involved in these campaigns, and they help by running activities called “The Little Cops”, where they let young kids actually experience organizing traffic. This is expected to breed a generation that respects traffic laws and applies them better.

The discussion was concluded with direct promises given by representatives of the Ministries of Transportation and Public Works and Housing, as well as the Jerusalem governor, to implement Mr. Elayyan’s suggestions, which included bring and placing the cement blocks, as well as circulating an order by the MoT that disallows drivers to load and unload passengers and goods in front of Jaffa supermarket and the bakery as these are sensitive spots and congestion there interrupts the flow of vehicles.

Proposed Recommendations:

- ✧ Intensifying the traffic awareness and education campaigns in order to instill the values of “traffic ethics” in future generations.
- ✧ It is essential for relevant government bodies to meet and unite their efforts to come up with practical and possible solutions.
- ✧ Since the simple efforts of volunteers to mitigate congestion has yielded good results and have proven to be successful, the official bodies should welcome, and even seek, input and ideas from those volunteers. They should also provide them with whatever resources they need in order to take action.
- ✧ The quest to solve the Qalandiya congestion problem is not an acceptance of the status quo imposed by the occupation. It aims to ease the lives of citizens and reduce the high costs imposed by the traffic. Solving the congestion problem also hinders the occupation’s plan to empty East Jerusalem of its Arab residents.

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Name	Organization
Husam Taha	Palestinian Police
Mohammad Qatoosa	Palestinian Police
Shorouq Aqel	PCBS
Mohammad Qeresh	Palestinian Economists Association
Ali Shaeth	Ministry of Transportation
Fursan Smoudi	Ministry of Transportation
Mazen Edeek	Ministry of Transportation
Adnan Husseni	Jerusalem Governorate
Ahmed Seyam	Jerusalem Governorate
Diana Abualoyoun	MAS
Niveen Shobaki	MAS
Duja Michael	MAS
Khaled Awartani	Arab Islamic Bank
Adnan Abu Hummos	PADICO
Jameel Taher	PIF
Dr. Fathi Srouji	Birzeit University
Raed Ilian	Call U
Hilal Elbrou	Call U
Rasha Sulaiman	Ministry of Local Government
Sawsan Dweik	Birzeit University
Majeda Salem	Birzeit University
Maher Ghuneim	Ministry of Public Works and Housing
Haitham Abu Obeid	Ministry of Planning and Administrative Development
Imad Odwan	Al Quds Bard Honors College
Abdesalam Shbeeti	Ministry of National Economy

