

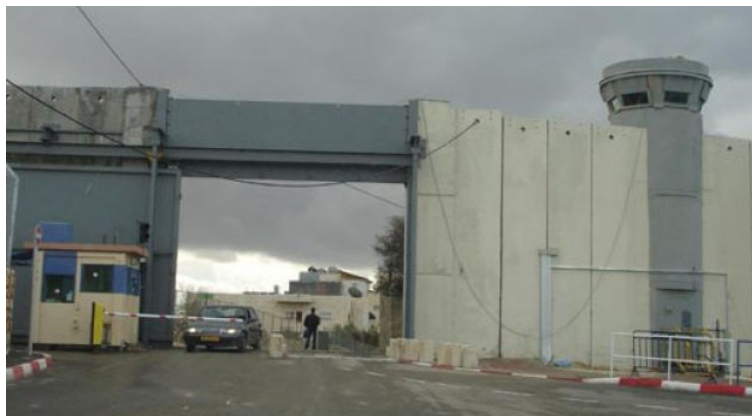
The Impact of the New Bethlehem Checkpoint on Tourism

The new arrangements at Bethlehem entrance have been the source of outrage by tour operators, hotel owners, bus drivers, souvenir shop owners, restaurants, guides and above all, the tourists visiting Bethlehem. Tourists have to leave their bus and walk into a waiting hall for Passport and baggage control and customs. This arrangement will reflect negatively on the flow of tourists between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, which in the eyes of all Christian tourists is one destination. Christian Pilgrims constitute to 70% of the total tourists visiting Israel and Palestine.

Bethlehem tourism stakeholders fear that this will limit the possibilities of having a normal tourism movement in and out of this Holy City, thus damaging all hopes for prosperity and development. Tour operators are worried that on the long run these arrangements will have greater negative effects arising from longer waiting times as more tourists are expected. Bethlehem hoteliers can already feel the drop in tourist overnights in Bethlehem due to the new developments. Many hotels in Bethlehem received cancellation of booked groups and new requests fell to an unprecedented level. Number of tourists visiting Bethlehem has not yet shown a dramatic fall but certainly anticipated.

Tourist groups spending two hours visiting Bethlehem are wasting an hour in crossing out. For groups spending several nights in Bethlehem, instead of starting their daily tour at 8 am they eventually have to start at 10am after checking out through this "border". Groups leaving the country from Bethlehem are checked with their luggage at this "border" for two hours and after a 40 minutes drive to Ben Gurion Airport they are checked again for another two hours.

This report details the arrangements, the measures, and impact on tourism. It also includes testimonials from tourists and foreigners using this check point. This report does not deal with political issues pertaining to Israeli/ Palestinian relations. It emphasizes the Economic factor of the problem and thus not tackling other problems faced by the local community such as Palestinian Citizens daily life, land confiscation, and the illegality of the new "terminal".



This report is based on the PALESTINIAN MONITORING GROUP (PMG) *Special Report : New Bethlehem Checkpoint Terminal the Israeli Unilateralism in the Occupied West Bank (1 December , 2005)*. The report was reviewed by the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities and prepared by the Arab Hotel Association in cooperation with the Chamber of Commerce and Industries.

Back ground:

(From the PMG report)

On 15 November 2005, the Israeli authorities began operation of a new checkpoint terminal and Wall gate at the main entrance to the city of Bethlehem, replacing the previously operational Checkpoint 300. Though located *inside* Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), the terminal complex, along with the procedures implemented therein, resemble that of an international border crossing. The Israeli government has noted that other such terminals will be opened within the Occupied West Bank.

Pedestrians passing through the new Bethlehem terminal must submit to comprehensive inspection procedures, including examination of personal identification and, upon exit, passing through a maze of barred, revolving doors, metal detectors, and turnstiles, along with having their bags x-rayed.

Procedures implemented at the terminal are likely to have a significantly negative impact on the Palestinian economy, in particular Bethlehem's beleaguered tourism industry. Approximately 35 per cent of the Palestinian economy is dependent on Metropolitan East Jerusalem, which extends from Bethlehem to Ramallah. This metropolitan area is now broken into enclaves by the route of the Wall and other restrictions on Palestinian freedom of movement. **The impact of the new terminal will be particularly acute in the coming month as local tourism operators expect the annual rise in visitors to Bethlehem during Christmas and other seasons on demand.**

Overview of Bethlehem Terminal and New Procedures

(From the PMG report)

Procedures for entering and exiting Bethlehem via the terminal vary slightly depending on whether passage is made by car or on foot. In general, procedures for entering Bethlehem are less cumbersome than those for exiting; tourists on busses and *passengers* of private vehicles must exit Bethlehem as pedestrians, which requires crossing through a total of 4 barred, revolving doors, 2 metal detectors, and 1 turnstile. Additionally, identification is thoroughly inspected and bags are x-rayed. Those driving private cars or tour busses direct their vehicle through the terminal, encountering 1 inspection point at the Wall gate and another inside the terminal complex. Drivers then proceed to a parking lot near the main road to wait for passengers to exit the terminal building.

Total processing time for pedestrians exiting Bethlehem through the terminal varies considerably.

In conditions where there are no other pedestrians crossing at the same time and no bags are selected for additional searching, the process for an individual takes approximately 5 – 10 minutes. *However, if there are others attempting to exit at the same time – particularly busloads of tourists – or certain bags are singled out for additional search, process times can reach up to 2 hours.*

Individuals who have exited Bethlehem as pedestrians report that the procedures at the terminal upon first use are confusing and disorienting and that, as with Checkpoint 300, many Israeli Border Police officers staffing the checkpoint are rude and/or aggressive towards those wishing to pass. In places where communication with an Israeli Border Police officer is via speaker, understanding the orders given, or his/her location is difficult. Communication throughout the terminal is stifled as many Israeli Border Police officers attempt to speak to those passing in Hebrew, a language that most individuals utilizing the terminal do not understand.

In places, there are no signs indicating where to go or guiding the process and no Israeli Border Police officers present to ask. If no other pedestrians are crossing at the time, trial and error may be necessary to determine in which line one should be. Additionally, individuals report that groups of Israeli Border Police positioned along elevated walkways in some areas of the terminal creates a feeling of extreme vulnerability.

Israeli-imposed restrictions on Palestinian freedom of movement implemented since the early 1990s, in particular the requirement that Palestinians holding West Bank identity cards obtain a permit to enter Jerusalem, have already heavily restricted the movement of Palestinian civilians into and out of Bethlehem along this route. **Consequently, these new procedures will be experienced primarily by those involved in tourism to Bethlehem and individuals using the terminal on a daily basis, such as Jerusalemites who work or study in Bethlehem.**⁵ However, the impact of the Bethlehem terminal on Palestinian society will be much broader.

Note: Testimonials by tourists and foreigners available at the end of this report

Bethlehem's Tourism Industry

(From the PMG report)

Bethlehem and Jerusalem are the main destinations for tourists to the OPT and have traditionally been marketed by tourism operators as “one destination”, in large part due to the two cities' close proximity and their religious significance for Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land, who form a bulk of international tourists to the OPT.

The Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, along with tourism operators in Bethlehem and Jerusalem, stress that the new procedures for entering and exiting Bethlehem are likely to have a damaging impact on the number of tourists traveling to Bethlehem and threaten to reverse positive achievements made over the past 2 years in revitalizing the flow of tourism to Bethlehem. By making access to Bethlehem's holy sites increasingly difficult, unilateral Israeli action threatens not only to **damage the Palestinian economy**, but to **reconfigure the nature of tourism to the Holy Land by eliminating ease of movement between Jerusalem and Bethlehem**, thereby eroding the historic connection between the 2 cities. Israel has already *de-facto* annexed the area surrounding Rachel's Tomb in Bethlehem and built infrastructure that provides direct access to the site – via an access road running adjacent to the Wall. Jewish worshippers and tourists wishing to visit Rachel's Tomb are thus able to do so without undergoing the inspection procedures at the Bethlehem Terminal.

According to the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, the Palestinian tourism industry experienced significant growth in the 1990s, growing from an average monthly tourism flow of 60,000 visitors at the end of 1994 upwards to 105,000 visitors as of September 2000.⁶ Tourism to Bethlehem peaked in 2000 with over 800,000 tourists visiting the city throughout the year. Following the beginning of the *Intifada* (Uprising) in September 2000, **this trend came to a dramatic halt, resulting in a significant loss of revenue from tourism and the subsequent closure of numerous tourism-related enterprises** (e.g. restaurants, souvenir shops, factories for production of souvenirs, etc.).

According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), the number of travel and tourism agencies decreased by 15.4 per cent between 2000 and 2002 and the number of souvenir shops decreased by 33.7 per cent during the same period.

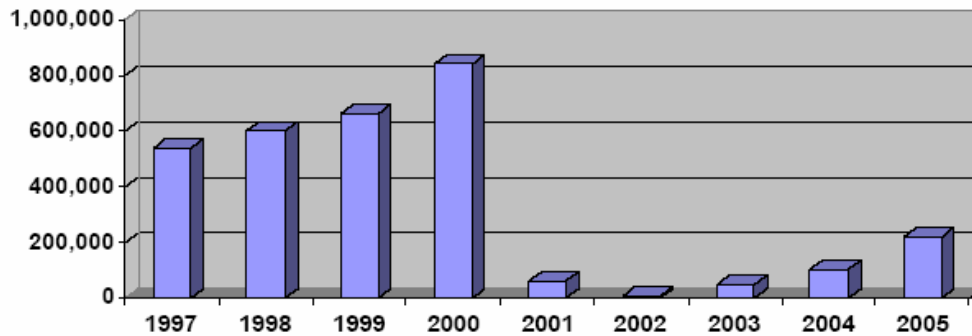
The impact of decreased tourism was felt acutely in the Bethlehem area. According to PCBS, while 54,720 guests stayed overnight at hotels in the Bethlehem Governorate during the year 2000, in 2002, only 732 guests stayed overnight. Similarly, between 2000 and 2004, the number of staff at hotels in the Bethlehem Governorate decreased by over 70 per cent.

Increased efforts from the tourism sector, along with relatively more stable ground conditions, resulted in a slow revitalization of the flow of tourists to Bethlehem beginning in 2003. In 2004, the number of tourists reached over 103,000 – up from some 46,000 in 2003 – and constituted some 98 per cent of total tourists to areas under Palestinian Authority (PA) control. According to the Palestinian Tourist and Antiquities Police, as of 24 November 2005, over 249,000 tourists had visited

Bethlehem since 01 January 2005. **In October 2005, alone, 30,023 tourists visited Bethlehem, an average of 968 tourists visiting the city per day.**

Tourist flow to Bethlehem: (From the PMG report)

FIGURE 1: Annual Flow of Tourists to Bethlehem, 1997 - 2005^y



Figures for 2005 include 01 January – 31 October 2005

As with non-tourist traffic, Palestinian tour agencies in Bethlehem and Jerusalem report that procedures for bringing busloads of tourists into and out of Bethlehem are more time consuming than those previously implemented at Checkpoint 300. Prior to the opening of the Bethlehem terminal, busses of tourists were stopped at the checkpoint, where exact method of inspection varied. In most cases, an Israeli Border Police officer would board the bus and inspect the passports of some, or all, of the passengers, but the passports were generally given only a cursory glance. In some cases, all of the passengers' passports would be gathered by the driver and given, *en masse*, to an Israeli Border Police officer who would inspect them. On occasion, 1 or 2 tourists would be asked to step off the bus for additional questioning, or 1 or 2 bags would be checked. In general, entry and exit took around 10 – 20 minutes at the previously operational Checkpoint 300.

Since its 15 November opening, process time through and procedures at the new Bethlehem terminal have varied greatly. Total process time can reach **up to 2 hours** as busloads of tourists are forced to step down from tour busses upon entry and exit.¹⁰ Exiting Bethlehem through the terminal is particularly time-consuming: tourists must step down from the bus, take their small, personal belongings with them and proceed through the terminal for processing as pedestrians, during which their belongings are x-rayed. Upon completion of inspection procedures, tourists then re-board the tour bus once exiting the terminal building.



Tour Busses Waiting to Exit Bethlehem through the Wall Gate (26 November 2005)

Impact on tourism

(From the PMG report)

According to tour operators, if the bus is also transporting large baggage for passengers, in some instances, specific bags are selected for manual “open and search” procedures. In general, however, suitcases remain on the bus as it proceeds through the terminal area. Process times are affected by the number of tourists on board each bus; the number of busses being processed at the terminal at the same time; and if the bags of any passengers are selected for additional searching. A simple calculation indicates that the average time for exiting and boarding a bus takes one minute at least for each passenger.

Tour operators and travel agencies report that tourists and International tour operators have already begun to complain about the new procedures for visiting Bethlehem and are being skeptical to whether they should still consider accommodating their groups in Bethlehem. Operators note that many tour groups in the past would base themselves at hotels in Bethlehem during at least part of their visit, making trips to other areas of the West Bank and Israel during the day. However, given the processing time for entering and exiting Bethlehem, **the feasibility of having tourists stay in Bethlehem is significantly diminished.**

Tour operators report that since the terminal’s 15 November opening procedures for entering Bethlehem have varied from bus to bus. While all tourists are required to get off the bus and enter the terminal building, operators indicate that though some busloads of tourists have had their passports checked one-by-one before being allowed to pass through the terminal, other groups of tourists have been allowed to pass *en masse* through the terminal without individual inspection of IDs. In the former case, time for entering Bethlehem averages 1 hour for a busload of 50 tourists. In the latter, the process takes around 15 minutes.

Figures 2: Comparative Table for Entry and Exit Procedures for Tour Busses to Bethlehem

Inspection Method	Before		After	
	Entry	Exit	Entry	Exit
IDs examined individually	Varied	Varied	Varies	Yes
Forced to get off bus	No	No	Yes	Yes
Passage through metal detector	No	No	No	Yes (twice)
Passage through barred, revolving door or turnstile	No	No	Yes (once)	Yes (5 times)
Small bags x-rayed	No	No	No	Yes
Passage through iron Wall gate	No	No	Yes	Yes
Average total processing time	10 – 20 minutes	10 – 20 minutes	15 min. – 1 hour	40 min. – 2 hours

According to hotels in Bethlehem

(Source: Arab Hotel Association)

Since the start of these new arrangements they have received substantial cancellations of groups at their premises. It is recorded that more that 2000 bed nights were cancelled as immediate reaction from International tour operators that held bookings at Bethlehem hotels. The Arab Hotel Association believes that the new checkpoint will have a damaging effect on the hotel sector in Bethlehem on the long run and hotels will start feeling the impact after six months when a number of tourists and tour operators will be more aware of the hardship and procedures. They will start being reluctant to have

their groups stay in Bethlehem and travel through the checkpoint on daily basis and with their luggage.

**Table : Main Indicators for Hotel Activities in Bethlehem Governorate
(1999- H1/2005)**

	Year	Indicators	
	No. of Operating Hotels	No. of Available Rooms	Room Occupancy (%)
1999	13	624	38.4
2000	18	1,201	22.1
2001	10	642	1.1
2002	10	750	0.5
2003	11	730	1.2
2004	16	956	2.5
H1/2005	18	1,411	6.2

Efforts towards finding a way out:

In November 2004 Israeli Minister of Tourism Gideon Ezra and Palestinian Minister of Tourism and Antiquities Mitri Abu Aita signed a joint statement in Jerusalem pledging to cooperate to promote tourism to the area.

Ministers Abu Eita and Ezra said in a joint statement issued promising cooperation in promoting tourism to the Holy Land and effective measures to provide the appropriate atmosphere for private sector in both sides in terms of traffic to assure the best services for tourist and pilgrims to the Holy Land. Both parties undertook to “take effective measures to assure the safe and smooth passage of pilgrims and tourists visiting Israeli and Palestinian areas.”

Based on the Paris protocol 1994 and on this statement the efforts towards finding a way out of this surprising unilateral step, all parties have been joining lobbying pressure on many levels.

Chaired by The Minister of Tourism Mr. Ziad El Bandak, a committee made up of MOTA, the Municipalities of Bethlehem , Beit Sahour, and Beit Jala together with Bethlehem Chamber of Commerce, the Arab Tourist and Travel Agents Association and the Arab Hotel Association has been established. Extensive meetings and dialogue with different channels aimed at pressuring Israel to reverse its arrangements especially on the tourism level.

Supporters to the call came were all Heads of Churches and his Holy See, Ministers of Tourism in Jordan, Egypt and Israel, Israeli tourism private sector institutions, Peres Center for Peace, most of the foreign Representative Offices and Consulates, in addition to other International Institutions and supporters. On the Political level the PA organized a campaign through its Foreign Affairs Ministry to inform the International community and President Abbas concentrated during his visit to Rome and the Vatican on this major issue. On another level the Prime Ministry is considering solidarity actions towards Bethlehem.

As a result, we are witnessing some change on the check point which is reflected through the random checking of the tourist buses. Not all buses are requested to load and unload at the crossing now. It is also a possibility that such facilitation is temporary for the Christmas Season. Anyway, **tourist coaches still do not have a separate lane which was always the promise the Israelis gave to the Palestinian Tourism Minister and private sector.**

Testimonials from Tourists visiting Bethlehem

This morning Martha Lawson and I went out to Nissan's with a driver to pick up host gifts. There was an entirely new system for entering and leaving Bethlehem. We were astounded by this new "terminal" and process. This was the first day of this operation.

Entering we were routed up the hill, no check-in at the old gate. turning before the opening in the Wall that has been there, but up to the gate with the tall watch-towers. Passports checked, really checked, and on in. On the return Martha and I had to get out of the car, taking all belongings -and walk across two streets to the other side to enter the first of 4 very heavy turn-stiles, each person waiting for their green light. After that we went down one corridor after another inside this new enclosed Terminal. Signs everywhere, terminal exit, keep terminal clean. We went on through an entrance similar to a cattle "shoot, again with the red and green light for one person at a time. There were many turns to the corridor, so that you could not see ahead, or where you were going. Again the red, and green light, another turn-stile, and then to the very formal X-ray machine, a clerk on each side in an enclosed glass room. You put your items on the belt to be X-rayed, money/wallets/metal items/phones, etc. in a container and sent through.

Then we went to another glassed-in section (all of this was inside the new terminal building), we had to put our passports under the glass window protection (like changing money), they were looked at and given back to us at the second window. There were two of these check-point glass rooms, only one open this morning. At this point there was one more green/red light to the final exit, with a metal bar across it until the signal was given. Another walk up a corridor to the final exit where buses will be parked and waiting which were up and across another street section. It would be very difficult, or impossible for a person with a walker or even cane to manipulate the heavy turn-stiles, let alone a wheel chair. Perhaps those passengers will be taken another route.

As we were crossing one of the street sections a tourist bus had pulled up to enter - the guide was furious with this new plan, and he hadn't even experience the departure from the other side. While Martha and I were going through the terminal, our driver told us his vehicle was thoroughly searched inside and out before he could go to the parking area to wait. The understanding from the border control personnel that we received was that even buses of PAX will now have to leave Bethlehem the same way Martha and I did.

Cars and buses were now lining up, down the hill, backed up to the old gate entrance, and it was only 11:15 am. This procedure will add a lot of time (perhaps hours) to the visit to Bethlehem.

It was "Humiliating" as Martha stated, we felt like we were in a prison. Just wanted you to know what is happening, we will privately alert our guides to this new system.

Here is my report of our trip in and out of Bethlehem yesterday.

November 29th Bethlehem Visit:

We went with a bus into Bethlehem -there was no passport check on the way in, the driver merely told the soldier that we were a tour group of Americans. We were waved in.

On the return there was about a 15 minute wait as cars ahead of us had their drivers and passengers get out of the car and go to the window to the soldier to have their papers checked.

We were then waved in to go to the entrance of the terminal. The bus was allowed to drive us across the street to the first turn-stile. There was a speaker on the wall by the turn-stile - and a voice in Hebrew. I tried to explain to the voice that we were a group of 33 PAX, the voice then said "go", and we waited one by one to go through the two turn-stiles that were side by side. We did not ever see the person that was talking to us through the speaker.

We continued down the ramp to another turn-stile, and then on to another which was just before the X-ray section. There two people could go through on one green light. We waited until directed to put our belongings on the X-ray belt. Still the leather "fingers" of the X-ray machine were too stiff to allow the bags to go through. Several of us helped push a local person's belongings to get through the leather fingers so that our items could go through.

We had to assist the fitting of the local belongings, and then our groups small bags went through. At the next passport check, George and I gave the soldier in the glass room our passports, he asked if we were a group - we

responded yes, so he let the rest of the group go through with only holding up their passports as they walked by the window. There were two local people that had finished the X-ray and were now mixed with our group. The soldier took time to examine and check in the computer those papers before letting our group continue out. There was another metal bar that the soldier release to allow passengers out one by one.

01/12/200:

Page 2 of

We were the only bus at that time (a second EO bus came a bit later, and they had the same experience) and the two local people, so it didn't take much time. We then walked down a sidewalk, across a street the the bus parking area where our bus was waiting.

The Passengers stated that it was as though we had been sent back in time - to border crossings similar to those from years ago traveling from one country into another in central Europe, or into East Germany. Both groups did not feel comfortable and expressed their feelings openly.

Hi James,

The border crossing tonight went very smoothly that is from start to finish it only tood about 12 minutes fromthe time they got off inBethlehem until they bordered the bus in Israel the drivers love it no long waiting in lines of traffic.

The only downside is that it is a little frightening for the people that is they get down and are faced with this huge cement structure corridor and no one to tell them where to go or what to do. They just enter this cement corridor and have to keep going until finally someone appears.In tonights case they were just whisked through without any passport checks.If it rains however they will be exposed for about a hundred feet at one point. They need to have people there directing tourists where to go as the building is very forbidding with watchtowers and high walls it is very intimidating and no one in sight One woman said her people would not like that experience at all.

I am going to see in can stir up something in the Ministry of Tourism here but letters from agents will help if they still haven't iomed out the kinks I hope thats all it is. **David**

Testimonial on the crossing procedures

four inspection moments. First, at the gate in the Wall, where a soldier checks whether I have a passport. I wave it. Then we enter, through iron corridors, into the terminal itself. We pass a glass booth where a soldier quickly checks the passport. A Palestinian woman wants to enter a revolving fence but does not have a tasreeh [permit]. A rather loud-speaking soldier at the other side of the fence refuses her entry. The kids and I pass, somewhat overwhelmed by all the iron and stone around us and by the huge size of the hall. It reminds of Eretz at the Israeli entry to Gaza

Thend, we pass by male and female toilets. Everywhere huge signs that people should keep the place clean. The hall is a combination of iron revolving gates, corridors and high roofs, and big and small signs. We are waiting for some minutes in front of another revolving fence with a red light on top of it. Through the fence we watch a Palestinian trying to understand the Hebrew-spoken orders of a female soldier. She apparently wants him to take his belt off. Or is it his shoes? She speaks through a loudspeaker from behind glass. The loudspeaker speaks very loud, with an echo due to the size of the hall.

The light turns green and we pass the revolving door. The soldier lowers her voice when she sees me and Jara, with Tamer on my arm.

I put my things in my bag which is X-rayed. aDonat bring your hand too close to the bag,ae the soldier warns. Through the loudspeaker the soldier tells me aHave a nice day,ae but much too loud. That is the third time to hear this, I count. Everything is here out of place and out of proportion. We then go to inspection point number four. The passport goes through the glass window and is thoroughly looked upon from all sides. Have a nice day, we hear again, mechanically.

Relieved we walk out of the terminal. Jara pulls my arm and whispers in my ear that she sees a soldier doing pee-pee behind a pillar. She giggles and asks why he is doing so. Donat they learn to go to a toilet?