

AN ENDLESS INTERROGATION

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May 19, 2023 12:15 am | Updated 12:50 am IST

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Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas decorates Prime Minister Narendra Modi with the Grand Collar of the State of Palestine medal during Mr. Modi's visit to the Palestinian Authority headquarters in Ramallah in 2018. | Photo Credit: AP

In 2018, I was in Ramallah, the de facto administrative capital of the Palestine Authority, to cover [Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Palestine](#). A day after Mr. Modi wrapped up his visit, I prepared to leave the city. My flight was from Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion airport. While leaving the West Bank for Tel Aviv, my driver, a Palestinian Arab from occupied East Jerusalem, warned me about the Israeli checkpoints on the way. I had to call a taxi from Jerusalem to come and pick me up from Ramallah and drop me at Tel Aviv as taxi drivers in Ramallah are not allowed to go to Tel Aviv and Israeli taxis seldom come to Ramallah.

There were three checkpoints between Ramallah and Tel Aviv airport. The first, in Kalandia, is the main checkpoint between the northern West Bank and Jerusalem. Thousands of Palestinians who live in the northern West Bank and work on the other side of the security wall, which Israel built, cross this point every day. My driver greeted the soldier with a 'shalom' while he handed him his permit card. I gave my passport to the soldier with the entry permit that the Israelis had issued at the airport. We were asked to wait. A while later, the soldier returned my passport and waved us on.

From there, we entered Highway 443, which Israel had built to link Jerusalem with Tel Aviv. The driver told me in broken English that the road was not open for Palestinians. "On the right is Palestine, on the left is Palestine, but this road is Israel," he said. He was able to enter the road because he lived in East Jerusalem, which was annexed by Israel after the 1967 war. On the exit points, the road was blocked by concrete walls or metal wires. This was what journalist Rachel Shabi had referred to as "the apartheid road."

At the third checkpoint, we were stopped again. The soldier, with an automated rifle in his hand, asked for the driver's permit and my passport. After a while, he came back and asked me why I had gone to Ramallah. I said I had gone to cover the Indian Prime Minister's visit. This was also written on my visa, which I showed to the soldier. Another soldier asked me to get out of the car with my belongings and go to the screening room. There, three soldiers stood holding guns. I was told to take out everything from my bag, remove my belt and jacket, and walk through the screening machine. I handed everything to them, literally at gunpoint, including a souvenir that I had bought in Bethlehem for my mother.

After the examination, the soldiers asked me to go to the adjacent room and wait while my bag remained in the screening room. My driver then came smiling. "Are you alright," he asked holding his belt in one hand. "Sorry. This is because I am an Arab from Jerusalem. And don't worry, I go through this every day," he said and sat beside me. After 15-20 minutes, I got my passport and was asked to take my bags and leave.

But at the Ben Gurion airport, a security official stopped me again. He asked me why I visited Ramallah, how many days I stayed there, why I was travelling alone, whether this the first time I was travelling to Israel (it wasn't) and whether I had left my bag unattended. He also walked away with my passport. After a while, another officer came only to ask me the same questions before vanishing. I waited not knowing what to do next. After 20 minutes, an official returned my passport. "Have a safe flight, Sir," he said.

The experience was intimidating, to say the least. I had never been interrogated like that before. I wondered, if this is what a journalist from India, which has friendly ties with Israel, who has gone to Palestine to cover a Prime Minister's visit, faces, what would others who want to travel to Palestine experience? Or perhaps I had to go through this because I was a journalist from another country who was travelling in territories illegally occupied by "the Middle East's only democracy."

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