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Nous sommes définis par les lignes que nous décidons de traverser ou d'accepter comme frontières

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From Check Point to Check Mate

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Checkpoints are common to every country in the Middle East and beyond. They play a central role in the daily lives of people from Tripoli in Libya to Peshawar in Pakistan and from the mountains of south-east Turkey to the marshes of southern Sudan. Nobody knows their number, although it must be in the tens of thousands, and they vary between being a minor inconvenience, a reassuring sign of security, and a place of terror and/or execution.

Their importance is commonly ignored by the ruling elite. Politicians, diplomats and even journalists are often permitted to pass through them with a polite wave of the hand. But for an Afghan farmer, returning to his village from the provincial capital, a checkpoint is where he may have to pay a bribe to continue his journey; if he is with his children, he fears they will raped by the police on duty. For Iraqis during the sectarian civil war of 2006-07, official or unofficial checkpoints were dreaded places where they might become victims of an “ID killing”, shot because their ID card revealed their religious identity.

Of course, their purpose is to establish control of the roads and show who is in charge. No consideration is given to the convenience, or even the ability to make a living, of ordinary citizens. Border checks show the same mentality. Almost the first act of the triumphant anti-Gaddafi militiamen after they had taken Tripoli last August was to impose such rigorous checks on those leaving the country that traffic tailed back for miles.

Most often there is nothing dramatic about checkpoints. They are simply the outward and visible sign of whoever is claiming authority over an urban street or a country road. But, without a shot being fired, they can stifle the economic life of an area, as Israel has done for years on the West Bank.

A surprise witness to the calamitous impact of these checkpoints in recent years is President George W Bush. In 2008 Bush was to make a presidential visit to Bethlehem from Jerusalem. The Israelis wanted him to travel the short distance by helicopter, but his Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, insisted, according to her recently published memoir, that he go by car. She wanted him to see “the ugliness of the occupation, including the checkpoints and the security wall, for himself, and it would have been an insult to the Palestinians if he didn’t.” Barriers were taken down and Bush’s convoy raced at speed down the road to Bethlehem, but even so, briefly viewing what Palestinians had to put up with, Bush commented, “This is awful”.

After working in the Middle East as a journalist on and off for 35 years, I almost invariably try to check the potential of any checkpoint to cause trouble before I get to it. The simplest way is to ask drivers coming in the opposite direction. If there is no oncoming traffic, this is a bad sign. It is also worth thinking about how local security or militiamen may react to the number plate on one’s car.

My worst experiences, both in different wars in Iraq, came from forgetting these simple precautions. In 1991, I was part of a convoy of cars provided by the Iraqi governor of Sulaymaniyah to Swedish officials from the UN, pre-positioning supplies for returning Kurdish refugees. We drove up to the Kurdish front line where the militiamen noticed our cars had no number plates which, to them, meant that they belonged to the hated Iraqi secret police. The drivers, who were indeed secret policemen, panicked and tried to reverse as the Kurds opened fire. Our car was hit by a dozen bullets but, amazingly, none of us was seriously wounded, although I was hit in the face by metal and glass.

A second and worse experience was in Iraq in 2004, when I was driving with two Iraqis to Najaf to a press conference to be given by followers of the Shia nationalist cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. Shortly before crossing the Euphrates at Kufa, we were stopped by a checkpoint manned by Mehdi Army militiamen who had just been fighting with US Marines and were in a high state of hysteria. I was wearing a red-and-white keffiyeh – headdress – as a

disguise because we had been driving through some very dangerous Sunni towns to the north. The Mehdi Army men tore it off and started shouting: “He’s an American spy!” For a few minutes it seemed certain they would shoot us until we persuaded them to take us to their local leader in the Grand Mosque in Kufa.

It was a nasty experience and drove home for me the dread felt by many when approaching a checkpoint. For a period their lives will be in the hands of bored, ill-paid men with guns, all of whom must be treated with exaggerated courtesy, as well as cheery greetings and a groveling smile.

As a way of knowing what makes a country tick, close observation of checkpoints may be more informative than meetings with prime ministers and ambassadors. In countries such as Afghanistan and Yemen, they tell one what the government does and does not control. For instance, a year ago I was in Afghanistan and drove 40 miles north of Kabul into what is meant to be territory firmly held by the government. But as we entered the Salang valley, the only big road leading through the Hindu Kush to northern Afghanistan, there was a checkpoint manned by ragged gunmen who claimed they were collecting a municipal road tax but were probably freelance bandits. We decided to drive up the Panjshir Valley, the natural fortress of the old anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. In the gorge at the entrance was another checkpoint where militiamen took our passports and wrote down our names. The message was that the Panjshir was one more Afghan state-within-a-state which set its own rules.

In Lebanon during the early 1980s, I used to give copies of the Beirut newspapers to bored militiamen at checkpoints in the mountains as a conciliatory gesture. At about the same time I had a comic fantasy of starting a newspaper devoted to checkpoint life to be sold in the many countries where they flourish. The idea came to me when I saw two militiamen selling their party newspaper. Without exception, every driver was buying a newspaper. Around the next corner in the road, lying in the ditch, was a discarded heap of the same publication. The beauty of my scheme is that it makes newspaper purchase more or less obligatory and the quality of the publication, often an irritating cause of expense, will not matter. Surely such a plan cannot fail?

Patrick Cockburn is the author of Muqtada: Muqtada Al-Sadr, the Shia Revival, and the Struggle for Iraq.

Post-scriptum :

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