

Narratives Under Siege (16) Drivers at Sofa Crossing Wait in Hope



Bahjat, one of the truck drivers waiting at Sofa Crossing, says he hopes the *Tahdiya* will last

11am, Thursday, June 19. The *Tahdiya*, or ‘Lull’ between Hamas and Israel started just hours ago, at six ‘clock this morning. At Sofa Crossing, in the south eastern Gaza Strip, it looks like business as usual for the Gazan drivers who are patiently waiting to collect their cargo so they can start distributing across the Gaza Strip.

“It is too early to say what will happen next” says Wael. “But we hope the *Tahdiya* will go well. I usually wait here for twenty four hours to collect five tons of fruit. I just hope all the Gaza borders will open, and then we’ll be able to work properly – and to live.”

Wael is one of the approximately seventy drivers waiting at Sofa this morning: he arrived here at 4pm yesterday, so he’s already been at Sofa for almost twenty hours. As long as Sofa remains open today, he and the other drivers will eventually be allowed to enter the Palestinian side of the crossing and collect their cargo; in his case five tons of fresh fruit. Gaza used to export citrus fruits, strawberries, vegetables and flowers around the world, but now, due to the Israeli siege and closure of the Gaza Strip which has prevented exports and devastated the economy, Gazans are producing a fraction of the goods they used to, and traders are now, ironically, importing fruit and vegetables from Israel.

“We spend a lot of time just sitting, waiting to enter the crossing” says Wael. “The goods are sometimes spoiled by the time we can collect them.” He and his friend, Bahjat, who’s

also a driver, both used to collect their goods from Karni Crossing, in the northern Gaza Strip. “Karni was built as a commercial crossing and so it has the equipment we need for hauling and storage” says Bahjat. “But Sofa wasn’t built as a commercial crossing, so, while we are waiting here, our goods are spoiling, because there are no proper storage facilities. It’s summer, and the weather is getting hotter - what do you think this heat does to fruit and dairy, and frozen meat left outside in the sun?”

The six crossings into the Gaza Strip have been sealed by the Israeli Occupation forces (IOF) for more than two years, depriving one and a half million people inside Gaza of freedom of movement, as well as their economic and social rights. Since mid June 2007, Karni Crossing, which used to be the main commercial crossing into Gaza, has been completely closed for approximately 297 days. Rafah International Crossing Point, the only border from Gaza to the outside world via a country other than Israel, has not been fully open for more than two years, only sporadically opened for just a few hours at a time. The two year Israeli siege and closure of the Gaza Strip has forced the entire civilian population to live on food and fuel rations, whilst Gaza has also become completely estranged from the outside world, and bitterly impoverished. All the trucks waiting at Sofa are empty – symbolizing the death of exports from Gaza, a country which used to sell its fruit, especially its strawberries, around the world, but has now become one of the most aid dependent communities on earth. The *Tahdiya* offers a hope for peace that the people of Gaza desperately need in order to fulfill their basic human rights. Talks on re-opening the Rafah Crossing into Egypt are scheduled to start between Israel, Hamas, the Palestinian Authority and the EU in two weeks, as long as the *Tahdiya* holds out.

The drivers at Sofa crossing this morning veer between being hopeful that peace may be coming to Gaza, and being utterly unconvinced that anything is going to change whilst Palestine continues to be occupied by Israel. The regime at Sofa Crossing itself highlights the stranglehold that Israel continues to wield over the Gaza Strip. Wael and Bahjat explain that Israeli trucks unload their goods onto the Israeli side of Sofa Crossing. All the goods then have to be security checked, before being re-loaded, taken over to the Palestinian side of the crossing and unloaded once again. The goods, which include large quantities of frozen meat and dairy products, are exposed to the intense sun until 3pm, when the Palestinian drivers are allowed to start collecting them, one truckload at a time. The goods are therefore liable to be damaged, or spoilt, because the facilities are completely inadequate and the system is slow and cumbersome. “Yesterday I waited for twenty four hours to collect five tons of plums,” says Wael. “But I had to throw almost half of them away, because they had been sitting outside and had completely spoiled. My company still has to pay for these goods, even when they are ruined. We need Karni crossing to open as soon as possible.”

The line of trucks at Sofa crossing has lengthened in the last forty five minutes, and now it snakes down the dusty road, the metal glinting hot in the sun. As we walk towards our taxi, an older driver waves to us from his cab. His name is Mohammed. “I’ve been a truck driver for a long time” he says. “I support fifteen people at home but the struggle gets harder, because of the closure and especially the fuel price increases. I collect a full

truckload of goods every three days, and make 400 Shekels - but now I spend almost 300 Shekels just paying for the fuel.”