

Linking Gaza and the West Bank: Convoys

This note proposes how convoys for people and goods might operate between the West Bank and Gaza. Technical discussions will be needed to agree on both concepts and the operational details.

Given the current lack of agreement between the parties on the how convoys will operate, **it is proposed that operations begin with bus convoys for the transportation of people, as this should be relatively straightforward to implement.** The following is recommended:

- A private bus operator, using buses which remain within Israel, would provide transport;
- A private Israeli firm would provide convoy security services;
- The companies would be selected by the PA on a competitive basis, from among a list of bidders approved by GOI;
- The terms of the contracts would need to be acceptable to GOI;
- Permission to travel would be granted to all Palestinians with the exception of those deemed by the PA or GOI to be a security risk. While in transit, passengers would not be subject to arrest unless their conduct *en route* gives cause for alarm;
- Convoys would run several times a day to three locations serving the southern, central and northern West Bank;
- The costs of the transport and of the security services would be borne by convoy users.

Once the key points are agreed, the passenger convoys could be introduced within a month. Once the passenger convoy system is agreed, it is recommended that discussions on car and truck convoys begin. The main principles governing bus convoys are applicable to car and truck convoys, though they would require additional levels of inspection and security. Financing will also be needed to procure equipment and to construct facilities, such as staging areas.

Convoy Operations for Buses, Personal Vehicles and Trucks

This note examines the options for the resumption of convoys to move people and goods between the West Bank and Gaza. Convoys operated prior to the intifada, but have been suspended for a number of years. Currently a small number of individuals are permitted to travel between Gaza and the West Bank; Palestinian trucks and vehicles are not.

The organization of convoys should be based on past experience, while recognizing the changes in security requirements resulting from the intervening period. A phased approach would allow time to test the system, build the necessary infrastructure and improve the level of confidence between the two parties. Convoys should continue to operate and expand until a more permanent transport link between the two Palestinian areas has been established¹.

1. Convoys can be separated into three types, in ascending order of security-related complexity:

- Phase 1 -- Movement of passengers on “sterile” buses;
- Phase 2 -- Movement of Palestinian cargo trucks;
- Phase 3 -- Movement of passenger vehicles.

2. Each phase would provide the experience and time needed to introduce the next. Certain characteristics would be common to all three types of convoy operation:

- It is proposed that all convoys operate on a set of three routes connecting Gaza with the northern, central and southern West Bank; this would increase efficiency/decrease travel times, given the persistence in the West Bank of internal movement restrictions. These routes should be located away from built-up and heavily-trafficked areas where possible;
- A sufficient number of convoys should operate to meet daily demand;
- The number of vehicles per convoy should be limited on the basis of security considerations (a working assumption is that convoys could contain up to 5 buses, 15 trucks, or 25 personal vehicles);
- Convoys should operate on a fixed, published schedule, and during daylight hours;
- Convoys would be organized by a private Israeli transport company, and escorted by a private Israeli security company. The movement of all convoy vehicles would be monitored using GPS and radio communications;
- All persons traveling in a convoy would be required to have valid ID and would be subject to security clearance. They should also be subject to prior physical check, though this should be modest since they are not traveling to Israel;

¹ A USAID/World Bank study is currently underway to examine options for a new physical link between Gaza and the West Bank.

- Refusal of permission to travel should be based on clear criteria, which would be subject to review should they result in the exclusion of large numbers of persons wishing to travel²;
- To the extent possible and in order to maintain personal dignity and minimize friction, inspections of travelers should rely on equipment and procedures that reduce direct interaction between travelers and officials;
- Tickets would need to be purchased in advance, to allow for security clearance. The parties should agree on a reasonable advance notice period;
- The costs of operating convoys should be recovered from the convoy users.

3. Private contractors should be competitively selected by the PA (for buses, for security) from lists of not less than three firms agreed to in advance by GOI. The bus contract would provide for a minimum frequency of service and maximum fee-for-service; a minimum transit time and adequate turnaround time; and penalties in cases of a failure to meet agreed schedules (though with provision for *force majeure*). The initial security contract would cover the operation of buses; subsequent arrangements would be needed to cover the operation of commercial trucks and passenger vehicles. Security arrangements would need to be approved by GOI.

Bus Convoys for Passengers

4. Bus convoys should bring passengers to points where they can access internal transportation in the West Bank and Gaza. Due to movement restrictions in the West Bank, it is recommended that three points be designated along the southern, central and northern border between Israel and the West Bank.

5. Convoys would use Israeli buses that remain inside Israel³. The buses should be air-conditioned, with all passengers required to be seated. In the start-up phase, the service can be provided at a designated crossing, with a simple inspection facility which would be used to validate the identity of the passengers, and to inspect them and their accompanying luggage for dangerous items. The limited initial capacity of such a facility would in turn limit luggage and the size of such convoys. Within a relatively short time, however, dedicated bus terminals could be established (three in the West Bank, one in Gaza). These terminals could be provided with unloading platforms that would allow arriving passengers to move directly across the border without further inspection (a separate loading platform and processing hall would serve departing passengers and their baggage). The terminals would require a parking area for local transport. These terminals should be privately operated, requiring separate contractual arrangements.

6. Security in transit would be provided by guards traveling on the buses and possibly by escort vehicles (depending on the arrangement agreed to by the parties). In the event of a medical emergency, the convoy should continue in transit but an ambulance should be dispatched to intercept the convoy and evacuate the affected traveler to a nearby hospital. In the event of a

² It is assumed that security checks would be coordinated with the PA. Prohibitions on individuals should be subject to periodic review.

³ As the movement is border to border, using a Palestinian bus would make no sense due to the time that would be lost in inspecting the vehicle.

breakdown, passengers should be transferred from the disabled bus to the remaining buses, and the convoy should continue.

7. The screening of passengers would not need to be as exacting as for those visiting Israel, since they would not alight in Israel. Passengers should be allowed to travel using their identity cards. Reservations would need to be made in advance, indicating the route (north, south, or central) and the name and ID number of the traveler. Approval should include a security review, which can be done on-line. It is recommended that an expedited reservation service be established for frequent travelers, particularly businessmen and officials, to allow reservations for same-day travel. Frequent travelers could be given frequent traveler ID cards to speed processing. Once approved for passage, no passengers should be subject to arrest while transiting Israel unless his or her conduct *en route* gives cause for alarm.

8. Luggage should be scanned and travelers should be inspected. There would be no need to screen the bus, however, since it would never leave Israel⁴.

9. The capacity of a passenger convoy could be up to 300 travelers per convoy, if each convoy consists of 5 buses carrying 60 passengers. Assuming a 45-minute turnaround time for unloading, driver rest and reloading, the expected time for a round trip bus convoy would be about 3 hours on a southern route, 4.5 hours on a central route and 6 hours on a northern route. With an optimum mix of routes and an average of a 10-hour operating day (8 in winter, 12 in summer), it would be possible to serve up to 2,100 passengers per day in each direction in 3 x 5-bus convoys⁵. With a reasonable level of utilization, it should be possible to provide this service at less than US\$15 per person each way.

Truck Convoys for Goods

10. At the outset it is worth pointing out that the use of “sterile” Israeli or Palestinian trucks operating inside Israel alone is not an attractive option from an economic perspective. Any such system would involve a “back to back” cargo transfer operation at each border---and since trucks can already transit between Gaza and the West Bank on this basis, a convoy system using sterile trucks would be *disadvantageous* since it would merely add time and cost.

11. It is recommended that convoys not exceed 15 trucks, with the precise number determined by what is manageable from an escort perspective.

12. The driver and an assistant driver in each truck would be issued with permits to transit through Israel, while any vehicle to be used should have a valid certificate of inspection confirming its roadworthiness according to Israeli standards.

13. The trucks would be inspected to ensure they posed no significant threat while in transit, and that no prohibited goods were being moved between the West Bank and Gaza. Since the trucks would not be allowed to stop in Israel, would not pass through highly populated areas and would be under close security supervision throughout transit, the threat level they would pose

⁴ After the passengers disembark, the bus would be inspected by the bus company for anything left behind by the passengers.

⁵ Assuming 3 trips to the central West Bank and 2 trips each to the north and south.

would presumably be modest, and this should be reflected in the inspection protocols to be applied⁶. This should then result in less time-consuming inspections than apply today for cargoes being shipped to Israel⁷.

1. A special channel should be created at Erez for the inspection of convoy trucks. These trucks would queue on the Palestinian side of the crossing and would then proceed through the verification/inspection of the driver & assistant driver, and the inspection of the vehicle---and would then assemble in a marshalling area.
2. Since no appropriate scanning equipment is likely to be available in the short-term, a physical inspection procedure will be required initially, and this will inevitably increase the time required to organize a truck convoy. The convoys should, therefore, be shorter in the start-up phase so as to minimize waiting time. Once scanners are available, they should be used to scan the trucks and their cargo, with any anomalies detected resulting in off-line manual inspection. The inspection channel is best located at Erez, given the congestion at Karni.
3. A reservation system should be applied, with the details to be worked out by the parties. Pre-notification would include appropriate information on the driver/assistant driver, the vehicle and the cargo. Once approved, the driver would be informed of anything needed to facilitate the clearance of the cargo. This system should eventually apply to all trucks and drivers, but initially it might be expedient to limit convoys to a smaller number of well-established trucking companies that would use pre-cleared drivers and vehicles operating on the basis of performance bonds. It should also be possible for these pre-cleared trucks to join convoys with only a brief pre-notification period.
4. Convoys need not be restricted to movement between the West Bank and Gaza, and it should be possible on the basis of successful experience it is proposed that they also travel to and from Ashdod, Haifa and Ben Gurion Airport. Container movement between these gateways will emerge once the new generation of scanners becomes operational, and this form of movement will be as, or more efficient than *via* convoy.

Passenger Vehicle Convoys

12. Once bus convoys are operational, it is recommended that convoys using Palestinian passenger vehicles be introduced. Such convoys present a greater security challenge since it would be necessary to inspect each vehicle, and because the drivers would be Palestinian.

⁶ Concern has been expressed by GOI that cargo shifted from Gaza to the West Bank could cross back into Israel from the West Bank. This, however, appears unlikely. In anticipation of the completion of the separation barrier, GOI is currently introducing border cargo controls that are as restrictive as those operating today on the Gaza borders. Besides, the goods will already have been inspected on exiting Gaza.

⁷ If the cargo were inspected to the same standard as for cargo moving to and from Israel today, there would be little benefit from conveying goods. One important advantage of a convoy system should be the freeing-up of capacity at the border crossings as a result of such lower-intensity inspection.

13. As with bus convoys, it is recommended that vehicle convoys should be managed by an Israeli security firm under contract to the PA. Escort vehicles would accompany the passenger vehicle convoy.

14. Passenger vehicle convoys should operate at scheduled times and on the basis of advanced notice and security screening, as with bus convoys. Drivers would need to provide information on the vehicle and the proposed passengers, and agreement should be reached by the parties on the length of time it would take to provide, or decline, approval. The Israeli and Palestinian security forces should cooperate in screening vehicles and passengers. Since the movement of these passenger vehicles would be supervised by security guards and would as far as possible take place on roads away from population centers, the threat level should be manageable. In addition to a regular service, a priority service should be established for PA officials and businessmen who hold frequent traveler IDs, allowing them to join a convoy on short notice.

15. There should be two stages to vehicle clearance. The first would require that the vehicle be in acceptable condition, as demonstrated through an up-to-date vehicle inspection certificate issued by the PA; this certificate would indicate that the vehicle in question meets Israeli vehicle operating standards. The second stage would be a physical security inspection prior to travel. Initially this would be done manually; after the delivery of the new generation of 6 MeV scanners, however, it should be conducted using a combination of scanning and additional off-line inspections if and when anomalies are detected. The scanner would be located on the Israeli side of the crossing, with vehicles queuing on the Palestinian side.

16. The parties need to agree on inspection time standards to enable proper time planning and convoy sizing. Multiple inspection lanes would be needed to ensure that convoys are processed in a reasonable period of time. Once scanners are installed, processing would speed up and the size of convoys could be increased. Drivers and passengers would submit their documents for inspection and would undergo physical checks. Once inspected, vehicles and passengers would queue on the Israeli side to await departure. Cars would need to be adequately fueled before joining the convoy.

17. The escort vehicles would be in constant radio communication. In the event of an emergency or vehicle breakdown, the convoy would be stopped and would await assistance. Upon arrival at the destination border, the passenger vehicles would pass through a checkpoint to verify that all passengers were accounted for, and would then proceed across the border with no additional checks.

18. Travel times for passenger vehicle convoys would be similar to those for buses. There should be no limit on convoy frequency other than the availability of escort vehicles. The cost of taking a passenger vehicle in such a convoy would depend on the volume of traffic, and on whether those using the system would be billed for any of the capital depreciation costs attributable to terminal construction and equipment purchase. An initial World Bank staff estimate suggests that without depreciation and given reasonable inspection times, the initial average fee per vehicle for a one-way trip might be in the US\$35-US\$50 range.