

Gaza MOM

Abridged Edition

Laila
El-Haddad

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With a New Introduction from the Author





Laila El-Haddad helps us navigate and experience a world far beyond our own and unknown to us, of what it means to own “a passport that allows no passage.” Perhaps most critically, this book does what few do: It allows us to understand Palestinians as we understand ourselves and in so doing affirms our common humanity. An extraordinary, eloquent work.

—Dr. SARA ROY
Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard University



Gaza Mom is humanly moving and politically explosive, vividly illuminating the cruelties of everyday life for Palestinians living under occupation for decades. Laila El-Haddad writes with disciplined passion and conveys a powerful sense of authenticity. This book should become required reading for Americans who have yet to comprehend the prison-camp conditions that prevail in Gaza.

—Prof. RICHARD FALK
Professor of International Law Emeritus, Princeton University
Special Rapporteur for the OPTs, UN Human Rights Council



El-Haddad’s assessment of the personal and collective impacts of Israel’s occupation policy—from trudging through the endless bureaucratic labyrinths of identification papers and travel restrictions, to her everyday conversations with people picking up the pieces of their lives after a bombing—and the piercing analysis of her own personal journey has created a text not often found in current literature on Palestine. It is exactly the kind of documentation that is needed in these times of dehumanization of the Palestinian people.

—NORA BARROWS-FRIEDMAN
Writer, *Electronic Intifada* and *Al Jazeera*



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SABA's programs and events such as the Hotel Quran Project and the three-in-one International Islamic Fair have involved and touched the hearts of many - journeys that have left lasting impressions and inspired others to embark upon other intellectually and spiritually meaningful programs over the years.

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Saba Islamic Media Sdn Bhd, Kuala Lumpur, August 2014

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- ***Gaza Menulis Balas*** : Short Stories from Young Writers in Gaza (Malay)
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- ***Anak Jeneral*** : Journey of an Israeli in Palestine, by Miko Peled (Malay)
- ***Gaza Kitchen (Abridged Edition)*** : A Palestinian Culinary Journey, by Laila El-Haddad and Maggie Schmitt

GAZA MOM

ABRIDGED EDITION



*To Yousuf and Noor. Thank you for always
helping me to put things in perspective.
I hope one day this will all make sense.*



GAZA MOM

ABRIDGED EDITION

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION FROM THE AUTHOR

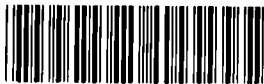
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Author:
LAILA EL-HADDAD

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Introduction

The blog that was the source of much of the material in this book came about largely by happenstance. It was originally named “Raising Yousuf” which later became “Gaza Mom.” I started it during Fall 2004, at a time when blogging was a new medium, universally, and almost unheard of in the Middle East.

That year was a testing time for my husband and me: We were recently married and raising our first born, Yousuf, in Boston, while in graduate school. Just one year earlier, in August 2003, I had landed my first job as a journalist with the newly launched *Al Jazeera English* website. That position would take me back to Gaza, my family’s beloved home city. But my husband Yassine could not come with me.

As a Palestinian with refugee status and despite the fact that Palestine is Yassine’s parents’ birthplace, his ancestral homeland and that of his wife and child, Yassine was (and still is) denied the right to enter or even visit Gaza or any other part of the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPTs) or historic Palestine.

Yassine is denied any version of “the Right of Return”. This, while Israel gives Jewish people from anywhere in the world—or anyone who can trace his Jewish ancestry back to several generations earlier or is a spouse, a grandchild, or child of such a person—the immediate “right” to reside in any of the areas it controls, even if their immediate ancestors have never lived in the area.

Yassine was born in Beirut and raised in the UN-administered refugee camp of Baalbek in Lebanon. Until shortly before his birth, his family had been living in the Palestinian refugee camp of Tel al-Zaatar (“Hill of Thyme”) that was a flashpoint in the internecine fighting of the Lebanese civil war (Yassine’s uncle was killed in the anti-Palestinian massacre perpetrated in Tel al-Zaatar in 1976.)

Yassine grew up amid the civil war that continued to rage throughout Lebanon in the 1980s. Thirty-five years earlier, his grandparents had been driven out of their homes in historic Palestine by Jewish militias in 1948, shortly before the state of Israel was founded on that same land. The villages from which his grandparents fled were both destroyed in their entirety by the Israeli authorities soon after. . . . Part of his extended family managed to escape to a neighboring town, where they remain to this day, though the two parts of the family still cannot meet.

In 1993, Yassine was awarded a scholarship to attend high school in the United States. From there he made his way to college and eventually to medical school in Massachusetts, where we met.



My parents, too, were both medical doctors. When I was born in the late 1970s, they were among the thousands of Palestinian professionals working in Kuwait. I passed most of my youth living primarily in the Gulf kingdoms of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain; however my brothers and I would spend our summers, springs, and sometimes our winters in Gaza. I remember that at the height of the first Palestinian Intifada in 1990, we were mocked in my mother's hometown of Khan Yunis, just south of Gaza City, for not knowing the difference between the insignia of the two main Palestinian movements, Fateh and Hamas! My parents tried to keep our lives as far away from politics as possible. But our existence as Gaza Palestinians was itself inescapably political.

I hold a Palestinian Authority (PA) "passport" which Israel began issuing pursuant to the Oslo Accords of the early 1990s, but that means very little. What allows me entry into Gaza is the all-important identification or residency card, known as the *hawiyah*, issued by the Israeli military authorities who still control the population registries of both the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

The *hawiyah* is the document by which we Palestinians from the OPTs live and die. It is a document that, while I was growing up in the 1980s, we struggled hard to retain and renew: Israel threatened to take it away from Gazans living outside the occupied Gaza Strip up until the early 1990s; it threatens to do the same to the Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem today. As children we endured annual, 24-hour trips to Gaza by land, complete with strip searches at the hands of young Israeli soldiers, just to renew our *hawiyahs* and thus our ability to return to our own homes.

But the *hawiyah* is the ultimate Catch-22. With it the Israelis, who till today—despite their much-vaunted "withdrawal" from Gaza in 2005—control all the Gaza Strip borders, consider me to be a "legal resident" of Gaza. And thus, so long as the only land crossing at Rafah is open the Israelis will graciously "allow" me to travel to my hometown, Gaza. But they forbid most other kinds of people—Palestinians from the nearby West Bank, Palestinian citizens of Israel ("1948 Palestinians") and refugee Palestinians who grew up in exile, like my husband, let alone any non-Palestinians who might want to visit—from doing so.

The *hawiyah* is also used to prevent me from traveling to the other areas that Israel controls such as the West Bank, Jerusalem, or historic Palestine (that is, modern-day Israel), and similarly, West Bank Palestinians or Jerusalemites are not allowed to travel to Gaza.) It even bars me from the kind of access to those areas that other, non-Palestinian journalists have. As an Israeli army officer once explained to me, "We consider you Palestinians, and therefore security threats, first; and journalists, second."

But most shocking of all, it is used to prevent thousands of Palestinians with different residency cards from living together with their spouses in their respective hometowns (whether the West Bank, Gaza, or, for those married to Palestinians

born before 1948, in Israel), forcing many families to leave, live apart, or live together, illegally.

All those kinds of restrictions intensified after the conclusion of the Oslo Accords in 1993.

The Israeli military has imposed the *hawiya* system on the indigenous (and therefore legitimate) residents of the West Bank and Gaza Strip throughout the 43 years since they first occupied these territories back in 1967, long before I was born. From the mid-1990s on, possession of a *hawiya* has also entitled its holder to obtain a passport issued in the name of the PA (though the whole system is still maintained and controlled by Israel.) The *hawiya* system lies at the heart of the tight-knit mechanism by which Israel controls Palestinian movement, residency, and life in general. It allows Israel alone to decide which “Arabs” it will recognize as “Palestinian,” which couples it will recognize as “families” that qualify for “reunification” and thus residency, and who is allowed to move where, when—all inside our own homeland. As the pioneering Israeli journalist Amira Hass has explained:

This control allowed Israel to deprive hundreds of thousands of Palestinians of their residency status after 1967. It allowed the continuation of marital, social, economic, religious and cultural ties between Gaza and the West Bank until 1991—and then, it severed those ties. This control allows Israel to prevent the addition of foreign residents to the population registry; it allows Israel to intervene in, and even decide, the choice of a partner, place of study, type of medical treatment, address, quality time with children, participation in celebrations and funerals, the writing of wills and distribution of family property. Israel has the authority to ban the entry of friends or family members who are not Palestinian residents—not just their entry into Israel, but also into the West Bank and Gaza Strip.¹

After Israel occupied the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and the Gaza Strip in June 1967, it issued *hawiyas* only to those Palestinians it found in residence there during a door-to-door census. Palestinians who had been driven out of, or fled, their homes in either the 1948 war or the 1967 war were excluded, as were any Palestinians who, at that time, were abroad for whatever reason—studying, working, visiting family, or vacationing. An exception was made for Palestinian physicians, for whom there was a desperate need. My parents were both completing their medical internships in Egypt at the time. They rushed back to Gaza, traveling in Red Cross ambulances with blackened windows that whisked them through the closed military zones of recently occupied Sinai.

Then in 1975, my father had an argument with the head of the Israeli military medical unit, who had come to meet with leading Palestinian doctors in Gaza to assess the needs of the main hospital there. The Israeli officer arrived with a prede-

terminated opinion: The hospital had no further needs. My father disagreed. He told the officer that the hospital was substandard, ranking at “negative 2 on a scale of 1 to 10.” “We run out of antibiotics by the first week of the month!” he explained. The other Palestinian doctors panicked and pleaded with my father to stay quiet.

The Israeli official forwarded my father’s file to Israeli intelligence, where he was then summoned on a weekly basis. He was advised to leave Gaza to seek work elsewhere—or face imprisonment. So he and my mother left, making regular visits back to Gaza with me and my brothers as we grew up. . . . Many years later, when their careers in the Gulf came to an end and whatever threat my father seemed to pose dissipated, my parents returned to their city of birth to retire.



When I traveled back to Gaza in the fall of 2004 after visiting Yassine in the United States, I took my son Yousuf, then 9 months old and still nursing, with me, as I have each time since. Yassine stayed behind in the United States. A tech-savvy cousin suggested I should start a blog to help Yassine stay abreast of our adventures and Yousuf’s development.

And so I did. In the fall of 2004, *Raising Yousuf* was born.

The idea was to write strictly for Yassine about, well, raising Yousuf. I created a separate blog in which I commented on all things purely political. But in an instant, all this changed.

This fact is hard for most readers to comprehend, even those familiar with the situation: the only way into Gaza for most Palestinian residents of the strip is through the Rafah Border Crossing with Egypt. Israel maintains a naval blockade off Gaza’s shores, destroyed the sole airport there, and controls all the other border crossings leading to the West Bank. And so to get to Gaza, we first have to fly into Egypt and then make the lengthy journey across Sinai by land.

Upon arrival in Cairo, we learned that the Rafah Crossing was closed indefinitely after several Israeli soldiers had been killed in an explosion set off by Palestinian fighters. The punitive closure stranded 1.5 million Palestinians inside the Strip, and tens of thousands of others (including us) outside it. It continued for 55 days, leaving Yousuf and I beached in Cairo. Faced with an uncertain waiting period away from my husband, and my home, with no recourse for appeal against that detention, I took to my blog. But as one day turned into 2, and then into 55, my blog entries gradually morphed into the story of how the personal is violated, immersed with, and often overtaken by the political for all Palestinians.

Faced with a steady stream of questions from well-meaning friends who simply did not understand our “situation” (Isn’t there another way in? You must be used to this by now, right?), I wondered how I could help people understand this experience . . . understand dispossession, statelessness, occupation . . . to see Palestinians as human beings rather than abstractions.

But most importantly, how could I convey that it was these moments, the ones that seem so routine and so quiet, that constitute the backdrop of Palestinian daily existence: being stranded by the border for days and sometimes weeks at a time with my young son, attempting to obtain a travel permit to the West Bank, or meeting my husband. How could I share, in the words of Rashid Khalidi, “the quintessential Palestinian experience?”

I came to understand then, as I would a 100 times over in the years that followed, that as a Palestinian you cannot separate the personal from the political. That our identity surfaces with particular intensity on international borders.

In my blog’s earlier days I struggled with many questions: Who was I blogging for? What right did I have to blog about Gaza anyway if I didn’t have it half as bad as the person in the village north of us?

And as the only blog out of Gaza at the time, and one of only a handful in the region, I felt a heightened sense of responsibility and urgency to immediately report every minute detail as it unfolded in front of me.

In 2006 I left Gaza to spend more time with Yassine in the United States, though I remained determined to return as frequently as I could. At that point I had to face a different challenge: the pain of being stranded outside my homeland when it was under siege. I struggled to explain our complicated lives to Yousuf—and later to his little sister Noor, who was born in early 2008: Palestine and Gaza; border crossings and closures; the right of return and occupation; civil unrest and Palestinian division. Who were “the bad guys?” Why were the Israelis, who made for so many of the miserable experiences he had, not visible? Why couldn’t we travel like ordinary people, when we want and how we want? Why could the children’s beloved Baba (Daddy) never travel to Gaza with us?

I managed to visit Gaza twice in 2007. But in 2009, after Gaza had been under prolonged closure, my attempts to go back failed. In April 2009, the Egyptian authorities, which were colluding closely with Israel to keep Gaza completely closed and under siege, held my children and me in Cairo airport for 30 hours before finally expelling us back to the United States, a country of which I was not even a citizen! Finally, in early summer 2010, responding to pressures raised by Israel’s lethal showdown with the Turkish-led aid flotilla, Egypt loosened the siege—just a little. In July 2010, I was able to go back to Gaza for a three-month visit.

This new abridged version of my original book focuses on the period between 2004 and 2007 while I was in Gaza, although some later entries (particularly during “Operation Cast Lead”) are also included. They chronicle in intimate detail such historic events as Israel’s greatly misunderstood “disengagement” from Gaza, which ended up repackaging its occupation in more insidious forms; the first truly democratic Palestinian parliamentary elections, held in 2006; the Western-backed, Israeli-enforced boycott; the bloody intra-Palestinian feuds that ensued as a result;

and finally, Israel's "Cast Lead" assault on Gaza, an account that I tell from abroad, amplifying my parents' voices on the ground.

Not much has changed on the ground in Gaza since the book's original publication: Palestine remains a nation dispossessed; Palestinians' basic freedoms are suppressed more than ever before; and Israel maintains strict separation between the different concentrations of Palestinians—those inside Israel itself, those in occupied Jerusalem, those in the rest of the West Bank, those in Gaza, and those in exile outside the homeland. . . . For all the talk of having "left Gaza," Israel still exercises effective control over Gaza's borders, sea space, airspace, and even its taxation system and population registry. Continued control over borders has meant an effective ban on exports vital to the economy, and imports vital for rebuilding and development, but also, critically, on the passage of Palestinians to the West Bank or Jerusalem, including to universities.

Notably, though, in 2011, the Arab world witnessed tectonic changes during its Arab Spring. The Arab Street has awakened, though the results are far from clear, especially in ravaged Syria. Gaza itself was subject to another brutal pounding by Israel in the fall of 2012 ("Operation Pillar of Cloud"), though the duration and extent of the attack appears to have been mitigated by the new political realities in the Middle East—notably the much stronger Egyptian and Turkish roles. Corrupt puppet regimes can no longer wive the Palestinian banner to deflect criticism against themselves from their populations. The new generation of young Palestinians too, who make up more than half the population in Gaza, are more connected, networked, and aware than ever before. And, critically, the global movement for a campaign of Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS), that Palestinian civil society initiated against Israel until it complies with international law and Palestinian rights) has picked up pace, while Israeli colonization of Palestinian land continues to render a two-state solution impossible.

Little, too, has changed regarding Gaza's borders crossing: successive Egyptian governments have adopted the Israeli principles governing the Rafah Crossing, even though Israel itself no longer manages it. Simply put, those principles are that only Gaza Palestinians listed in the Israeli-controlled population registry are permitted to use the crossing. Visitors and non-resident Palestinians even Palestinians from the West Bank are still forbidden from entering Gaza, and this includes the spouses of resident Palestinians. Young males in particular face great difficulty in passing in or out of Gaza and are often denied permission outright by Egyptian authorities.

If there is any lesson to glean from this book or from covering and living the conflict for this period of time, it is the consistency and constancy of Israel's Palestinian policies regardless of who rules in Gaza or the West Bank. So long as those in power in Palestine are not willing collaborators in their own imprisonment, the consequences will be fierce: institutions will be destroyed, development and prosperity will be blocked, and the pretext will always be security. The Israelis

will argue that Palestinian violence, rather than Israeli occupation, colonization and violence, is the stumbling block to “peace.” For decades, the Israeli authorities have used such strategies to deliberately forestall any prospect for viable Palestinian statehood. The late Israeli sociologist Baruch Kimmerling referred to this overriding policy as “the politicide of the Palestinian people, a gradual but systemic attempt to cause their annihilation as an independent political and social entity.”² Indeed, an Israeli government document released in September 2010 showed publicly for the first time that Israel’s objective was to create two separate Palestinian political entities.³



Throughout the book, you will be introduced to many of the people in my life. Chief among them are my children, Yousuf, now 9 years old; Noor, who has just turned 5; my husband, Yassine, now a practicing ophthalmologist in Baltimore; and my parents, Maii El-Farra and Moussa El-Haddad, both retired physicians.

The tone and style of writing changes continuously throughout the book, as do the space, the setting, the content, and the situation. I attempt to navigate the variegated terrain of identities and spaces, of being reporter and mother, of being a Palestinian under occupation and a Palestinian in exile—and all the complexities and details in between.

Journalists who have covered the Palestinian–Israeli conflict at great length often note that headlines written five or even 10 years ago could have been written today. Readers finish reading article, listening to or watching news programs feeling more confused than before and are left with a sense of hopelessness that the conflict will never be resolved. Such headlines as “more violence in the Middle East” or “Palestinian terror” have become mainstays of the news—and of the average person’s perceptions of the conflict. Such statements are mistakenly attributed to a vague and misleading notion of “cyclical violence” that seems to have no end and no clear beginning, while most mainstream media fail to delve deeper, to ask why the conflict has persisted for so long, what forces are driving the “violence,” or what kinds of lives people can live underneath it all.

This book does not claim to explain Gaza comprehensively or to speak for all of its residents. It is merely a singular account within the dizzying multiplicity of experiences and existences that constitute the Palestinian experience as a whole. It is a window into Gaza during some of its most turbulent years and into the violated but resilient lives we live as Palestinians. It is a story about mothering, homeland, identity—and survival.

Laila El-Haddad,
April 2013.

NOTES

1. Amira Hass, "What a Strange 'Abroad,'" *Haaretz*, February 14, 2007, archived at <http://bit.ly/caaM1C>.
3. Baruch Kimmerling, "The Politicide of Palestinians," *Dissident Voice*, June 11, 2002, archived at <http://bit.ly/cXi6dR>.
4. An English-language version of this government document can be found at <http://bit.ly/alptVv>.

PART I

Gaza Life as Israel (Partially) Withdraws

December 2004–December 2005



PERDANA
LEADERSHIP
FOUNDATION
YAYASAN
KEPIMPINAN
PERDAMA

Gaza City

Mediterranean Sea

Madinat Al 'Awada

Beit Lahya

Jab
Car

Shati' Camp

An Naser

Jaballa

Northern Remal

Gaza
City

Ash Sheikh Radwan

Southern Remal

Al Daraj

At Tuffah

Ash Sheikh 'Ijleen

Es Sabra

Al Jadida

Tal El Hawa

Gaza Old City

At Turkuman

Al Fawaidh

Al Shuja'iyeh

Al Montar

Az Zaioun

Nahal
Oz
Crossing Point

Karni
Crossing Point

500 Meter
Buffer Zone

0 .5 1 2 kilometers

ISRAEL



Chapter 1

Going Home to Gaza

December 2004–February 2005

This book begins in the fall of 2004 during a trip I was making back to Gaza from the United States with my son, Yousuf, then 9 months old. We had been back and forth multiple times before this date, twice with Yousuf in utero. But this time was different. The birth of my blog coincided with a forced stay of exile in Egypt for both of us as Israel sealed the border to Gaza for an indefinite period of time. And so suddenly surfaced the complications and contrasts of being a Palestinian, a mother, and a journalist—striving for survival, sanity, and the stories behind the news.

It was the beginning of what would become a recurrent theme of the labyrinthine nature of travel and movement for our family, as it has long been for Palestinians in the broader sense. The chapter also includes a piece I wrote for Al Jazeera about the sniping death of a young schoolchild in southern Gaza. In Gaza, existence was as jarring and strenuous as untimely death was commonplace. As in the text, the routines of mothering (which continue, even in a war zone) were frequently interrupted by field reporting in that same war zone.



Stuck in Egypt¹

Cairo, Egypt, December 25, 2004

Was on my way back to Gaza to work after a brief hiatus to the U.S. to see Yassine, when wouldn't you have it, the Israelis closed the Rafah border crossing—the only route into Gaza—after a gigantic explosion killed five of their troops there. Well that means Yousuf and I have been stuck here for over two weeks now and counting.

An Egyptian friend of my mother's, who trying to be good-natured, made the comment that, "It's not a big deal, you must be used to this by now," meaning of course, the constant border closures.

How can one EVER get used to the uncertainty of Palestinian existence? To being prevented from entering one's own homeland arbitrarily, spontaneously? To being in absolute lack of control of one's life—that is, to have another be in absolute control of your every movement? You cannot. And as Palestinians we do not. We live, for the most part, in a state of constant temporality, and this, more than anything else, has come to define us.



Standing on My Own (Sort of . . .)²

Cairo, Egypt, January 8, 2005

Yes, unfortunately, we are still in Cairo. But we're trying to make the best of it. Here's an excerpt from article I've published on it at *Al Jazeera English*, "Palestinians Stranded at Border Crossing":

With the world's focus on the Palestinian elections, Palestinians stranded at the closed Rafah-Egypt border feel they have been forgotten.

One such victim of the Israeli measure is Yasmin and her groom who held their engagement celebration in a Cairo hotel.

For the Palestinian couple from Gaza it was supposed to be a momentous occasion that was months in the planning—the celebration of the beginning of a lifetime together.

But the ceremony was bittersweet, and the dance floor empty save for the bride and groom. The majority of their guests, after all, could not attend.³

Meantime, Yousuf is growing: He stood up on his own the other day for a few fleeting seconds! I couldn't get it on film though.

He's also developed an appetite for popcorn (thanks to *Seedo*).

Unfortunately he's still not sleeping well at night, which means neither am I!



A True Gazan Palate⁴

Cairo, Egypt, January 12, 2005

Yet further proof that Yousuf has picked up more of my Gazan roots than his father's Haifawi ones: He wolfed down a plate of chicken livers, Gaza-style, today. That means *lots* of chilies (those who have been a foot away from a Gaza chili can relate). And he didn't seem to mind them one bit. On the other hand, when I

attempt to feed him any dairy product (the staple of the North), even if disguised in other foods, he will spit it out in disgust.

Another thing I think he picked up from Gaza (besides his voracious appetite) is his manners! He found a tangerine on the floor and ripped it apart—quite literally, before stuffing it in his mouth. *Sigh* I think we have our work cut out.

On another note, his hair is getting out of control. I mean it. Yassine is insisting I let it grow until he seems him again, hopefully next month.



Shards of Glass and Murphy's Law⁵

Cairo, Egypt, January 20, 2005

Add to the list of highly unusual, toxic, and dangerous things Yousuf has managed to put in his mouth during these forty days of imposed exile: a shard of glass!! I noticed him attempting to chew on something, which he then spit out only to realize it was a piece of glass from a chili sauce bottle that shattered the previous day . . . oops.

He's also, during the past week, become very attached to his *seedo*. He has learned how to wave "Bye Bye" (although he pronounces it "beh beh") when he sees his granddad approaching the door.

On another note, the Rafah border will *finally* open on Friday, *Inshallah*. We all plan to journey to al-Arish Friday afternoon, then attempt to make our way to Gaza Saturday along with thousands of others. Murphy's law? Yesterday I decided to stop buying things in minute amounts in anticipation of the border opening "any day now," and wouldn't you have it, the border opens.



Killing of Palestinian Girl Shatters Family⁶

Gaza City, Palestine, February 5, 2005, *Al Jazeera English*

Nuran Dib went to school as ecstatic as any schoolgirl should be. But this crisp winter day was special: She would receive her bi-annual report card.

As it turned out, she passed with flying colours, which meant a gift from her parents, who had been saving up their dwindling funds for this occasion. The teacher's comment on top of her report read: We predict a very bright future for Nuran.

But Nuran would have no such future, and her gift lies abandoned in a corner of her family's grieving home. On the afternoon of 31 January 2005, Israeli sniper fire ripped through her face as she stood in her school's courtyard, lining up for afternoon assembly.

The last thing Nuran's mother remembers of her daughter before she left for school that morning was hearing her say her morning prayers, during which she recited a verse about God having created death—and life—as a test for mankind.

In retrospect, Nuran's mother believes it was a premonition of what was to come.

"Then she left for school. She was a completely selfless child. She was thinking of her sisters till the last second. She came back after she had left the house, and said: 'Mommy, it's cold—please put some sweaters on my sisters before they leave,'" her mother said.

"What more can I say except that she was a breath of fresh air in these hard times? Her name was Nur [light] and that's exactly what she was."

Her death has many here questioning Israel's commitment to a ceasefire amid a one-sided truce and virtual period of calm.

"We extended an olive branch to them and instead of reciprocating they cut our hand off," Nuran's mother cried, sitting in an unpainted cement-block bedroom with nothing but thin foam mattresses on the ground.

"What did she ever do to deserve such a fate? Or her sister, who saw Nuran die in front of her? Every night she wails out in her sleep: 'Bring me my sister, bring me my sister.'"

Fifth child killed

Nuran was the fifth Palestinian child to be shot dead or maimed by Israeli occupation forces while on the premises of their UN-flagged schools in the past two years. She was also one of 172 children killed in Gaza this year alone—and one of 644 killed in Gaza since the start of al-Aqsa Intifada in September 2000.

Two girls were shot dead in separate incidents in Rafah and Khan Yunis last year while sitting at their desks, and a little girl was permanently blinded in March 2003.

According to UNRWA's spokesperson, Paul McCann, the UN relief organisation has repeatedly protested against the Israeli military's indiscriminate firing into civilian areas in the occupied Palestinian territory.

Nuran's school, which is about 600m away from the border, has been hit on numerous occasions since the start of the conflict, he said. This is the first time the shots have had tragic consequences.

"We want to ask the world: Was Nuran holding an explosive belt around her waist? Was she toting a Kalashnikov? She knew no politics, only love," her aunt Iktimal Husayn asked rhetorically.

"She was supposed to bring home her report from school, but instead she brought home her death certificate."

... Witnesses say the children were clapping their hands and singing the national anthem when the firing started.

One bullet pierced the hand of Aysha Isam al-Khatib, while the other hit Nuran in the head. She fell to the ground at once.

Bystanders say they assumed she was unconscious until they noticed the pool of blood beneath her shattered skull.

A third bullet hit a young girl's book bag, and was stopped in its tracks by one of her folders, just inches away from her spine.

Eleven-year-old Salwa al-Khalifa was next to Nuran when the bullets struck. She described with disturbing composure well beyond her years the details of that bloody hour.

"A bullet went in through her nose and came out of her neck. We all ducked. Several other bullets hit the window and school wall over there."

A day after the incident, Israeli authorities said their initial investigation indicated it was fire from jubilant Palestinian police celebrating the return of Hajj pilgrims, not Israeli sniper fire, that killed Nuran.

But the pockmarked wall of the UNRWA school, which stands 600m away from an Israeli sniper tower and far away from residential blocks, tells a different story.

"There is nothing around us here, and there were no pilgrims that we know of celebrating that day. There is just an outpost a few hundred metres away—one from which sniper fire has frequently hit our school," school principal Siham al-Ghoff said.

Al-Ghoff says if the fire was indeed Palestinian, the bullet would not have hit Nuran in the face but rather landed on top of her head, as rifles fired in celebration usually point upwards.

Both Palestinian security sources and UN officials confirm the account, saying that the way the bullets were scattered, along with witness testimonies, point to Israeli gunfire.

"Everything is pointing to the fact that it was the Israelis. There were a number of shots, and the way they were scattered gives us an indication of the direction where they came from, and that corresponds with witness reports that the firing came from an [Israeli] APC or tank in the area," one official said.

School goes on

Meanwhile, in Nuran's school, life goes on. Girls who received top marks this term were rewarded with tins of toffee that they passed out enthusiastically to all visitors, a step taken by school counsellors to attempt to normalise an abnormal situation.

But in Nuran's fourth-grade classroom, the mood was far from celebratory.

"The children are too afraid to go out for their recess, and many simply go to the bathroom and weep all day," principal al-Ghoff said.

Counsellors have been trying to help the children work through the trauma of recent days. When asked to portray their classmate's death, most drew tanks and Apache helicopters invading their school.

"I thought there's a truce now, something like this would never happen. Now we're trying to pick up the pieces," al-Ghoff added.

The Palestinian Authority has filed a formal complaint with the Israeli side



Student working next to memorial.

about the girls' shooting, but it is unlikely Nuran's family will ever get answers about their daughter's death.

Back in her family's home, Nuran's mother sat gazing in disbelief at her daughter's report card, while her father, Iyad, stood weeping silently.

Nearby, an Israeli tank shell rattled the windows of the room, which together with young Nuran's death served as a reminder that if there is any calm it has not yet reached Rafah.

"When Nuran died, a part of me died also," her mother said.

"She was a bright light that was extinguished. For me, there can be no more peace.



Help! A Vacuum Cleaner!?

Gaza City, Palestine, February 14, 2005

Most children living in a strip of land overrun by trigger-happy soldiers, Merkava tanks, and sewage might be afraid of loud noises and machine gun ricochets (that and putrid-smelling water). Not Yousuf. Those he tackles fearlessly, having become accustomed to F-16s swooping overhead and the pounding of shells (even while in the womb).

His latest phobia: vacuum cleaners. My father was cleaning the carpets today, and the boy crawled to save his life, wailing in horror, fingernails clenched deep within mother's back. Tanks, bad... vacuum cleaner, good, I tried to explain. Perhaps it was an incident of friendly fire. But how will I explain this to his therapist years from now?



Rap Finds New Voice in Occupied Gaza⁸

Gaza City, Palestine, March 15, 2005 (reported late February), *Al Jazeera English*

Far away from its roots in the Bronx of New York, rap is finding a new voice as a group of young Palestinians sing about the frustrations of life under occupation in the Gaza Strip.

As I enter the small sound-proof recording room in central Gaza, I am greeted by something rather unexpected. . . . It is rap; it is potent; and it is in Arabic.

Sitting in front of the recording equipment is 22-year-old Nadir Abu Ayash, a member of Gaza's first ever hip-hop group PR (Palestinian Rappers), who provides many of the song's identifiable background sounds—with no special effects.

"Rap is our way of resisting the occupation, it's our weapon," he explains . . .

"Do you remember, or do you choose to forget/that your army, against us, aggressed/My voice will continue to echo, you'll never forget/You call me terrorist, when I'm the one who's oppressed," he raps in one of their latest songs.

The band, which first starting rapping two years ago, believe that hip-hop provides them with an alternative way to voice their resistance to and frustrations with the Israeli occupation.

The young rappers, Nadir Abu Ayash, Mutaz al-Huwaisi (Mezo), Muhammad al-Fara (DR), and Mahmud Fayad (Bond), pour all their emotions into their work. And they don't need to go far for inspiration.

Abu Ayash lives in the refugee camp of Maghazi and all around are constant reminders of the Israeli occupation, whether by way of a demolished home, an orphaned family, or the enduring poverty that has taken hold over 57 years of dispossession.

Fellow band-member Muhammad al-Fara lives in one of the most volatile areas of the Gaza Strip, just 5km away from the refugee camp of Khan Yunis. Three years ago he was shot in the arm by Israeli snipers situated in one of the nearby Jewish settlements.

"With the situation and the events around us, it's not difficult to come up with songs. It expresses itself inside us. Whenever you are affected by something you see, you write," al-Fara said.

A few months ago, the group was unable to leave Gaza to perform at a concert in France because of an Israeli policy banning young men between the ages of 16 and 35 from traveling.

. . . The band members say they dream of one day meeting with all of the hip-hop groups in Palestine to rap together in a large concert. They would especially like to rap with the Arab-Israeli group DAM, who they consider their idols, and whose song "Who's the Terrorist?" put them on the musical map.

They are hopeful it won't remain merely a dream. The lyrics of one their song declares, "the night is bound to leave and day will come upon us."



Happy Birthday!!⁹

Gaza City, Palestine, March 6, 2005

Yay for Yousuf! He officially turned 1-year-old on Saturday. Something very bittersweet about that day though—I felt my grip slowly beginning to loosen, and that Yousuf was graduating into toddlerhood . . . never again will he unexpectedly roll off the bed and land crashing on the porcelain floor, or wail bloody murder every hour if the milking station was not open for service, or eat my mother's hormone replacement pills . . . oh wait, he did that yesterday. I suppose I have much to look forward to after all.



CHAPTER NOTES

1. The full original text of this post is archived at <http://www.gazamom.com/2004/12/stuck-in-egypt/>, shortened to <http://bit.ly/bk0aop>.
2. Archived at <http://bit.ly/cPt2EI>.
3. Laila El-Haddad, "Palestinians Stranded at Border Crossing," *Al Jazeera English*, January 8, 2005, archived at <http://bit.ly/dyo6Ge>.
4. Archived at <http://bit.ly/akPFDB>.
5. Archived at <http://bit.ly/cSoATt>.
6. Laila El-Haddad, "Killing of Palestinian Girl Shatters Family," *Al Jazeera English*, March 10, 2005, archived at <http://bit.ly/aCPDcN>.
7. Archived at <http://bit.ly/ai3Jff>.
8. Laila El-Haddad, "Rap Finds New Voice in Occupied Gaza," *Al Jazeera English*, March 15, 2005, archived at <http://bit.ly/a2Slmb>.
9. Archived at <http://bit.ly/bTTK1Q>.



Chapter 2

Palestinian Life in Lebanon and the West Bank

March–July 2005

This chapter sees Yousuf and me reunited with Yassine in Lebanon, where his family, descendants of refugees from the 1948 Nakba, reside in a refugee camp. Yassine had some rare time off after finishing medical school in Boston. Because he is forbidden from traveling to Gaza, we decided to meet up in Lebanon instead. While there, I wrote various stories exploring the situation of the Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon. Yousuf and I returned to Gaza in early May 2005.

It was the first time either of us met Yassine's family. And though I was lucky to enjoy a "relative" degree of freedom of movement denied to many other Palestinians (like Yassine's own family, forbidden from entering Palestine), the journey was far from easy or assured. It took more than two months to arrange the proper single-entry permit I required to enter Lebanon.

While I could eventually get to both Lebanon and Syria on this visit, I was unable to travel to the West Bank (see "The Crushed Citizen"), despite its proximity to Gaza and its status as supposedly part of the same territory. Pieces I reported about the West Bank, such as "Road Signs Get Remade," had to be reported by phone, because Israel banned most Palestinians from traveling between Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem.

It is also worth noting that though the Rafah crossing was often tortuous to cross in 2005, some Palestinians were still able to cross in and out of Gaza much more easily than we could in subsequent years, after Israel's much-lauded "Disengagement" from Gaza.



What they're saying about Gaza Mom

Laila El-Haddad writes with passion and uncompromising honesty, revealing a personal narrative that encapsulates a collective Palestinian experience... Her sense of self and identity, sometimes presented with critical distance and irony, remains the dominant vehicle of expression in the multiplicity of Laila's roles as mother, daughter, wife, journalist, blogger, activist—or simply a Gazan Palestinian grappling with her plight as with the fate of her nation.

—Hon. HANAN ASHRAWI

Palestinian parliamentarian, PLO Executive Committee member, and former negotiator

The journey Laila chronicles in this book is intensely personal, yet it is one Palestinians, exiles, and wandering souls all over the world will recognize. The realities of life in Gaza are hard. But Laila's razor-sharp observations, tenderness, and humor make her—throughout this book—a wonderful traveling companion. It's a journey I highly recommend.

—ALI ABUNIMAH

Activist and author, *One Country, A Bold Proposal to End the Israeli-Palestinian Impasse*

We Americans treat Palestinians as abstractions, rather than as human beings with children, parents, husbands, or wives, bound together by enduring dreams and repeated disappointments. Laila El-Haddad's *Gaza Mom* brings the realities of Palestinian existence to life with wit, anger, passion, love, and most of all a keen eye for the cruel absurdities of life under occupation. Read it, reflect, and reconsider.

—Prof. STEPHEN WALT

Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University

LAILA EL-HADDAD, author of *Gaza Mom: Palestine, Politics, Parenting, and Everything In Between* and co-author of *The Gaza Kitchen: A Palestinian Culinary Journey*, is a talented blogger, political analyst, social activist, and parent-of-three from Gaza City. She is also a contributing author to *The Goldstone Report: The Legacy of the Landmark Investigation of the Gaza Conflict*, and a policy advisor with al-Shabaka, the Palestinian Policy Network. She received her BA from Duke University and her MPP from Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.

From 2003-2007, El-Haddad was the Gaza stringer for the Al Jazeera English website and was a regular contributor to the BBC and the *Guardian online*. She has been published in the *Washington Post*, *International Herald Tribune*, *The New Statesman*, *The Daily Star*, *Le monde diplomatique*, and has appeared on CNN, NPR, and Al Jazeera. She started her award-winning blog *Gaza Mom* in November 2004.



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