



## NOTES ON THE AFTERMATH: GAZA, SUMMER 2009

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*This personal account describes aspects of closure, siege, and daily life witnessed in the Gaza Strip from May to July 2009, with emphasis on the impact of the blockade in the wake of Operation Cast Lead. As an international worker made to grapple with increasingly complicated Israeli bureaucracy, but “allowed” access into Gaza for purposes of humanitarian aid, the author describes her impressions of the current Gazan situation as an instance of isolation whose plight is increasingly hidden from the gaze of the outside world.*

I FIRST ENTERED THE GAZA STRIP ON 5 May 2009 through Erez crossing, the only Israeli passage for the movement of people into and out of this Palestinian territory isolated on the shores of the Mediterranean. I had been hired by a small Italian NGO to work in Gaza City for three months on an emergency distribution project providing polyurethane water storage tanks to households affected by Operation Cast Lead some five months earlier. Having said this, I am not inclined to describe myself as a humanitarian aid worker, but rather as someone who has been seeking to better understand, through direct experience, what is unfolding in the occupied Palestinian territory. I had not been to the Strip in nearly seven years, as entering Gaza for internationals has not been easy since well before the Hamas takeover in June 2007 and the further tightening of the closure that has led to the unprecedented levels of blockade we witness today. What seems to be an almost complete narrative blackout about Gaza has provoked me to write this brief report.

I will begin at the Israeli Ministry of the Interior in West Jerusalem on 10 June 2009—my first failed attempt to get an Israeli working visa.

“When did you arrive in Israel?” the Israeli functionary asked me from behind her computer.

“On 30 April.” I answered, convinced she already had this information on her screen.

“It does not say that here,” she challenged, “. . . it says you arrived yesterday. You must be in Israel for at least one week before you can get the working visa. You must make another appointment and come back.”

“But I arrived in Ben-Gurion over a month ago,” I cautiously objected.

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"I said you must be in *Israel* for at least one week before you can get the working visa. Do I have to repeat it again? What word didn't you understand?"

"It's the concept I don't understand. I'm sorry."

"Yesterday, you were in Gaza. Gaza is not Israel," she proclaimed. "You must be in Israel for at least one week before you can get the working visa. Make another appointment and come back again. Goodbye."

Scenes like this one have become commonplace: although humanitarian aid workers constitute one of the few categories still allowed some form of access to Gaza, for those based there and in need of work permits, Israeli bureaucracy grows increasingly more complex. Heeding the advice of my country representative, who argued that passage in and out of Gaza would be easier with the pink slip of paper attesting to an upcoming work visa appointment, I took the first one available (5 August) before heading back to Erez.

### ISSUES OF ENTRANCE AND EXIT

"Welcome to Erez Crossing." The greeting on the large blue sign at the entrance of the massive checkpoint's parking lot seemed surreal as my taxi passed the caged German shepherds lining the heavily fortified concrete wall extending out from both sides of Erez to seal off Gaza from the rest of the world. I called my Gazan colleague.

"Hi, Nabil," I said. "It's me. I'm on my way back to the office and I have some great news: you're free! They just informed me at the Interior Ministry in Jerusalem that Gaza is not part of Israel."

"Really? Oh that *is* great news," he replied. "And to think I was worried that we were trapped here. Call me again when you get through passport control, and I'll have someone pick you up at *kbamsa kbamsa*."<sup>1</sup>

Any entrance into Gaza these days is wholly dependent on the possession of a military coordination number granted to most humanitarian aid workers, some journalists, and a handful of diplomats at the discretion of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). Opening hours of Erez have been progressively restricted year after year. Sunday through Friday it now closes at 3:30 P.M. It is completely closed on Saturdays for Jewish Shabbat, as well as during IDF training exercises, technical testing, internal work in progress, Jewish holidays, and even fog. Going in, direct contact with soldiers, metal detectors, and conveyor belts has been all but eliminated for several years now, as have crossing Gazans.

Erez crossing is not an internationally recognized border, but since the 2005 unilateral disengagement from Gaza a young female Israeli soldier at passport control will stamp an exit from Israel when you enter the Strip. And vice versa: upon leaving Gaza through Erez, most likely the same soldier will stamp an entry into Israel. In this second case, though, she will correct the validity of your visa by hand so that it always reflects the three months allotted for an Israeli tourist visa based on your initial entrance into Israel from Ben-Gurion

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***Although “Gaza is not Israel” for an Israeli work visa, a stay in Gaza still counts as time spent in Israel.***

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airport or Jordan. In other words, although “Gaza is not Israel” for an Israeli work visa, a stay in Gaza still counts as time spent in Israel.

Similarly, Israel now requires Gaza-based international aid workers to spend at least fifteen hours per week in an office inside Israel in order to be eligible for a work visa. This of course entails logistical hardship, substantial travel costs, and significant time loss. Most international NGOs working in the Palestinian territories have a main office in East Jerusalem, the flip side of the same geopolitical ambiguity afflicting the Gaza Strip: for the Israeli Interior Ministry, an office in occupied East Jerusalem is located in Israel, whatever international law has to say about the matter.

At the first stage of passage through Erez, you must hand over your passport to a private security guard stationed in a small booth near a level crossing in front of the terminal, then wait until your name is called. As with major checkpoints like Qalandia and Gilo, which control access to the West Bank, security management at Erez has been largely privatized, an attempt to depoliticize and routinize the crossing while creating substantial profits for Israel’s vast private security industry. The guard tells you to wait on the curb opposite the level crossing. There is no shelter there, so you bake in the muggy summer sun or, I imagine, get drenched in the winter rains. Since very few people are allowed to cross Erez, you are most likely the only one waiting. The 2007 blockade imposed a general ban on all Palestinian movement through Erez, except for a few “humanitarian cases.”<sup>2</sup> A soldier eventually walks out of Erez with a white slip of paper (your clearance), which he hands to the security guard at the booth, who then barks your name unintelligibly through the microphone, returns your passport with the white slip, and motions you into the terminal proper.

Once inside the strangely deserted vastness of the outsized structure, you wait for the female soldiers manning passport control booths to beckon you into what seems like a livestock holding pen, with half doors on either side that the soldier locks and unlocks. There is a brief, seemingly perfunctory questioning about what you are going to do in Gaza, how long you plan to stay, and where you will be staying. A soldier then unlocks one of the half doors and you advance to an armored steel sliding door to which a paper sign is taped that reads “Gaza” with an arrow. The door opens and you enter a barred-in semi-outdoor area enclosed by a three-meter-high barred-steel one-way turnstile leading to another armored steel sliding door. From this point, no soldiers, private security guards, or other Israeli personnel are to be seen. Once, I was left in this area for about half an hour before the sliding door opened to let me through to the other side, compelling me to realize the true holding-pen potential of every space in this structure. At such times, the dehumanized isolation and rising sense of personal diminishment of these crossing procedures snap to the forefront, augmented by the sterile desolation of so much concrete and steel and the anxiety triggered by not knowing how

long you will be penned in. One “reassuring” certainty came to mind, however: I am not one of the 1.5 million this structure was built to contain. I am choosing to go in and I can just as easily choose to pass back out.

The protocol of passage through Erez becomes, of course, far more complex when going the other direction: besides metal detectors, luggage checks, and conveyor belts, it includes the radiation of a full-body X-ray. Erez’s very design makes it impossible for anything even approaching the volume of the Gazan laborers who went daily to Israel just a generation ago to pass through.

A brawny, mustachioed, middle-aged Gazan with bright blue eyes, accentuated by his bright blue construction worker’s vest, is always waiting to greet you when the steel door eventually slides open. He is the official “bag carrier” for the “blue-vested bag carrier segment” of the long terminal walkway known as the tunnel. “*Marhaba*,” he always welcomes before bartering about the price of loading your bags onto his cart for this first portion of the walk. His “half” of the tunnel is paved and covered, so he and his blue-vested colleague get a lot less business than the orange-vested bag carriers, who wait about a hundred curving meters away on the other side of another tall, metallic barred turnstile. When you get through this, you are finally at the last leg of Erez. As you exit the tunnel by way of the large hole blown through the side in 2008 by a suicide bomber driving a truck full of explosives, you see stretched before you the last two-hundred-meter-long, straight gravel path leading to *khamsa khamsa*.

The Gazan landscape here is bleak and thirsty: a barren buffer zone where all vegetation and most buildings have been bulldozed away, a few remaining as collapsing concrete skeletons lying in ruins. The botanical contrast of this desolation with the lush greenery and trees that grace Israel’s side of “the border” is stark. Looking back over your shoulder, your gaze follows an expanse of concrete wall projecting out from Erez, with its white mini-surveillance balloons, its robotized watchtowers, its huge machine guns mechanically operated from distant control stations inside the terminal. Where the wall ends, an electrical fence begins and your mind’s eye can imagine it continuing, dotted with watchtowers, along the entire perimeter of the Strip. This closure wraps around the southern border where it is passed off to the Egyptians before curving its way back north into the sea, where it is passed back to a line of state-of-the-art Israeli naval vessels whose ever-visible orange lights monitor the Gazan shores, clearly fixing on the ground how “Gaza is not Israel.”

## CLOSURE AND DESTRUCTION

If the exhaustively total blockade was one element that shaped Gaza’s reality throughout my stay, the other was large-scale military destruction. These two elements, though distinct, work in tandem to contour Gazan life and its hinterland. Day after day, I drove down Gazan roads, passing mosque after mosque devoid of minarets that Israeli air fire had targeted and blown to bits. The debris and wreckage of pulverized government buildings served as landmarks in finding the various offices I had business with: “. . . yes, then you

make a right when you arrive at the ex-prison, it's the big pile of rubble halfway down the street. Follow it around and you'll find our office on the other side."

Closure and destruction are nothing new to Gaza. As Sara Roy summarized at the time of the 2005 disengagement:

[T]he devastation of Gaza is not recent. By the time the second uprising broke out, Israel's closure policy had been in force for seven years, leading to levels of unemployment and poverty that were, until then, unprecedented . . . the closure policy proved so destructive only because [it took place] on a foundation already undermined by thirty-eight years of deliberate Israeli policies of expropriation, integration, and deinstitutionalization that had long ago robbed Palestine of its developmental potential, insuring that no viable economic (and hence, political) structure could emerge.<sup>3</sup>

The newly "unprecedented" closure of Erez to Palestinians as of June 2007 was thus simply the latest stage in a continuing process blocking the movement of most people and most information in and out of Gaza. The "unprecedented" level of closure imposed in June 2007 also extended to the commercial crossings: the import of all industrial, agricultural, and construction materials to Gaza was banned; a further reduction of industrial fuel, benzene, diesel, and cooking gas was decreed; and a suspension of virtually all exports was imposed. The Rafah crossing (controlled directly by Egypt) was also locked down except for occasional and erratic openings.<sup>4</sup> The massive Cast Lead operation that continued for twenty-three days from late December 2008 to mid-January 2009 simply made the subtly devastating impact of total closure more apparent.

My job coordinating the emergency distribution of water tanks to families whose water storage systems had been damaged during Cast Lead took me into homes all over the Strip's central area, including the refugee camps of al-Bureij and Nussayrat, rural areas such as Wadi al-Silqa and Juhur al-Dik, and neighborhoods in the southern districts of Gaza City such as al-Zaytun and Tal al-Hawa. The homes I saw were generally largely bare inside but always clean—a few pieces of old furniture, concrete walls often cracked, cheap asbestos roof panels. But in the rural areas especially, these homes often had some of the most beautiful, lush, idyllic, and well-kept gardens I have ever seen.

Damage to central Gaza was minor compared with certain neighborhoods in the north, nevertheless, this area counts thousands of destroyed or partially damaged civilian houses. Even partial damage has dramatic consequences for families whose piping to municipal water and sewage lines has been cut by tanks rumbling through; whose walls have been cracked and windows shattered by missiles landing in the next block; and whose rooftop water storage tanks have been perforated and made useless by gunfire from Apache helicopters or shrapnel from nearby buildings. Without the means or materials to

replace or rebuild, these families are simply left to bear their fate until some international aid project finds the funding to relieve them even minimally.

Meanwhile, the completely destroyed residential areas of northern Gaza, such as al-Atatra and Izbat 'Abid Rabbuh, still lie in ruins. After seven months, people are still living next to, on top of, or even under the rubble of their houses in these neighborhoods and others like them, as the import of steel, cement, wood, piping, and glass continues to be banned. Over six thousand homes blasted by air raids, heavy artillery, and even dynamite hand-placed by IDF soldiers will not be reconstructed any time soon,<sup>5</sup> and United Nations (UN) agencies are still busy doling out tents and container dwellings in preparation for the coming winter.

Gaping holes still scar the walls of al-Fakhura and Asma, the two civilian-packed UN schools struck by heavy artillery fire in Jabaliya and northern Gaza City. They had served as refugee centers during Cast Lead, when there was nowhere safe to run, and the UN had identified them as such to the IDF. These schools crown the damage—still unrepaired—to over 250 schools. The blackened, bombed-out, but only half-destroyed, al-Quds hospital in Gaza City remains as it was then: half still in use, half being sampled by human rights organizations for lingering traces of white phosphorous. Seaside buildings preserve the hulking holes of cannon fire launched by Israeli naval vessels, while taped-up windows characterize even such places as the posh Mazaj coffee shop in Gaza City's upscale al-Rimal district. After Operation Rainbow, Operation Days of Penitence, Operation Summer Rains, Operation Autumn Clouds, and Operation Hot Winter, among the many that have pummeled Gaza since 2003, the aftermath of Operation Cast Lead is just more rubble added to the heap.

There were no IDF bombings or other major military operations during my stay apart from the near-daily incursions into the eastern buffer zone areas that have become part of the status quo. Cast Lead, however, continues to hang over the bombed-out buildings and streets still smelling of gunpowder, haunting people's conscious and unconscious. The heavy, pervasive load of its memory surfaced almost every day. My colleague spoke often of her seven-year-old son's bed-wetting since January and the way he still jumps at any loud noise. In offices, in restaurants, and on streets, conversations almost always end in predictions about when the next big operation will be launched, the various theories supported by analyses of statements by this or that Obama official, a rumored resumption of the Hamas-Fatah reconciliation talks, or more often by such "indicators" as variations in the intensity of military actions on the eastern border, the distance of Israeli military vessels from the coast, how often the fishermen are shot at, the frequency with which drones and F-16s can be heard flying overhead, or the duration of IDF training exercises at Erez.

Gazans are convinced that large-scale military destruction in Gaza is cyclical, a conviction regularly reinforced by the sudden explosion of a sound bomb that shakes the windows and shatters the silence of a quiet mid-afternoon, or a cannon inexplicably fired from the sea in early morning. My Arabic teacher

asked me early on to tell her if I ever received *the* phone call from my embassy, the one evacuating its citizens from Gaza, so she could prepare herself for what was to come. I thus became her most reliable “danger gauge”—as long as I was not called to leave, she was safe.

### DE FACTO GAZA

The enduring siege has ravaged Gaza’s private sector as well. Legitimate commerce has shriveled even as, by force of necessity, a flourishing black market extends its roots under the Egyptian border. The long row of tunnels dug makeshift at Rafah feed this market, supplying Gaza with everything from scratched-up Egyptian Coca-Cola cans to sheep and camels. Gaza thus becomes an outlet for cheap smuggled goods without warranty or guarantee. Shoddy Egyptian products of all kinds fill store shelves, while brand-new tunnel-imported motorcycles flash through the streets alongside the donkey carts. Cars gasp and wheeze, rattling down the potholed roads, propelled by the poorly refined Egyptian fuel that is destroying their motors.

Tramadol pain killers, intended to treat burn victims, are another product made widely available through the tunnels. This opioid is addictive and its withdrawal symptoms severe, but in Gaza, its emotionally numbing high has won it much popularity as a self-prescribed antidepressant: “When you use Tramadol, it really calms you down,” a young Gazan told me. “You don’t care about anything. You don’t worry, but you’re alert, you can work well, you don’t feel hungry. I don’t normally use drugs, but I take it sometimes . . . especially in January—so did a lot of people—it helped with the bombs.”

The tunnels often collapse, killing and injuring the young Gazan men (and boys) paid to crouch and scamper through them. Israel and Egypt

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both intermittently bomb them as an “infrastructure of terror” supporting Hamas—tactically bombed but never totally destroyed despite Israel’s state-of-the-art technology and detailed knowledge of every tunnel path. The tunnels contribute to stifling international outrage by supplying Gazans with enough needed goods to keep them breathing while masking the actual asphyxiation that total siege means for Gaza’s infrastructure.

For over a year, the “de facto” Hamas government has been largely regulating, to the extent possible, the de facto phenomenon of tunnel commerce by overseeing usage and taxing imports and tunnel owners.<sup>6</sup> This remains one of the only aspects of “international trade” in which Hamas is allowed in some way to engage, despite the legitimate 2005 elections that brought it to power. By contrast, the appointed, unelected government led by Salam Fayyad was immediately recognized internationally as the legitimate government of the West Bank. As a result, UN agencies and NGOs in Gaza continue to

be banned from dealing with Hamas, further hindering infrastructural project work.

Indeed, Gaza's infrastructure in all sectors is crumbling. Certainly in the water, sanitation, and hygiene sector in which I worked, it is crumbling about as quickly as Gaza's legitimate economy. Crossing Wadi Gaza, the smell of the breakdown is nearly unbearable. Wadi Gaza, a valley in the middle of the Strip, was once famous as a wetland hosting many species of birds; it is now famous as the place where the highest volume of Gazan sewage flows untreated into the Mediterranean. Noses are plugged and heads shake at the thought of the unlucky families whose houses are situated in the midst of this stench. Ever since Cast Lead, when the already deteriorating sewage lines and wastewater infrastructure were further damaged, some 80 million liters of raw and partially treated sewage are released directly into the environment every day. The pollution both of the Mediterranean and Gaza's underground aquifer is painful to contemplate.<sup>7</sup>

Many families in northern Gaza still have no access to running water for want of materials for maintenance and upkeep. Most do not have running water every day.<sup>8</sup> To compensate, they rely on rooftop storage tanks of the kind my NGO was distributing. One day near the end of July, I was in Gaza City's al-Zaytun neighborhood overseeing a distribution point. At the tent where beneficiaries receive their tanks, men crowded around the distribution table impatiently waving their vouchers and IDs to be registered, while long lines stretched back to the street behind us. As always at these distribution points, adrenalin ran high, with palpable tension in the air as recipients are suspicious of getting a faulty product or perhaps fear tanks running out. Many in these lines are jobless, and all are poor enough not to have been able to replace their damaged water tanks themselves. Some women waited back at the road for their husbands or sons to bring their tanks, while a few three-member work teams of young boys roped up their donkey carts to load as many tanks as possible for the door-to-door delivery they had organized to earn a few shekels.

I was drinking an ultrasweet glass of homemade carob juice someone had brought me and contemplating the crackling gunfire in the distance (which turned out to be routine training activities by some local group, most likely the Izzeddin al-Qassam Brigades) when my colleague tapped me on the shoulder. "This man would like to talk to you," he said. I turned around and a soft-spoken man politely asked if there was any possibility he could receive an additional tank. He went on to explain that he was now caring for his deceased brother's nine children, but had listed them all as part of one family. "I'll see what I can do," I said, and asked him his name. "Samuni," he replied, jerking me abruptly to full attention. I looked at my colleague, who confirmed with a simple nod. As I wrote down his information, I couldn't help but feel an overwhelming sense of shame at offering an extra water tank to a man who had lost forty-eight family members on the same day, during what the UN has called "one of the gravest episodes" of Cast Lead.<sup>9</sup>

## LIFE GOES ON

Summer is traditionally marriage season in the occupied Palestinian territory, and this summer of Cast Lead's aftermath was no exception. Almost every evening around five or six, I could hear from my office window in Gaza City the approaching drums and *qirbah*<sup>10</sup> announcing a wedding caravan on its way to some beachside reception hall. Musicians and male family members packed in the back of pickup trucks, clapping, chanting, and dancing, arms held high and swaying from side to side. They would be followed by ribbon-decorated, honking cars carrying the rest of the family, makeshift parades animating the streets as they wound through the city. My colleague explained that while dancing in the streets was generally prohibited, the wedding party with its caravan was an important exception.

Streets were crowded during the day, and I never tired of watching the passersby and their varied attire. Professionals in business suits—a few sporting Bluetooth earpieces—mingle with older men in long white or beige tunics, with the young men seeming to prefer jeans and T-shirts. Meanwhile, the largely bearded Hamas security forces stationed at the many corner checkpoints throughout the city bake under the sun in their black uniforms. Moving toward the rural areas, sandals replace men's dress shoes; worn jeans and cargo pants replace the suits. But my gaze most often focused on the women—in part because I was always contemplating our differences and wondering how they saw me, in part because most were dressed so colorfully and stylishly, their *bi-jabat* (s. *bijab*) artfully coordinated with their outfits, both chromatically and through the many ways of tying them to create different aesthetic effects. The full black *niqab* with only the eyes left visible were also common—far more common than in the West Bank and more numerous as one left the city for the poorer rural areas and the south, where clothing colors in general become bleaker and materials cheaper. In the more upscale neighborhoods of Gaza City, a few women do go bareheaded, their hair carefully styled and blown dry, but their fashionable clothing completely covered their arms and legs.

My own experience walking alone in Gaza's streets was relatively short-lived. I had begun to leave my office in the late afternoons to walk, thinking to enjoy the sea breeze after the sweat and stickiness of a day's work. The moment I set foot in the streets, however, almost every car passing would pull up next to me honking: almost all cars in Gaza are also taxis, official or unofficial, and they assume you are just walking until they find you. But others honk to remind you that you are foreign, or to let you know they are coming, or just out of habit. After about a week of this, I began to drive myself around the city. Curiously, as I honked my own way along, I discovered that a woman driving in Gaza is more readily accepted (or ignored) than an unaccompanied (foreign) woman on foot.

An all-female gym at the roundabout near my office unexpectedly ended up being a key factor in my social life. Most of the gym's workout equipment was broken down, the power was often out, and the sauna was not properly

sealed, but the women young and old who went there were friendly and kind. Between aerobics classes alternately taught by a Filipina and a Gazan throughout the day to a mix of Arabic, European, and American pop, some of the women would try to teach me to dance, laughing at my poor Arabic and usually responding in good English. I became friends with a number of them, who would ask me to lunch on Saturdays or to have coffee or smoke hookah in the afternoon, eager to practice their English.

In the early evenings when the temperature drops in Gaza City, crowds of families (more than I had ever seen in the West Bank, with the possible exception of *ʿId*) stroll through the streets, buying ice cream cones and window shopping. Men, women, children, and street vendors fill the central square in al-Rimal with talk and laughter. In the refugee camps, children jam up the narrow alleys, running about, playing soccer or *jaysb wa arabi* (soldiers and Arab), and flying homemade kites. On the beaches, families barbecue and chat, and women sit fully clothed in the shallow water while watching over their children as they swim and play. But on the other side of the Strip in the eastern border area, people quickly leave their fields and empty the streets as dusk falls, wary of the border patrols. Even in Gaza City, the streets mostly become mute and empty after 11:00 P.M., leaving them to Hamas security forces and checkpoints.

The hardship and rubble of Gaza are such that things taken for granted in most large cities of the world come as a surprise here. For example, circles of very active young artists—painters, photographers, and documentary filmmakers, male and female alike—organize small monthly exhibits and installations at the French cultural center in Gaza City, where the cinema was burned down by Islamists some years ago. Most of the artwork on display this summer was in some way inspired by Cast Lead and the difficulties of daily life in Gaza. This disturbing yet creative and effervescent aesthetic response to the violence illustrates one of the reasons to have hope for the future: Gazans struggling not just to carry on, but to preserve their lives and their humanity intact.

If you follow the coastal road north from Gaza City, you find another Gazan anomaly: the elegant archeological museum of Gaza and its adjacent seaside restaurant next to Jabaliya camp. The museum was built in March 2008, in the midst of the open-ended siege, by well-to-do construction company owner Jawdat Khudari. “I had nothing to do at the time,” Khudari told me in a clear reference to the absence of cement and building materials in the Strip. “And so I decided to invest in something positive. . . . People here are suffering from a lack of beauty,” he explained, “so I tried to put beauty and history together in one place to enrich people’s lives.” Though the museum was damaged during Cast Lead, it opened its doors to the public again in April 2009, as Khudari is convinced that “it is not healthy for people to have to manage with the minimum. If we are forced to continue like this, I foresee that political parties like Hamas will be considered the moderate ones.”

Khudari exemplifies for me one of Gaza's most striking qualities: verve in the face of seemingly perpetual crisis and major unraveling. I felt that same spirit in Gaza's busy Qattan Center for the Child, a large cultural institution in downtown Gaza run by a private Palestinian arts charity, the Qattan Foundation. Dedicated to children under fifteen, the center seeks through literature, the visual arts, music, and the performing arts to offset some of the negative psychological effects of the Israeli siege on Gaza's young people. The center, which has a two-story-high children's library, organizes book readings, drama courses, plays, creative computer workshops, and numerous other activities. The motto of the center's founder, Ahmad Qattan, poignantly sums up this uncanny spirit of life: "Through culture and learning we can survive."

### BACK IN JERUSALEM

On 5 August, once again, I sat in a cubicle inside the Israeli Interior Ministry. "When did you arrive in Israel?"

"I first arrived on 30 April, but I've been in Jerusalem for a week now," I specified.

"Yes, I see that here," the functionary replied looking at her screen. "So you are working in Gaza?"

"Yes, I was working on a three-month humanitarian aid project in Gaza, so I was traveling back and forth from Jerusalem." I hadn't actually come to Jerusalem every week for fifteen hours. I held my breath.

"But there is a problem here."

Here we go again, I thought. I started to imagine exiting Ben-Gurion with an expired travel visa, and, even worse, trying to enter Israel again in one month.

"It says you have only been to Jerusalem for a total of twenty days" she continued, ". . . in three months, twenty days. That is not enough time. I'm sorry, I cannot give you the working visa because you were not in Israel enough, and the working visa is Israeli. You have to go in front of a special commission to be considered for a working visa. You were in Gaza, you must ask the military for a visa."

"Does the military grant visas to work in Gaza?" I asked, a bit surprised.

"No, they do not."

"Oh." The appointment was not going well.

I thought quickly. "But I was based in Jerusalem . . ." I ventured, feeling I had nothing to lose except the past week spent in Jerusalem, and perhaps even the possibility to continue working in the occupied Palestinian territory, ". . . and I was in Gaza so much only because we had an emergency project there, but it's finished now, and in September I'll be living in Jerusalem, really . . ."

"Then you must write a declaration on this paper," she stated, handing me a blank white sheet and a pen.

It had worked! She was giving me a way out.

“And you must declare that in September you will live in Jerusalem, and why you were in Gaza too much just now. I am putting your name into the computer as someone to monitor closely. If you cross into Gaza and the West Bank too much, we will not renew your working visa next year.”

“That’s just fine.” I stated, and quickly wrote my declaration.

The woman then filed the piece of paper and stuck a one-year work visa to the pages of my passport. I walked out of the ministry with my new work visa in hand, having just written and signed a statement swearing not to do my job as a humanitarian aid worker in the Palestinian territories. I returned to my car, sighed at the Kafkaesque nature of the situation, then turned the ignition key to head for Erez crossing one last time before a needed vacation. I called the office in Gaza. “Nabil? It’s me,” I said, “I’m on my way, I’ve just left Jerusalem.” “OK,” he answered, “give me a call when you’re through passport control, and I’ll send someone to pick you up at *kbamsa kbamsa*.”

## NOTES

1. *Kbamsa kbamsa* is the container unit located at the border of the Erez buffer zone from which the Palestinian Authority calls the coordination numbers of potential passers to the Israeli military for permission to proceed to Erez. It is called *kbamsa kbamsa* (five by five), because from this point, in the past, Gazans were made to proceed into Erez five by five.

2. See International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), “Gaza: 1.5 Million People Trapped in Despair” (June 2009), p. 4. This document provides details on denial and delay of Gaza exit permits for health care and on arduous crossing conditions for medical patients at Erez. See also United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), “Locked In: The Humanitarian Impact of Two Years of Blockade on the Gaza Strip” (August 2009).

3. Sara Roy, “Praying with Their Eyes Closed: Reflections on the Disengagement from Gaza,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 34, no. 4 (Summer 2005), p. 64.

4. See OCHA, “Locked In” for further details.

5. OCHA, “Locked In,” p. 3.

6. See Avi Issacharoff, “ Hamas Piping in Fuel from Egypt,” *Ha’Aretz*, 1 September 2008, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1016557.html>.

7. OCHA, “Locked In,” p. 4.

8. ICRC, “Gaza,” p. 3.

9. Rory McCarthy, “Amid Dust and Death, a Family’s Story Speaks for the Terror of War,” *The Guardian*, 19 January 2009. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jan/20/gaza-israel-samouni-family>.

10. Reed instrument vaguely resembling bagpipes.