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Searching for Answers: Gaza's Suicide Bombers

Lamis Andoni

This article focuses on two young men from Gaza's al-Shati refugee camp who were among the first Palestinians to "martyr" themselves in suicide attacks against Israeli soldiers following the Oslo agreement. The story of the two friends, culled from conversations with their families, neighbors, and friends, traces a common itinerary from early Fatah militancy and intifada activism through progressive disillusionment with the peace process toward withdrawal into radical Islam. In the course of the author's inquiry, a window on life in Gaza in the post-Oslo period emerges.

We arrive at the Erez checkpoint at 11 a.m. With its watchtowers, gray barricades, and Uzi-bearing Israeli soldiers, the entrance to the Gaza Strip looks like a military camp.

It is eerily quiet. There are few cars. Gaza is still closed off by the Israeli military, as it has been since the suicide bombings of February and March 1996 claimed fifty-nine Israeli lives. Only foreigners, and Palestinian officials with Israeli-granted VIP passes, can move in and out of the Strip.

Clouds are gathering to the south, casting gloom. On this day, all movement is halted. There is a rumor of a bomb alert. We tune to the Israeli radio Arabic service but there is no confirmation. An hour later an Israeli soldier tells us that we can cross.

We drag our luggage over the dividing line between Israel and the Palestinian self-rule area; cars are not allowed to cross. The waiting taxi is parked close to the narrow passage that has been the Palestinians' lifeline to menial jobs in Israel. In "good times," when Israel allows the workers to enter, thousands of Gazans carrying brown lunch bags walk in silence through the steel corridor in the wee hours of the morning, hoping to earn their daily bread. Today the square, what the Gazans call the "slave market," is empty. There are no echoes of the Israeli restaurateurs and construction bosses looking for cheap Palestinian labor, no swift, efficient body searches by Israeli soldiers. But in my mind's eye, I can still see from past visits the sad eyes of Palestinian men who swallow their pride to feed the children they leave behind.

It was those children who broke the indignation of two decades of occupation by challenging armed soldiers with stones. The intifada that erupted at the end of 1987 gave hope that the future was in the hands that clutched

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the stones. For many, that hope seemed within reach on 13 September 1993, when the Oslo agreement was signed. Once again, Gaza erupted, this time in joy. Flowers and Palestinian flags replaced the stones. Tears of joy replaced those of loss. But then suddenly, shockingly, within the short span of a few years, the intifada generation erupted again as young men turned themselves into human bombs, taking their own lives and the lives of scores of Israelis.

That is why I have come here, in this scorching summer following the bombings of spring 1996. I want to find answers to some of the questions that haunt Palestinians in the diaspora. I want to know what would drive young men to destroy themselves in order to kill others at a time celebrated by the world as an era of peace.

AL-SHATI CAMP

No sooner has our taxi maneuvered around the potholes of the dusty entrance to al-Shati refugee camp—ten minutes from Gaza City—than a world of angry souls begins to unfold. Posters of dead young men, mostly Islamists, stare down from walls everywhere. It is a bright day. The marketplace is teeming with life. But the silent screams of the faces on the walls compete with the sounds and smells of the central marketplace in front of the White Mosque. Neither the blaring horns nor the cries of peddlers hawking sweet Gaza dates and oranges, nor the aromatic scents of carnations and spices can dispel the lingering specter of death conveyed by those posters.

To the outside world, these young men are terrorists who spread death in attempt to derail efforts to make peace. To Palestinians here, they are the *munadilin*—Arabic for those who struggle for justice and freedom. They are *al-shuhada*, martyrs who sacrifice their lives for the liberation of their people.

In fact, this hub of al-Shati is called Martyrs' Square, scene of the bloodiest clashes between Israeli forces and the youth of the intifada. Beside the mosque stands the Martyrs' Memorial, two huge granite tablets arranged like an open book. The slabs bear seventy-three names—the Palestinians from al-Shati killed by Israeli soldiers.

I gaze up from the stone tablets to a large, crude portrait of a young man—thin-faced, with large mournful eyes staring into eternity. As I look around I see his face on another poster. And another. His name is splashed everywhere: Ali Imawi. It almost seems that Martyrs' Square has been named for him. I ask around. Ali, it seems, was the first from Gaza to sacrifice himself after peace had been declared. And this, it seems, is his neighborhood.

"Ali's home is behind the mosque," a young man tells me. I make my way past the market. Around the corner, the tiny Peace Park built by the government of Norway is deserted.

I find myself in a narrow alley across from the park. Someone has scrawled "Ali Imawi Street" on the wall, giving a name to a nameless alley. A woman hanging laundry out to dry points to Ali's house.

The door is half open. When my knocks go unanswered, I push against it and the door gives way with a tired creak. I find myself in a small yard. Standing there, staring curiously at me, is a tall woman with a long black skirt wrapped around wide hips. "Come in," she says, her right eye squinting at me.

The open courtyard serves as kitchen, laundromat, and occasional family room. There is a large sink for washing clothes. A broom stands in one corner and a mattress is propped against a wall. The tile is freshly mopped.

"*Marhaba*," I begin. "Are you Ali Imawi's mother?" She pauses. Her squint becomes a fast twitch. "Yes," she sighs. "I am Ali's mother." She invites me in. In the dim light a man rises in greeting. Ali's father. With a gesture of his hand he asks me to sit on the mattress across from him. "She has come here to talk about Ali," the woman says matter-of-factly, as if I am not here. "She must be a journalist like the ones who came here after Ali's martyrdom."

I look down, embarrassed to be brooding on the pain of others to get a story. But the room gradually warms when we start talking of where each of us comes from. The scattered map of Palestine seems to come together again when Palestinians meet. Villages that were demolished when Israel was established in 1948 come to life and assume their place on the map of memories.

"Bethlehem!" Talib Imawi exclaims, his gray-blue eyes shining with nostalgia, when he hears where my family is from. I tell him how I, a Palestinian Christian, used to pray in the Church of the Nativity; how Star Street, leading to the star of Bethlehem, seemed so wide when I was little and how, when I returned recently from the long exile that began in 1967, I realized that it barely had room for one lane of cars. "I was there once, a long time ago," Talib murmurs. "At least Bethlehem still exists. Massmiyya no longer exists."

Talib was barely fourteen years old when the war for Palestine was launched. By July 1948, the small village of Massmiyya, thirty miles north of Gaza, was evacuated after a military operation by an Israeli paramilitary brigade. Talib's family left before the village fell. "The village leaders wanted everyone out except for the armed men," Talib remembers. "My father had bought a rifle for thirty-three pounds, but what could a cheap rifle do against an invading army? We had to leave," he says with a deep sigh. The family fled south to Bayt Jibrin, near Hebron, where they found temporary shelter under the generous shade of olive trees. But when the attacks continued, they moved on. "We were like herds of ants carrying our scant belongings on mules and donkeys. We left Bayt Jibrin and went to Faluja," Talib says.

But Faluja village was also a constant target of armed attacks. The Imawi family fled a third time, west to al-Majdal, where thousands of refugees had gathered. Little did they know that al-Majdal, along with other Palestinian villages in the area that had been allocated to the Arab state under the UN partition plan, would become the target of Israel's Operation Yoav that aimed at linking Israeli army positions in the Negev desert in the south with

their forces in the north. The heavy Israeli air bombardments of al-Majdal drove out thousands of Palestinians.

"When the bombers came we fled to a nearby grove," Talib recounts. "When the bombs stopped falling, we went back to al-Majdal. In the marketplace, there were body parts everywhere. We started picking up a hand here, parts of legs there. We had to collect the remains and bury them in respect."

Grisly TV images of Israelis collecting remains of the victims of the spring suicide bombings flashed through my mind. No television cameras bore witness to the horrors of al-Majdal, but these shattered images had become part of the family's spoken history—stories repeated again and again as Ali Imawi grew up under the occupation of the same people who had forced his family out.

"You'll be having breakfast with us," Fatima Imawi said with forced cheer, trying to push her hospitality through the gloom. She placed a steel tray on the red and green straw mats at our feet. For a moment, the smell of mint tea, fresh strawberry jam, and home-baked flatbread dispelled the thickening sadness.

ALI

Ali was born here in al-Shati (literally, the beach), a stretch of sand on the Mediterranean that became home for thousands of refugees evicted during Israel's formation. Zionism's mythic slogan "a land without a people for a people without a land" had painful irony for the scores of thousands of Palestinians whose communities had become rubble or had been taken over by strangers from afar. Their new homes were now in the tent cities of teeming Gaza refugee camps. Over the years the tents yielded to houses of tin and concrete blocks. Now tight-packed rows of permanent refugee homes stretch out in a crazy maze toward the sea.

During the intifada, the winding alleys among the chaotic clusters of houses became battle fronts between soldiers and young Palestinians. The youngsters, who knew the secrets of the mazes all too well, would disappear into the labyrinth with soldiers hot on their heels. Ali came of age during these tense but exhilarating times. Here the rebelliousness of teenagers translated into daily confrontations with the Israeli soldiers who patrolled the camp and watched over nearly every aspect of the residents' lives. Ali was one of the stone throwers who splashed across television screens, bringing the Palestinian struggle to living rooms across the globe. He belonged to the generation of the intifada who took pride in turning childhood toys into potent weapons in defiance of the occupation.

Ali was one of the stone throwers who splashed across television screens, bringing the Palestinian struggle to living rooms across the globe.

The intifada seemed to turn Palestinians from victims to masters of their fate. The paralysis and resignation that characterized the 1970s and early

1980s was replaced by a new resolve. A new generation was emerging to fill the vacuum left by Israel's systematic deportation of the core of the West Bank and Gaza Strip leadership ten years earlier.

Like most Palestinian children living under Israeli occupation, Ali supported the PLO. At thirteen, he joined Fatah, Yasir Arafat's mainstream, secular faction that had begun to depart from its strategy of total liberation of Palestine as of the early 1970s, flirting with the idea of a Palestinian state alongside Israel. In November 1988, the PLO formally embraced the "two-state solution" to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

It was the intifada that had made the leap possible. The Palestinian rebellion redefined the geopolitical map, convincing the Fatah leadership that a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza was a realistic and acceptable goal. These public aspirations fanned high expectations among the stone-throwing teenagers even while the intifada was taking a huge physical and psychological toll, ingraining in them a culture of fear and violence. Between 1988 and 1990, the most intense years of the intifada, death or injury came to one of every twenty-two children in Gaza, according to the Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem. Every alley, every block of every refugee camp resonated with stories of young Palestinians killed, wounded, or beaten by Israeli soldiers. And every resident of the refugee camps remembers the official Israeli response to the intifada, announced by Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin in January 1988, which was to use "force, might, and beatings" to quell the stone throwers. By the time of Ali's death, his mother recalls, he had been wounded seven times. Fatima shudders, remembering that when he died, he still had three bullets from the intifada days in his flesh.

One night, Fatima says, Ali was sitting on the roof when he spied soldiers coming. He raced downstairs and slipped into bed. Palestinians were accustomed to raids of their homes. "We used to monitor the soldiers' footsteps in the alleys," she recalls. "There were many nights when we would sleep with our clothes on."

There was a loud knocking on the door. The soldiers pushed past Fatima and started searching for Ali. A soldier yanked him from under the covers and started beating him. "I pleaded with the soldiers not to take him away, but they just shoved me aside," she says. An officer assured her, as they dragged Ali away, that he would not be hurt. He told her that they only wanted to question him about kids who were hurling stones and setting up barricades in the camp. But Fatima's heart could not rest. She put on her scarf and followed the soldiers. "I found them behind the mosque. Ali was on the ground and they were beating him with the butts of their guns. I fainted."

The encounter did not cow Ali. Neighbors remember a quiet teenager who never shunned a confrontation with the Israeli army. In the clashes that followed, Ali sustained bullet wounds in his hip, chest, and shoulder. Nor is his story unusual in the neighborhood. Over the years of the intifada, Ali saw neighbors and friends beaten and shot by soldiers. He was there when his friend Farid Sha'arawi was fatally shot by Israeli soldiers. He was there when

Muhammad al-Hindi, eleven years old, was killed late one summer afternoon by an Israeli bullet. "He had come back from the beach," Muhammad's mother recalled. "He loved to swim. He ate something and went back out to play. Suddenly he was shot in the head." She saw blood gushing out of Muhammad's head into the street. Ali saw it too.

Ali was also there when six-year-old Yusif Salameh went to buy a cigarette for his father and was shot dead by an Israeli soldier. "Ali loved Yusif," Yusif's mother recalls. "We used to hide Ali from the soldiers during the confrontations. Ali was shocked when Yusif was killed. Yusif was only a child."

With each death, Ali deepened his commitment to the liberation struggle through the PLO's Fatah faction. "Ali was a very dedicated Fatah activist. I know because I recruited him," one of Ali's friends tells me. "Ali used to say that the Islamists were backward and reactionary," a former Fatah comrade recalled. Thus, when Hamas and the Islamic Jihad began emerging as new powers toward the end of the intifada, Ali resented them as upstarts. "Ali hated the Islamists. He believed in Fatah's slogans," his old friend told me.

But the years of curfews, strikes, and high casualties were taking their toll, and the influence of Hamas and Islamic Jihad continued to grow. Meanwhile the desperate hope for change prompted many Palestinians to support Iraqi president Saddam Hussein, who had never been popular among Palestinians before, when he threatened to destroy Israel if it attacked Iraq. Gazans waited on their rooftops for the Iraqi missiles to hit Israel, chanting and cheering, indifferent to the possibility that an Iraqi attack would spell their destruction as well.

Two and a half years later, another kind of salvation seemed promised in the historic handshake between Arafat and the late Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin on the White House lawn. Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians cheered. Ali's parents believed that independence was going to be achieved in their lifetime. But Ali had already come to the conclusion that peace negotiations launched in 1991 in Madrid were a waste of time. He did not see any changes on the ground. He no longer believed that the intifada would lead the Palestinians to a state. "This is surrender," he would tell his mother. "It's just a mirage."

"He was right," Fatima nods.

As Ali's disillusionment deepened, he began moving toward religion. He became more withdrawn, disappearing for long spells—to the White Mosque, everyone assumed. By the end of 1993, in the months following the Oslo Accord, he was spending most of his time at the mosque, praying, sweeping the floors, cleaning the toilets. To the astonishment of his comrades, he left Fatah. "We tried to dissuade him," says his friend. "We knew that Islamic Jihad was getting to him. We saw him change before our very eyes."

The no-compromise victory-over-Israel stance of Hamas and Islamic Jihad found receptive hearts and minds among the disillusioned young men. But it was not until February, five months after the handshake at the White House,

that Ali apparently felt ready to make the supreme sacrifice. On 23 February 1994, the American-born Jewish settler Baruch Goldstein entered Hebron's al-Ibrahimi Mosque and killed twenty-eight Palestinians at prayer. To hard-line Islamic groups, there was only one appropriate response.

Portrait of Ali and Hisham in Martyrs' Square, al-Shati refugee camp, Gaza. (Jerusalem Media and Communication Centre)

On 4 April, Ali told his parents that he was going away for three days to look for work. His parents had had high hopes that Ali, a diligent student, might one day become the first in the family to earn a college degree. But for the time being, his father, a fisherman suffering from diabetes and heart problems, needed his support.

"I will be back in three days," Ali told his parents.

Three days later Ali Imawi walked into an army bus station in Beyt Lid, near Tel Aviv, where Israeli soldiers stood waiting for a bus. When Ali was close enough he pulled out an Israeli-made Uzi and began firing. One soldier was killed, four were wounded. Soldiers and armed settlers fired back. Ali died instantly. Claimed by Islamic Jihad, it was the first suicide attack in Gaza after the peace accord.

That evening, Ali's bullet-ridden body played on television screens across Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. His friends all recall seeing Ali on the news, lying there in his brand new tennis shoes, all white and clean.

"He was true to his word," Talib Imawi stated, remembering Ali's last words to them. Three days after he had left, Ali's corpse arrived in a box at the al-Shati refugee camp. He was nineteen years old.

I look beyond Ali's mother and father, trying to avoid their tears, only to be captured by Ali's gaze. His pictures are everywhere in the sparsely furnished room. I realize I am in a shrine for Ali and other Islamists killed since the signing of the Israeli-Palestinian agreement. "I don't know them," Talib says, "but they all are our sons."

I ask Ali's parents if they watched the recent bombings that killed Israeli civilians. "Civilians should not be killed. That was a horrible thing to do. Ali did not kill civilians," Talib answers defensively. "The new operations have been ordered by forces abroad," he continues, echoing Arafat's accusations that Iran and the more militant Islamist leadership in exile were behind the attacks.

Fatima shakes her head in silence. Her eyes are dull. "But how did it feel?" I probe. "How did it feel to see all these Israeli civilians dying, to see parents and loved ones crying and mourning?" We sit through a long silence.

"Sometimes I think that I have lost my ability to feel anything," she says finally. "I can no longer feel sad or happy. I guess I am numb to feelings." She shifts her weight. "Listen, we have suffered so much that when you see them suffering you think 'maybe now they know what it means to live under fear.' But then I saw the mothers crying. . . ." She stops and looks at me for a moment. "I am a mother. I know what it means to lose your loved ones. I realize they are people too. It is the same loss." She breaks off and looks up at her son's face staring at us from every wall of the tiny room.

I look hard at Ali's pictures. Thick eyelashes accentuate the thin face. The eyes are huge, like a doe's. Two images dominate. In one photograph, Ali and a friend, all smiles and hope, pose against the studio backdrop of lush palms, an imaginary escape from their grim reality. In the other, a more lasting image of defiance and despair, Ali stands in his final pose as martyr. Like all paramilitary Palestinian organizations, the Islamic Jihad takes last photographs of its "martyrs." And there is Ali, staring out with those mournful eyes, poised with an automatic rifle, ready to initiate what would become a long string of suicide shootings and bombings.

In the photograph, Ali is reaching out, holding the hand of someone cut out of the frame. In Gaza, it is widely assumed that the hand Ali held belonged to Hisham.

HISHAM

"In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate. In response to the policies of Rabin, the criminal, and avenging the death of Hani al-Abid, I read my last will."

The voice of Hisham rings out in his father's dusty construction materials shop. The family found the tape, along with a written message, hours after they watched in horror the news report on Israeli television: Hisham had ridden a bomb-laden bicycle into an Israeli military checkpoint near the settlement of Netzarim. He exploded himself upon his enemy, taking three

army reservists with him and wounding eleven others. The date was 11 November 1994, seven months after his friend Ali had died and nearly a year before suicide bombers began targeting civilians in Israel.

The family found the tape hours after they watched in horror the news report on Israeli television.

Hisham's mother shudders at his voice, wiping at tears streaming down her cheeks. His father sits cross-legged, his head back, his eyes shut. Hisham's young nephews sit on the floor, listening in silence.

Over and over, Hisham's family has listened to the tape, trying to understand why their boy, the son of relatively affluent refugees, decided on a tragic end to his life. Unlike most refugees, Hisham's father did not stay long in al-Shati camp, moving his family to the working class Shaykh Ridwan neighborhood in Gaza City. His trade in construction materials earned enough to build a modest three-story apartment above his shop. He and his wife hoped to marry off their sons after they had secured them homes.

The family recalls that Hisham, like Ali, had belonged to Fatah and was disdainful of the Islamists. But as he became disillusioned with secular efforts at peace and autonomy, he grew more religious. He began to talk about martyrdom.

"He once asked me, 'What will you do if I get martyred?'" Hisham's mother remembers. "'Don't even mention that possibility!' I answered. 'Don't be selfish, mother, we have to sacrifice ourselves for God and for our people,' he would say."

"My dear family and my dear pious freedom fighters, mujahidin—a tear is in my eye. God knows that the eye will cry and the heart is wrenched."

His mother begins to weep uncontrollably.

"My dear family . . . forgive me!"

"You are alive and we are dead!" shouts Hisham's cousin Suhayl in anguish. He is shouting at the tape, shouting at Hisham. "What life is it anyway?" the young man demands of no one in particular. "Hisham is right! What kind of peace is this? We are prisoners in Gaza!"

"One operation of self-sacrifice by a heart filled with love for his people will tip the balance in our favor and force the hand of the arrogant. . . . Reject all of the humiliating plans . . . . Resist and be ready to martyr yourselves."

The tape is silent. It takes a while for Hisham's family to regain their composure.

As in all national liberation movements, the notion of self-sacrifice has been entrenched in the Palestinian political culture. But suicide attacks are entirely unprecedented in Palestine, and suicide itself is rejected by the Sunni branch of Islam to which most Palestinians adhere. Sunni Islam views suicide as a sacrilegious act that defies the will of God. But to some Muslim militants, suicide operations are part of *jihad*, the holy struggle for justice. Hisham, who is believed to have been recruited by Islamic Jihad while

spending two months in an Israeli jail for membership in Fatah, was by then convinced that any act of self-sacrifice was a blessed martyrdom.

But there are other factors, not necessarily peculiar to members of Islamic groups, that might have led Hisham to his fatal end. According to a study by prominent Palestinian psychologist Dr. Iyad Sarraj, defiant and traumatized children who came of age during the intifada developed suicidal tendencies as a result of constant fear and humiliation. "The words *angry* and *defiant* accurately describe the Palestinian children [of the intifada generation]. They are also tense and vigilant. For many of them, throwing stones directs their anger onto the Israeli soldiers who are considered a legitimate target," writes Sarraj, who has documented and treated dozens of cases of suicidal Palestinian children. "These children have learned the language and the meaning of the occupation," he continues. "Even if every child has not been humiliated by the Israeli soldiers or told that his or her life is worthless, the environment sends this message loud and clear."

Indeed, every child in Gaza knows the gulf that separates Palestinian lives from those of the Israelis in the nearby settlements. "Children easily perceive the difference between the living conditions in the camps and the newly-built Israeli settlements. These differences make them believe that Jewish settlements deserve big clean playgrounds and swimming pools while their refugee camps have open sewer systems and garbage piled up at every street corner," Sarraj observes.

Hisham must have passed the settlement of Netzarim, built on expropriated Gazan land, many times. The difference between the lush lands of the settlements, dotted with swimming pools and date palm orchards, and the parched lands of Gaza just across the fence, where water usage is severely restricted, where sewage backs up, and where many families have no drinking water, is shocking.

However bitter he became, Hisham struggled for a long time to accept his fate as a suicide bomber, his cousin Suhayl says. Hisham trained with Ali, Suhayl says. "They were supposed to take part in an operation together, but Hisham felt he was not ready," Suhayl reveals, to the astonishment of Hisham's mother. Apparently, Hisham felt he had let his friend down. Ali decided to go ahead alone. Seven months later, Hisham paid tribute to his friend.

"When I heard the news of your martyrdom, God was telling me at that moment what to do. . . . I am getting ready, Ali. I am preparing to meet you in heaven."

WAITING FOR A FUTURE

Hisham's farewell tape made the rounds in the labyrinths of al-Shati, where he and Ali had been born less than twenty years earlier. All the camp residents now know the fair-complexioned Hisham with large light eyes. His portrait, like Ali's, is everywhere. Their acts, though committed after the sign-

ing of the Oslo agreement, are seen in the camp as part of the legacy of the intifada, as belonging to a new and more despairing chapter in the struggle for Palestinian liberation.

"We are in a big prison." Suhayl's words echo everywhere I go in Gaza. It is true that daily clashes with Israeli soldiers are gone. Residents of the camps are no longer scrutinized from military watchtowers. Mothers no longer fear that their children will be shot the moment they step out of the house. Gaza is no longer a ghost town after dusk. Its beachfront coffee shops and restaurants are packed, giving more freedom of movement to the wealthy. Even for the poor, a stroll on golden sand is a welcome break after years of tension and suffering. Yet little joy is evident here.

One afternoon a young man stops me. "I hear that you've been talking to my family," he begins. "Did they tell you that they are proud that their son is a martyr? If they did, don't believe them. We were once proud when we thought that we were struggling for freedom. But is this freedom? What did Ali die for? What did all of them die for? Had we known that this will be the result, do you really think we would have made all this sacrifice?"

He shoots his questions through me like bullets and leaves me standing there, wondering how despair had come so quickly after Oslo, when Gazans had joyfully waved once-forbidden Palestinian flags in all-night celebrations. Scarcely two years had passed since Arafat had made his triumphal return to Gaza, followed by hundreds of Palestinians from the diaspora. "We have brought them back through our sacrifices!" Gazans had told me proudly at the time.

Today, men in al-Shati sit around, at home, in coffee shops, near the White Mosque, waiting for Israel to lift the closures that continue to strangle their economy. Unemployment has soared to 60 percent. Perhaps more than anything, the repeated closures that cut Gaza off from Israel drive home to the Palestinians their worst fears about the future. The "safe passage" to the West Bank promised in the agreements has not materialized, and since Oslo it has been more difficult for Gazans to travel to the West Bank than at any time since 1967. With the gates locked, they are pinned against the sea, literally with nowhere to go. The new airport remains closed, its opening subject to Israeli approval. The Gazan port stands idle. In the spring, carnation growers lost 60 percent of their crop, or nine million carnations, because of Israel's sudden ban on Palestinian exports. Angry growers and their children marched to the Erez checkpoint, hurling thousands of wilted flowers at the Israeli soldiers. In August, the meat of ten thousand lambs, donated to Gaza by Saudi Arabia, rotted in the sun as Israel held the shipment at the checkpoint. Thus far, the Palestinian Authority, strapped for cash and vulnerable to Israeli pressures, has not been able to resurrect a devastated infrastructure. The only jobs it can provide to Gazans are in its inflated bureaucracy, mostly in the multiple security agencies that have turned Gaza into a police enclave.

Under tremendous U.S. and Israeli pressure to rein in the Islamic militants, Arafat has cracked down on dissent at a high cost for Palestinian human

rights. In al-Shati, as elsewhere in Gaza and the West Bank, people talk of night raids by Palestinian security, arbitrary arrests, and even torture. Repression has taken a high toll on the fabric of the Gazan society. Neighbors have become suspicious of each other.

Young men, deprived of work opportunities, are faced with the choice of joining the security force or doing nothing. A man I'll call Said chose the security force. He had been tailing me around the camp, suspicious of my movements. When he confronted me with his security ID, I was furious. I feared he would bring the full weight of the Palestinian security apparatus down on the families I had interviewed, especially Ali's. "Wait a minute," he protested. "Ali was my friend." He swore he would never hurt the family.

I challenged him to accompany me to Ali's house to prove his words. He came. Fatima's face hardened when she saw him. "Have you come with her to see what we have told her?" she demanded. "I don't trust your leadership, and I am not afraid of you."

"Please, please don't talk to me like that," the security agent pleaded. "You know how much Ali meant to me."

She lowered her gaze and then looked at me. "Yes," she confirmed. "Said is now in the security, but he was a hero in the intifada. He was about to get killed." I looked at Said. He opened the first three buttons of his shirt, revealing a deep, thick, winding scar. "Ali is our hero. He did it for us. But Arafat has no choice. He cannot jeopardize our independence by supporting attacks against Israel," he told Ali's mother.

"Arafat is powerless," she shot back.

Later, we walk down an unpaved alley of al-Shati, toward the home of another of Ali's friends. Said tells me that Ali had come to see him three days before his attack. The relationship between the two had been strained since Ali left Fatah. "I was in Martyrs' Square. Ali called my name. When I looked over, he said, 'Said, forgive me' and continued on his way."

We arrive in front of a tiny house of concrete block and rusted tin siding. A lean young man with a navy blue training suit and jogging shoes stands waiting. Ihab Salameh introduces himself as a friend of Ali's. "I wish I could have prevented him," Ihab says quietly. "He did not tell me about his plan, but we all knew that Jihad was recruiting young men around here. They asked me to join. I refused. I did not want to die," he tells me.

I ask him if he felt he had much to live for. "During the intifada death was a daily reality. We had nothing to lose. But then after the agreement I started wondering why should I die if our leadership has decided that this was it," he answers. We move inside the small home. Pictures of PLO leaders, dead and alive, line the living room walls. Alongside are pictures of Ihab himself, in his running uniform, accepting medals from local sports officials.

His mother comes in. "Ihab has a lot to live for," she says, beaming. It is the first time I've heard someone in Ali's neighborhood talking about the future. "Ihab is an Olympian," his mother says proudly. He is preparing to go to Atlanta. I had heard about the Olympian runner from Gaza but was sur-

prised to find out that he was Ali's friend. "Ali and I had to run a lot during the intifada," he says. "We had to escape the Israeli soldiers. I was determined not to be captured. Sometimes I would feel that I was flying," he remembers, smiling.

But what about a job? I ask. Ihab Salameh, Olympic sprinter, pulls out his police identification card.

Not everyone can be a policeman. Not everyone wants to be.

Beyond the tin and concrete shacks of al-Shati, men gather by the sea to dream of something different. They are fishermen by trade, and they would like to move into the waters, to make a living once again. But now this precious source of livelihood has been drastically cut. In March, following the suicide bombings, Israel restricted Palestinian access to sea resources to a limit of four miles from the Gaza coastline. The good fishing lies far beyond. Four thousand Gaza fishermen were thrown out of work.

Yet fishermen still come to the beach every day. Right behind Arafat's office, they pass the time at the run-down Gaza Harbor. Some do small repairs on rusted boats. Others gaze hopefully at the modest construction on a new harbor. They are waiting for something. For permission from the Israelis, perhaps. Or for a new agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority that will allow the Gaza port to open, for things to get better.

"It is our life," says Anan Bakr, a sixty-year-old fisherman. He doesn't look at me once during our conversation, but keeps gazing out to sea. He comes from a long line of Gaza fishing families. His sons and grandsons sit around him. Three generations, waiting for something to happen, hoping for something to change.