



NOTES FROM THE FIELD: RETURN TO THE RUIN THAT IS GAZA

JENNIFER LOEWENSTEIN

This personal account of the author's November 2006 visit to Gaza, which coincided with Israel's launch of its "Operation Autumn Clouds," examines the impact on the Strip of economic and military siege, which intensified following Hamas's victory in the January 2006 parliamentary elections. The author also addresses post-election changes in Gaza, both politically (especially the rise of open conflict between factions) and socially. She concludes by examining Gaza's grim and uncertain future in the wake of the intense devastation—economic, political, and social—wreaked over the past several years.

DEPUTY SPOKESMAN for the Hamas government Ghazi Hamad sits quietly behind his desk, his new office bare except for a couple of cheap wooden chairs, a worn Qur'an and a pile of notes on his desk, and a small side table where an aide sets a cup of hot sage tea for me. He looks bemusedly at me in my black headscarf, sweating and out of breath. A taxi driver had mistakenly taken me to the wrong place so I arrived 25 minutes late for my scheduled appointment. I apologize profusely to Hamad, whose "never minds" come across reassuringly. He smiles at me in the headscarf—I had thought that, as a foreign woman, wearing it in the office of a Hamas official would show respect. Instead, I look ridiculous trying to adjust it correctly and he tells me gently that I can take it off. "There is no need for you to wear it," he remarks, and offers me chocolates from a box on his desk. "Take two, or three," he smiles. I take just one and he laughs pleasantly. "I know, I know, you are afraid you will get fat."

There is something endearing, reassuringly calm, about Hamad, completely unlike his brusque colleague Mahmud Zahhar who, sitting in the half-bombed Foreign Ministry building the day before, told me that there was no problem between Hamas and Fatah. Zahhar transcends his own organization when it comes to popular opinion. Even those sympathetic to Hamas dislike him. The young women at the Mezan Center for Human Rights where I am based crinkle their noses when I mention his name. Others just laugh at his rude manners. Both Hamad and Zahhar will soon be replaced by a new national unity government—if political snags do not unravel the February 2007 Mecca agreement calling, among other things, for an end to the bitter factional fighting in Gaza. It is one of the few remaining threads of hope in this place of unraveled dreams.

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THE HOLDING PEN

I had arrived in Gaza mid-afternoon on Saturday, 28 October 2006, and charged up the stairs to the offices of the Mezan Center flush with excitement at finally seeing long-missed friends and coworkers. Getting into Gaza had taken ten months of intricate coordination with a UN agency, endless e-mails, phone calls, letters of reference and corroboration, faxes, and a futile journey halfway across the world before it succeeded. Only the most confident (elite media representatives) and the most desperate still bother to try.

My previous, failed attempt to reach Gaza was that summer, when I had flown on 24 June 2006 to Tel Aviv for the first time in over two years. A visiting fellow at Oxford University's Refugee Studies Centre, I came as a researcher with specific goals that I believed would be acceptable to the Israeli authorities. One does not just "visit" Gaza these days; it is off limits to almost everyone, ostensibly because of the risk to the traveler's personal safety, but actually because if the average news-reading citizens of Europe and the United States saw what is happening there month after month, a cry of outrage would go up in the halls of their capital cities.

Ben-Gurion airport had changed considerably since my last visit in January 2004, and not just because it had been renovated. In the past, I had always been waved on through with the clusters of other visitors, helped no doubt by my Jewish last name and the fact that I had family in Israel. But this time, almost immediately after the young girl at the smart new visitors' booth ran my passport through her computer, two armed security personnel appeared and, under the gaze of the scores of others standing in line, led me away to the "holding pen" where suspect persons are kept for detention, searching, and interrogation. My experience there showed that visiting Jews are no longer immune from the humiliating, demeaning treatment previously reserved for Arab-Americans, international solidarity workers, and others attempting to reach the occupied territories. The procedure varies from individual to individual, sometimes lasting an hour without much harassment, sometimes lasting more than two days and ending in deportation. Mine included a strip search, multiple interrogations by several different security officials asking identical questions to which they already knew the answers, temporary confiscation of my passport, and what seemed like endless waiting while laughing young soldiers socialized nearby without ever deigning to look in the direction of those of us waiting for word from on high as to whether we would be permitted to enter Israel. I was lucky: after only six and a half hours, I got through. It was too late, however, to venture on to Gaza's Erez crossing, which closes at 9:00 P.M. Had my "detention" ended even 40 minutes sooner, I could have gotten there in good time and, in all likelihood—because of the security clearance prepared for me in advance by the Office of the UN Special Coordinator—been allowed to enter Gaza. Instead, I spent the night in East Jerusalem, only to learn the next morning that Palestinian fighters had carried out an attack at the Kerem Shalom crossing in

southern Gaza, killing two Israeli soldiers and kidnapping a third—the now infamous Gilad Shalit—and that a military operation was underway. It could be a long wait at Erez, my friends warned me.

Indeed, twelve hours of waiting in the gravel and dust outside Erez that day yielded no positive results. (It was not that I was too stubborn to leave; rather, I ended up waiting with journalists Steven Farrell of the *London Times*, Ian Fischer of the *New York Times*, and James Reynolds of the BBC, all of whom were being told, hour after hour, that we would “probably” be let in “in an hour or so.”) As it was, journalists from the mainstream media had no difficulty getting in the following day. They even received phone calls of apology from the ever-professional Israel Defense Forces (IDF) public relation’s office for the inconvenience they’d endured.

But except for them, and for those with diplomatic immunity, the rest of us were locked out. I spent the next days between Jerusalem and Ramallah in futile anticipation that Erez would reopen, seeing friends and preparing for interviews I had secured with key Hamas officials in the West Bank. But with the dramatic sting operation during the night of 28–29 June, when Israel rounded up nearly all the high-level Hamas officials in the West Bank, literally taking hostage a third of the Palestinian government, it was clear that this trip there would be no interviews (the intended interviewees now being under arrest) and no getting into Gaza. As I anxiously followed the news, I thought of Ghada, the secretary at Mezan Center, who had remarked sadly on the telephone phone two days earlier: “Don’t you know? You cannot plan for anything here. Our life is totally arbitrary.”

When I flew again to the Middle East in late October 2006, I chose to fly not to Tel Aviv but to Amman, where I could spend the night with friends and recover from the 16-hour journey. I figured that with a solid night’s sleep I would be able to face the Allenby Bridge crossing into Israel more easily. And in fact it was far easier. The female soldier inside the Allenby terminal, looking at my passport, asked me if I were Jewish and, when I said yes, kindly offered me a bottle of water and asked me to sit down, assuring that my wait would “just be a minute.” The Palestinians huddled together on the bench beside me watched all this with the familiar understanding that of course I would be given precedence over them. Unlike them, of course, I knew that the soldier’s friendliness would evaporate the minute she checked my passport, and so it was. Still, the search and interrogation lasted less than three hours this time and by mid-afternoon I was safely in Gaza. The irony is never lost on me: how much relief I feel every time I return to Gaza’s familiar streets, its noisy traffic mazes and shouts of street vendors, the threads of a thousand conversations, the honking horns and clapping hooves of horses and donkeys pulling wretched wooden carts full of stale goods along the potholed roads.

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THE IMPACT OF SIEGE

And yet Gaza had deteriorated visibly in just two years. It was as though whole layers of debris had settled over the already existing decrepitude; frenzied graffiti covered what seemed like every wall, every sidewalk and storefront window. The roads, already potholed and cracked since the second intifada, had further deteriorated, sometimes to the point of seeming unpaved; there is no Palestinian money for repairs and the European NGOs that previously stepped in with funds to rebuild wells and repair bridges, roads, and underground piping no longer have a mandate to do so. UN funding was being held up for a host of other reasons. The result is that when it rains the streets overflow with water and sewage, causing more and more physical damage to the infrastructure of roads as well as increasing environmental damage. A Mezan Center report more than four years ago warned of an impending environmental disaster if the sewage collection pools in north Gaza were not immediately cleaned up and the wastewater plant expanded and repaired, but nothing was done.* Yet the deterioration of the environment was the least visible feature of Gaza's continuing decline.

In the city center, I was struck by the number of shops selling identical wares—phone cards, cables, cords, tools, and other hardware supplies, sometimes used or broken—while the proliferation of blackened, smoke-filled stands selling shawarma or kebab sandwiches testified to the greater levels of underemployment. Shop owners and employees sat outside their shops as the days wore on, despondent and bored from the lack of business despite slashed prices on the merchandise.

Still, Gaza's traffic was heavy. One sunny afternoon, it was brought to an absolute standstill as hundreds of young men ran in formation through the streets, training for membership in the Palestinian Authority (PA) security forces, already filled to the brim with recruits who had nothing else to apply for and no other way of acquiring even a partial paycheck. Men, women, and children witnessing the training session cheered and clapped as the trainees, chanting slogans, ran by. Almost as distressing to me, though for entirely different reasons, were the neatly dressed children with their book satchels on their way home from school, chattering away as if everything were normal. They laughed and whispered to each other when they saw me. I stared back in bewilderment, wondering how it could be that they didn't appear to register what was happening to their city.

Indeed, much has happened in the two years since my last visit. Israel's unilateral disengagement of August 2005, though it emptied the Strip of settlers,

*In March 2007, a waste reservoir finally burst and the ensuing flood of sewage water killed four people, two of them children, and destroyed the nearby village. The wastewater plant, it was reported, had been designed to serve 50,000 people, but was in fact serving closer to 200,000. See, for example, Harvey Morris, "Four Killed as Gaza Reservoir Bursts," *Financial Times*, 27 March 2007.

did nothing to alleviate the misery and in fact tightened the noose around Gaza, since Israel controls all the points of entry and exit. But the immediate cause of the present crisis, of course, is that in January 2006, the Palestinian people went to the polls, participated in free, fair, and transparent democratic elections unmatched in the Arab world, but voted for the *wrong party*. So when the Hamas-led government took power in March 2006, the United States, Israel, and the European Union imposed a draconian boycott on the Strip, magnifying the occupation ten times over and greatly intensifying the already wretched conditions of its 1.5 million inhabitants, the majority of whom are under the age of 20. Since the imposition of the siege, which continues at the time of writing, the poverty level has reached 80 percent, the under- and unemployment level above 60 percent. The Erez crossing, the main passage for human traffic into Israel, has been closed to the tens of thousands of workers once employed in construction, on road crews, in restaurants, and as menial laborers inside Israel. The economy of Gaza has been smashed, deliberately deprived of imports and exports. The Qarni (industrial) crossing, closed most of the time, allows in just enough humanitarian aid and material to keep the population alive.

The “disengagement” document stipulates that by 2008 no workers from Gaza will be allowed to enter Israel to earn their wages. Israel still controls the Rafah crossing into Egypt, and in any case Egypt does not want an influx of poor Palestinian workers desperately trying to sustain their families. If things continue as they are, whole families will be forced to leave in order to survive and Israel will be able to say that they left of their own free will. What seems certain, however, is that they will not be allowed back. In the past few years, many thousands of Gazans have left the Strip seeking better prospects elsewhere.

“It will never get better,” Ghada told me. “It just gets worse and worse. No one on the outside would ever believe it.” Her words were echoed by her colleagues. Recounting the events of the last summer, Ruba described the relentless bombings and blackouts, the water and fuel shortages, the rising panic as the siege around the Strip tightened with every passing day. She told me that from the window of her home she had seen white smoke rising from the beach on 9 June, the day Huda Ghalia’s family was wiped out by stray artillery during a picnic outing. The video footage of the 12-year-old girl rocking back and forth and weeping next to her father’s dead body was seen around the world, but after an initial Israeli apology the IDF disclaimed responsibility, blaming Palestinian rocket fire. “I know the color and sound of Israeli weapons and Palestinian weapons,” Ruba said. “With our weapons the smoke is thick and gray; with theirs the smoke is white. All around the beach after the attack I watched white smoke dissolve into the air and listened to the sirens coming to gather the dead family. We all know who killed them and we will not listen to their lies.” Indeed, Human Rights Watch discredited Israeli’s attempt at damage control in a report dated 20 June, which confirmed not only the testimonies of the Palestinian witnesses and victims at the scene but also the inadequacy

and bias of the IDF “investigation” launched after international media reports on the event brought Israel negative publicity.*

Ruba is one of the few women I know in Gaza who refuses to wear the headscarf in public. She grew up in Kuwait, was expelled with her family after the first Gulf War, and ended up in Baghdad, where she was educated on a full scholarship in computer science at one of the finest universities. She came to Gaza with her father for a visit in September 2000, a week before the outbreak of the second intifada, and was prevented from leaving when a general closure sealed off the Strip from the world. By the time people were able to leave again, their “tourist” papers had expired. She and her father, without IDs, were trapped in Gaza. Her mother, sisters, and brother, who remained in Baghdad, are now refugees in Jordan. They cannot get into Gaza and she cannot leave without forever relinquishing her right to return. Her name does not appear in the Palestinian population registry—a registry that Israel controls—which means that legally she does not exist. She has told me her story over the past five years in vignettes, in little islands of detail, each one adding a new layer of sorrow. Yet she speaks with the calmness of an old woman recounting tales of bygone days to her grandchildren. Ruba is only thirty-six.

I have never seen any of the women I know in Gaza cry. They voice their anger and despair, but carry on. I know it cannot be true of everyone, but it strikes me as remarkable that people can continue to sustain this exhausted defiance. The men at the Center turn daily hardships into bleak humor. At lunch time, no one eats, and indeed I discovered that many, even among the comparably well-to-do, no longer have meat with their main meals and substitute watery orange and grape drinks for fruit juice and milk, even for their children. At the center, Lauren, the British intern, and I struggle against the daily rumbling in our stomachs and one afternoon finally beseech Samir, the fieldwork coordinator, to go out and get us something to eat. When we gather our shekels together he chides us indignantly: “Pay? Do you think we will let you pay?” To Mahmud he laughs and says, “the foreigners are hungry! They have not lived in Gaza long enough. A few more weeks and they will be happy with coffee and tea until dinner!” He goes off and returns with shawarma sandwiches, hummus and pita, and Snickers bars. No one in the office seems to notice the food, which Lauren and I wolf down in a few gulps.

Each day I am shepherded by friends from place to place, from interview to interview, from shop to shop. I share Lauren’s flat and each morning we wait for Mezan’s driver, Abu Muhammad, to pick us up and drive us the two blocks to the office. We are cautioned against going out alone. Strangely, however, I do not feel afraid. The few times that I do manage to walk alone, snapping photographs outside the Foreign Ministry building or running to the sole outdoor ATM machine in Gaza City, I notice stares more intense than usual, marking the

*See the Human Rights Watch report entitled “Israel: Gaza Beach Investigation Ignores Evidence. IDF’s Partisan Probe No Substitute for Independent Inquiry,” available online at hrw.org.

now-rare presence of a Westerner in Gaza, but no noticeable hostility. It is difficult for me to imagine not feeling at home here. But tension in the Strip is at an all-time high and impossible to miss. Kidnappings are common now, though still mostly carried out as a form of angry bargaining for salaries, greater local influence, factional demands, or the release of a family member from jail. With one exception (Kate Burton and her parents in December 2005), those kidnapped have been men, which perhaps helps explain my lack of fear.*

INTERFACTIONAL STRIFE AND HEADSCARVES

One night, in the balmy late autumn air, I stand outside on the balcony of the apartment where I am staying, listening to sporadic gunfire from the rooftops of nearby buildings. This was also a new experience in Gaza: interfactional violence on a scale that causes parents to keep their children home from school in the tensest periods, terrifying the kids when militants set up their firing positions on the tops of tall apartment buildings. Sometimes the fighting goes on all night. It adds a palpable distrust between strangers in the Strip and raises the anxiety levels of people already exhausted by the months of hardship, intermittent electricity and water, continual shortages of food and supplies, and, worst of all, of seeing no end to it all.

My hosts have advised me not to stand in front of the open windows of the fourth floor apartment or to walk unaccompanied through the familiar streets of Gaza City, Khan Yunis, Rafah, and other places that had once been so welcoming and friendly. People at work speak of the worsening conditions as the catalyst for radicalization among some Islamist elements in the Strip. This phenomenon continues to worry many in the secular left, like Jamil Majdalawi of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) or the independent Talal Okal, who view themselves and their supporters as a vital check on the power of Hamas and Islamic Jihad with regard to Islamization of society. But as each of them speaks to me of the new political configurations, I am struck by the extent to which the desire for coexistence dominates their narratives: in discussing their personal and professional experiences with Hamas, neither voices fear or contempt. “My political views are closer to those of Fatah, as you must know,” Okal says at one point. “But personally I have no problems with many of the Hamas leaders and on a basic human level I am closer to Haniyeh than to Abbas or his followers. Haniyeh and I get along fine.” I press him on this, wondering whether he is sincere or trying to paint a picture of cooperation for the visiting foreigner. He begins to laugh as he recounts a story about his dealings with the prime minister. “I once sat with Haniyeh after a meeting and said to him, ‘the only real difference between you and me is

*Up to now—March 2007—none of those kidnapped, except for BBC journalist Alan Johnston, has been harmed or kept for longer than a fortnight. Kidnapped on 13 March 2007, Johnston has been neither released nor located. Like most of the other foreigners kidnapped, he is sympathetic to the Palestinian plight, making any harm done to him incomprehensible as well as morally wrong.

that I can go sit with my wife on the beach to relax and drink a beer. You can sit with your wife on the beach and relax but you can't drink beer!' and you know what Haniyeh said? He said, 'Oh well, some people have all the luck!'"

It is difficult in a conservative place like Gaza to gauge the Hamas government's impact on social practices. Palestinian society has long been growing increasingly observant of religious strictures, and a source of malaise in Gaza for some time has been boredom: no cinemas, no museums or public parks, no "jazz club" spaces for music entertainment, no bookstores or health clubs, no clubs or nightlife outside the hotels where foreigners stay. From my own observations and from what I hear, there is still a fair amount of alcohol consumption in private homes in Gaza, but this is kept very quiet because of the social stigma against drinking. (A Christian-owned liquor store in Gaza was burned to the ground a year or so before the onset of the second intifada and never reopened.) Each time I come to Gaza I make sure to bring my male friends (I've never known a woman in Gaza to drink) gin, whiskey, or vodka purchased in Ramallah or at the airport duty-free shop.

Wearing the hijab in public has also long been the "norm," and if it is more universal today than it was two years ago, the difference is not obvious. Now, as previously, many women in Gaza City refuse to wear headscarves in their homes or places of work, but the overwhelming majority wears them in public. One who steadfastly refuses to do so at any time is Manal Awad, founder of the Women's Empowerment Project in the Shatti' camp and former director of the Rafah branch of the Gaza Community Mental Health Project. She is unquestionably an anomaly in Gaza, but she has slowly won acceptance even in the most conservative refugee camps. In a long interview, she told me of the progress made in areas affecting women's lives, such as domestic violence, vocational training, single parenting, and daycare. Awad says that Hamas's election and growing popularity represent a step backward for the women of Gaza, but acknowledges that the Islamists have made no serious attempt to shut down organizations such as her own.

Indeed, whatever attempts Hamas has made to impose stricter moral codes appear to be uncoordinated and local. Within Hamas itself there are "moderate" and "hardline" currents with regard to social mores, Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh being an example of the first trend and the Hamas leader in exile, Khalid Mishal, seen as representing the second. In some regions of the Strip—Rafah, for example—friends tell me that local Hamas officials have tried to impose tighter restrictions on the population: insisting on mosque attendance for Friday prayers, attempting to shut down Internet cafes to clamp down on internet games or surfing the Web, banning the sale of Hollywood movie videos in local shops.* The results, however, appear to be spotty and do not always

*A number of violent attacks against internet cafés, music shops, and the like have occurred in Gaza, but Hamas has disclaimed responsibility.

hold; I continue to receive emails sent from Rafah's internet café, for example. For the time being at least there is no unified effort or consistent policy to "Islamize" the Gaza Strip or the West Bank. More important than the lack of clear consensus within Hamas and the amount of popular resistance efforts to clamp down too heavily on "Western" attitudes and openness would generate is Hamas's limited hold on power internally.

At all events, what was obviously of far greater concern in the Strip was the interfactional violence. Majdalawi's mood abruptly darkened when the subject came up. "It must stop," he said, shaking his head. "We cannot afford to be divided like this. We know it is what the Israelis want. We know that it weakens us, not only here in Palestine or Gaza but in the eyes of the world." Similar words were spoken by everyone I talked to, Hamas, Fatah, or independent. Palestinian Council member Ziad Abu-Amr, slated to be foreign minister in the national unity government being negotiated, told me: "The people here are exhausted. We must have an agreement. We can't go on like this indefinitely." Ghazi Hamad spoke in similar terms. All saw a national unity government as the last hope for the people of Gaza, the West Bank, and Palestinians everywhere.

A similar consensus seemed to apply to the prospect of civil war, which was dismissed by everyone I spoke to as unlikely in the Palestinian territories. According to Majdalawi, the ethnic, religious, geographic, or class-based divisions of the sort that fuel civil conflicts elsewhere are not significant enough in Palestine to bring about a real civil war. My own impression, growing out of innumerable conversations, is that Gaza's interfactional fighting reflects, among other things, the pent-up anger of a government choked to a standstill, the refusal of a long-dominant clique within Fatah to let go of its hold on power, and the family feuds that have resurfaced as what little there was of civil society has been stripped away and replaced by the relics of tradition. It is also, of course, the logical result of the proliferation of small arms across the Strip.

BOMBARDMENT FOR DINNER

Preoccupation with interfactional strife, so marked in the first days of my sojourn, was temporarily pushed to the background on 1 November. That night, I was once again standing on my balcony in the warm air to catch the breeze blowing in from the sea. Stars filled the blue-black dome encasing us and for a few short minutes I was reminded of the Caribbean and its tropical beauty. Silence filled the sky until, from the east, an ominous light buzzing noise began, traveling in unseen circles overhead, growing louder at first and then diminishing as it retreated. This happened again and again: the buzzing of pilot-less drones searching the land below.

Like everyone else in Gaza, I knew instantly that this was a prelude to something worse; I knew the sights and sounds well from earlier visits: tracer flares, search lights, fighter planes, the loud staccato of helicopter blades, the whoosh of tank fire and the explosions that follow, the monstrous white surveillance blimp hanging in the sky above Erez. Unlike the children of Gaza, I cannot

differentiate Uzis from Kalashnikovs, immediately identify the place of impact or tell the weapon used, or recognize bullet types. I cannot tell a tank shell from a missile casing; or whether lights in the distance are from cars, trucks, tanks, or armored personnel carriers. I do know that an F-16 is very loud, because I remember well its thunderous approach flying low above my flat in Gaza just

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after midnight in July 2002, when Dan Halutz, then head of the Israeli Air Force and later IDF chief of staff, ordered a one-ton bomb dropped on the apartment building where Salah Shehadeh slept. Shehadeh had been the head of the Izzeddin al-Qassam brigades, Hamas's military wing, and his death was more important to Israel than the lives of his fourteen neighbors, including nine children, who died with him, or the other lives turned upside down by their injuries or affected in

scores of other ways that never make it to the papers or occur to people discoursing on the need to eradicate "terror."

Later that November night, longtime friends from the Mezan Center invited me to their home for dinner. Up on the eleventh floor, in their flat, with the sounds and smells of cooking food wafting from the kitchen, the children ran about giggling, flopping over each other in games on the floor. The rest of us talked and laughed about adult things: stupid politicians, work projects, long-term goals; half of everything in English and half in Arabic so we could all understand. Tea, coffee, and soft drinks made the rounds, cups and glasses clinking against each other and appetizers spread out on a low coffee table. Samir Z., always putting an uproarious spin on everything and challenging the prevailing wisdom, smiling with his arm affectionately around his wife, Suheir, made the whole room radiant and alive. His four-year-old daughter Leila climbed into his lap for a hug, looking over at me bashfully.

Suddenly the evening was pierced by huge explosions off to the east. In the distance, lights still peeked out from Bayt Hanun, but we knew it was under attack again as the site from which Qassam rockets had been fired into Israel. The laughter died away and Samir led me up to the roof of the building, where I phoned a U.S. radio station, holding out my mobile phone so it could pick up the sounds of the explosions. Back downstairs in the flat, the socializing and conversation continued, though more subdued than before. People here are accustomed to blasts shattering the dark sky, to Gaza nights turned schizophrenic. A crackling spray of gunfire and more explosions. *Would you care for another soda?* Crackle, crackle, the wail of sirens in the distance.

Samir turned on the television to get the news reports, but the reception was poor, interrupted by the aerial bombardments. More soft drinks appeared, and a delicious main course of chicken and okra with raisins and pine nuts in saffron rice was set out: a very special occasion for me and the British girl, Lauren, the guests of honor. More explosions, in rapid succession. The buzzing of the pilotless drones circling overhead began again, adding another voice to the martial symphony of explosions continuing outside. Dinner was served.

Leila had stopped smiling when the explosions began, and sat down to table with her brothers and sisters, looking away from the room and the quiet that has descended upon it. Focusing a little too intently on her plate, she picks at her food but doesn't eat. She is suddenly wrapped in an invisible blanket, withdrawn into a private world. The television hums: a young woman from al-Jazeera reports on the attack, cutting live to spokespeople in Gaza. All of the adults, about eight of us, stare at the screen, the dark images, the exhausted faces of Haniyeh and others. The voices from the television, though, are drowned out by the explosions outside the windows, which defy all our attempts to carry on pleasantly. Stupid, defiant pipe bomb launchers in Bayt Hanun firing random, worthless bits of plastic and metal into the air! Can't they see that they only give the Israeli army another excuse to hammer Gaza again, bearing down full force with tanks, armored personnel carriers, helicopter gun ships, F-16s, arrow missiles, precision-guided bombs, and heavy artillery preparing the ground for the charge of heavily armed soldiers and their state-of-the-art, high-tech automatic weaponry? The wrath of Goliath, the enforcer. No crude homemade rockets, no sticks, no stones, no property deeds, no rusty keys to destroyed ancestral homes, no memories. *How dare you resist our will.* The television drones on; we eat our dinner silently.

Eighteen civilians were killed in Bayt Hanun that night, marking the launch of "Operation Autumn Clouds," following on the heels of "Operation Summer Rains," which had gone on most of the summer. We later learned that all men of Bayt Hanun between the ages of 16 and 35 had been rounded up and loaded onto trucks and hauled away for "questioning." By the time the operation ended a week later, more than 80 Palestinians had been killed.

A NEW STRAIN OF INTIFADA?

That November night, and the days that followed, haunt me still: the trips to the hospitals and morgues, the terrifying immediacy of the reports in Gaza juxtaposed with the cool, detached reports on CNN or the BBC, the reaction locally versus the obliviousness or irritability of those back home.

At the morgue, an unshaven man, shirtsleeves rolled up and dressed in dirty blue jeans, leans forward to pull out the silver-colored tray. Gray over brown, wet mud over a tanned face speckled with blood, dark tangled hair half hiding shut eyes, tender gray lips, lifeless, calm. A little boy is rolled up in a cold white shroud. I have flashbacks to Jenin, to Rafah, to Gaza City again in 2002; to Beitunia, to Ramallah, to Bayt Sahur, to al-Bireh and Hebron; to Khan Yunis, Bureij, and Jabalya, to mountains of rubble, concrete and rot; to shrouds and dried blood, ghost faces, dismembered limbs; a ring of blood for a dead baby girl and the colorful, winged, dangling toy still hanging above where the crib used to be; bombed-out mosques, ruined schools, gaping holes in concrete homes, cardboard-covered windows; polka-dotted bullet-holed neighborhoods along the Philadelphi corridor. More than 17,000 people displaced from Rafah alone. But who remembers that now? Who cares? That was four years ago, before

the siege that now shrivels even the hopes of children who, like nine-year-old Muhammad now living in his tent, dream of having an orange.

In the morgues and hospital wings, in depressed and muggy offices, you can feel in your bones a new intifada germinating, unseen: in the tunnels and weapons' caches; in the sweat-drenched sheets of the hospital beds and mats on the intensive care unit floors; in the now empty corrals near the steel walls and barbed wire at Erez, across from the guard towers that once monitored thousands as they made their way to their handfuls of shekels in the dreary underworld of Tel Aviv. You feel it blowing across the sands, pulling up dust devils on Huda Ghalia's beach. It blows out to sea on the fishing boats; it is nestled in the cradles of Shabura camp and clutched in the fists of grandmothers; it is buried in the ruined cemeteries on the edges of towns, blessed each year with fragrant branches in the predawn hour of the breaking of the Ramadan fast. It haunts the dreams of the aged, reaching up from the roots of blighted olive groves; it is in wilted fields and spectral orange blossoms, and calling out from the labyrinthine alleys of the wretched camps of far-away Beirut, Damascus, Amman.

This is a new, dangerous strain of intifada, a threatening pandemic, transmitted in the flash of eyes from one person to the next. It is in Ruba's wallet with no identity card; lodged in the bombed power grid and speeding over downed bridges. It sits rotting on trucks at Qarni, festering in the toxic Gazan water. It is reaching for daddy's arms and trembling with fright, wetting the bed and drawing tanks with crayons. It is tied backwards with a vomit-stained sack over its head on an overturned chair. It is weeping over headstones of lost companions. It wafts hauntingly from the loudspeakers of the minarets and from the chalices of ancient stone church altars. It shakes in my face its basket of shell-fragment souvenirs marked "Made in America." It is patient, observant, watching the shrill indifference of the international community, waiting, waiting.

Another tray with another face, an old one this time, is pulled out before me in the morgue: pinkish and bloated, with ancient, weathered skin, a grizzled beard and blackened nose. The grandfather who ran out onto the balcony to save his grandson when the bombing started. He and his grandson sleep now, side by side, on the cold freezer trays.

Later that week, I traveled to Rafah, wilted and sand-swept as ever, but less tormented this time: The systematic destruction of Operation Rainbow, when the Philadelphi corridor was cleared of the poor refugee shanties (shanties which, however dilapidated, had been loved and clung to like floating refuse on an open sea), ended in 2004, in time for the unilateral disengagement the following year. And because of Fatah's unchallenged dominance, Rafah has been spared the factional fighting of the northern Strip, where the two factions are in greater equilibrium. Yet the marks of years of relentless battering and ruin are everywhere in Rafah and I ask the mayor, Ali Barhum, how the generation of militarized intifada children who grew up in this wasteland would be able to free themselves of their anger, their wish for revenge? He could only return the same question to me. "People here have stopped believing that America

and Israel want peace. They no longer believe in your laws and your justice. They feel abandoned by everyone, including, of course, their Arab neighbors. When you live like this, how do you rebuild trust?"

In the taxi on my way back from Rafah, I am struck by the sense of isolation this landscape conveys. Gaza feels like a floating island disconnected from the mainland and allowed to drift out to sea. Barely four miles to the east is Israel, but it might as well be another planet. The incongruence of these two worlds is heightened by the sight of the bombed-out bridge that as recently as last year—before the power grid was destroyed, depriving half the Strip's residents of electricity, before a re-devastated Gaza was identified anew as one of the outposts of Terror in the region—connected the main north-south Gazan "highway." Long stretches along that road reveal a landscape that seems to suffer a yearly Katrina, inexorably returning, but with no relief network in place, no headlines decrying the scandal of its abandonment, no fingers pointing accusingly at those who created this travesty and then blame its most desolate victims for their predicament. Where are the voices denouncing the crimes committed in Gaza? Year after year, it slides into deeper decline. But unlike other victimized societies, Gaza remains a taboo subject, muffled in denial each time it manages to surface at dinner tables or conference halls. We have been conditioned to excuse the offenses there, to chalk them up as deserved misfortunes.

With its electronic fences, its watch towers, its strict controls on exit and entry, Gaza is virtually sealed from the world; the "problem" of its suffering can be thought to be "contained." Yet as much as the situation in Gaza is ignored in the Western elite media, it is closely followed throughout the Middle East and elsewhere in the world. And even as we dismiss Gaza as irrelevant, the bitterness against the worldview that permits and condones what is happening there, and to the Palestinians in general, deepens; the fault lines of the resistance to U.S. and Israeli policies are crystallizing. Our denial and dismissal of the tragedy unfolding there will come back to haunt us; we ignore it at our peril.