

Hope's Coffin

Elliott D. Woods

About [Elliott D. Woods](#)



Elliott D. Woods studied Arabic and worked as a freelance writer in Cairo before traveling to Gaza in January 2009, on behalf of VQR and the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting. He returned to Gaza in April to work for a humanitarian organization. His essay "A Few Unforeseen Things" appeared in the Fall 2008 issue of VQR.

For a generation of young people, the Gaza Strip has become a place where dreams go to die.



Young boys stand amid the wreckage of their family home in Jabaliya. Tents erected by aid organizations for the newly homeless were flooded by heavy rains in late February.

Israel did its best to keep me out of the Gaza Strip. Not just me—all international media. For two weeks, we watched from the Egyptian side of Gaza's southern border as plumes of smoke erupted from around Rafah, and the wounded trickled out, one by one, in battered Palestinian ambulances on their way to intensive care units in Cairo. Finally, in the last week of Operation Cast Lead, something gave, and the Egyptian government unexpectedly opened the gates.

I entered Gaza with a few dozen journalists and aid workers on January 16—the day after my twenty-eighth birthday. An armed drone tracked my taxi, plastered with press insignia, through the wasted streets of Rafah, and the ear-splitting sonic booms of strike fighters rattled the windows. The war was no longer a spectacle on the horizon; I was in the kill zone.

As I moved north from the heavily bombed neighborhoods near the Egyptian border, targeted for their proximity to Gaza's illegal tunnel network, toward the epicenter of the Israeli offensive in Gaza City, I was haunted by images of Stalingrad, Dresden, Hué City. Weeks of shelling had left the tiny, teeming enclave a moonscape of flattened homes and ravaged fields.

On January 18, Israel called an end to Operation Cast Lead and withdrew. What, if any, tactical or ideological gains Israel had made, however, remains unclear. Ostensibly the offensive was designed to reduce militant rocket fire against southern Israel and to cripple Hamas—the Islamic Resistance Movement—which has governed in the Gaza Strip since 2007. But Hamas retains the capability to launch rockets; its senior cadre remains intact; its smuggling tunnels are still operating; and Gilad Shalit, the Israeli soldier kidnapped in 2006, isn't any closer to freedom—in fact, some Palestinian militants have circulated the rumor that Shalit was injured by the Israeli bombings.

Hamas, for its part, can hardly declare a tactical victory over the Israeli military (Israel lost only thirteen soldiers in the fighting, four to friendly fire), but twenty-two days of air strikes by screaming F-16s and two weeks of ground maneuvers by the Israel Defense Force's (IDF) highly trained riflemen and tankers produced nearly 1,400 martyrs for Hamas to claim. Such casualties have left Hamas stronger than ever as it has sought, in the months since the offensive, to portray Operation Cast Lead as conclusive evidence of the savagery and irrationality of the occupier.



A young boy sells usable scraps of metal and plastic harvested from the wreckage of an appliance store that was destroyed when an Israeli air strike targeted the al-Abbar Mosque in Rafah. The Israelis accused Hamas of storing weapons in the mosque, a charge locals vehemently denied.

Among young Gazans, raised on a diet of death and disappointment, this message is especially powerful. According to the Ministry of Social Affairs, 437 children under the age of sixteen were among the dead of Operation Cast Lead and nearly 1,900 more were wounded. And those are only the immediate, visible casualties. A joint Japanese and Jordanian team of doctors is treating more than a thousand children for the long-term effects of white phosphorus weapons, and the Gaza Community Mental Health Project estimates that as much as 90 percent of Gaza's youth suffer from some sort of psychological trauma. For hundreds of thousands of children, Operation Cast Lead proved what their forebears have told them all along—Israel thirsts for Palestinian blood and will stop at nothing to punish the Palestinians for the very fact of their existence.

Hamas has spun this latest Israeli offensive as the fulfillment of a morbid prophecy, another nail in the coffin of hope, and their case is increasingly easy to make. Nearly half the total population of Gaza is under the age of fourteen—too young to remember the Oslo Accords and the handshake between Chairman Arafat and Prime Minister Rabin, viewed by many Palestinians as the crowning achievement of the First Intifada (1987–1993); too young even to remember a time before the Second Intifada (2000–2006) and the strangling backlash. The Gaza they have always known is a giant fortified encampment—its borders closed to exportation, crippling Gaza's economy; closed to the importation of luxuries, such as chocolate and cigarettes; closed even to the arrival of aid items such as steel and cement to rebuild the 9,000 civilian homes partially or entirely destroyed by Operation Cast Lead, on the grounds they could be used to build bunkers.

Looking at a map, it's hard to get a sense of how claustrophobic this embargo makes the Gaza Strip feel, but stand on any rooftop and it becomes painfully clear. One can look out on the Mediterranean to the west, the tree-lined Israeli hills to the east. The widest point is a ten-mile tract of dusty farmland that links the sea to the Negev Desert, home to Israel's impoverished and despised Bedouin. Most of Gaza's 1.5 million residents, however, live in the five-mile-wide corridor that stretches from the southern city of Khan Younis to Beit Hanoun on the border twenty miles north. For the younger generation of Gazans, their entire lives have been circumscribed by thirty-five miles of concrete and barbed wire. Now that Israeli gunboats enforce a strict blockade, even the Gazan fishing fleet is hemmed inside a similarly narrow sea corridor.

There is no way for teenagers or twentysomethings to build a life in Gaza and no way to escape. And yet the most amazing thing happens when you meet young Gazans: you realize that they are cheerful

despite their pessimism, generous despite their poverty, full of passion and intensity despite their hopelessness.

In January, the buzz of outboard motors on the backs of rickety fishing boats replaced the buzz of armed drones as soon as Israeli aircraft vanished from the skies over Gaza City. I watched from the tearoom at the Beach Hotel as skiffs slipped steadily in and out of the little harbor. The silhouette of an Israeli Super Dvora attack boat crept across the horizon. Its twenty-millimeter cannons spit out occasional puffs of smoke, visible before the sounds of the bursts reached the shore. Warning shots, aimed not at vessels encroaching the line of demarcation—fishermen know their limits—but at the core of the besieged Gazan psyche.



Four-year-old Hamza Hamoudah gathers firewood from the wreckage of his family's orange groves in Jabaliya.



Young boys attend a mass funeral for the twenty-nine members of the Samouni family who were killed over the course of Israel's winter offensive. The Samouni survivors waited until all of their deceased relatives had been recovered from the wreckage of the family home in Zeitoun before burying them all together in family tombs.

hen I was born, I opened my eyes to the sea," says twenty-five-year-old Hassan Mughdad, as he pumps the priming button on his Mercury outboard. Hassan motions for me to sit down beside him at the stern of the boat. The baggy zebra-print rainpants he wears over his jeans make him look shorter than he actually is, and bow-legged too. The little boat pitches like a canoe in a hurricane as Gaza City recedes behind us. We are nearly vertical as we crest one wave after another, and I'm beginning to doubt my decision to join Hassan as he sets his fishing nets. I'm wondering if I could swim to shore before becoming hypothermic. But Hassan and the others are completely nonplussed. Hassan's cousins wriggle into one-piece thermal suits. Twenty-two-year-old Aatif fumbles in his pocket for a cigarette, cracking a black-toothed grin at me as he reclines across the net, bundled in the center of the deck. Hassan's thirty-six-year-old uncle, Eyad, stands at the bow, barefoot, looking like Washington crossing the Delaware. I envy his confidence.

We race toward deep water against a half-dozen boats. The crabbers stop short, hustling to haul in their pots and deliver in time for the dinner rush at Gaza City's seafood joints. Shrimp trawlers spew black plumes into the sherbert-colored sky, swing-arms clanking on the choppy seas. In less than fifteen minutes, Aatif, Eyad, and another cousin named Omar are tossing the net overboard. A string of fluorescent orange buoys bobbles on the sea behind us, marking the net's length. After they have

cast out, Hassan doubles back along the net's length, communicating with hand signals and whistles to the men as they untangle the snags.

Aatif disappears under the hull and reemerges with a dowel rod driven through a Styrofoam cooler, a blinking strobe fixed to the top. He attaches the strobe to the end of the line, plunks it into the sea. We chug slowly to the other end, where Aatif anchors the boat to the net. Aatif, Eyad, and Omar sit crossed-legged, smoking in silence. Hassan rinses his arms, feet, and face with seawater, then teeters through his afternoon prayer.

We wait in darkness for hapless tuna and mackerel to stumble into the trap. Gaza is black behind us. The southern Israeli cities of Ashkelon and Ashdod light up the sky to the north. The occasional crack of cannon rounds interrupts the peaceful lapping of waves against the hull. "Super Dvora," says Hassan. "Ibn Il-Kelb," I say. *Son of a bitch*. The rounds sound a lot closer on the water than on the sun-splashed terrace of the Beach Hotel, but Hassan assures me the boat is far away.

"It's just to make us afraid," he says.

Eyad lays out a blanket and pillows on the bow. The sea's surface has trapped the sun's warmth, and heat rises from the water. Hassan wants to know whether or not I know anything about Islam. Aatif chirps from the other side of the boat, "Byefhemsh." *He doesn't understand*. But I do understand most of what Hassan is asking me. Unfortunately, I don't have the words to give nuanced answers, and I couldn't get any of my translators to come with me—they were either too afraid of the Super Dvora, or they couldn't swim.

Hassan asks me what I think about the war, about the Palestinian people, about Gaza, about the Israelis, about Barack Obama. The usual probing survey. I dole out the answers that I have come to rely on since arriving in Gaza, responses that are noncommittal and entirely true. They also happen to be the only answers I can muster with my fumbling Arabic. "The war is tragic . . . The Palestinian people are very kind and very generous . . . I like Gaza better than Cairo because there is no traffic and no pollution here . . . I don't know any Israelis . . . Anyone is better than Bush."

Eventually, it's time to pull in the net, and I'm off the conversational hook. Strung out along the length of the gunwale, the men hoist the net into the boat without a word. Their rhythm makes the chore look effortless, but Aatif's veins bulge from his neck, and Eyad—the grandfather of the crew—

grunts with every tug. Twenty minutes pass without a single fish. The strobe blinks at the end of the line like a giant firefly, half a mile away.

When a football-shaped fish tumbles onto the deck with a thud, the men shout, “Alhamdulillah.” *Thanks be to God.*

“Elliott,” Hassan calls, “Tuna!”

It takes about an hour for the men to haul in the catch, roughly fourteen kilos of mackerel and another fourteen kilos of tuna. Mackerel sells for thirty shekels a kilo at market, a little less than eight American dollars. Tuna sells for fifteen. Eyad stacks the fish in blue plastic bins, one for tuna, another for mackerel. The fish are beautiful. The moonlight spills a rainbow of colors across their silvery skin. If it weren't for the whir of the outboard, I could be in the company of Phoenician fishermen plucked from history and dropped into a dangerous and disappointing future.

Some bored sailor cracks off rounds on the Super Dvora as we speed toward shore, the sea spraying in our faces, General Washington at the helm.



Hassan Mughdad, right, guides his boat toward his family's fishing waters off the coast of Gaza City.

afely anchored on the jetty, I ask Hassan if he is happy with the catch. He hesitates, then shrugs, “Alhamdulillah,” then insists that I accompany him home for dinner. I try to decline, but I've learned

that refusing an invitation is rude, and usually impossible. And so we pile onto the horse cart and clop toward Beach Camp, the refugee community on the Gaza City coast where the Mughdad clan lives.

On the way, Hassan shows me a photomontage on his cell phone, compiled by Hamas to commemorate the death of his brother, Khalil, on January 4, 2009. It seems like every martyr's relative has some kind of cell phone multimedia tribute to the deceased. I never get over the revulsion I feel as an accomplice to this ritual. It is routine. Trivializing. Cheap.

Hassan peers over my shoulder as photos of Khalil compete with jihadi chanting and a collage of tacky Hamas logos. In one photo, twenty-year-old Khalil wears a snappy gray suit and stares, expressionless, into the lens. It looks like a prom photo, sans date. Or as if Khalil had gotten himself fitted for his own funeral, dour face and all. In another photo, a gaping wound in Khalil's neck oozes dark blood onto a white sheet. Hamas banners flit between photos, crossed M-16s flanked by the Palestinian and Hamas flags, images of jihadis armed to the teeth with RPGs and Dragunov sniper rifles, strapped with bandoliers.

"Was Khalil a fighter?" I ask.

"No, he worked with me on the boat," Hassan replies. He stops the horse cart as we pull into a pitch-black alley and points to a street corner a few yards away. "That's where the Jews hit Khalil," he says. Gazans rarely refer to the citizens of Israel as Israelis. They are always "el-Yehud." According to Hassan, Khalil was walking home from the pool hall down the road when a pair of F-16s dumped a payload of high explosives onto Beach Camp. Khalil was not the target, but shrapnel nearly severed his head, and he died instantly.

I am taken aback by the calm with which Hassan talks about his brother's death, but death is a shared reality in Gaza; it is almost a living, breathing presence. I rarely enter a home that doesn't have posters of family martyrs plastering the walls. Martyrs' faces adorn the avenues, gaze down on every intersection, guard the entrances of mosques. There's a well-worn slogan prized by Gaza's fighters—"You may know how to fight, but we know how to die."

Hassan's brother brings the cart to a halt inside a tiny garage, humid with horse piss and fish. Hassan pulls out his cell phone again, this time using the built-in flashlight to guide the way to his third-floor flat. I wait outside the door while he hurries the women out of sight. When the path is

clear, Hassan leads me into a room with thin mattresses spread against the walls. A typical *diwan*, or parlor.

It's just after eight o'clock, and the family switches on the generator to welcome the men home—or maybe it's just for me. Fuel is a precious commodity in the immediate post-war economy. Every ounce of combustible liquid comes through the smugglers' tunnels on the Egyptian border, near Rafah, and the smugglers demand a heavy tariff for their mediation. At five shekels a liter, about five dollars per gallon, the diesel that powers generators, boats, and cars is now twice as expensive as before the Israeli blockade, which began in response to Hamas's rise to power in June 2007.

Cooking gas has also doubled in price, and quantities are scarce. People spend hours perched on their blue tanks outside the dispensaries, waiting in lines that are hundreds deep. Boys sell soda and vegetable oil bottles filled with kerosene—also used for cooking—from the backs of donkey carts. Kerosene is cheaper than propane, but stoves fueled with the unstable liquid often explode, and the fumes can cause brain damage.

Hassan brings a tray piled with fried fish, hummus, tabouleh, and fresh-baked bread into the room, sets it before me, and invites me to eat. Aatif and Omar join us. We use pieces of bread to scoop up the soupy hummus and tabouleh. Hassan squeezes lemon wedges over the fish. He picks small pieces off the bone for me as if I were a child. He gives a small bite to his two-year-old daughter, Hyama, curled up on a cushion behind him. After we finish, there is tea, strawberries, and cantaloupe. Then we smoke shisha.



Gazan children play in the narrow alleys of Jabaliya Camp, a refugee neighborhood north of Gaza City.

I ask Hassan what the fishing was like before the siege. His eyes roll toward the ceiling; his uncle sighs. “We could sometimes catch two hundred kilos in a trip,” he says. “Sometimes we would catch one tuna that weighed a hundred kilos.” The problem, Hassan explains, is that the big fish are out with the big schools of feeder fish, ten to twenty miles out, far beyond the Super Dvora. Catching a hundred kilo tuna is good for business, but Hassan prefers to hammer schools of Sultan Ibrahim, known as red mullet in English. The succulent six-inch fish sell for fifteen dollars a kilo, the same price as prawns, but Sultan Ibrahim are not plentiful within the limits of the blockade.

Fishing families like the Mughdads have struggled to survive since the blockade began. “Now, we might catch a hundred kilos in a day, we might not catch anything,” Hassan tells me. Tonight’s catch will bring them about one hundred and sixty dollars at market, which the men will divide between their four families. Other nights the men return empty-handed.

When I leave the house around ten, the Mughdads are turning in for the night. They will wake up at 2:30 in the morning, as they do every day. They will bridle the horse and trundle down to the jetty. By 3:30 they will have cast their net. They will drink tea under the stars, make the morning prayer at sea. By the time the sun peeks over Gaza City’s rooftops, the Mughdads will already be at market, hopefully with a few more kilos of tuna.

In the harbor behind the Beach Hotel, dozens of boats are permanently aground, their paint cracking, their sideboards warped from too much sun and too little attention. The siege has docked families that plied Gaza's waters for generations. But hundreds of fishermen like the Mughdads still break out of the jetty each day, refusing to yield to the Super Dvora.

"Shughelna jameel," Hassan says. *Our work is beautiful.*



Tasneem Shaban amid what could be salvaged from the library of her family home.

It was about five in the morning on Sunday, January 11, when an Israeli drone fired two rockets into Nizar Awadallah's roof. Luckily for Mr. Awadallah, he wasn't home; he had moved his family to a safehouse in an unknown location at the start of the Israeli offensive. But next door, the blasts catapulted twenty-one year-old Tasneem Shaban and the rest of her family out of bed. The women quickly tied their headscarves in the dark and rushed for the door. Outside in the darkness, three generations of Shabans—thirty-five in all—fled to a neighbor's house in their pajamas.

"Until then, I didn't really worry about what was happening," Tasneem admits now. "I watched it on TV, but somehow I never thought they would attack our neighborhood."

Just then, Tasneem's uncle Iyad realized that no one had grabbed his two-week-old daughter Basma; she was still lying in her crib. While Iyad ran back for Basma—born on December 27, the first day of

the Israeli offensive—the rest of the Shaban family waited, cursing the Israelis for bringing the war to their doorstep.

The Shaban home is—or rather, was—tucked in a sandy alley, barely wider than a car, just north of Beach Camp in an area known for its main boulevard, al-Nasr Street. The Shabans claim they had no reason to feel especially afraid in the two weeks leading up to the destruction of their home. Air strikes had targeted the residences of senior Hamas officials and ministries all over Gaza, but none of that had anything to do with them, they figured. Sure, Mr. Awadallah was a Hamas party member, but he was, as far as the Shabans knew, only a civil engineer at the Islamic University.

Iyad had just rejoined the family at the neighbor's house, blue-eyed Basma in his arms, when the shriek of a diving F-16 split the pre-dawn sky. The Shabans barely had time to flinch before shockwaves from the explosion shattered the windows of the neighbor's home where they were huddled, two hundred yards from the bomber's target.

When the sun rose, the Shabans rushed toward home, only to find it reduced to a smoking shell, added to a list of destroyed homes that would grow to five thousand by the end of the Israeli offensive. The blast tore down the outer walls and sparked a raging fire, fueled by the Shaban's library of over ten thousand books. Next door, the five floors of Mr. Awadallah's home were stacked like pancakes. The Shabans would later find whole pieces of his furniture in the rubble of their living room.

tanding on the gutted second level of his home, wearing a floor-length *djellaba*, skullcap, and tweed sport coat, his white beard fastidiously trimmed, sixty-eight year-old Rajab Ali Shaban, Tasneem's grandfather, looks the picture of a provincial Arab gentleman. He is not so far removed from a portrait hanging askew on the blackened wall. How the photo survived the fire is anybody's guess. I tell Rajab he hasn't aged a day. He flashes a gentle smile. Tasneem whispers, "I hate to see him like this. He is so sad."

"All of my money from forty years of my life, I put into this house," Rajab says with a bewildered shrug. "Gone in one minute."

In Gaza, the home represents the sum total of a man's labors, but it's no mere physical object. In a culture that eschews public life—especially for women—the home and the family it houses are the body and blood of society.

It's common to see rebar jutting out of concrete supports on the roofs of Gaza's blocky, Soviet-style homes—their top floors left hopefully unfinished, waiting for sons to build new flats to house their wives and families after marriage. A man's home is not only the center of his family's universe; it is also his best insurance in old age. A man provides for his sons, and his sons provide for him. The loss of a home in Gaza means the rupture of this generational promise.

Fatima Shaban, Rajab's wife, has moved to a rented flat with one of her daughters in downtown Gaza City. She cannot bear to stay in the charred remains of the home that saw the birth of her children and the marriages of her sons. Rajab stays on. He sleeps in one of the two surviving rooms, cared for by a childless daughter and her one-legged husband. During the day, he sifts through the rubble. His sandaled feet are blackened and cracked from the chore. There are photocopies of *King Lear* and *Twelfth Night* and hundreds of half-charred textbooks. There are bubbly photos stuck to singed upholstery. There are melted dolls whose deformity makes them seem human, deserving of sympathy.

"He refuses to leave," Tasneem tells me. Rajab fled once, and once was enough. In 1948, during what Israelis call the War of Independence, Rajab and Fatima fled to Gaza from al-Jiyya, a farming village on the outskirts of what was once Mejdal, which is now Ashkelon. Palestinians call that same war "al-Nakba." *The Disaster*. Rajab was eight at the time. He grew up in the camps, was educated in the United Nations Relief and Works Association schools. He went on to college and secured a job as an accountant for a local shoe and handbag manufacturer.

Before the First Intifada, Gazans moved freely across the Israeli border to conduct business or to work as laborers. It wasn't much of a border then. There was no fence, no siege. On a business trip to Ashkelon, a strange feeling came over Rajab as he drove through the southern Israeli countryside. "I realized I was in al-Jiyya. I remembered exactly where my house was. I could see the streets and the buildings."

He dreamed of returning one day—and kept the deed for the eighty dunams of his ancestral land. After the Six Day War in 1967, when Israel seized control of Gaza, the West Bank, and West Jerusalem, Rajab's dream all but evaporated.

"There's nothing left now, just fields of grapes."

He would have to give his sons a different kind of inheritance. Rajab would stake his children's futures to education—something no one could take away.

The accountant's salary enabled Rajab to send his sons to college, and they have gone on to successful careers in business and academia. He has since developed the forgivable habit of bragging about the proliferation of doctoral degrees among his brood. Tasneem's father earned a doctorate in pharmacology in Egypt, and another of Rajab's sons teaches politics at al-Azhar University. It was the professor's library that burned the house down. Tasneem's younger brother Ali studies at the Palestinian Faculty of Medicine, while Tasneem is following in her father's footsteps, slogging through the pharmacology curriculum. She hopes to pursue postgraduate study abroad.

Rajab's and Fatima's grandchildren have multiplied to such a number that they are no longer easily accounted for. "Fifty-one," Tasneem decides, after five minutes of genealogical finger tallying. All of Rajab and Fatima's grandchildren—Basma included—escaped from the war without a scratch. But the family home is gone.

"The house can be rebuilt," Rajab says with a beaten shrug. His sons have turned good educations into good jobs. They will get by. And now the sons are passing the gift on to their own children—a refuge for the perpetually displaced.

When I met Tasneem in the first week of February, she was on her way to photocopy a friend's textbooks so that she could cram for upcoming examinations. The fire consumed her own textbooks along with her notes and calculator. To make matters worse, electricity had been inconsistent in the weeks since Israel bombed north Gaza's main power station. No books, no lights to study during the long winter nights, but professors at al-Azhar University refused to postpone exams.

When test week finally came around, Tasneem decided to opt out of a particularly daunting exam in pharmacokinetics. The Gazan university system—well equipped to handle interruptions—allows students to defer examinations by one semester if they feel unprepared. This summer, make-up exam rooms will be jammed.

Tasneem is disappointed to have to delay the exam. Sitting on the fifth-floor terrace of al-Quds Hotel a week after her twenty-second birthday, glancing out at skiffs hunting octopus and crabs in the turquoise shallows, she looks tired and agitated. A wisp of hair falls from her polka-dot headscarf, dangling above her downcast eyes. She doesn't bother to hide it. She pulls her trembling hands up

into the sleeves of her floor-length, patent leather overcoat. Gazan women wear bulky overcoats indoors and out to hide their figures. At least today it's almost cold enough to be justifiable.

"I always used to come here when I was feeling lonely or sad," she says. I expect a sad reflection on her grandfather's declining spirits, or her ruined home, or her exams. Instead, I get a love story.

Tasneem recently declared her devotion to her boyfriend of two years, only to be met with silence. It wasn't the first time she'd been rebuffed, but this time was different. Tasneem had depended on the distraction of Mohammad's daily phone calls during the drudgery of the war and its aftermath. She thought the war had brought them closer, but Mohammad told her, "I can't tell you that I love you, because that would be a promise." At age twenty-eight, Mohammad is at the upper limit of bachelorhood, but he lives in the West Bank city of Ramallah, still under control of the moderate Fatah movement and the Palestinian Authority. By Tasneem's description, Ramallah is the Amsterdam of the Middle East. Men and women mix freely in the streets. They dance together in nightclubs. There is beer, and Mohammad likes to drink it. Tasneem worries that he has other girlfriends.

In Mohammad's defense, he has never seen Tasneem. They met in an online chatroom two years ago, and the blockade has kept them apart. If she were allowed beyond the Erez checkpoint, Tasneem could cover the distance between Gaza and Ramallah in an hour, but Ramallah may as well be Amsterdam after all. International visas are easier to obtain than permits to visit the West Bank, which are only available to what remains of the Gazan political elite.

Even if Mohammad were in Gaza, however, the relationship would only be markedly different if he were prepared to make a marriage offer to Tasneem's parents. A suitor—usually shopped around by his relatives—must have a steady job and a plan for the future. Preferably, he would also be a cousin. He must be able to afford the bride price and the cost of the wedding feast. Finally, he must be able to welcome his new bride into a home of his own. The going rate for a modest wedding is about twenty thousand American dollars. It is impossible for most young people to afford the cost of marriage without substantial assistance from their families, and Gazan families rarely invest in love stories.



Eighteen-year-old Sobhaya Shaban, Tasneem's sister, stands on the second floor of her family's home, gutted by a fire after Israeli F-16s struck a neighbor's home.

Suffice to say, Gaza is hardly abloom with young romance. Some young people still find ways to date, but aside from a smattering of bourgeois coffee shops and prohibitively expensive hotel restaurants, lovebirds have scant few places to avoid the prying eyes of Hamas. The enforcement of sexual segregation is part of Hamas's broader ambition to transform Gaza—and eventually all of Palestine—into a conservative Islamic theocracy. While most Gazans agree that Hamas has made the streets safer, bringing an end to blood feuds and kidnappings, they acknowledge that safety has come at a steep price.

Under Hamas, even married people endure police harrassment. Plainclothes officers frequently stop couples and ask for proof that the man and woman are husband and wife, or brother and sister. As a result, young love plays out over the Internet and text messages, even within Gaza. Tasneem draws little comfort from the knowledge that she is not alone.

“I've been thinking I should forget about Mohammad and focus on school,” she says finally. Tasneem knows she is fortunate to have progressive parents who encourage her ambition to study abroad and who have not forced her into an early marriage. Tasneem's mother also holds an advanced degree in pharmacology and works as a researcher in a local laboratory. Tasneem's parents survived a crucible of young adulthood similar to her own. They have managed to breed optimism and ambition in their children.

“I sometimes wonder how we can be patient,” Tasneem says. “I think we have something inside of us that keeps us going. We know the meaning of laughing instead of crying.”



Mohammad Mattar smokes shisha with his best friend, Osama, at an outdoor café in Gaza City.

Mohammad Mattar will be one of the students suffering through make-up exams this summer. He failed Arabic in his first semester at al-Azhar University. “Arabic must be the hardest language in the world,” he says. “I’ve been speaking it all my life and I still can’t speak it.”

We are sitting at the Popeye Coffee Shop—its storefront windows adorned with a larger-than-life mural of the sailing spinach-lover. A knock-off Nike baseball cap shades Mohammad’s eyes, casting a shadow over his gaunt face. He can’t weigh more than one hundred and fifty pounds, but he looks hard. In fact, he radiates toughness. It’s always been a problem for him.

When Mohammad was in eleventh grade at the American International School of Gaza, he went to the guidance counselor with an odd request. “I told her that I was always getting in fights, and I wanted to stop.” The counselor referred Mohammad to the Gaza Community Mental Health Project (GCMHP), a collaborative of mental health professionals started by the renowned psychiatrist Eyad el-Sarraj in 1991 to confront the psychological aftermath of the First Intifada.

“What are we going to tell the neighbors if they find out you’re seeing a psychologist?” Mohammad’s mother asked. “They will think you’re crazy.” Dr. Hassan Ziyada, a psychologist who has worked at

GCMHP for over twenty years, says fear of tarnishing the family reputation prevents many people from seeking the help they need. “Most people do not know the difference between a psychotic and a neurotic,” Dr. Ziyada explained. According to Dr. Ziyada, Gaza’s tightly knit families help prevent psychoses from developing, but there are few Gazans who do not suffer from some neurosis—chronic depression, anxiety, or an inability to restrain anger.

In one particular fight, three fellow students jumped Mohammad in the hallway. Mohammad stabbed one, a longtime rival, repeatedly in the shoulder with a pen and attacked a teacher who rushed in to break up the fight. Mohammad was suspended and eventually lost his scholarship to the American school. After that, he decided to ignore his mother’s protests and went to the GCMHP secretly, twice a week, for several months. “They taught me how to control my anger, to try to understand why other people act the way they do,” he remembers. But he had to complete his senior year at a public high school near his home in poverty-stricken Atwam, north of Gaza City.

It was 2004, and Israeli soldiers and settlers still occupied the Gaza Strip. Classmates affiliated with al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades—Fatah’s paramilitary wing—nudged Mohammad to join them on nighttime reconnaissance patrols. At the time, Mohammad was picking up odd jobs after school, cleaning shops and helping out in restaurants. He jumped at the opportunity, hoping he could use the al-Aqsa irregulars as a stepping-stone to a permanent position in the Fatah security forces.

Mohammad’s plan paid off. After graduating from high school, he was selected to enter Fatah’s Presidential Guard. He began drawing a salary and for the first time felt like a man. While most of his classmates searched fruitlessly for jobs in an economy where unemployment approached 50 percent, Mohammad counted himself lucky.

here is a reason why Mohammad Mattar looks so much older than his friends. While they were working their way through the basic course requirements at al-Azhar University, Mohammad was leading a squad of young soldiers in the brutal fight against Hamas.

Sporadic fighting erupted in 2006 when Fatah refused to turn over power after losing to Hamas in Palestinian legislative elections. Israel and the United States gave military and financial support to Fatah in an attempt to prevent Hamas legislators from taking office, on the grounds that Hamas—classified by the US as a terrorist organization—denies the legitimacy of Israel and refuses to abandon violent resistance. Mohammad’s unit was responsible for providing safe escort to high profile members of Fatah, and for rescuing them when Hamas fighters besieged their homes. He had

joined the Presidential Guard for financial reasons, not out of support for the Fatah movement. Still, Mohammad volunteered for every mission that came up.

In May 2007, as fighting reached fever pitch after more than a year of skirmishes and dead-end cease-fires, Mohammad was assigned a rescue mission in Beach Camp. Beach Camp is a cavernous patchwork of narrow alleys, hemmed in by uniformly bleak cinderblock apartments, stacked one atop the other in no discernable pattern. An ambush team with access to the high ground—the laundry-strewn rooftops and bedroom windows of family homes—could not dream of a better place to lay a trap.

Mohammad's squad was working its way toward the target house when machine guns opened up on them from above, wounding one of Mohammad's men in the hand. Mohammad had to find a way out of the kill zone. With bullets pinging off the pavement all around him, Mohammad ordered his men to retreat one by one, each man covering the one before him. The men executed the order flawlessly until only Mohammad remained. The last man turned the corner without laying covering fire for Mohammad. "I tried to press myself into the ground and I just began praying, 'God protect me, God protect me, God protect me.'"

After what seemed forever, two heads peeked around the corner. One fired at the building from which they'd been ambushed while the other sprinted to Mohammad's side. "He was shaking," Mohammad remembers. "He said, 'Forgive me. I was so scared I forgot you.'"

Though safely out of the line of fire, Mohammad and his men were cut off from the rest of the company, trapped in the middle of Beach Camp with no means of transportation. "We were standing there, trying to figure out what to do, and this old woman opened her door and told us to come in her house. She gave us regular clothes and her daughter bandaged the wounded soldier's hand. I told the guys to leave all of their gear in the house and go home."

Mohammad walked back to the unit, terrified that a sniper would pick him off or a Hamas patrol would sweep him up. At the time, summary execution of prisoners was standard procedure. When he finally arrived at the unit, Mohammad learned that five of his friends had been killed in that day's ambushes in Beach Camp.

The civil war ended anticlimactically for Mohammad in July 2007. He and his squad had been manning an observation post near the Islamic University, used as a Hamas base during the fighting.

Hamas and the Fatah forces had fought to a bitter draw in the area near the Islamic University, and things had been quiet for several days. Mohammad and his squad were playing cards, smoking cigarettes, dodging boredom in the suffocating summer heat, when a soldier called down to him from the guard tower, "You'd better come see this right now!"

When he reached the top of the tower, he looked out through binoculars at the Islamic University's shattered windows for signs of snipers or RPG teams. "No," the soldier said, "look there, at the station." The central police station, where the Presidential Guard was based, had been completely deserted.

"I told my guys, 'let's go, it's over.' One of them stripped down to his underwear and ran home along the sea, to make it look like he was going swimming. The rest of us went to the station. There wasn't anyone there. We found maybe three hundred AK-47s in a pile. That's how it ended." Mohammad threw his rifle in the pile, put on his civilian clothes, and walked out into the streets.

A taxi pulled over and Mohammad stepped up to the window. "Are you from Fatah?" the driver asked. "I told him yes, and he told me to get in quickly. He drove me toward Atwam by all of the back roads but got stopped by a Hamas jeep anyway. The soldiers told me to get out of the car and they put me against a wall. I couldn't remember if I had my ID card or anything from Fatah in my bag. I was sure they were going to shoot me. Then I hear this voice ask, 'Mohammad Mattar?' I said, 'Yes, who are you?'

"I recognized his voice but he was wearing a mask. He said, 'Don't concern yourself with who I am. Just go home and stay there.' Finally we got to my house. I tried to give the driver two hundred shekels, but he wouldn't take it. He told me, 'My son is a Fatah soldier too. I don't know where he is. I just hope someone will be there to help him.'"

After two weeks of house arrest, Mohammad emerged from his home into the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip. The danger was over for the time being, but memories of the brutal fighting thwarted Mohammad's attempts to regain normalcy. Nightmares ruined his sleep for months, and he would often break down in tears. This time, Mohammad's mother encouraged him to seek help. The counselor and Mohammad's mother agreed: he had to find something to occupy his mind.



Young girls dance at the Amar Ibn Yasser youth center in Gaza City, crossing their arms in a gesture of peace.

hammad enrolled at al-Quds Open University in the Fall semester of 2007 and transferred to al-Azhar University the following year, where he is currently studying English and French. “Studying is the most important thing in my life right now,” he says. Like so many people his age, Mohammad hopes that education will open doors to opportunities abroad.

Gaza’s crippling unemployment rate keeps even professionals like dentists and physicians from finding work. The smuggling tunnels that run underneath the border with Egypt are the only growing business here. They are incredibly lucrative for the Gazans who own them—bringing in as much as five million dollars a year per tunnel—but getting a foot in the door requires almost a hundred thousand dollars and mafia-like connections, not to mention nerves of steel to handle daily F-16 strikes and raids by the Egyptian authorities. As for labor in the tunnels, it’s backbreaking work in suffocating darkness sixty feet below ground. A doctor at al-Najjar Hospital in Rafah told me that a year of work in the tunnels is enough to cause early-onset rheumatism and even permanent spinal damage.

Despite his university education, Mohammad still toys with the idea of working in the tunnels. He has few illusions about his prospects for employment after graduation. He has seen Gaza’s economy ruined by internal instability and a harsh blockade. He has watched his father and almost all of his

uncles lose their jobs, and he has seen their spirits broken by unemployment and lack of opportunity. Mohammad wants something different for himself. He wants to leave Gaza.

But Mohammad doesn't have a passport. To get one, he would need to make the impossible trip to Ramallah. Hamas shut down Gaza's passport agency when they assumed power, payback for Fatah's refusal to grant passports to prominent Hamas members living in the West Bank. If he cannot emigrate, Mohammad thinks he might try his hand in politics. A college degree will guarantee him advancement in the Presidential Guard, which may be restored in Gaza if Hamas and Fatah successfully negotiate the terms of a unity government in the coming months. Mohammad could follow the well-worn path from the soldiers' ranks to the hallways of bureaucracy, just like his idol, Mohammad Dahlan, who rose from humble Gazan origins to serve as the strong arm of the Fatah movement.

When Mohammad describes his adoration of Dahlan, I feign ignorance. But I know too well: Dahlan is public enemy number one in Gaza. He is the walking emblem of the egregious vice and corruption that drained the Fatah movement of public support and catapulted Hamas to power.



A young boy is dressed in Hamas-green garments at a festival in Gaza City celebrating Jerusalem as the "Capital of Arabic Culture."

In the second week of March, after two months in Gaza, it was finally time for me to leave. I held a small party in the garden of the building where I lived. The generator kicked on as stars punched

holes in the blackness over Gaza City. We played cards and danced the *dabke* under fluttering lights. When we ran out of jokes, when there was nothing left to say in our patois of English, Arabic, and body language, my guests slowly began to trickle away. They left in groups of two or three, small bands of blood brothers making their way past shattered homes on dirt streets, back to crowded houses, back to places where collective anxiety infuses the dusty air with a discomforting charge.

On the coast road the following day, heading south to the Rafah border crossing, I gazed out the window at the succession of buildings leveled by Operation Cast Lead—soot-covered houses riddled by bullets and blown apart by artillery shells, farm fields plowed under by tank treads and bulldozers. I marveled at the comprehensiveness of the destruction, and my mind returned to the handful of Gazans who had made such deep impressions on me. How would they recover from all of this?

Gazans of all political stripes and varying religious devotion will tell you that previous generations survived, even in the worst of times, by uniting against the Israelis. Over the years, political movements—especially the Palestine Liberation Organization and, more recently, Hamas—provided many Gazans with ideological moorings for their dreams, but politics have produced little more than frustration in recent years. The PLO's negotiated agreements with Israel have yielded little change, a fact that drains President Mahmoud Abbas's Fatah movement and his Ramallah-based government of what little legitimacy it claims. Hamas refuses even to recognize the PLO's agreements with Israel, contributing to factional animosity and providing the Israeli government with pretext for ignoring the agreements too.

Whatever hopes Gazans had of a reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas in the immediate aftermath of Operation Cast Lead have already faded: talks in Cairo between the bitterly divided Palestinian factions have fallen flat, and Gaza and the West Bank are more polarized than ever before. To make matters worse for ordinary Gazans, Israel has elected the most anti-concessions government in its history. There is little hope of the blockade lifting, and the Netanyahu cabinet has all but promised a new offensive against Hamas.

The indefinite extension of the blockade presents the single greatest obstacle to the infrastructural and economic rehabilitation of Gaza and also the most potent source of bitterness, desperation, and sheer fatigue among young Gazans. They well recognize that the siege can only be brought to an end through factional reconciliation, but the unlikelihood of that happening threatens to rend the last

threads of confidence they have in Palestinian leadership. Barring a political miracle, young Gazans can expect a rise in religious extremism as a response to the blockade, increased restrictions from their own government as shows of authority, and further constriction of an already barren job market. If all continues on its present course, this generation may never leave Gaza.

I arrived at the Hamas-controlled half of the Rafah border crossing early on a Friday morning. It was my mistake—I had forgotten that neither the Hamas border personnel nor their Egyptian counterparts would start work until after Friday prayers, which meant that I would have to wait for hours to cross. I spent the morning chatting with Hamas border guards, who fed me lunch to apologize for the long wait.

Finally word came that I could pass. I boarded a Gaza Bus Company coach for the two hundred meter trip onto Egyptian soil. I haggled a good price for a stretch Mercedes taxi, and soon I was speeding along the Sinai highway toward the Suez Canal, and on to Cairo after that, but in the darkness of the wide-open desert, with the sweep of a limitless road ahead, I couldn't stop looking back.

Elliott D. Woods traveled to Gaza with support from the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting.