

# Notes from Gaza

## *Israeli activists fight for Palestinian rights*

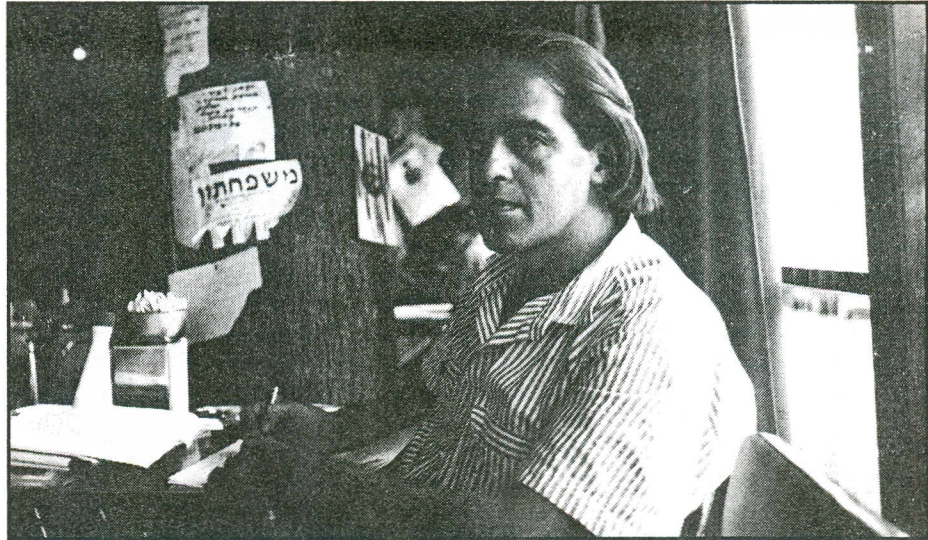
by Michael Halberstam

Two weeks prior to the Israeli elections in June of 1992, I accompanied a group of Israeli human rights activists to the Gaza Strip, to "see for myself," as far as possible, what the conditions were like. Despite the plethora of news stories and television clips about the occupied territories, I realized that I had trouble picturing the situation in Gaza. Also, I had heard little in the American press about Israeli efforts on behalf of Palestinians in the occupied territories.

The impressionistic piece that follows is an attempt to let the experience speak for itself. Of course, the lens supplied here is mine. I have tried to use a wide aperture to reflect a light that generally eludes the narrow focus and the fast clip of hard news coverage.

**T**EL AVIV. JUNE 15, 1992. In the car on the way to Gaza City, Israeli human rights activist Neve Gordon prepares to give me the full tour of south Gaza. Gordon works for an Israeli human rights organization called "Protagoras". The organization's "Gaza Team" files complaints on behalf of Gaza residents with the Israeli military authorities and with the secret police. On their own initiative, and at some risk to their own safety, they have established informal meeting points in Gaza where Palestinians can come and seek their assistance. It is a last resort for those who come, and perhaps the only one.

The group admits that much of their work involves merely monitoring the situation in Gaza. Complaints are rarely trivial, I am told, and remedies are occasional. When a case stands a chance in court, and is not otherwise settled, the Gaza Team seeks legal counsel with the law offices of Amnon Zichroni. Zichroni runs one of Israel's most prestigious law firms and handles many cases on behalf of Palestinians.



Dan Assan, seated in Cafe Tamar, a gathering place for intellectuals and the Israeli left

M. Halberstam

Dan Assan, one of Zichroni's attorneys, has also joined Gordon's group for the day in order to interview some of his clients in Gaza. There are seven of us and we plan to split up at a gas station before we enter the Gaza sector.

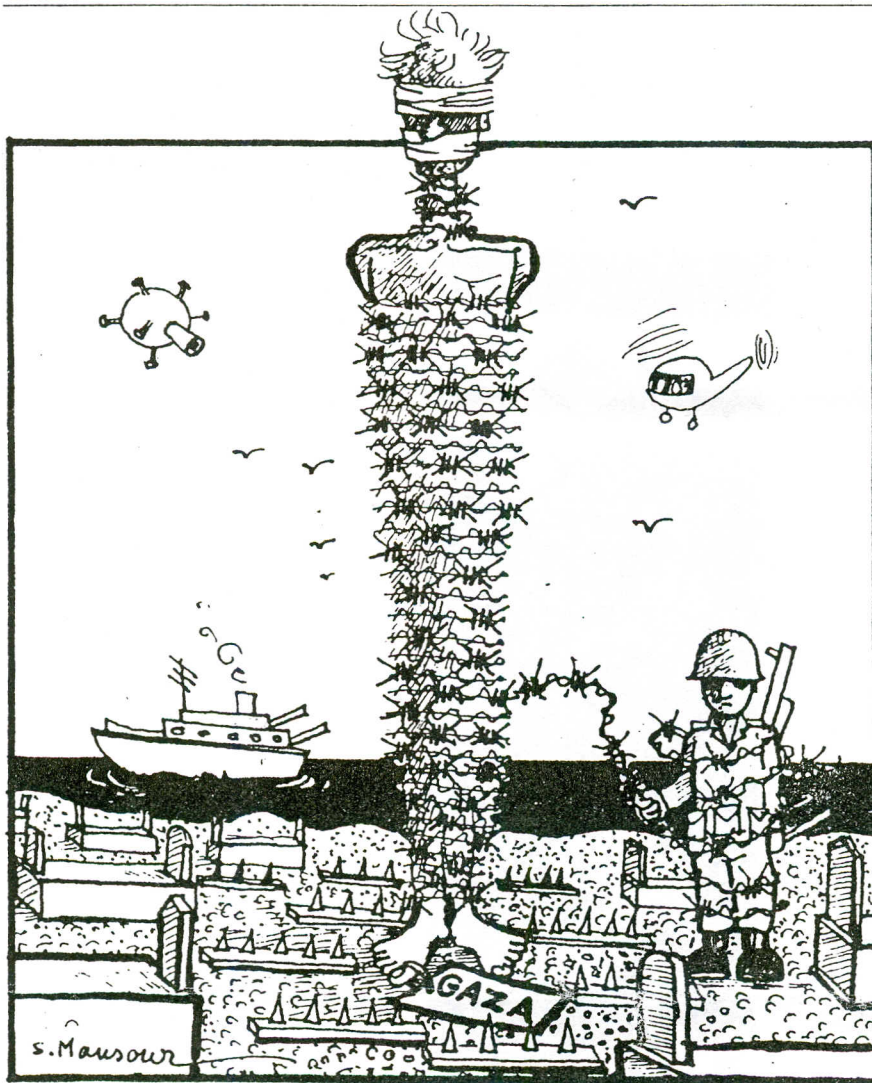
*A "Welcome to Gaza" sign spans the road to Gaza City mocking the occasional visitor. The smell of garbage is pervasive as the lush green landscape begins to fade into browns.*

Assan has acted as counsel in several highly-publicized cases. In February 1991 he defended Taher Shriteh, a prominent Gaza correspondent for a host of Western news agencies (including Reuters, BBC and CBS News). Shriteh was accused of supporting the Hamas, because he reported details of Hamas

leaflets to Reuters. Hamas is an extremely violent, radical fundamentalist group that has gained ground in the occupied territories during the course of the uprising. Shriteh was thrown into jail for several weeks, despite international pressure, and finally was convicted of illegally owning a fax machine.

Our purpose for the day is straightforward. The logistics are not. No one dares enter Gaza with a civilian Israeli license plate these days, except for the settlers, who take a special highway to their homes and are armed with automatic rifles. Pick-ups by Arab drivers at checkpoint Erez, which is just over an hour's drive south of Tel Aviv, are arranged beforehand. Throughout the day Gordon is constantly on the phone negotiating with contacts and checking on members of the group underway elsewhere. Assan relies on Gordon for the logistics of his trip. All activities on behalf of Palestinian Arabs here have the air of makeshift operations. "Everything is a problem," one of Gordon's activists explains to me. "Just getting someone to the hospital





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requires contacts at both ends, transportation, translators and, most importantly, permits."

Just a week ago Gaza was sealed off in response to the killing of a 16-year-old girl in Bat Yam by a Gaza resident. During the course of the past week the restrictions have been partially lifted as Arabs resume their jobs in Israel. Only those under 25 — a group deemed more likely to engage in terrorist acts — are now still barred from entering. Demonstrations at the Erez checkpoint by Israeli employers, as well as election campaign charges that the closing of Gaza proved the Likud is losing control of the security situation, were among the reasons that swayed the government to ease the restrictions.

A "Welcome to Gaza" sign spans the road to Gaza City mocking the occasional visitor. The smell of garbage is pervasive as the lush green landscape begins

to fade into browns. Machine gun positions are numerous. At the roadside we pass an Israeli foot patrol "opening" the road for the day by checking for mines at the roadside. The tension is palpable as we are driven through the broken-up streets. Assan calls it "the Aza mood."

"We're not really targets," he reassures me, "but imagine what it's like to be a soldier here."

Gaza City, or "Aza" City as it is properly pronounced by both Israelis and Arabs, has a population of around 300,000 (40 % of Gaza's total population). Buildings are always under construction with steel reinforcements sticking up out of the concrete as far as the eye can see. Additional stories are added as supplies become available and owners have the money to continue building. The odd sight appears to comment on the tenuous nature of a life between past and future here in this crevice of twenti-

eth century history.

Houses along the main road are covered at eye-level with red and black arabic graffiti, or with lateral streaks of white paint. I am told it is not unusual for the army to force people out of their houses in the middle of the night to paint over the affronting political slogans.

Many think of Gaza City as a complete slum. While the streets are in bad shape, and garbage is strewn about in large heaps and overflowing dumpsters, many of the modern houses appear fairly decent.

"There are also wealthy neighborhoods in the city," says Assan. "The class structure is very entrenched, with the inhabitants of the refugee camps at the bottom of the hierarchy." Entering the refugee camps is considerably more dangerous than visiting Gaza City. Ever Gordon says he only goes there when he has business that can't be moved elsewhere.

**O**UR FIRST DESTINATION is a furniture store owned by S., a wealthy Palestinian Arab, who offers his facility as a meeting place for Arabs and Israeli activists. He has no permit for this kind of activity and says he fears reprisals from the military. S. is a bitter man, despite his willingness to help. He seems to hate Americans even more than Israelis. "If the Americans would leave us alone, Israel and the Arabs, we could make peace. We want peace." To ease his humiliation at the plight of Gaza, I bring up US innuocities. His response: "I am glad to hear things are bad in America."

Meanwhile Gordon's people and Assan have begun to interview Palestinians with the help of local translators. Men, and women with their children are lined up in an aisle of plastic-covered office chairs that are for sale and quietly await their turn.

Sharon Weinman, a 24-year-old volunteer, asks me to join her as she begins to interview a Palestinian woman in traditional dress. Her translator is a young man of around 17, who keeps slipping into Arabic as he struggles to express himself in Hebrew. The Palestinian woman's husband is in Kuwait and has been denied permission to return to Gaza by the military authorities. Suppo-



edly he has lost his job there (a common story in the aftermath of the Gulf War) and is living on handouts from friends. She has four children here. The woman's case is a standard one. The Israeli authorities almost never grant such transfer requests for family unification, Assan tells me later.

Not only are non-resident Arabs prohibited from entering the territories. Current residents who want to travel, in order to visit relatives in the Arab countries, or to go abroad to study, are often forced to sign documents barring their return for a considerable period of time. Assan's office is currently filing a case with the Israeli High Court of Justice, arguing that such "hidden transfers" are illegal. Assan regards these kinds of cases as typical of the chicanery that faces the population of Gaza under the occupation: "From the point of view of security considerations it is completely illogical that someone who has been cleared for travel has to commit himself to stay abroad for a certain period."

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Weinman comes to Gaza every three weeks or so. The night before trips she doesn't sleep much, she readily remarks with little sense of that romance with the heroic one so often encounters among journalists. "The Hamas is very dangerous," she says. "With the PLO we have no problem here."

Weinman grew up on Kibbutz Yad Mordechai, which borders on Gaza. She began this type of work two years ago. Why does she do it? "I want to make sure the army knows that we will know if they violate human rights. The most important thing is that they know somebody cares."

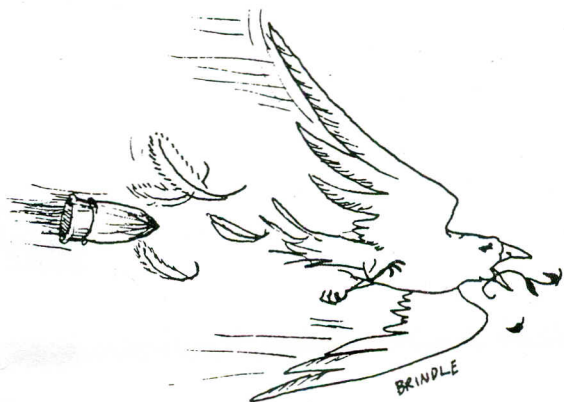
At noon, after a quiet and pensive coffee break, we cram into S.'s air-conditioned glass cubicle with a group of three men from *Dir el Balach*. The older man

in traditional dress is a landowner. He is here with his son and his neighbor. The younger men are friendly, the older man is respectful. He averts his eyes as he shakes my hand.

On May 27th, the Rabbi of *Kfar Darom* was stabbed to death in *Dir el Balach*. The angry settlers went out into the fields, cut down many acres of orange groves, burned greenhouses and destroyed a water pump that served 100 acres of vegetable fields. Then they went into the houses of *Dir el Balach*, broke TV's, burned rugs, beat inhabitants and disrupted the water system that supplied the homes. This is the report we hear from the older man, and Gordon substantiates the account. During the rampage, the older man lost three greenhouses and five acres of orange groves.

The army's response was simply to put the Arab population under curfew until June 3rd. Gordon elaborates, while the translator is conversing in Arabic: "Until today they have not been allowed to return to their fields, not because they have done anything wrong, but because the authorities are worried that the settlers will kill them. Of course this means that the authorities cannot or do not want to stop the settlers from what they are doing." (A day later Gordon informs me that another greenhouse was destroyed.)

**G**ORDON IS PROFESSIONAL and to the point in his questioning. There is no show of empathy on his part. He seeks to ascertain what the factual claim is, and takes careful notes. The next day he will file a request for information with General Natan Vilnai, the head of the Israeli southern



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command, and Yaacov Turner, the chief of the Israeli police, to ask what came of the complaint the Palestinian made on June 4th. "We go to the top," he explains. "As far as we're concerned, they are the responsible people."

The Gaza team first asks the plaintiff to file a complaint with the authorities. Only when the claim fails does the group assume the case for him or her. "We [then] report what the Palestinian tells us and ask the civil administration, or the police to open an investigation. We acknowledge that we can't decide [the truth of a claim]," says Gordon. Often the mere involvement of the Israeli group brings about a settlement. "We succeed in most kinds of cases, in complaints ranging from physical torture to the damage of property, except when the secret service is involved."

***"Everything is a problem, Just getting someone to the hospital requires contacts at both ends, transportation, translators and, most importantly, permits."***

**— Israeli activist**

Gordon's father, Chaim Gordon, is a Lecturer in Philosophy at Hebrew University in Jerusalem and has been a well-known and controversial activist for years. Gordon, I am told, is more measured in his attitudes.

I notice a large scar on his arm and am later told that he was shot by terrorists and sustained serious injuries when





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he was a paratrooper in the army. The arm injury was the least of it. Gordon studies philosophy at Tel Aviv University, cramming this weeks final on "moral relativism" into his busy schedule between campaign activities for Meretz (the coalition of left-wing parties) and his activities with the Gaza Team.

Gordon sees a two-fold purpose to their work: to help individuals in their claims against the authorities and to exert influence on Israeli society. "The abuse of human rights is ruining Israeli democracy," he observes. Gordon is careful to distance himself from anti-Israeli attitudes: "[Some activists] have crossed the line. Our struggle is for the Israeli democracy."

"We're trying to break two myths. [It is widely held]...that after the first two years of the Intifada, the major human rights violations have stopped. That is not so. The second myth is that the civil administration and the judicial system within the occupied territories are interested in trying to stop the violations. Our analysis of the cases shows that they are not."

At about 1:30 in the afternoon we call for our Palestinian driver. Assan, Weinman and I return to Israel, while Gordon stays behind to continue his rounds for the day. Back in Israel, at the relatively elegant roadside cafeteria that belongs to Kibbutz Yad Mordechai, Assan

has time to comment on his work.

Today Assan saw a teenager who lost his eyesight in one of his eyes due to the impact of a rubber bullet. The case is a fairly straightforward suit for damages. Assan has around 25 such damage claims for personal injury on behalf of victims who have been shot either with live ammunition or with rubber bullets. "We seldom have the possibility of locating the person who fired the shot," he explains. "This, of course, doesn't preclude the government's liability in the case."

Assan makes sure that his clients have no previous arrest records and have never been involved in activities against the military. Nevertheless, he always runs into special difficulties when preparing a case on behalf of a Gaza resident.

"When reading police files one clearly notices that the attitude of the Israeli authorities is completely different when an incident occurs in Gaza. With few exceptions, every car accident with injuries that takes place in Israel is more thoroughly investigated than a shooting in the territories which hits a 4-year-old girl in the head and reduces her to a vegetable."

It is also very difficult to bring his clients to Israel for medical examinations. Every resident needs a permit to leave the territories. "In principle, a permit should be readily obtainable, but in practice," Assan says, "it is often thwart-



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ed by the bureaucracy, and weeks are lost in preparing a case."

Just half a mile from Checkpoint Erez, we sullenly take in our coffee amid the bustle of tourists and confess to our emotional exhaustion. We were in Gaza City for only four and a half hours!

"All the individuals in Gaza are acting normally, both the residents and the soldiers," Assan remarks with no irony intended. "The phenomena we are dealing with here are a consequence of the abnormal situation of military occupation....The occupation is morally corrupting the Israeli state."

What about the future?

"Everyone agrees that we should leave Gaza, the military most of all. If the government saw a possibility I think they would move out as soon as possible. The West Bank, of course, is a different matter. The problem is that Gaza cannot survive without Israel. We can't just pull out and build a big wall around it."

**N**EW HAVEN, January 29, 1993. Half a year later the situation in Gaza has not much changed. Despite the promise of a new beginning and the considerable hope on both sides, generated during the summer by the ouster of the conservative Likud party by Yitzhak Rabin's Labor-led coalition, the violence has in fact increased during November and December.



The imposition of a two-and-a-half week curfew in *Khan Junis*, a notorious district in the southern part of Gaza, led to severe rioting as residents refused to return to their houses during a one-hour break in the curfew on December 19th. That day ten people were killed.

In a telephone interview in late January, Neve Gordon, who is now Director of the Tel Aviv-based Association of Israeli and Palestinian Physicians for Human Rights, claims that human rights violations during November and December in *Khan Junis* were exceptionally high in number. The Israeli human rights organization *B'tselem* gives a similar assessment of the situation in its report for December.

The deportation of *Hamas* leaders from the Gaza Strip and the other occupied territories, which has received broad international news coverage for the past few weeks, is becoming a severe drain on the political capital of the current Israeli government.

Some say that Gaza has calmed down since the leaders of the *Hamas* were deported. *The Jerusalem Post* reported that members of the PLO thanked the

government for the recent blow against the *Hamas*, which constantly clashes with the PLO and is considered the PLO's major rival for political influence in the territories.

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[our work] has not  
really helped."*

*— Neve Gordon*

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The implication of the *Jerusalem Post* report is that the international outrage is not even genuinely shared by the PLO, and is therefore thoroughly hypocritical. This view suggests that the deportations have strengthened the hand of the PLO in the occupied territories and should thereby in fact enable the Israeli peace negotiations with the Palestinian delegation, which is essentially representing the PLO position, to go forward.

Gordon believes the deportations were a big mistake. He claims the *Hamas* has gained popularity at the expense of the PLO, due to the sympathy generated

by the plight of the deportees. Like many of the younger members of the left-wing Meretz party, he is especially disappointed by the fact that *Meretz*, which has several cabinet positions in the coalition government, acceded to the deportations. For him there is no question that the action constituted a clear violation of human rights.

"[The army] deported them without a trial. And they tried to deport them by shipping them out in the middle of the night without the knowledge of anybody in Israel."

The Gaza team still represents Palestinian Arabs in their claims against the Israeli government. In a recent effort to publicize human rights violations, the group has brought members of the Israeli Parliament with them on their visits. So far eight members of the Knesset have gone.

Gordon, however, is not very optimistic: "My impression is that this has not really helped....In order to bring peace the Israeli government has to act courageously. So far, neither *Meretz*, nor Labor has been able to do so."

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